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**From Margins to Museums: Tracing the Evolution of Representation for
Contemporary African Artists in the United States**

by **Victoria Mouraux Durand-Ruel**

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

MASTER OF ARTS in INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on the art community in the United States and the evolution of representation for Contemporary African artists. By analyzing the careers and artistic contributions of Omar Ba, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, the study explores the concept of artistic agency according to which African artists have more control over the production and distribution of their works.

The research begins with a comprehensive literature review, investigating the historical contexts that have shaped the art landscape, including the impact of colonization, decolonization, and globalization. The study reveals how these artists, historically marginalized in major art centers, have found new opportunities due to the changing social climate.

The current shift in the global art community is notably visible in the increasing number of exhibitions and acquisitions of African artists' works by major cultural institutions in the United States. It represents a significant moment in the history of art, signaling a future where African artists are celebrated for their unique perspectives and contributions. This research suggests a reversal of cultural imperialism through new, equitable practices between artists, galleries and museums.

Keywords: African Artists; Contemporary Art; Art Market; Museums; Black Lives Matter

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I. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 marked a turning point in art history: a moment when the vivid canvases of African artists began covering the walls of cultural institutions in the United States and making their presence felt within the international art market. For centuries, the art world has predominantly celebrated and valued the works of a select group of artists, primarily white male, from Europe and the United States. Artworks created by artists not belonging to this dominant group were not deemed worthy of study in Art History or of exhibition in museums. This has resulted in the exclusion of marginalized groups, including women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, among others.

The issue of representation is problematic not only because it prevents talented artists from gaining recognition and opportunities, but also because it perpetuates a narrow and exclusionary view of what art is and what it can be. By prioritizing certain types of artists and artworks, the art world reinforces a particular set of cultural values and biases and excludes other perspectives and experiences.

Having worked for a museum in New York, auction houses both in New York and London, an art fair in the Netherlands, and in academia, I have observed these disparities in representation in private and public institutions in Europe and the United States. I aim to use this thesis to raise awareness of Contemporary African art commodification and to shed light on alternatives to this evolution while advocating for more inclusivity, and diversity within the art industry.

This research will examine the roots of the marginalization and exclusion of contemporary African artists in museums, galleries, and art history books. It will demonstrate that the Black Lives Matter movement has been key in questioning structural discrimination toward this group of artists in the United States. A downfall of this social pressure, was the hype emerging around contemporary African artists leading to the increasing commodification of their works and speculations on the market. By examining the careers and artistic contributions of three contemporary African artists, this research observes the current transformation of the global art ecosystem.

In this context, this research will answer the following question: How has the Black Lives Matter movement facilitated a paradigm shift in the art world, enhancing the power of African artistic agency, and fostering more equitable and collaborative relationships between contemporary African artists and key art world stakeholders in the United States?

This research begins with a comprehensive literature review, examining the historical contexts that have shaped the contemporary African art landscape, including the impact of colonization and decolonization on artistic creativity, and the interplay of identity and subjectivity. The research also explores the role of globalization in the migration of artists and ideas, as well as the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement on museums and the art market. Drawing on data gathered during my internship at Phillips auction house in New York, this study further investigates the career trajectories of three contemporary African artists: Omar Ba (Senegalese-Swiss), Toyin Ojih Odutola (Nigerian-American), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (Nigerian-American). This exploration will encompass their exhibition histories, press articles, CVs, and

gallery website information, providing insights into their careers, artistic styles, and messages. The analysis aims to highlight the extent of artistic agency among contemporary African artists in the United States, underscoring their influence over the creation and distribution of their work.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A) Defining Contemporary African Art

Contemporary African art represents a dynamic and multifaceted field that has gained increasing attention in recent years. To understand its evolution and historical context, Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Augulu examined in their book, *Contemporary African Art since 1980* (2009), the work of contemporary African artists from diverse situations, locations, and generations who work either in or outside of Africa since 1980. Enwezor and Okeke-Augulu analyze the historical transition from the end of colonization to the decolonization process and the cultural shift induced by globalization. This research will often make references and build on the argumentation developed by these two authors in this book.

According to them, the notion of "African identity" in contemporary art is a flexible concept having cultural, geographical, and subjective dimensions. It extends beyond ethnicity, nationality, and language. Enwezor and Okeke-Augulu emphasize that "Africa" should not be viewed solely through national, or continental lenses. It represents a network of positions and affiliations, reflecting the diversity of cultural traditions and contemporary global dynamics. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the aim of this research is not to categorize contemporary African art as a monolithic entity. It is imperative to acknowledge that artistic trends in Senegal, for instance, may diverge significantly from those in Nigeria, Tanzania, or Mozambique. These

differences are deeply rooted in the unique sociohistorical contexts of each country (Mudimbe, 1999). Olu Oguibe articulates this approach as follows: “the argument is to recognize a plurality of *Africanities* but aspire toward the active formulation of singular African identity, somewhat along the lines of Pan-Europeanism and the construction of the West” (Oguibe, 1999). This research will thus follow Enwezor and Okeke-Augulu’s approach by examining a range of ideas, concepts and issues that have shaped the work and practice of African artists within an international and global framework.

Defining the precise timeframe of contemporary African art has been a subject of many debates as scholars would often oppose traditional art to contemporary art. As explained by Salah Hassan in “The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics” (1997), the dichotomy between traditional versus contemporary art is the result of colonizing structure in Africa. This discourse creates an illusion of African art designated “traditional” as only being artifacts of the past, although in reality traditional forms of art continue to be produced today in urban as well as a rural sector of Africa (Hassan, 1997). As argued by Mudimbe, the colonizing structure has resulted in a dichotomizing system which opposes “traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilizations” (Mudimbe, 1988, p.4). In this context, the concept of modernity leading to contemporary art was clearly influenced by European constructed ideas of the African culture.

To go beyond this narrative, curators and scholars have progressively agreed on two principles in African art history: traditional art should be interpreted as an ever-evolving creative

process and contemporary African art is considered to having begun at the end of colonialism (Enwezor & Okeke-Augulu, 2009). In the 1980s, new African art movements and initiatives emerged either in reaction to, or as a rejection of, western hegemony in the art world. The art movements in Africa lead to a “more culturally-rooted, self-conscious, and “African” aesthetic expression” (Hassan, 1997, p.31). Rejecting the concepts of primitivism and exoticism built by western countries, African artists redefined themselves as creators of an “autonomous more global art” qualified as contemporary African art (Hassan, 1997, p.31). This evolution led to the appearance of a new generation of African artists, new art movements, art fairs, museums, curators, all working towards a new narrative (Hassan, 1997). This master’s thesis will analyze the work of three living African artists who contribute to the construction of this new narrative by using innovative technics and addressing contemporary issues.

To understand the history of contemporary African art, it is necessary to delve into the influence of colonization and decolonization of the African continent on artistic production.

B) Impact of Colonization

In the exhibition catalogue "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994 ", Okwui Enwezor delves into the turning point of Africa’s tragic history: the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885. Orchestrated by the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, this conference was composed of representatives of fifteen European nations primarily driven by their “pursuit of profit even if it meant betraying the foundational principles of their own civil societies” (Enwezor, 2001, 13). Despite the abolition of slavery in the 19th century, the colonization of Africa unfolded through a combination of legal treaties, military conquest, and occupation. Consequently,

Africa became a battleground for the dominance of five major colonial powers: Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and Germany, each aiming to exert control and influence over the continent.

This approach was underpinned by a more profound principle central to colonial policy: perpetuating the fiction of differentiation between Europeans and the colonized, a foundational element of the colonial project. This project was structured around the concept of the "Other," as elucidated by Edward Said in his theory of Orientalism (1978). Said argues that Western nations created a dichotomy between them and the "others" by considering the colonized as irrational, barbaric and violent while Western nations would be seen as rational, civilized and modern (Said, 1978). Orientalism, as Said describes it, generalizes the diverse cultures and peoples of the Orient into a singular, homogenized image. This fictive narrative justified Western imperialism and colonization of the African continent. According to Said, Orientalism is not just a body of knowledge about the East but a "discourse" in the Foucauldian sense. This means that Orientalism is a way of speaking, writing, and thinking about the Orient that reinforces Western dominance. It involves institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, and even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. Possessing a creative sensibility was perceived by Europeans as a crucial indicator of civilization. Therefore, to maintain the idea of "otherness" and "barbarism" among the African population, colonial education conspicuously omitted art studies from its curriculum (Oguibe, 2004).

Valentin Yves Mudimbe acknowledged Said's theory and extended his critique to the African continent. Mudimbe suggests that Africa, as understood in the Western academic and cultural context, is largely an invention of Western scholarship. This constructed identity of Africa

is based on a set of stereotypes and generalizations that have been developed and perpetuated through Western literature, anthropology, and colonial discourse. As stated in his book *The Invention of Africa*, “the alienation of colonialism entails both the objective fact of total dependence (economic, political, cultural and religious) and the subjective process of the self-victimization of the dominated. The colonized internalizes the imposed racial stereotypes, particularly in attitude towards technology, culture and language.” (Mudimbe, p.93). Mudimbe's theories and findings provide a critical examination of how Africa has been represented and understood in Western thought. He encourages to rethink how non-Western societies are conceptualized.

To maintain the Western hegemony over the continent, colonial education restricted multiple forms of expressions including fine arts. Olu Oguibe, in "The Culture Game" (2004), emphasizes that art was undervalued, deemed neither essential nor advantageous within the colonial context. Instead, the educational framework was designed to perpetuate a state of reliance, prioritizing the teaching of specific skills that would benefit the Western imperial powers. This strategic limitation on education not only delayed cultural development but also strategically restricted self-sufficiency and innovation.

