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Kelechi Nwaneri
THROUGH MY EYES

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Kelechi Nwaneri
Artist in residence
2020, Venezia



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THROUGH MY EYES

Solo exhibition by Kelechi Nwaneri
Oct 21 - Dec 4, 2021

AKKA Project Venezia
Ca' del Duca Sforza 3052
Venezia

The exhibition is the result of
Kelechi Nwaneri artistic residency in 2020

Kelechi Nwaneri

by Serge Tiroche

Let me start off by saying that I absolutely love Kelechi Nwaneri's work and I was immediately struck by it when I first saw it online in 2019. I acquired 5 works that year, 2 more in 2020 and one from AKKA Project in 2021. I think it is safe to say that I am one of his first international collectors and that I am biased.

From his first series I saw, called "Depth of Solitude" I acquired five works: "Lovers" 1 & 2, "Battle Within", "Time, People & Change IV" and "Carry You Home".

Based on a 16th-century unfinished drawing by Raphael - "Young man carrying an old man on his back", "Carry You Home" recently became Nwaneri's ultimate masterpiece when it was featured in an Apple TV+ episode of Ted Lasso, produced by Warner Bros Pictures.

It is one of my favourite works by him and in some ways a precursor to the series Kelechi painted during his Venice residency. Like so many of Kelechi's later paintings and particularly his Venice series, this one presents two figures traversing the waters of an imagined, surrealist landscape. It is a work full of contradictions - it is about hope and resilience but also about destruction and pain; it combines Kelechi's masterful pencil drawing with flat contemporary graphics; the central figure has a black body with a white face; Nature is praised by the strong presence of the sun, water and the water lilies, but is simultaneously mourned over by the flooding and the sinking dead pigeon. One body is painted in pure black color that is covered in white scars and tribal markings (bringing to mind contemporary graphic artists like Keith Haring), whilst the other is drafted in detail using pure pencil to highlight the natural beauty of a naked male (reminiscent of Raphael's drawing).

The most recent work I bought, from AKKA project, shows the same kind of complexity. Inspired by an even more famous series of paintings on the subject of the Pieta, it is another of Nwaneri's masterpieces.

I acquired it in Dubai where it had arrived wrinkled, so I hand-carried it back home to have it professionally restored and re-stretched. Here again, Nwaneri uses diverse painting techniques within a classical setting. In this instance, the use of patterns derived from traditional African

textiles bring to mind the works of Yinka Shonibare or Eddy Kamuanga Ilunga. The beautiful subject, perfect coloring and proportions, the light that emanates from the work and the balanced composition and the scale make it an absolutely phenomenal work. I am so fortunate to have been able to acquire it. Over the past 3 years, Kelechi's practice has

received vast praise and recognition. He is now represented by galleries in Nigeria, South Africa, London, Germany, Norway, Dubai and Italy. With his complex hybrid style, diverse technique and appealing imagery, I believe it won't be long before he is picked up by a major international gallery and is invited by a museum to do a first institutional solo show.





Kelechi Nwaneri
Ala's Compassion, 2020
Acrylic, coffee stain, charcoal and Pencil on Canvas
147 x 140 cm

About Kelechi Nwaneri

Nwaneri Kelechi Charles was born in 1994 in Nigeria where he currently lives and works.

Inspired by Pencil Artists such as Kelvin Okafor, Arinze Stanley, and Ken Nwadiogbu, he initially focused on Pencil Realism which has evolved by introducing other mediums such as acrylic paints, collages, watercolors and oil paints.

Kelechi focuses on analyzing issues around mental health, psychology and social values with his work. Inspired by events happening in his environment, he creates art with surrealistic imagery.

Kelechi's style stands between Photorealism, Surrealism, and Postmodernism but perfectly fits into what he defines as Contemporary Surrealism. A major characteristic of his work is the use of West-African Iconography (including Symbols such as Adinkra, Uli, Nsibidi) mystical, metaphysical, allegorical concepts and the Black Hybrid Figure, inspired by the idea of Scars and African Tribal Marks.

From Lagos... to Venice

Words by Lidija Khachatourian

We first saw Kelechi's works online and we were captured immediately by their intensity, their symbolism. Ala's compassion was one of the first works that caught our attention both as collectors and gallery owners. The flooded apartment series touched us personally as we do spend a lot of time in Venice and these pieces talked in a way only a Venetian could understand, so we connected and became friends.

