

# THE ART OF STORYTELLING

**Once defined** and disseminated almost solely by Western critics, global perceptions of African art are experiencing an exciting shift. Nana Ocran meets three Lagos-based curators helping to lead the charge.

WORDS *Nana Ocran*



Photo-Ready  
The team behind  
annual exhibition,  
Lagos Photo.

**“A**rt is necessary for life,” states Chike Nwagbogu, founder and curator of the Lagos-based Nimbus Art Gallery, which saw its formal re-opening in August 2011 with no less than the Obi of Onitsha, Igwe Alfred Nnaemeka Achebe presiding over the venue’s debut exhibition.

Chike’s approach is something of a celestial take on art, and what he feels its aim should be in a country that over the years has largely forgotten the impact of its creative and cultural heritage.

The former Nimbus Art Centre suffered a hiatus from the late noughties, but Chike feels that this year’s opening will: “usher in a new era of art in Nigeria, focused on rebuilding our nation.”

Over the years, he has witnessed what he sees to be an explosion of contemporary art in Lagos and Nigeria, to the extent that it now occupies a highly visible position in the minds of millions of Nigerians from all walks of life. The result is that artists from the country can now think a little more confidently about making a living from their work. “The art scene is enjoying something of a renaissance,” Chike explains. “Lagos, with its millions of people is an incredible muse from which artists can draw inspiration, and a growing number of galleries and promoters are courting a new generation of punters who appreciate and understand the global investment possibilities of contemporary Nigerian art.”

What with the scene becoming more mainstream, the new Nimbus Art Gallery is well placed within a creative niche, an exciting and internationally far-reaching hub of modern art venues in the city, which offer a newer and perhaps more open style of showcasing, buying or selling artwork that is creatively refreshing.

## The city in the frame

So who are the collectors and buyers? “The dynamism of artistic expression resonates globally,” says Chike, “in the same way and with the same soul as Nigerian home videos and pop music,” he says. “It’s redefining global entertainment, which is why everyone, including international buyers, is flying in from all over the world and collecting Nigerian art.”

Much of this is echoed by his sibling, Azu Nwagbogu, the founder and managing director of the nearby African Art Foundation (AAF). It’s a labyrinthine building serving as gallery space, studio and workshop, as well as the headquarters for

## CURATOR’S CORNER

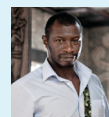
Leading Lagos curators name the artists to watch out for...



### Azu Nwagbogu

It would be unfair to name one, so I’ll

mention a few: Adolphus Opara is showing at the Tate Modern in London, George Osodi is a legend already, Akintunde Akinleye is a world-class photographer who has character and substance. Olayinka Stephen won the Nigerian Breweries/AAF national art competition two years ago, and in that time he’s made giant strides. Lucy Azubuikwe has bags of talent. Oh yes, and Emeke Obanor is a naturally gifted photographer who has a great future in Fine Art photography.”



### Chike Nwagbogu

Demola Ogunajo, a young artist from the Ife

School will change the course of artistic expression today. His understanding of mythology and use of colours leaves me in awe. He has already produced album sleeves for people like Damon Albarn and Tony Allen. His range of artistic expression and knowledge is extraordinary.



### Jude Anogwih

Emeke Ogbob is an outstanding new media artist. His sound and

video works are engaging and pleasing.



the annual Lagos Photo exhibition, which he curates.

“With photography, I honestly think that the internationally-based collectors have shown more courage and are leading the appreciation of this art form,” says Azu. “I suppose our local collectors need time to appreciate the value and essence of this photography but we’ll get there. This is one of the reasons why we started the Lagos Photo festival last year.” To him, the city is also a canvas for creative expression. “The contemporary art scene is definitely thriving in Nigeria, maybe more so in Lagos, because it’s a city that’s becoming more and more cosmopolitan. An energy runs through it. Anyone can feel it, but the artist feels it most because he or she is more in tune.”

### First Nigeria... Then the world

This aesthetic trend is one that Jude Anogwih, curator, practising artist and co-ordinator at the Video Art Network (VANLagos), a new-media art organisation over on the mainland, is also aware of. He has seen new audiences for the visual arts develop ever since the umbrella Centre for Contemporary Art (CCALagos) venue was established by international curator Bisi Silva in 2007. At VANLagos – which shares the CCA building – screenings and exhibitions of established and emerging new-media artists, as well as the development of educational and public events, are at the heart of the collaborative programming efforts of Jude and fellow Van Lagosians, artist Emeka Ogboh and cultural producer Oyindamola Fakeye.

Having taken part in curatorial residencies in the UK through an initiative between CCA, Lagos and London’s Tate Modern, Jude has first-hand experience of working across different continents and contexts, although he feels that the art scene in Lagos is more or less on the same level as what exists internationally. “The content, and also the approach and context of the work, basically share similar experimental patterns that differ according to individual artists.”

Azu has a slightly alternative view. “There are obvious differences, because art by definition must have a source that defines its power,” he says.

“Technology possibly plays a greater role in artistic expression internationally, but that’s not to say that these artforms are non-existent in Nigeria. There are several new-media artists producing relevant work. There are also, sadly, a few making worthless pieces that represent ideas heavily borrowed from the West in the name of new-media art.”

Adding to this, Chike says: “Contemporary art in Nigeria has an energy, which I think is clearly different from the catalysts for art innovation internationally. It’s inspired by the same creative foundations that’ve been guiding artists from this part of the world for thousands of years. In most global museums, Nigerian art from Ife, Benin, Igbo Ukwu, Nok and the Delta attract thousands of visitors annually because of their artistic essence, and it’s this energy contemporary Nigerian art has been able to tap into.”

But where is all this consistently soulful vitality headed? What’s its future? “Brilliant, enriching and thrusting in all aspects of social, political and economic growth,” is the vision that Jude has for Nigeria’s evolving art scene, while Azu hopes for a future in which: “we as individuals are all inspired to be creative and original, regardless of formal arts education. As Chike often says, the most creative people aren’t degree-carrying artists. I’d like to see a future in which the government will realise the value in supporting the arts, by providing world-class venues where art can be seen and appreciated.”

## “Art in Nigeria has an energy that’s clearly different from the catalysts for art innovation internationally” Chike Nwagbogu



## LAGOS GALLERIES

### African Artists' Foundation

Raymond Njoku St., Ikoyi  
+234(0) 8062451371  
africanartists.org

### Baroyet art studio

12, Odozi Street, Ojodu  
+234 (0)803-216-8019  
baroyet.com

### Centre For Contemporary Art (CCA)

9 McEwen Street, Off Queen Street, Sabo  
+234 (0)7028367106  
ccalagos.org

### Didi Museum

175, Akin Adesola Street, Victoria Island  
+234(0)8024108765

### Nike Gallery

2, Elegusi Rd, Ikate 2nd roundabout, Epe Expressway, Lekki  
+234 (0) 8033036969 &  
08034096656  
nikeart.com

### Nimbus Art Centre

nimbusartcentre.com

### Quintessence Gallery

Falomo Shopping Complex, Ikoyi  
+234(0)8033357151  
quintessenceld.com

### Signature Gallery

107 Awolowo Road, Ikoyi  
+234(0)8033177676

### Terrakulture

Plot 1376, Tiameyi Savage, Victoria Island  
+234 (0)27005888  
terrakulture.com