In defiance of the colonial system's suppression of fine arts education, Aina Onabolu, a Nigerian autodidact, stands as a pioneering figure in early colonial West Africa. He challenged the educational restrictions by embracing modern art, drawing influence from European religious and commercial texts (Oguibe, 2004). As stated by Oguibe, “Onabolu’s work reminded the Europeans of the fallacy of their construction of the colonized as incompetent savages. Within this frame,

Onabolu's ability to draw like the European signified both civility and an argument for equality beyond dispute. (...) the possibility of a native acquiring this skill outside the regulatory structures of colonial authority represented a crack in the imperial scheme" (Oguibe, 2004, p.45). After colonial schools in Nigeria refused to include art classes in the curriculum, Onabolu pursued a teaching diploma in London, ultimately improving his chances of entering the colonial education system upon his return. Following his return to Nigeria, he secured a position as an art teacher in four schools in Lagos (Oguibe, 2004). This example demonstrates how cultural production in Africa was systematically limited, if not prohibited, during colonization to perpetuate the concept of otherness and the perception of African populations as inherently barbaric. Cultural production served as an important tool in maintaining Western imperialism.

For a selected group of black African artists like Onabolu, asserting their legitimacy and creative prowess in Europe emerged as a more effective response to the white supremacist dominance than attempting to combat it from within the confines of its oppressive reach (Oguibe, 2004). While European scholars had traditionally considered African artists only proficient in woodcrafts and clay, some artists defied these preconceived notions by working with other materials (Oguibe, 2004). For instance, Onabolu boldly dismissed this stereotype and opted to work with oils, a medium perceived as more "sophisticated" and typically reserved to European artists (Oguibe, 2004).

These examples vividly illustrate how Western countries utilized the narrative of otherness to exert control over the creative expressions of African artists, limiting their avenues for artistic

innovation. The following section will examine how processes of liberation and independence in the 1980s reshaped creativity and led to a new art category: contemporary African art.

C) Decolonization and Liberation movements

Africa's journey towards decolonization and independence was a complex process that unfolded over several decades. In the exhibition catalogue "The Short Century", Enwezor demonstrates that the emergence of new African art movements and initiatives between 1960 and 1990 was closely tied to the broader context of liberation and independence movements on the continent.

During this period, two distinct political programs embodied the struggle for independence. One program, influenced by Gandhian principles of non-violence and civil disobedience, was particularly prominent in West Africa (Enwezor, 2001). This approach involved a range of tactics, including the use of newspapers, public speeches, campaigns, strikes, and trade union activities to disrupt colonial economic interests and challenge its legal authority (Enwezor, 2001). In contrast, armed struggle was the chosen method in territories such as Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.

As pointed out by Enwezor, the achievement of Ghana's independence in 1957 marked a significant turning point. Kwame Nkrumah's 1960 speech on the decade of African independence further highlighted the wave of liberation sweeping across the continent. In the same year, 17 African countries gained independence and joined the United Nations (Enwezor, 2001). However, the reality of independence and liberation encompassed not only political change but also social

movements like pan-Africanism and philosophical explorations of culture such as the Negritude movement.

Enwezor identified key phases in the decolonization process, including the destruction of inferiority complexes, the ending of colonial injustices and economic exploitation, the affirmation of a political and social vision, and the redefinition of modernity with Africa at its center. The post-1980s era brought new challenges with the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programs by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1983 (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). These programs deepened Africa's reliance on foreign aid and eroded cultural networks, leading to political repression, censorship, and a sense of instability in African societies. Additionally, wars, genocide, population movements, currency devaluations, and natural catastrophes further exacerbated this precarious situation (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009).

In the midst of these challenges, contemporary African artists played a crucial role in positioning the African population at the center of their history and adapting the notion of modernity. Artists grappled with the complexities of tradition, modernity, and Western influence. The 1984 exhibition "Primitivism in 20th Century" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York generated significant debate internationally on African art. It segregated African art objects into the past, while Western avant-garde artists were depicted in the modern era (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). The absence of artists as authors of these works highlighted the impact of post-colonial narratives on art perception. This narrative of inauthenticity was rooted in the notion that African art did not follow a succession of historical styles as Western art did (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). Maintaining this separation is paradoxical when knowing that European art

dramatically changed in the 20th century when Western artists encountered African and Oceanic “ethnographic” objects (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). The works of Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Henri Moore, Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Amedeo Modigliani, which were significantly influenced by these artifacts, later became known as foundational to Cubism and Surrealism (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009).

The year 1989 marked a pivotal moment in global politics, notably the historic end of apartheid in South Africa (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). This period also ushered in a radical shift for contemporary African artists, both those living in Africa and those living abroad. Their works gained greater recognition internationally as they were beginning to be showcased in museums, the press and art residencies (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). The same year, the exhibition "Magiciens de la Terre" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris was a milestone in this evolution. The exhibition featured 50 Western artists and 50 non-Western artists. The curator, Jean-Hubert Martin, aimed to counter the traditional narrative that non-Western art was primitive or folkloric by presenting these artists alongside their Western counterparts. This approach disrupted the art world's prevailing hierarchies and geographies. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu considered this show to be the first and most important exhibition for contemporary artists of non-European descent (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009). As Enwezor noted, it was where contemporary African art truly made its appearance in Europe. It fostered dialogue among artists from diverse cultures, and created a new method for evaluating contemporary African art (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 2009).

Despite its groundbreaking nature, "Magiciens de la Terre" faced criticism for not fully rectifying power dynamics, as the inclusion of non-Western artists in a Western venue was seen by some as insufficient to address the art world's deeper systemic disparities. The Congolese artist, Cheri Samba's "Quel avenir pour notre art?" (1997) encapsulates this critique. Samba makes references to traditional art with masks and figurines while also depicting Picasso having a black skin and working on a modern painting. In this work, Samba wrote the following: "What future for our art in a world where living artists are mostly oppressed? The only solution is to be accepted in France. It seems that an artist accepted in France is probably acceptable anywhere in the world. And France means the Musée d'Art Modern. Yes, but ... isn't the Musée d'Art Modern racist?". Samba's questions the future of Contemporary African art in a world where living artists can only gain legitimacy if they are exhibited in major museums in Western art hubs.

Africa's journey towards decolonization and independence was thus a complex process that shaped the continent's political, social, and cultural landscape. The emergence of contemporary African art movements in the 1980s was closely tied to these historical developments and reflected the ongoing struggle to assert Africa's place in the global narrative of art and modernity.

D) Globalization and migration: African Diaspora dynamics

In the post-1989 era, significant transformations occurred for contemporary artists of African descent. Growing numbers of contemporary African artists saw their work featured in museums and galleries exhibitions while also getting more press coverage. This first step into the global art world was driven by two major forces: the overarching influence of globalization and the emergence of a new African diaspora (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). As stated by Enwezor &

Oguibe, the new African diaspora is the result of mass mobility, migration, post-coloniality, and economic interdependencies. This evolution gave rise to “new relationships between notions of home and elsewhere, global and local, tradition and modernity” (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999, p.12).

Contemporary African artists began to build their international legitimacy through the emergence of curators, art historians, scholars, and academic departments dedicated to the study of their work (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). International events such as the Dak'Art Biennale, Cairo Biennale, Johannesburg Biennale, and the Biennale of Photography in Bamako have further propelled the internationalization of contemporary African art (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). As pointed out by Enwezor & Oguibe in 1999, there remained a pressing need to bridge the gap between artists residing in Africa and those living abroad, particularly within the growing African diaspora. These artists contribute significantly to ongoing discussions surrounding identity, globalization, and diaspora in contemporary African art (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999).

Enwezor & Oguibe noted that the concept of migration holds a dual significance in contemporary African art. On one hand, it signifies the physical movement of artists across borders, while on the other, it symbolizes the transmission of ideas across regions (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). This unceasing flow encompasses materials, information, commodities, signs, images, objects, and people, each negotiating multiple cultural systems and temporalities. It leads to the invention of new imaginaries and ecosystems of production and reception (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). Migration, in its broadest sense, is integral to understanding contemporary African art, fostering a new dialectic between diaspora artists and those based on the African continent.

As artists increasingly migrated and settled in Western countries, they gained access to opportunities, including education, exhibition systems, grants, media exposure, technology, and collectors (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). This led to advantages for diaspora artists over their counterparts residing in Africa. However, this discrepancy has sparked debates on the authenticity and cultural capital of artists, as those living on the continent seek to challenge the privileges afforded to diasporic and transnational Africans. Enwezor & Oguibe insist on the fact that a new discourse on authenticity emerged, emphasizing being "on the ground" as a criterion for artistic legitimacy (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999). The rise of continentalism, a movement driven by artists and curators based in Africa, reflects a form of resistance to the perceived cultural capital of diasporic Africans working in Western countries. The debate over continentalism is intertwined with the "politics of resources within artistic networks on the continent" (Enwezor & Oguibe, 1999, page). In fact, access to resources heavily depends on the financial and infrastructural capacities of individual countries.

This thesis will use this Enwezor & Oguibe argumentation on migration, globalization and the emergence of a new African diaspora to demonstrate that increasing resources and initiatives are put in place to build a growing ecosystem around contemporary African art. This research will analyze connections built between the United States and Africa in terms of cultural production and distribution.

E) Contemporary African Art exhibition history since 1980

The exhibition history and market evolution of contemporary African art reflect a long journey towards legitimacy and recognition within the global art world. The exhibition "Magiciens

de la Terre” was considered the first exhibition in Europe to showcase at the same level European and African artists. This exhibition was instrumental in initiating conversations about postcolonial curatorial methods and the global art discourse.