Working with Kelechi was a very easy and natural step. He is a very kind and humble person, almost shy. We first programmed an exhibition in Dubai during the art season in March 2020 but, due to covid restrictions, the show was online only. However this didn't stop us, as Kelechi fits our requirements, we invited him to join our residency program in Venice.

Kelechi joined the residency program in very difficult times, getting him to Italy wasn't simple, embassies were still closed as some countries' borders too.

However he managed to reach Venice in October 2020, and after spending 14 days in quarantine with us (apart from few late-night escapes) he was able to explore one of the most visited cities in the world, but this time the city was almost only for him. Understanding the sense of intimacy of the city, once overcrowded, Kelechi felt somehow privileged to experience and enjoy the true Venice and shared this same intimate belonging with the few other lucky.

The emptiness of the streets of Venice was filled with stories of those individuals that were able to stay and meet again;

Kelechi has been able to discover through his unique observation and through the interactions with those who were fascinated by his work intimate stories, symbols and cultural heritage of Venice and its calli (Venetian word for narrow streets).

We are extremely excited and proud to present the outcome of Kelechi's residency in Venice, knowing that we all have learned and gained more knowledge and definitely got to know each other more, because apart from working together and understanding his creative process better, it has been a great pleasure living with Kelechi cooking and drinking together, breaking the rules of quarantine with few late-night walks and see the genesis of his inspirations, in the most beautiful ghost town of all time.



Kelechi Nwaneri
Tourist at the Lagoon, 2020
Charcoal Sticks and Acrylic Paints on Canvas
120 x 120cm

The city from the bridge

Prior to his trip, Kelechi viewed the city on google earth several times; he already had a clear picture of what Venice looked like.

However, he had the chance to witness a very different Venice, less crowded, fewer tourists and definitely more Venetians. Upon his arrival, seeing the city from the bridge was magical. It was the first time he had ever seen something like that. "I was amazed by the fact that the palazzos have kept the same look-like-feeling as in the past. It was truly amazing seeing the city for the first time."

Spending the first 14 days in quarantine, was difficult, however as he had access to the rooftop (altana), he still managed to enjoy the city. As he waited impatiently for the quarantine to be over, he reflected on what the city would bring.





Hot water, cold water and flooded apartment

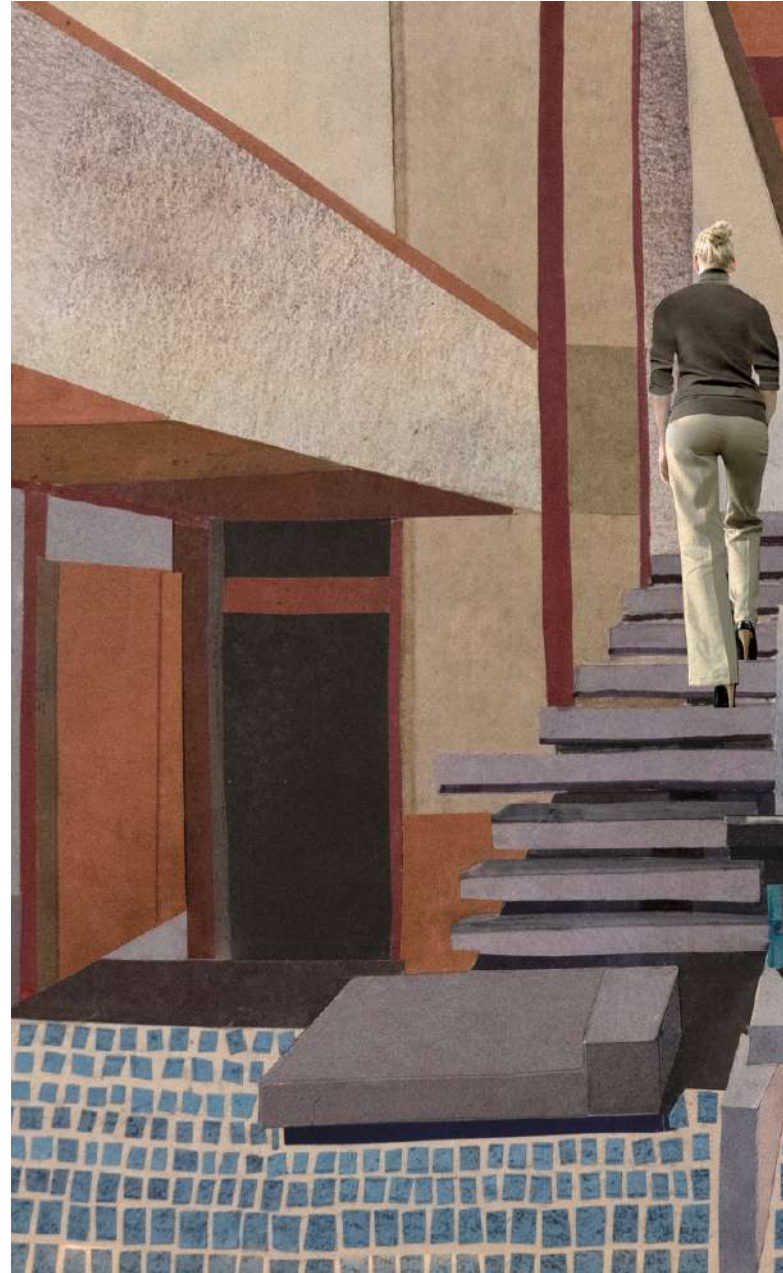
Using his own words, coming from a very hot climate, overpopulated, busy Lagos with lots of traffic, malls and stores to Venice in a pandemic was like moving from hot to cold water.