The exhibition "Africa Explores" organized at the Museum for African Art and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1991 brought together over 130 works from 15 African countries. It mixed various media and artistic styles, aiming to represent 20th-century African art from an African perspective. Although the exhibition faced critique for its American-centric narrative, it laid the groundwork for more nuanced and inclusive exhibitions.

"Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," curated by Thelma Golden at The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994, critically examined how African American men were portrayed in a range of media and artistic contexts, challenging stereotypes and redefining representations of black masculinity. Thelma Golden's curatorial approach is known for its critical engagement with issues of race and identity, and her exhibitions have been pivotal in bringing the works of African diaspora artists to broader audiences.

Launched in Munich in 2001, "The Short Century," curated by Okwui Enwezor, presented a pivotal exploration of African art and cultural history. This exhibition delved into the era of African independence movements from 1945 to 1994, capturing a critical phase in the continent's history. It showcased an array of artistic mediums such as photography, film, painting, and sculpture, each offering insights into the dynamic relationship between African artistic expression and the continent's complex path to independence.

"Africa Remix," held in 2007 at the Johannesburg Art Gallery and previously in major cities like Düsseldorf, London, Paris, and Tokyo, was a monumental exhibition presenting contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora. This global tour brought African art to a wider audience and integrated it more fully into the international art dialogue. More than 80 artists from 25 countries were shown in this exhibition. Directed by Simon Njami, it exhibition displayed a broad array of artistic identities to the global stage.

These exhibitions underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of contemporary African art. Prominent curatorial figures like Okwui Enwezor and Thelma Golden have long advocated for the recognition of artists from the African diaspora. Their efforts have contributed to the slow but steady change in the museum landscape. Despite their efforts, a stark reality of persistent underrepresentation was revealed by an investigation conducted by Artnet. Since 2008, only 2.37% of all acquisitions and gifts and 7.6% of all exhibitions at 30 prominent American museums have been of work by African American artists (Halperin & Burns, 2018). It took years for the curatorial world to address these disparities. In 2018, the number of solo and thematic exhibitions focusing on African American artists increased by nearly 66%, and museums acquired a record number of works by African American artists (Halperin & Burns, 2018).

The Baltimore Museum of Art has been a leader in acquiring works by people of color. In 2018, it raised \$16 million by deaccessioning works by white male artists to purchase pieces by under-represented figures (Kenney, 2021). The museum's "Now Is The Time" exhibition features

acquisitions made with these proceeds, reflecting a commitment to equity and representation of the city's predominantly Black population (Kenney, 2021).

A significant step has been the appointment of diversity and inclusion directors in major art museums across various cities, including New York, Washington, D.C., Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, St Louis, and Toledo (Kenney, 2021). The Phillips Collection, for instance, received a \$2 million gift to endow its diversity position permanently. Other museums are hiring consultants for anti-racism staff training and drafting workplace discrimination policies (Kenney, 2021).

F) The slow adjustment of the art market

Initially, African artists encountered challenges in gaining recognition and commercial success, evidenced by their limited representation in galleries and sparse presence at major art fairs and auctions. However, a shift began to emerge, notably in London, which developed into a key center for contemporary African art. The city's historical connections to former African colonies enriched its art market, facilitating the growth of new galleries, expanding institutional collections, and a thriving auction market (Sharp, 2016). This culminated in Sotheby's launching its first auction dedicated to African modern and contemporary art in May 2017. Additionally, the London art fair 1-54, established in 2013, significantly contributed to this progress, showcasing the rising global demand for African art, with numerous works being incorporated into museums and private collections worldwide (Sharp, 2016).

The American market, however, was slower to mirror these developments. A turning point came with the global prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the police killing

of Rodney King in Minneapolis in 2020. This resurgence of activism against racial discrimination and historical marginalization brought new pressure on cultural institutions and market structures, demanding more equitable representation of minority artists and challenging the prevailing Western-centric narrative in art history (Mouraux Durand-Ruel; Zarobell, 2023). This cultural shift, described by Tina Campt as the "Black Renaissance," signified not just an artistic and social awakening but also marked an economic emergence in the art market, particularly benefiting Ghanaian, Nigerian, and South African artists (Mouraux Durand-Ruel; Zarobell, 2023).

The U.S. market for contemporary African art has since witnessed substantial growth and diversification. A key indicator of this expansion is the notable increase in auction sales, with contemporary African artists generating an impressive \$63 million in 2022, almost doubling the sales figures from the pre-pandemic era (Abrams, 2020). In addition to the traditional art markets in Europe, significant sales have been recorded in New York and Hong Kong, indicating the global appeal of contemporary African art. Christie's and Sotheby's have seen heated price records races for African artists' works with figures reaching \$4.47 million for a painting by Njideka Akunyili Crosby at Christie's New York (Abrams, 2020).

These trends suggest that the contemporary African art market in the U.S. is not only growing but also becoming increasingly integrated into the global art market. The diversity of collectors and the geographical expansion of sales channels point to a robust and promising future for contemporary African art on the global stage.

III. METHODOLOGY

In understanding the dynamics of the art world, this research aims to trace the trajectories of three contemporary African artists who have carved a niche for themselves in the United States. Success in the domain of art is not merely a matter of subjective taste but can also be gauged using tangible metrics. Some of these metrics include the monetary value of artworks, frequency and reputation of gallery exhibitions, and inclusion in cultural institutions' collections.

To trace the rise of representation of contemporary African artists in the U.S., this research provides an in-depth exploration of three artist journeys, charting their transition from margins to museum exhibitions. These artists have seen their works gain increasing attention in the United States leading to major solo shows and resulting in the increasing value of their artworks. Born in Africa, all three migrated to Western nations, adopted figurative art styles, created mixed-media paintings, and addressed themes like migration, colonization, and the African Diaspora. This research will conduct case studies on Omar Ba (Senegalese-Swiss), Toyin Ojih Odutola (Nigerian-American), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (Nigerian-American) to examine their careers, techniques, conveyed messages, gallery representation, and museum exhibitions that were pivotal in their trajectories and their artwork's valuation.

This study will scrutinize the extent of the artists' control and influence — their artistic agency — over the creation and dissemination of their works. This examination will reveal how the dynamics between artists, galleries, and museums are evolving, marking a significant shift in their interrelationships.

To gather comprehensive data, this research delved into press articles, gallery and artist websites, artists' CVs, exhibition catalogs, online interviews, and books.

Furthermore, I engaged as a participant observer at Phillips New York, working in the Modern and Contemporary Art Department during the summer. My role involved conducting in-depth research to determine artworks' provenance, historical context, and literary references to assist specialists in appraising pieces. This position at Phillips granted insights into auction house marketing strategies, artwork consignment considerations, client and artwork sourcing, and profit-maximizing approaches. Immersed in this milieu, I interviewed various art specialists regarding market trends and the burgeoning interest in Contemporary African art.

Beyond my experience at Phillips, I interviewed key art professionals instrumental in promoting contemporary African artists, especially the ones studied in this research. These interviews enabled me to better understand market dynamics, sales strategies, exhibitions processes leading to the successful journey of contemporary artists.

Interviews conducted with the following art professionals:

- Omar Ba, artist
- Mathieu Templon, Gallery director (New York)
- Barth Pralong, Gallery founder (Geneva, Switzerland)
- Leslie Cozzi, Curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art
- Hannah Traore, Gallery founder (New York)
- Avery Singer, Contemporary Art Specialist at Phillips (New York)

- Sofia Delgado Beauperthuy, Cataloguer at Phillips (New York)
- Ferguson Amo, artist and content manager at Phillips (New York)
- Jacqueline Francis, scholar (San Francisco)
- Genevieve Hyacinthe, scholar (San Francisco)

Drawing from a blend of quantitative data, hands-on experiential learning, and deep qualitative insights gathered through interviews, this research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the complexities and driving forces behind these artists success.

IV. FIELD WORK FINDINGS ON THE MARKET

A) Commodification of Contemporary African art

While working at the auction house Phillips, I quickly realized how artworks are commodified to maximize revenue for the company. In 2023, the Modern and Contemporary Art department sold 1776 objects across twelve sales.

The sales process at Phillips is meticulously structured. Collectors typically approach Phillips when interested in selling a work. Phillips then conducts a swift analysis and provides a consignment proposal, estimating the work's potential selling price. Works of low quality, questionable authenticity, or minor value are not accepted for consignment. Clients often compare sales estimates from competitors like Christie's and Sotheby's, typically selecting the auction house offering the most attractive estimate. For artworks exceeding one million dollars in value, auction houses often propose a comprehensive consignment package, including marketing

campaigns across social media, newsletters, websites, and reduced vendor's commissions. A specialist advises on the optimal timing and location for the sale. After negotiating and finalizing the consignment terms, Phillips undertakes extensive research on the piece, gathering authenticity proofs, establishing provenance, and documenting all exhibitions where the piece was showcased. This information, crucial in enhancing the work's value, is compiled into the sale catalogue to foster trust and transparency among potential buyers.

Intense competition exists between auction houses to achieve the highest sales. Senior specialists face pressure to secure top-quality artwork consignments. As Sofia Delgado, Cataloguer of the Evening Sales, notes, most auctioned artworks are sourced from collectors, whether private individuals or public institutions. While Phillips does sell contemporary works from living artists, direct artist engagement in auction organization is rare. Auction houses operate in the secondary market, dealing with artworks previously sold to an initial client. Once sold, artists lose control over their work, which can be exhibited, resold, stored, or used as loan collateral by its new owners.

Auction sales results are pivotal to assert the valuation of any artworks. These results, available online, provide insight into how the art community, and by extension the market, values artists. However, sole reliance on auction house sales can be misleading. Private art galleries often engage in transactions which might equal or even exceed auction results in value. The opacity of this part of the art market necessitated further consultation and engagement with art professionals.

Following the Black Lives Matter movement, auction houses have seen an increasing interest from collectors to purchase artworks from contemporary African artists. As noted by

Semjen, collectors are diversifying their collections to include formally marginalized artists and be more representative of global art history (Semjen, 2023). Delgado observes that auction house collector profiles have largely remained the same, with traditional selling motivations (death, divorce, debt) now joined by "flippers" – those who acquire art to resell it quickly for profit, often breaching contractual agreements to retain the pieces for a set period (Delgado, 2023). In the past years, flippers have used this practice when purchasing the works of young artists graduating from college. This trend of flipping contemporary African artists' works for quick financial gain has garnered increasing attention since Amoako Bofo's episode.

Amoako Bofo, born in 1984, exemplifies the market's extractive approach towards artists. A figurative painter from Ghana now residing in Austria, Bofo is celebrated for his vibrant portraits that honor the African Diaspora's identity, self-determination, and dignity. His rapid ascension began with a solo exhibition at the Mariane Ibrahim gallery during the art fair Art Basel Miami in December 2019, where his paintings were initially priced at \$50,000 (Artprice, 2021). The value of his works skyrocketed the following year, with "The Lemon Bathing Suit" auctioned in February 2020 for \$881,500, vastly exceeding the \$40,000 – \$65,000 estimate. By December 2020, another painting, "Baba Diop," reached \$1.14 million at a Hong Kong auction (Artprice, 2021).

Bofo, seeking to regain control over the market, collaborated with investors to repurchase "The Lemon Bathing Suit" using their finances. He promised them art worth up to \$480,000, based on the secondary market value, with the stipulation that any profits from reselling these works would yield him a 20% share (Freeman, 2020). However, Bofo has yet to see any financial return

from these deals. This scenario with "The Lemon Bathing Suit" and similar cases exemplify Boafo's struggle to maintain control over his creations' value and distribution on the market. Even though Boafo's prominence in the contemporary art market is now established, his long-term success will depend on his gallery's ability to protect him from speculation and securing artworks in cultural institutions (Mouraux Durand-Ruel; Zarobell, 2023).

Despite efforts by emerging artists to influence market dynamics, they often find themselves eclipsed by more experienced market participants. As artworks enter the commercial domain, they become distinct entities from their creators. These artworks worth at auction houses rely on collectors' interests and will definitely impact the artists career trajectory. Either sales on the secondary market propel an artist's career or slow it down. The artist has no control over market dynamics.

The commodification of art at auction houses like Phillips, intricately structured to maximize revenue often at the expense of the artists themselves, echoes the Edward Said and Y.H. Mudimbe theories. Western art markets, especially those in New York, function as contemporary imperial centers, dictating global art trends and values. These power dynamics force many African artists to migrate or find gallery representation in the United States, perpetuating dependency between young artists and more experienced stakeholders. The phenomenon of 'flippers' buying low from young African artists and selling high in Western markets manifests a form of neo-colonialism where African talent and creativity are exploited for Western profit. Such abusive practices underscore the urgent need for a more equitable and respectful global art ecosystem.

Hannah Traore, art dealer in New York, interprets this market "explosion" as "performative", driven by speculation rather than substantive change. According to Traore, museums, under pressure to avoid being perceived as white supremacist institutions, scrambled to acquire artworks from African artists. Similarly, curators felt compelled to diversify their staff. Galleries, for their part, felt the need to represent at least one African artist to maintain legitimacy and rushed to promote figurative art from African artists because it has become "trendy". However, Traore suggests that this haste to meet demand may not always reflect a true commitment to diversifying their representation of artists. Traore advocates for a more authentic and inclusive approach that moves beyond merely fulfilling a quota or capitalizing on a trend. She aims to challenge the extractive postcolonial mindset that can pervade galleries, which sometimes capitalize on marginalized artists without addressing deeper systemic inequities. Her approach is to foster a real and lasting change in the industry.

The Black Lives Matter movement has undoubtedly opened doors for debate and provided opportunities for underrepresented artists. However, specialists note that it has not yet shifted the paradigm within the art world where the same groups of collectors dominate, and the highest prices are still often commanded by white male artists (Semjen, 2023). Barth Pralong, founder of Wild Gallery, suggest that the BLM movement acted as an accelerator for change within the art world, a call for more diversity and inclusion. Pralong believes that requests formulated by the BLM movement are likely to persist on the long-term as we are now living in a politically correct era where social consciousness and equality shape public discourse.

From a previous study, my research partner and I established new trends in the market and analyzed the surge of African artists in the global art scene since 2020 (Mouraux Durand-Ruel & Zarobell, 2023). This study examined the market value and ecosystem evolving around 51 emerging artists from the Global South. We established patterns linking unprecedented sales results with exhibition history, demonstrating the importance of artistic migration on artists' visibility and the necessity of being promoted by a variety of stakeholders. As noted, "the African continent stands out as the clear leader, being the region with the highest number of emerging artists succeeding in the global auction market. Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, in particular, are home to the most top-performing artists in our sample" (Mouraux Durand-Ruel & Zarobell, 2023, p.4). This market trend observed between 2020 and 2022 demonstrates a growing interest in artworks from the African Diaspora being showcased at major art fairs, galleries, and auction houses. The Armory Show in New York, the specialized 1-54 African Art Fair, and Cape Town Art Fair, which were created recently, have been key in promoting the work of African artists worldwide.

Despite the international drive towards multiculturalism, both Pralong and Templon, raised the point about quality, indicating that not every artist may stand the test of time. They speculate that a century or two from now, the true impact of these movements will be evident based on the artists and works that major museums like MOMA and Centre Pompidou choose to exhibit. Their objective is to identify and support the best artists, those whose work will be remembered in art history books. In this complex environment, art galleries are increasingly mindful of securing spots for their artists in esteemed venues. They need to place the work of their artists strategically to ensure the gallery's own reputation for discernment and quality.

While they are gatekeepers of art trends and influencers of market dynamics, galleries like Templon are deeply conscious of the ethical dimensions of their roles, particularly the intricate post-colonial power relations involved when they choose to represent artists from nations with a history of colonization. Galleries must navigate the complex interplay between promoting underrepresented artists and avoiding the pitfalls of cultural extraction. By focusing on the artists' caliber and the sustainability of their art careers, galleries mitigate the risks of being perceived as merely capitalizing on emerging African art. Templon's approach demonstrates an investment in its artists' future, seeking to facilitate their entry into prestigious cultural institutions.

The question remains as to whether the recent interest in Contemporary African Art is a temporary trend or a lasting shift in the market. A comparative look at the trends in Contemporary Latin American Art offers a cautionary tale. A few years ago, Latin American art experienced a surge in popularity similar to that of African art, leading to the creation of dedicated departments in auction houses, increasing number of sales and the creation of specialized fairs (Delgado, 2023). However, this interest has faded, raising questions about the long-term sustainability of the current interest in African art (Delgado, 2023).

Semjen notes that Contemporary African Art has reached a point of equilibrium, prompting collectors to adopt a more thoughtful and deliberate approach to their acquisitions (Semjen, 2023). Recognizing the excitement in past purchases that may have led to over-evaluation, buyers are now taking more time to make their choices. More questions have been raised about the sustainability of the contemporary art in general and the purchase of young artists at auctions. In

this uncertain environment, collectors continue to invest in more established artists and art movements such as Old Masters, Impressionism and Modern art among others (Semjen, 2023).

B) Artists' valuation on the market

Before delving into the artists case studies, it is necessary to understand their current valuation on the primary and secondary market. Artsy database collected the following auction sales results over the past 36 months (Artsy, 2023).

Artist	Yearly Lots Sold	Total sold lots at auctions	Sell-through rate	Average Sale Price	Highest Sale Price	Highest Sale Price Date
Omar Ba	2	12	78%	\$33,000	\$47,742	21-Sep-22
Toyin Ojih Odutola	5	38	90%	\$480,000	\$2,198,000	18-Nov-22
Njideka Akunyili Crosby	2	22	100%	\$1,200,000	\$4,740,000	17-Nov-22

Figure 1. Auction sales results obtained in the past 36 months (Artsy, 2023).

Starting with Omar Ba, the data indicates that on average, two of his works are sold each year at auction, with a sell-through rate of 78% - referring to the percentage of works listed for sale which were actually purchased. The average sale price for his works stands at \$33,000, suggesting a consistent market value. However, his highest-selling piece fetched \$47,742 on September 21, 2022, which was 74% higher than its estimated value, reflecting a strong market demand and perhaps a growing interest in his work. Ba has seen the lowest number of artworks sold on the secondary market with only 12 pieces sold at auctions. The prices sold on the secondary market are also lower than the ones announced on the primary market by his galleries. At the 2022 Armory Show, Ba's pieces were priced between \$17,000 and \$200,000 (Dozier, 2022). These disparities between primary and secondary market prices can be attributed to the paintings' size and Ba's

nascent presence in the secondary market, which often takes time to find its footing. Pralong noted that while Ba's works initially sold for 400 Swiss francs in 2008, large formats now command prices between 100,000 and 150,000 euros, aligning with Templon's pricing at fairs. This trajectory highlights the evolving recognition and valuation of Ba's work in the complex art market ecosystem.