Continuing on the theme of water, Kelechi experienced the Aqua-Alta. He appreciated having the opportunity to experience this phenomenon as it gave him a hint of how flooded the city can be when the tides rise to extraordinary levels and also it gave him more reasons to continue with the flooded apartment project. He had seen flooding in some parts of Lagos which initially motivated the "flooded apartment series" but there was something different about the Aqua-Alta, this natural occurrence that affects the whole city all at once, at the same time.

Surreal inspiration

Through my eyes | Kelechi Nwaeri

"Venice is Surreal: Houses floating on water! What could be more surreal than that? I enjoyed the fact that there were fewer tourists as it gave me time and space to absorb the city and its elements." - says Kelechi.





AKKA Project | Rhythmic Elements

"Artistically and personally I learnt the need to exercise more patience with myself and my work, the more time you give a painting, the better it becomes."



One year later



Kelechi Charles Nwaneri presents us "Through my eyes",

The exhibition aims to combine how the artist experienced that in many ways the culture of the people of Venice is similar to the Igbo People of Nigeria, the most striking being the use of Masks and Symbols in cultural activities.

The result is a body of work of 20 new works, (10 paintings and 10 photos), all of which give a Venetian experience through his eyes.



Kelechi Nwaneri, Ponte dell'Accademia, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
105 x 100cm

Kelechi Nwaneri
07/2021

Masks

The word PERSONALITY originates from the Greek word "**Persona**", which means "Mask".

Supporting the idea that once you meet someone, you actually meet the personality (the mask) that they present to you, you can't see their real selves until they decide to take it off.

In this series, the artist has explored different human personalities with the varying faces of masks, combining the traditional use and meanings of both Venetian and tribal masks; Taking his references predominantly from Igbo, Venetian masks, and photos he took while in dialogue with some friends during his stay in Venice.

The artworks perfectly represent Kelechi's ability to look at reality and turn it into an inspiration: from a typical Venetian daily occurrence, Kelechi created a surrealistic scene in which the hidden personality of a city, still to be completely understood, like Venice, is merged with the fascinating mystery of the African land and its symbols.

Dialogue 1

Maiden Mask

"Maiden masks, representations of adolescent females, impersonate Igbo ideals of youthful feminine beauty. In their original context, they were danced by male performers during festivals honoring important patron deities, as well as for entertainment. During performances, they were complemented by vibrantly colored suits and accompanied by a multi-instrumental orchestra."

Dialogue 1, can be seen as a tribute by Kelechi to "Lisa", a friend known during his residency. Following the hypothesis initially formulated, we admire how Kelechi, using the traditional Maiden Mask, has portrayed one of Lisa's faces. Only one of her personalities according to the artist, is enclosed at its best in the traits of the traditional Maiden Mask. The presence of the mask itself implies the existence of an "underneath" that hides a thousand other faces that for now we are not permitted to discover.



Kelechi Nwaneri, Dialogue 1, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and charcoal
on canvas, 135 x 120 cm



Dialogue 2

Maiden Mask (left) and
Venetian Mask (right)

"The Igbo mask (left) used is another kind of "Maiden Mask", characterized by the presence of a secondary figure and usually used to represent older women."