Both Toyin Ojih Odutola and Njideka Akunyili Crosby have seen a higher number of artworks sold on the secondary market and at higher prices. Toyin Ojih Odutola shows a higher activity with five lots sold yearly and an even better sell-through rate of 90%. Her average sale price is significantly higher at \$480,000, and her highest sale to date reached an impressive \$2,198,000 on November 18, 2022. This particular work sold at 35% above its estimated value, demonstrating her strong market presence and the high esteem collectors hold for her art.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby's results are notable for the 100% sell-through rate, which means every work of hers put up for auction sold—a rare feat in the art market. The average sale price for her works is \$1.2 million, highlighting her position in the higher echelons of the market. Her highest sale price at auction is a remarkable \$4.74 million for "The Beautiful Ones, 2012" on November 17, 2022, which was previously auctioned in 2017 for \$3.075 million, indicating a substantial increase in value over a five-year period.

The data serves as a testament to the escalating interest and value placed on their works over the past three years. When comparing these three artists, it is evident that each occupies a distinct segment of the market. Omar Ba's works average below \$100K, Toyin Ojih Odutola's

around \$500K, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby's exceed \$1 million. Evaluating these artists' paths offers invaluable insights into varying degrees of success within the art realm.

V. CASE STUDIES ON THREE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS

This research will examine the career evolution, migration and artworks created by Omar Ba (Senegalese-Swiss), Toyin Ojin Odotola (Nigerian-American) and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (Nigerian-American). These artists have had exhibitions both in museums and galleries in the United States recently. Each artist employs a distinctive technique to portray social justice issues in their own way. By shedding light on their stories and artistic contributions, we can better understand the evolving landscape of the art world and their role in addressing pressing global issues.

A) Omar Ba

Omar Ba was born in 1977 in a Serer village located 150 km from Dakar in the Fatick region of Senegal. Ba's work engages with some of the most urgent issues of our time: the growing inequality of wealth and power globally, questions around immigration, and our changing relationship with nature. Ba regularly draws from and intertwines a range of symbols, techniques and tools from both the African and the European cultures (Wilde Gallery, 2023).

Essentially a painter, Ba began at a very young age, on the streets of Dakar, to cover walls with his animated forms for passers-by (Singer, 2022). As stated by the artist himself, "I've always loved drawing. I was so good at drawing people and objects that my elementary school teachers used to ask me to draw pictures featured in science, history, and geography books on the

blackboard. There weren't enough books for all the pupils, so it was a way of ensuring that everyone had access to the same information” (interview with artist).

Despite his innate talent, Ba was not destined to become an artist. He explained that it is difficult to become an artist in Senegal as people are considered professionally successful when they have their own business or work for the state (interview with artist). To comply with social norms, Ba began studying mechanics in Dakar to work later in factories. One of his teachers once asked him: “What are you doing here Omar? You should be study fine arts” (interview with artist). This conversation changed Ba’s mindset who began studying at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Dakar. After graduation, Ba worked with a Swiss art teacher on murals in Dakar. Following this project, the professor advised Ba to come and study at École des Beaux-Arts de Genève, which he did shortly afterward (interview with artist). Ba’s artistic journey was thus guided by unique encounters.

Upon his relocation to Geneva, he experienced a profound transformation, realizing that he had become a foreigner (Njami, 2022). Prior to his move, Ba exclusively engaged in abstract painting. Examining his artistic expression, it became evident that his abstract language lacked resonance and that he needed to find a way to connect with an audience he knew little about (Njami, 2022). Breaking with the aesthetics taught in Dakar, he found himself once again on the margins in Switzerland. The initial distance from his home provided a unique opportunity to embrace a new painting style and immerse himself in a different cultural environment. The imperative to communicate is intrinsic to Ba's work despite linguistic and cultural divides. Ba's distinctive style is characterized by blending human and animal forms within imaginative landscapes, crafting a

unique visual narrative. Njami highlights, “the figurative form he develops, in which nature remains omnipresent, is the language he feels is most appropriate for his drawings” (2022, p.16).

After graduating, Ba encountered a number of financial difficulties. Married with a newborn son, he had to find a steady job that could pay him a regular salary. He divided his time as follows: 80% for his work as an art teacher and 20% for his creations (interview with artist). Not having enough time to work on large formats, Ba mainly made drawings on A4 paper. A Swiss curator spotted his work, organized a group show, and advised him to contact the Wilde gallery located in Geneva. It took Ba several years to knock on the gallery's door. He felt a sense of "shame presenting these small drawings to a prestigious Swiss gallery exhibiting contemporary giants like Marina Abramovic” (interview with artist). After exhibiting few A4 paper drawings in the gallery’s basement, de Wilde Gallery organized a group show featuring his work. His works attracted increasing attention from the public, collectors, and cultural institutions. This exhibition marked the beginning of a wonderful international journey.

The artist is now supported by the Wilde Gallery in Switzerland and Templon Gallery in France, Belgium, and the United States. Ba’s works have been exhibited in numerous cultural institutions, including the Centre Pompidou (France), Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (Belgium), Contemporary Calgary (Canada), Royal Academy of Arts (United Kingdom), Baltimore Museum of Art (United States), among others.

- **Ba's Canvas: Blending Traditions and Challenging Norms**

Ba's artistic process and material choices serve as a reflection of his deep engagement with the local community. His method typically begins with the utilization of photographs taken in and around Dakar, the Senegalese capital, capturing the vibrant essence of youth culture and daily life in markets, streets, and beaches (Wilde Gallery, 2023). Ba then transfers these images onto colored paper, pinning them to his studio wall for reference.

Ba employs a diversity of techniques and materials for his paintings, including oil and acrylic paint, watercolors, inks, wax crayons, ballpoint pens, white correction fluid, pastels, and colored pencils (Cozzi, 2022). He achieves textural and chromatic effects that, in other contexts, might be achieved using beads, fabric, glitter, and appliqués (Cozzi, 2022). Ba also employs feathery strokes created with the tips of his fingers. Additional details, such as repeating circles, are drawn in with pencils. He often builds the composition from a solid black background, a deliberate choice rooted in subverting the historical racism inherent in the Western canon, which has long associated beauty with whiteness (Power Plant Pages, 2019). Ba's technique, thus, becomes a powerful vehicle for challenging and redefining established norms within the realm of artistic representation. Layered on top of this black structure, a profusion of vegetative texture is drawn with bright primary colors. Fictive characters and symbols are then added in this vegetative environment to narrate a story. Ba constructs his paintings in a particular way. He does not follow the classical canons of perspective established during the Italian Renaissance (Singer, 2022). Instead, he uses figures and vegetation to create a fictional universe.

Ba's 2016 portrait, "Les Autres" (The Others), is a striking tribute to both his mother and wife, blending elements of African and European traditions. The scale and placement of its subjects reflects their importance: the two women overshadow the artist himself, positioned to the right. This portrayal brings to mind Moustapha Dimé's 1992 work, "Serer Woman/Femme Sérère", which celebrates the feminine as the foundation of all existence (Cozzi, 2022). Floating above a fictive world, the two women look peacefully to the viewer. Though the layout of Ba's piece might remind one of an Italian Renaissance Madonna on her throne, the cultural symbols present—such as cotton fields and mosques—draw inspiration from a blend of diasporic and Muslim influences.



Figure 2. "Les Autres". Omar Ba. 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Wilde Gallery.

The artist's complex visual expressions are deeply attached to personal and societal history. Through the use of allegories and ambivalent titles, Ba's creations invite the viewer to reflect on the world in which we live, with the question of the interaction between the outside world and our “own inner heart” (Singer, 2022). Ba raises the question of the gaze and subjectivity, and with it, that of otherness. His work actively challenges the generalized and often reductive views typically associated with African art.

To interpret Ba's work requires a nuanced understanding of African history, challenging Eurocentric narratives. His paintings suggest a need for the West to reexamine its history, challenging assumptions of cultural superiority and political sovereignty deeply embedded in European and American worldviews. Ba's art confronts these Western-centric ideas by showcasing a history where African and European elements are deeply interconnected. Frequent motifs in his artwork, such as globes and the Atlantic Ocean, highlight the idea of global interconnection. Ba's paintings serve as reminders of our shared history and responsibility in past and current events (Cozzi, 2022).

- **Bridging Dakar and New York: Ba's Rise in the American Art Scene**

Ba has made a mark on the art world in Africa and Europe, and his influence is now extending to the United States. His debut in New York was facilitated by his participation in the residency program offered by the International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP) in 2019. During this residency, Ba had the opportunity to connect with collectors, curators, and journalists, immersing himself in the American art scene (interview with Templon).

His stay in the U.S. coincided with a particularly noteworthy period, encompassing the elections, Black Lives Matter protest movements, and the global health crisis. This unique context prompted Ba to recognize shared issues affecting people in Dakar, Senegal, and the United States. This realization became the driving force behind his exhibition titled "Right of Soil – Right to Dream" at the Templon Gallery in New York. This residency program also led him to meet with Leslie Cozzi, curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art. This encounter led a few years later to his debut in a U.S. museum with the exhibition "Political Animals" at the Baltimore Museum of Art (interview with Cozzi).

- **“Right of Soil” – Right to Dream, Templon Gallery, New York, 2022**

Influenced by the insights of historian-philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Ba offers a critical exploration of prejudices against African democracies. He delves deep into the complex historical and cultural dynamics that restrict personal freedoms in Africa and their subsequent effects on Afro-American identity (Templon, 2022). Ba recognizes the profound influence of recent Black Lives Matter movements on the aspirations and future of African youth (Templon, 2022).

The artist aims to bridge the gap between African Americans and African communities by advocating for equal opportunities, asserting that every individual, regardless of birthplace, should enjoy the same rights in education, work, and community life. The title "Right of Soil – Right to Dream" encapsulates the essence of his philosophy, affirming that everyone has the right to pursue and realize their dreams (Templon, 2022). Traveling between Dakar, Geneva, Paris, and Brussels provides the artist with a unique perspective, allowing him to reflect on global challenges,

particularly the complexities of emigration. He endeavors to offer a positive vision for those often marginalized, victims of exploitation, systemic injustice, and seeks to rewrite history through his paintings.

Templon Gallery initiated its display of Ba's artwork in Brussels and Paris before introducing him to the audience in New York. Ba was the first African artist promoted by the gallery, which now counts four artists from this continent (interview with Templon). Shedding light on the gallery's approach, Templon emphasizes their dedication to discovering and supporting the best artists, aligning with a specific idea of contemporary art. The gallery's long-term objective “is not to chase trends but to maintain a consistent standard in their selection of talents” (interview with Templon). The decision to represent Ba was driven by the excellence of his work and the potential of securing future exhibitions in cultural institutions.

From a strategic standpoint, Templon Gallery inaugurated its new space in New York in September 2022 with the "Right of Soil – Right of Dream" exhibition. The year 2022 has been pivotal for the artist, highlighted by his triumphant display at the 14th Dakar Biennale and his debut solo exhibitions in U.S. galleries and museums.

As pointed out by Mathieu Templon, the collaborative effort between the gallery and Ba goes beyond the gallery's space. The gallery has increasingly showcased his work at international art fairs, crucial for the artist visibility towards collectors, journalists, and critics. The symbiotic relationship between Ba and the gallery exemplifies a mutually beneficial dynamic, with Ba

creating captivating works for the gallery's booths, attracting major collectors in the process (interview with Mathieu Templon).

- **“Political Animals”, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2022-2023**

Political Animals marked the inaugural U.S. museum exhibition for Ba, showcasing fifteen paintings created on canvas and corrugated cardboard, along with innovative modular works fashioned from shoeboxes and a site-specific mural. This retrospective offers a comprehensive exploration of the artist's creative evolution, featuring both early and recent pieces. Ba's evocative mixed-media paintings depict surreal scenes with hybrid animal-human figures, unraveling the lingering impact of European colonialism in Africa.

Ba elucidated, "I have often mixed human beings and animals. I have noticed that human beings have an animal instinct which is even worse than the animal kingdom. It's a bit like the jungle. Domination, the act of showing force, of being able to impose power and humiliate populations, is something that I often notice in humans" (Odufu, 2022). The exhibition's title itself underscores the pervasive use of animal metaphors in political discourse to illustrate power dynamics and societal inequalities.

After observing dictators leading African countries, Ba noted that formerly colonized populations still lived in precarious conditions. Through his paintings, Ba sought to instill hope, especially in the younger generation. He confessed that the pandemic shocked him with the lack of solidarity between countries and humans, leading him to view human reactions akin to animal

survival instincts. For two years, Ba struggled to paint, unable to find the inspiration and strength to depict his observations. He slowly resumed painting in 2022, preparing for multiple shows.

In this exhibition, Ba's mural, fashioned from cardboard boxes, emerges as a symbolic centerpiece, encapsulating memory and functioning as an archival wall that carries multiple connotations. This mural becomes the foundation of Ba's narrative, embodying separation, division, and a wall of lamentations. The inclusion of Tipp-Ex (white-out) adds another layer, symbolizing the act of erasure for rewriting—a dialogue between what was and what is. In an interconnected world, Ba asserts that understanding global history is vital for comprehending the present and envisioning the future (Cozzi, 2022).

Ba's works are not meant to be representational. Creation is a strength that triggers dialogue, prompting spectators to question their perspectives (interview with artist). In fact, Ba's work addresses political inclusion, youth culture, economic disparities, and protest—issues relevant in both Baltimore and Dakar.

As stated by Leslie Cozzi, curator at the BMA, this exhibition aligns with the museum's mission. The mission is to "bring the world to Baltimore and Baltimore to the world" while prioritizing social justice in decision-making. In recent years, the museum has notably increased exhibitions featuring artworks by women artists, LGBTQIA artists, artists of color, and minority groups. Leslie Cozzi emphasizes that this commitment predates the Black Lives Matter movements, with the museum striving to be inclusive of all of Baltimore's inhabitants.

Following the exhibition, the museum acquired a piece from Ba through Templon Gallery, requiring approvals from the curatorial and registrar teams and the board committee (interview with Cozzi). This acquisition marks a milestone in the artist's career as it was the first artwork acquired by an American museum.

B) Toyin Ojih Odutola

Born in Ife, Nigeria, Ojih Odutola relocated to the United States at five years old with her mother and younger brother, joining their father in California's Bay Area. The family's subsequent move in 1994 to Huntsville, Alabama marked a transformative period in her life and artistic perspective (Gyarkye, 2021).

Growing up in Alabama, a state deeply interwoven with America's racial history, Ojih Odutola was confronted with the multifaceted complexities of her black identity. The move to Alabama, as she recalls, was like a "history lesson" – a profound experience that propelled her to question societal impositions and the intricacies of power dynamics (Fox, 2020). Through the act of drawing, which she began at a young age, Ojih Odutola addressed racism and sexism she encountered at a young age (Fox, 2020).

She earned her BA from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and her MFA from California College of the Arts in San Francisco. Her first solo exhibition, "(Maps)" was organized in 2011 at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, just before her final year at the California College of Arts (Gyarkye, 2021). This exhibition introduced the world to her unique style—hypnotic ink

portraits of Black individuals, defined by soothing pen strokes and vigorous shading. Jack Shainman Gallery has represented the artist since then.

Ojih Odutola has participated in exhibitions at various institutions, including The Barbican Centre, London (2020); The Drawing Center, New York (2018—19); The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2017—18); Brooklyn Museum, New York (2016); Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2015); the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York (2015, 2012); Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield (2013); and the Menil Collection, Houston, (2012).

Her work is now part of the following permanent collections: The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Birmingham Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, New Orleans Museum of Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Spencer Museum of Art, Honolulu Museum of Art, and the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian).

- **Inked Identities: Ojih Odutola's Exploration of Self and Society**

Ojih Odutola's artworks stand out with their vivid multimedia illustrations on paper, reshaping the traditional perceptions of portraiture and storytelling. Her creations dive deep into various subjects such as socio-economic disparities, the enduring impacts of colonialism, the complex facets of queer and gender constructs, the symbolic importance of blackness, and the poignant tales of migration and relocation.

Ojih Odutola has a distinct fascination with topography, leading her to develop a unique artistic style. She uses basic drawing tools like ballpoint pens, pencils, pastels, and charcoal. Her technique involves layering, blending, and adding intricate details, which not only adds depth to her artwork but also enriches the narratives she presents. This layered storytelling makes her work feel like intricately woven stories. The use of pens, typically linked to writing, helps her turn her artworks into evolving visual stories, akin to chapters in a novel or a film.

Ojih Odutola crafts her solo exhibitions with the meticulous care of a director setting scenes for a film. Each artwork serves as a frame, a sequence that when pieced together, unfolds a larger story much like a movie does over its runtime. The narratives across her shows are interconnected, creating an overarching plotline that guides the viewer through a cinematic journey. The continuity from one piece to the next is akin to a visual storyboard, where characters develop, themes evolve, and stories progress. This cinematic storytelling technique captivates audiences, immersing them in a visual and thematic experience that transcends the static nature of traditional art viewing. As spectators move from one work to another, they become absorbed in the unfolding plot that Ojih Odutola lays out before them.

Drawing inspiration from a blend of art history, contemporary culture, and her personal experiences, Ojih Odutola's works are deeply rooted in her journey. Born in Nigeria and later relocating to the United States, the essence of movement and self-transformation resonates in her art. Reflecting on this, she shares, “The places my family and I have called home have continually shaped us. Adapting and molding ourselves to fit into different contexts has become second nature. This personal evolution is something that has stayed with me, and it's a sentiment shared by my siblings” (Ojih Odutola, 2014). At the heart of her creations is an exploration of identity—how

one perceives oneself and is perceived by others. Her art becomes a mirror, reflecting the ongoing interplay between personal introspection and societal expectations, with the latter often leading to feelings of alienation or rejection.

According to various art critiques, her method isn't solely about depicting physical appearances but revealing the histories, emotions, and narratives embedded within the individual. Her focus on skin isn't just about the external but what lies beneath: the experiences, the memories, the traumas, and the joys (Artsy, 2023). The layers she creates on the canvas echo the layers of human existence, making her work relatable and resonant (Artsy, 2023). Ojih Odutola's artistry stands at the intersection of technique and narrative, of personal and universal, offering viewers not just a visual treat but a deeply emotional and intellectual experience.

- **"When Legends Die", Jack Shainman Gallery, 2018**

One of Ojih Odutola's iconic gallery exhibition was "When Legends Die" hosted by the Jack Shainman Gallery in 2018. It showcased a series of artworks that continued the artist's exploration of an imagined aristocratic Nigerian family. This exhibition was a culmination of Ojih Odutola's creative journey into an imaginative world of Nigerian aristocracy. It was the last of a series of exhibitions dedicated to this theme, depicting a fictional nobleman and his husband at the center of an expansive family narrative. The artworks represented a fascinating blend of reality and imagination, bringing to life an entire family tree through Ojih Odutola's artistic vision (Jack Shainman website).