As for Dialogue 1, the reference comes from the reality and the real people met by Kelechi during his residency. The Igbo Mask hides this time, ALICE's face. The composure and quietness, shown by the young woman, have influenced Kelechi to represent her with the mature personality that this kind of Igbo mask usually alludes to. ALICE is represented with MARIANNA, hidden under the fascinating details of the Venetian "Moretta" Mask.



Kelechi Nwaneri, Dialogue 2, 2021
Pastels, acrylic and charcoal
on canvas, 135 x 120 cm



Dialogue 3

Jester Masks

"The jester's mask, one of the most popular at Carnival, was born in medieval palaces. Jolly spends her time entertaining the king: singing, playing and reciting poems."





Tourist guide
MODERN PARIS
PARIS
TOURIST GUIDE
PARIS
TOURIST GUIDE
PARIS

Klein, 1980

Dialogue 4

Ekeleke headdress

"A Mask commonly worn in the Ekeleke performance, a part of Igbo masquerade traditions. The Ekeleke is a group display and drama performed on stilts with dancers wearing long-necked carvings."



Through my eyes | Kelechi Nwaeri

Kelechi Nwaneri, Dialogue 4, 2021
Pastels, acrylic and charcoal
on canvas, 160 x 130 cm



Acqua Alta

Through my eyes | Kelechi Nwaeri



Kelechi Nwaeri, Acqua Alta, 2021
Pastels, acrylic and charcoal
on canvas, 100 x 105 cm



Keele's Manner: 8/21

Symbols

Kelechi Nwaneri,
The Gondola Iron, 2021
Pastels, acrylic and
charcoal on canvas,
45 x 104 cm



Kelechi Nwaneri
Lion of S. Mark, 2021
Pastels, acrylic and
charcoal on canvas,
45 x 104 cm



Symbols like the Lion of St. Mark, The gondola iron of the prow and a few others, show some of the many faces of the city of Venice.

The creation and use of symbols to define the local identity, seems to also be a common aspect with the indigenous Igbo tradition. Referring to both of these realities, so different and similar, Kelechi Nwaneri created images able to analyze the aesthetics and deep meaning of these symbols: where the far tradition of Nsibidi and Uli ancient systems of writings* comes to life, the Lion of S. Mark and the Gondola's iron of the prow, seem to rise, to recall a deep, common desire for symbolism.

* **Nsibidi**

is a system of symbols or proto-writing developed in what is now the far South of Nigeria. They are classified as pictograms, though there have been suggestions that some are logograms or syllabograms. The use of the symbol system was first described in 1904. Excavation of terracotta vessels, headrests, and anthropomorphic figurines from the Calabar region of southeast Nigeria, dated to roughly the 5th to 15th centuries, revealed "an iconography readily comparable" to nsibidi. There are several hundred nsibidi symbols. They were once taught in school to children. Many of the signs deal with love affairs; those that deal with warfare and the sacred are kept secret. Nsibidi is used on wall designs, calabashes, metals (such as bronze), leaves, swords, and tattoos. It is primarily used by the Ekpeleopard society (also known as Ngbe or Egbo), a secret society that is found across Cross River State among the Ekoi, Efik, Igbo people, Bahumono and other nearby communities of Nigeria

* **Uli (Uri)**

are the curvilinear traditional designs drawn by the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. These designs are generally abstract, consisting of linear forms and geometric shapes, though there are some representational elements. Traditionally, these are either stained onto the body or painted onto the sides of buildings as murals.

Designs are frequently asymmetrical and are often painted spontaneously. Uli is generally not sacred, apart from those images painted on the walls of shrines and created in conjunction with some community rituals. In addition, Uli is not directly symbolic but instead focuses on the creation of a visual impact and decorating the body of the patron or building in question. The designs are almost exclusively produced by women, who decorate other people with dark dyes to prepare for village events, such as marriage, title taking, or funerals, as well as for more everyday wear. Designs last approximately 8 days. Igbo women also paint Uli murals on the walls of compounds and houses, using four basic pigments: black, white, yellow, and red. These designs last until the rainy season.

Masquerade 1, 2

Masquerade 1 and 2 intend to replicate the essence of the “Masquerades”; In Igbo culture, Masquerades (Mmanwu) are held in accordance with the community native calendars during festivals, annual festivities, burial rites and other social gatherings, Are geared in colourful robes and made of wood or fabric.