This exhibition stood out for its powerful portrayal of Black identity and luxury, offering viewers a glimpse into the everyday lives of her characters "outside of the parameters of a white gaze" noted Amber Jamilla Musser. The pieces were a testament to the richness of Black

experiences, showcasing the artist's ability to weave together various elements like landscape, fashion, and fine art into a cohesive visual story (Musser, 2020).

Ojih Odutola, reflecting on the end of this narrative journey with "When Legends Die," shared her intense emotional connection with the characters she had developed over three years. She described the process as an immersive, challenging, yet rewarding experience, marking a significant milestone in her artistic career (Will Heinrich, Martha Schwendener, and Jillian Steinhauer, 2018).

A notable piece from the exhibition, "What Her Daughter Sees" (2018), captured the essence of Ojih Odutola's artistry. This work featured a young woman in a domestic setting, executed with a combination of pastels, charcoal, and pencil. The artist's skillful use of color and texture brought the scene to life, especially in the rendering of skin tones. The intimate portrayal placed viewers in a personal moment, highlighting the significance of self-representation and the power of portraiture in storytelling (Will Heinrich, Martha Schwendener, and Jillian Steinhauer, 2018).

This three-year exhibition project set the tone of Ojih Odutola's creative process. Interested in narrating a story around her paintings, Ojih Odutola immerse the viewer in a visual novel.

- **"A Countervailing Theory", Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2021-2022**

The rapid ascension of Ojih Odutola's work echoes a present-day craving to witness Black subjects in traditional art institutions from which they were historically absent (Gyarkye, 2021). Ojih Odutola's "A Countervailing Theory" exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum amplifies this narrative, urging audiences to rethink ingrained beliefs and prevailing stories.

“I started asking, who has a right to create their own stories?” Ojih Odutola voiced in a poignant discussion. She yearned to craft artwork that "visually stood apart from occidental picture-making, that felt very ‘other’." Determined to "flip the script in every aspect," she employs a striking monochromatic technique using white charcoal and pastel on black canvas, deliberately inverting traditional artistic representations (Hirschhorn Museum, 2021).

The 40 large-scale monochromatic drawings narrate a fictional mythology that dissects systems of power, culture, gender, and history. Ojih Odutola's invented myth is rooted in a prehistoric civilization. Within this mythical society, Ojih Odutola introduces a dominant matriarchal group known as the Eshu, resembling Amazonian warrior women. Alongside them exists a subordinate group, the Koba, humanoid males whose role centers around serving the Eshu, primarily through activities like mining and food production. In this realm, any form of interaction between these distinct classes, particularly heterosexual relationships, is strictly prohibited (Larson, 2021). However, an Eshu named Akanke and a Koba named Aldo (each of whom already has a partner from their own social class) transcend these rules and form a bond, leading to the system's collapse (Larson, 2021).

Ojih Odutola highlights Aldo's journey into the oppressive system, emphasizing how such systems can seamlessly integrate individuals, making them internalize and accept their roles without question. By doing so, she sheds light on the idea that systems of power are not just external; they become deeply internalized, shaping one's consciousness. Akanke's path offers a stark contrast, showing a member of the ruling class confronting the inherent unfairness of the system (Ojih Odutola, 2020).

The intertwining lives of Akanke and Aldo underscore the potential of dialogue, empathy, and collective action to dismantle oppressive systems. Their union gives birth to a child symbolizing their combined ideologies and races, suggesting that societal transformation is not just about the present but also the future generations.

The drawing, “To the Next Outpost,” captures the two groups’ power differential. Akanke stands imperiously gazing the distant landscape, a staff in her hand while Aldo naked seems struggling to pull a heavy load of stone with a rope. Themes of colonialism, systemic oppression, and historical injustices are palpable, culminating in a realization that transformative change often demands personal sacrifice.



Figure 3. "To the Next Outpost". Toyin Ojih Odutola. 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Some of the images are pure landscapes, others represent groups of figures with beautifully- choreographed movements. In the « Mating Ritual » is a monochromatic drawing featuring a sense of movement and physicality. Three figures engage in what appears to be a struggle or a dance, their muscles defined with exquisite detail in the play of light and shadow. The background contrasts the dynamic figures with its geometric patterns and organic forms,

adding to the tension of the scene. The use of light and texture brings a three-dimensional aspect to the bodies, emphasizing the interplay between the figures and their environment.



Figure 4. "Mating Ritual". Toyin Ojih Odutola. 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

This exhibition reflects her commitment to blending history with fiction, crafting an "informed imaginary." With a clear emphasis on queerness and a fresh perspective on gender power dynamics, Ojih Odutola's artworks don't just critique our societal constructs, but they also offer an invitation to question and reimagine them.

C) Nidjeka Ayinkil Crosby

Njideka Akunyili Crosby, a renowned contemporary African artist, was born in Enugu, Nigeria, in 1983. She currently resides in Los Angeles, California. She creates densely layered figurative compositions demonstrating strong attachments to the country of her birth and to her adopted home (Victoria Miro Gallery, 2023).

Growing up in a small village in southeastern Nigeria, she experienced a significant cultural shift when she moved to Lagos at the age of 10 to attend a girls' boarding school. In Lagos, she encountered the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city and was exposed to elements of Western culture through interactions with her wealthier classmates (Solway, 2017). This exposure included American TV shows like "Friends". These early experiences in Nigeria would influence her later work, as she examines Western culture (Solway, 2017).

In 1999, at the age of 16, Akunyili Crosby moved to the United States. She pursued her education at Swarthmore College and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Later, she earned her master's degree at Yale University. It was during her time at Yale that she had a pivotal encounter with the work of Kerry James Marshall (Pogrebin, 2023) leading her to see the portrayal of skin in a new light. Marshall's philosophy of learning the rules of Western portraiture to break them resonated with Akunyili Crosby, and it became a guiding principle in her own practice (Pogrebin, 2023).

In 2011, Akunyili Crosby became an artist in residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, a period she describes as crucial for her career. "The Studio Museum (...) gave me a huge free studio space for a year that I had access to 24 hours a day every day, including the holidays" (Pogrebin, 2023).

As time progressed, Akunyili Crosby's artworks began gaining attention. In 2012, the renowned Victoria Miro Gallery in Europe started representing her, and by 2018, she was also being represented in the U.S. by the prestigious David Zwirner Gallery. These significant

partnerships paved the way for her artworks to be showcased in various cultural institutions worldwide. Some notable exhibitions include those at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas (2018-2019); National Portrait Gallery, London (2018-2019); Baltimore Museum of Art (2017-2018); Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida (2016); and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (2015).

Furthermore, Akunyili Crosby's artworks have been acquired by major museums' collections globally including the Yale University Art Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Tate, The Norton Museum of Art, Zeitz MOCAA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, MOMA, and the Whitney Museum of American Art (Victoria Miro Gallery, 2023).

- **Interweaving Mixed Media with Colonial Iconography**

Akunyili Crosby is celebrated for her exceptional skill in combining various art forms in her pieces. She blends drawing, painting, collage, and printmaking. These artworks beautifully merge her Nigerian roots with her American experiences, using a mix of visual symbols, historical nods, and personal moments (Pogrebin, 2023).

Her works, on initial inspection, appear to revolve around interior settings and seemingly everyday scenes. Figures, often derived from family and friends, populate her compositions, engaging in various activities such as eating, drinking, or watching TV. However, it's the closer inspection that reveals a second layer of images - vibrant, patterned photo-collages that draw from

Nigerian pop culture and politics. Here, one encounters pop stars, models, celebrities, lawyers in white wigs, and military dictators, an intricate fusion of personal snapshots, magazine clippings, internet-sourced images, and personal memories (Victoria Miro Gallery, 2023).

The influences of pop culture in Akunyili Crosby's work provide an opportunity to map cultural trends and transformations from the British colony to the American influence on the territory due to the exploitation of the national oil wealth (MOCA, 2018). Akunyili Crosby uses colonial symbols to explore the ways in which colonial legacies persist and mutate over time. She often features porcelain tea pot within her painting, making references to the British tea culture brought to Nigeria during the colonial Empire. The tea culture is now part of the everyday life in Nigeria.

In addition to tea culture, textiles have played a significant role in her art. She draws parallels between her artistic journey and the fabric-making industry. A vivid manifestation of this endeavor lies in her captivating exploration of Vlisco fabrics. Initially conceived in Holland, these textiles were intended to cater to the Indonesian market, providing an alternative to the time-consuming production of batik (MOCA, 2018). The goal was to mechanize their creation, yielding fabrics in vibrant, intense colors. However, this innovation initially failed to gain traction due to its perceived mechanical nature, which seemed to sacrifice the artistry of handmade craftsmanship. Vlisco persisted in their quest, and by the 1920s, their fabrics had permeated African culture, becoming an integral part of the continent's rich heritage. These textiles have become so deeply woven into the African cultural fabric that they are often colloquially referred to as "African fabric," despite their Dutch origins (MOCA, Los Angeles, 2018).

The significance of this phenomenon lies in the way formerly colonized places, including Africa, have taken inherited traditions and over time, have imbued them with unique character, ultimately asserting ownership. This transformative process is exemplified by local textile artisans who embraced the techniques employed by Vlisco, incorporating them into their own craft. At a certain point, these artisans even began to incorporate local photographs into the fabric's design, further personalizing its cultural significance and enabling people to wear these textiles at a variety of events. Thus, through this exploration of Vlisco fabrics and the broader world of textiles, Njideka Akunyili Crosby highlights the intricate dynamics of colonial commerce, and the power of tradition reimagined and reclaimed (MOCA, 2018).



Figure 5. "Dwell: Aso Ebi". Njideka Akunyili Crosby. 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery.