Masquerades are associated with spiritual elements and represent images of deities or sometimes even dead relatives. The identity of the masquerade is a well-kept secret and performed exclusively by men. These dancing figures are what Kelechi tries to represent in the works using a male (masquerade 1) and female (masquerade 2) wooden Ghanaian mask, together with symbols inspired by the ancient Nsibidi writing system. The Mask and the text creates a 2D representation of the essence of a masquerade.

Kelechi Nwaneri, Masquerade 1, 2021
Charcoal, Acrylic paints and Acid-free Acrylic
markers, 45 by 35 cm

Kelechi Nwaneri, Masquerade 2, 2021
Charcoal, Acrylic paints and Acid-free Acrylic
markers, 45 by 35 cm



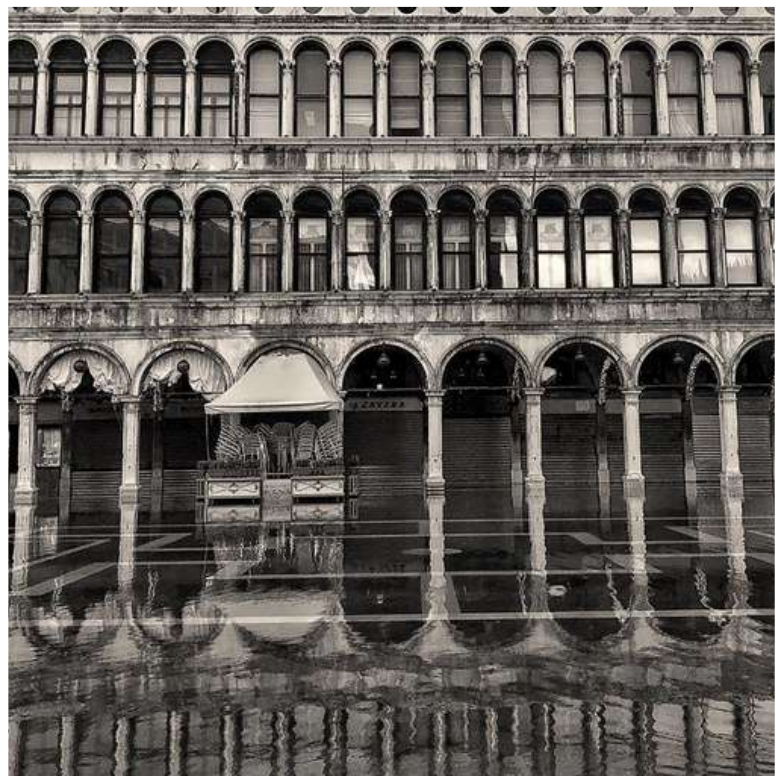
Photographs

The photos exhibited alongside the paintings show a less densely populated Venice with sense of peace and serenity. Images were concisely taken to capture rare moments that portray Venice in this state of rare beauty, seen maybe once in decades."

1. Untitled, 2020, 60 x 40 cm
2. Untitled, 2020, 40 x 60 cm
3. Graffiti, 2020, 40 x 60 cm
4. Restaurant, 2020, 40 x 60 cm
5. Graffiti, 2020, 40 x 60 cm
6. Reflections, 2020, 60 x 40 cm
7. San Marco, 2020, 60 x 40 cm
8. Pigeon, 2020, 60 x 40 cm
9. Untitled, 2020, 60 x 40 cm
10. Untitled, 2020, 60 x 40 cm









Engaging the community

AKKA believes in the importance of people and in cultivating relationships in order to enhance culture together. To achieve these objectives, we actively collaborate with local universities and entities. On the occasion of Kelechi Nwaneri's residency, we selected Lisa Pujatti, a student from the BA in Multimedia Arts at IUAV University of Venice to assist him during his Venetian experience.

Lisa works mostly with photography and illustration where she experiments with different techniques such as hand drawing, collage and digital illustration.

As a result of the multicultural exchange, she created a series of four illustrations representing Kelechi in Venice, exhibited during the artist solo show at AKKA Project Venezia. Lisa's illustrations are made with the technique of collage followed by a digital reworking. The idea behind the work was to recreate, through a slow manual technique, some pictures taken during the Kelechi's artistic residence in Venice.

In creating these illustrations, Lisa paid particular attention to rendering the richness and the diversity of the building materials that give Venice its distinctive look, experimenting with different types of paper, from the one found in magazines to the typical Venetian printed and marbled papers.