The painting, *Dwell: Aso Ebi*, features images from Nigerian fashion magazines, society pages, and specially printed fabrics bearing portraits. It highlights symbols of colonial trade, such as tea and traditional textiles. Akunyili Crosby's piece illustrates her skill in blending various art forms, her deep insights into colonial motifs, and her capacity to connect historical contexts with contemporary realities. To Nigerians, these images carry a deep sense of recognition, while for others, they may simply depict individuals sipping tea. The interpretation of these symbols varies, influenced by one's history and affiliations (MOCA, Los Angeles, 2018).

- **Living “in between” Two Worlds**

Akunyili Crosby's art is deeply rooted in the hybridity of her homeland. Nigeria, with its over 200 different cultural groups, embodies a diversity that has nurtured an environment where traditions are continually evolving, adapting, and appropriating new ideas. Akunyili Crosby wants to channel the energy of the place. Taking inspiration from the Malian photographer, Malik Sidibé, known for his black-and-white photographs of the youth during Mali's transition from French colonial rule to independence in the 1960s (Moma, 2021). His iconic images encapsulate the prevailing sense of joy, freedom, and zest for life during that transformative era. Following Malik Sidibé's influence, Akunyili Crosby aims to depict the energy and culture of Nigeria nowadays (WMagazine).

In her artwork, Akunyili Crosby skillfully portrays a fusion of symbols drawn from both American and Nigerian cultures, incorporating elements rooted in colonial trade, such as tea, fabrics, hairstyles, and architectural influences, along with a touch of American pop culture through references to the movie, fashion, and music industries. Her intention in using a diversity

of components is to challenge viewers' conventional interpretations of her work. When examining her pieces, it becomes apparent that the scenes depicted exist beyond a specific timeframe or geographical location, evoking a sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. Akunyili Crosby deliberately creates tensions between calm and busy areas, simultaneously evoking sensations of home and strangeness. She reflects upon her own multifaceted journey as a migrant by employing a range of mediums that reference both her Nigerian heritage, seen in her use of textiles and photographs taken in Nigeria, and the Western tradition of portraiture, which she achieves through painting.

Akunyili Crosby's art delves into the complexity of being an immigrant, living in two spaces simultaneously, and embracing the feeling of being "in between." Her work consists of images portraying the ordinary lives of people of color, capturing intimate scenes that resonate with her own experiences (MOCA, 2018).

Akunyili Crosby's artwork epitomizes the essence of Afropolitans, a term for Africans who inhabit multiple geographies and navigate the interconnected realms of various places. She challenges both the Western painting tradition's historical omission of representative diversity and the dominant perspectives that limit Nigeria and Africa to stereotypes of poverty and suffering (MOCA, 2018). Through her art, Akunyili Crosby emphasizes the multifaceted experiences of a cosmopolitan Nigerian woman and redefines who deserves representation and recognition. She leverages her artistic platform in public institutions to rewrite narratives and reach a broad audience, aiming to reshape how black individuals are perceived and celebrated.

- **“Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Coming Back to See Through, Again”, David Zwirner Gallery, 2023**

The exhibition "Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Coming Back to See Through, Again" showcased new works by the artist at David Zwirner Gallery both in Los Angeles and New York in 2023. This show featured multiple works where different places and times coexist within single compositions, using doorways, screens, and windows as transitional elements bridging private interior spaces, lush gardens, and vibrant Nigerian markets.



Figure 6. "Still You Bloom in This Land of No Gardens". Njideka Akunyili Crosby. 2021. Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, and David Zwirner.

One notable work, "Still You Bloom in This Land of No Gardens," displays Akunyili Crosby with her child, incorporating an image of her mother to offer a powerful multigenerational view on motherhood. This piece, among others in the exhibition, was previously featured at the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Blanton Museum of Art.

Two new works from her notable series "The Beautiful Ones," begun in 2012, were also on view. This series features intimate portraits of Nigerian youth and their families within domestic spaces. As Als describes, "In her ongoing series The Beautiful Ones, artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby takes as her subject children she came across in family albums, or observed and photographed on trips to her native Nigeria. The paintings ... are framed by vulnerability, hope, and a certain self-awareness." (Als, 2022). The title of that series refers to the 1968 novel, "The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born," by the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah, which deals with issues of revolution, political corruption and hope. Crosby resists the notion that to become American means to assimilate entirely and discard one's cultural heritage. She believes that embracing one's heritage enriches the American narrative, and her art reflects this idea of holding on to one's history and culture while living in this "in-between" space (Pogrebin, 2023).



Figure 7. "The Beautiful Ones". Njideka Akunyili Crosby. 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Private Collection.

VI. CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMING THE GLOBAL ART ECOSYSTEM

The landscape of representation for contemporary African artists in the United States has undergone a transformative evolution, particularly in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. This social movement catalyzed a demand for greater diversity and inclusion, notably impacting the visibility and recognition of African American and African artists. Historically marginalized in major art centers, these artists have found new opportunities and acknowledgment due to the changing social climate.

To maintain their legitimacy and avoid criticisms of white supremacy, cultural institutions had to organize an increasing number of exhibitions and change their acquisition policies to include more artworks from this group of artists in their permanent collections. In their quest for suitable artworks, these institutions turned to art galleries as sources. Seeing a market opportunity, galleries began paying more attention to this group of artists. To distance themselves from accusations of opportunism or exploitation of African artists, they revised their operational strategies. Their primary goal shifted to strategically positioning their artists' works in prominent private and public collections, safeguarding against market speculation, and enhancing their gallery's reputation.

The surge in exhibitions, acquisitions by museums, and the heightened value of these artists' works at auctions have created a favorable environment for African artists. This has enabled them to gain increased visibility and share their stories more broadly, both in the United States and globally.

This thesis highlights the empowering stories of Omar Ba, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, showcasing the emergence of African artistic agency. This concept encompasses the artists' influence over the production, distribution, and representation of their work, including financial aspects such as pricing and contract negotiations. It also emphasizes their ability to shape cultural dialogues and adapt to changing artistic landscapes. Essentially, artistic agency represents the empowerment of artists in managing their careers, the production, and distribution of their works.

Growing up in Senegal, Ba's decision to relocate to Switzerland for further studies marked the beginning of an international journey that would lead to a profound transformation in both his artistic style and market presence. Finding his initial grounding in Geneva, Ba's art, rich in political narrative and cultural critique, shifted from abstract to figurative, allowing for a more direct dialogue with global audiences. His dedication to producing a large number of works facilitated his participation in numerous shows in galleries, museums, and art fairs throughout the year. Participating in an art residency in New York provided him with the opportunity to engage with the American art scene and connect with curators, including Leslie Cozzi, which, a few years later, led to his first solo exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art. After gaining recognition in Europe and Africa, Ba finally achieved visibility in the United States. By using migration, artist residency programs, and gallery representation across different countries, Ba was able to secure solo exhibitions in major museums.

In contrast, Toyin Ojih Odutola's journey reflects a nuanced exploration of identity and belonging. Facing discrimination as a young, Black, queer woman, Odutola turned to art as a

means of expression and investigation into the complexities of the African Diaspora identity. Her educational experiences and early gallery representation set the stage for a body of work that evolved from vibrant colors to a monochromatic palette, deepening the storytelling aspect of her art. The show at the Hirshhorn Museum became a significant playground for the artist, who created 40 large paintings. It showcased her ability to create immersive narrative spaces, inviting viewers to reconsider existing power structures and to envision progressive alternatives. Ojih Odutola often has "carte blanche" to create monumental traveling exhibitions. Toyin Ojih Odutola's work exemplifies the empowered position of African artists in choosing their thematic focus and shaping the narratives around their creations.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby's move to the United States marked the beginning of a career that would navigate between Western classical training and the rich tapestry of her Nigerian heritage. Her participation in a residency at the Harlem Studio Museum quickly led to gallery representation at Victoria Miro Gallery in England. A few years later, this gallery would share her representation with David Zwirner, located in the United States. This strategic representation enables the galleries to focus on their respective markets. Her creations delve into postcolonial themes and the contemporary experience of Afropolitans worldwide. Creating only a few paintings a year and maintaining her style contribute to the rarity of her work and strengthen her brand. Due to the limited number of artworks available for sale, waitlists are established to determine who will be able to acquire her latest paintings. This process changes the dynamics with cultural institutions, which are compelled to organize solo exhibitions of the artist to have a chance to acquire one of her works. The challenge for art galleries is no longer to convince people of the worth of her art but rather to place her artworks in the most impactful collections to generate the best exhibition

opportunities. Njideka Akunyili Crosby exemplifies how contemporary African artists are increasingly involved in determining the trajectory of their artwork, influencing both exhibition opportunities and sales. This active participation signifies a shift in the negotiation dynamics with both public and private art collectors.

As these artists gain more visibility and influence, they are redefining what it means to be a contemporary African artist on a global stage. This thesis proved the power of African artistic agency in the United States and the current shift of paradigm within the global art community. These changes underscore an epoch-making significance where fundamental interactions between artists, dealers, and curators are radically changing. Living African artists are now active reformers of the system. They can decide which gallery can showcase their work and how they should proceed. It hints at a future where the art market and cultural institutions no longer solely dictate terms but collaborate with artists in a more egalitarian and justice-oriented manner. This research suggests a possibility to reverse cultural imperialism through new, more equitable practices. These long-term structural evolutions were fueled by a potent mix of advocacy, artistic innovation, and institutional support. This significant moment in the history of art is laying the groundwork for a future where African artists are not only recognized but celebrated for their unique perspectives and contributions. It is a shift that will resonate through generations, altering the landscape of art and its appreciation worldwide.

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