"Negozio Olivetti" and "San Marco" were much easier to create: the subjects are important architectures that cannot be boring even if portrayed from a really standard frontal view. On the other hand, the rendering of the simpler environments of "La casa di Kelechi" and "Galleria" was more challenging. I tried anyway to give them a Venetian touch and to circumvent the problem of boredom with a little more complex framing.

The process of creating this series of illustrations was always really spontaneous, without careful planning before; this attitude, in the case of "La casa di Kelechi", led to the need of expanding the frame when the work was already in process."



Lisa Pujatti, Negozio Olivetti
Digital Illustration, 2021



Lisa Pujatti, Galleria
Digital Illustration, 2021



Lisa Pujatti, San Marco
Digital Illustration, 2021

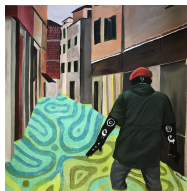


Lisa Pujatti, La Casa di Kelechi
Digital Illustration, 2021



Kelechi Nwaneri, Lisa, 2020
Mixed Media, Oil Paints on Primed Canvas
100 x 70cm

Artwork details



Acqua Alta, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
100 x 105 cm



Dialogue 4, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
160 x 130 cm



Ponte dell'Accademia, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
105 x 100 cm



Masquerade 1, 2021
Charcoal, Acrylic and Acid-free Acrylic markers
45 x 35 cm



Dialogue 1, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
135 x 120 cm



Masquerade 2, 2021
Charcoal, Acrylic and Acid-free Acrylic markers
45 x 35 cm



Dialogue 2, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
135 x 120 cm



The Gondola Iron, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
45 x 104 cm



Dialogue 3, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
130 x 125 cm



Lion of S. Mark, 2021
Pastels, Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas
45 x 104 cm



Osondu (Rece for Salvation), 2020
Mixed Media, Oil Paints on Primed Canvas
150 x 100cm

About EndSARS movement

End SARS is a decentralized social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuses. The protests which take their name from the slogan started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #EndSARS to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigerian government. After experiencing a revitalization in October 2020 following more revelations of the abuses of the unit, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities of Nigeria, accompanied by vociferous outrage on social media platforms. About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag have been accumulated on Twitter alone. Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities of the world. The protests are notable for their patronage by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians. The movement has since expanded to include demands for good and accountable governance.

Within a few days of renewed protests, on 11 October 2020, the Nigerian Police Force announced that it was dissolving the unit with immediate effect.

The move was widely received as a triumph of the demonstrations. However, it was noted in many quarters that similar announcements had been made in recent years to pacify the public without the unit actually being disbanded and that the government had merely planned to reassign and review SARS officers to medical centres rather than disband the unit entirely.

Protests have continued accordingly, and the Nigerian government has maintained a pattern of violent repression including the killing of demonstrators. There have been international demonstrations in solidarity with those happening in the country, and the movement has also grown increasingly critical of Muhammadu Buhari's government response to the protests.

SARS officers have been alleged to profile young Nigerians, mostly males, based on fashion choices, tattoos and hairstyles. They were also known to mount illegal roadblocks, conduct unwarranted checks and searches, arrest and detain without warrant or trial, rape women, and extort young male Nigerians for driving exotic vehicles and using laptops and iPhones. Nigerians have shared both stories and video evidence of how officers of SARS engaged in kidnapping, murder, theft, rape, torture, unlawful arrests, humiliation, unlawful detention, extrajudicial killings and extortion of Nigerian citizens. A large section of the victims of the abuses of SARS has been young male Nigerians. [Source Wikipedia]

Not only Through my eyes



Kelechi arrived in Venice in a very delicate period: the restrictions for the Corona Virus pandemic were very strict all around Europe and his own country was facing the #EndSars protests against police brutality after a video went viral of a man allegedly being killed by the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (Sars).

The artwork, Osondu (Rece for Salvation), 2020, the first artwork produced during his permanency in Venice, takes inspiration from the #endsars protests, the #blacklivesmatter protests all over the world and every other movement that has supported that all humans be treated equally and Fairly.

Kelechi Nwaneri
Osondu (Rece for Salvation), 2020
Mixed Media, Oil Paints on Primed Canvas
cm 150 x 100

Behind the scenes

"One of the best moments of my residency was seeing the mountains and for the first time the snow."











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