

Dreams That Money Can Buy: An Interview with Kelechi Nwaneri

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Studio November 6, 2020 Paul Laster



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Ebony/Curated

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Flooded Apartment II*, 2020.

Working in an inventive, personal style that he boldly calls contemporary surrealism, Nigerian artist Kelechi Nwaneri creates beautifully bizarre imagery of fictional figures in landscapes, which are half-real and half-imagined. Making use of indigenous West African iconography, which he marvelously mixes with psychological scenarios straight out of the history of European modern art, Nwaneri constructs colorful, new, dreamlike narratives that magically catch and hold viewers' minds and eyes.

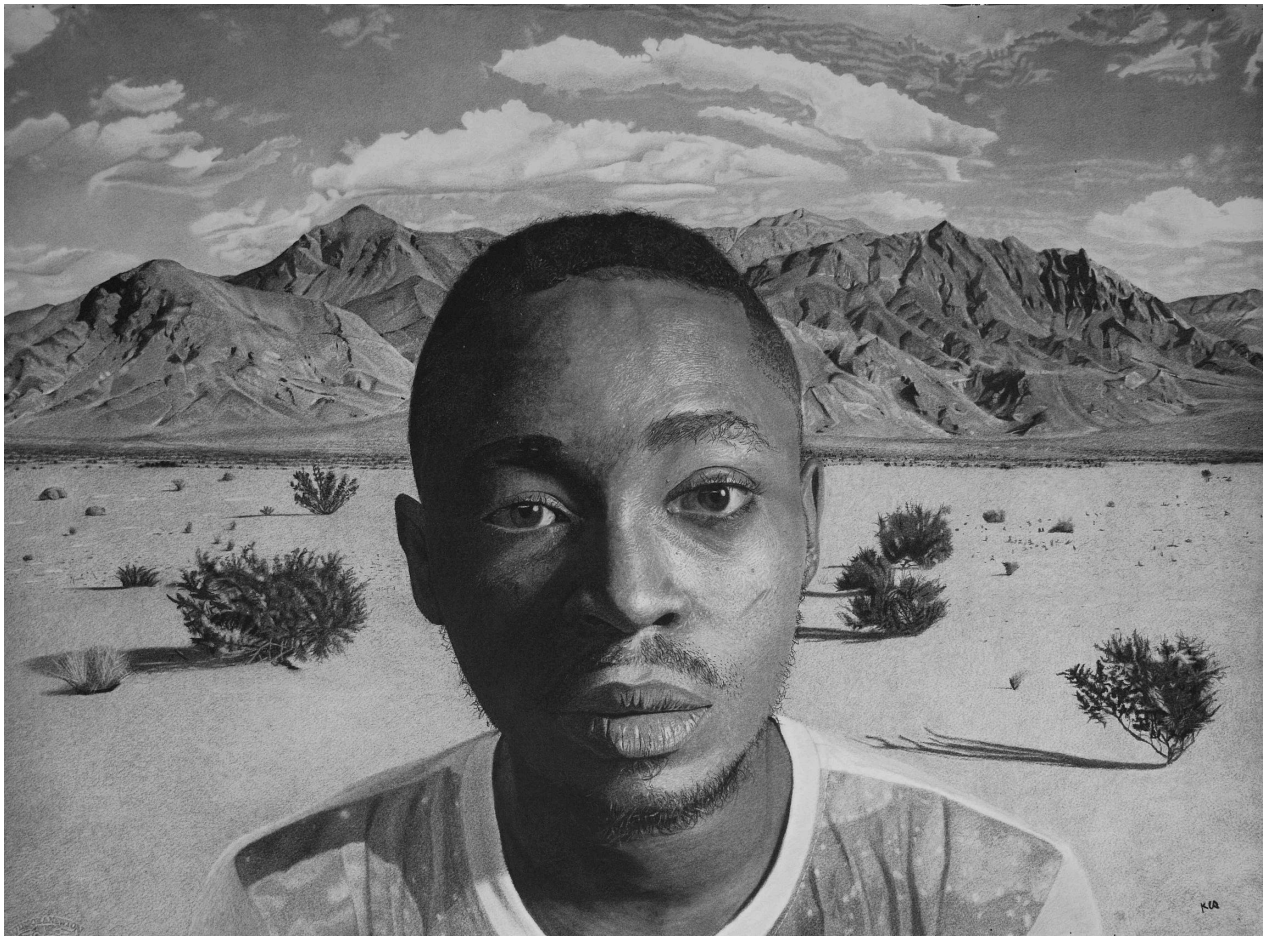
With his first solo show presently on view at the South African gallery Ebony/Curated, and future one-person exhibitions planned for Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery in London and AKKA Project, which has galleries in Dubai and Venice, the twenty-six-year-old emerging painter is a rising star on the burgeoning contemporary African art scene, which is currently a hot topic in Europe and on the radar of collectors around the world. Wanting to learn more about his enchanting work and the ideas behind it, *Art & Object* spoke to the emerging artist at his studio in Italy, where he is an artist-in-residence in Venice for the next six weeks.

Paul Laster: When did you first become interested in art?

Kelechi Nwaneri: I've been drawing as long as I can remember. I started drawing cartoons, like *The Lion King*, when I was quite young. At one point in secondary school I even wanted to create a comic book, but life moved on and I forgot about it. Then I started to get more serious about making art around 2013, when I was in college.

PL: But you didn't take art classes in college, right?

KN: No, I studied agricultural extension, but—to be honest—I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do. In my third year I realized that I definitely wasn't interested in agriculture, so I went back to the only thing that I knew how to do, drawing. I watched videos on the Internet to find out how to become an artist and discovered artists like Kelvin Okafor making hyper-realistic pencil portraits. I was really inspired. It had a negative effect on my grades in school, but I knew that was what I wanted to do. I was astonished at the possibility that a simple pencil could create so much detail in a drawing.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Alone*, 2017.

PL: So the internet was a better teacher for you than college was?

KN: Yes, I basically taught myself to draw realistically, almost like a black-and-white photograph, with a pencil.

PL: Did you teach yourself to use other mediums, too?

KN: Yes, I soon got tired of my work being monochromatic. After doing something over and over I want to do something new. I wanted a new challenge, so I started adding color. I learned how to use acrylic and oil paints, and—more recently—I started trying out pastels.

PL: How did you start using charcoal?

KN: It was just an extension of using the pencil. I first used charcoal to draw human hair and then to do whole bodies. I discovered that I could create different effects with different types of charcoal. The way that you apply pastel is not that different. I'm attracted to the roughness of these mark-making materials.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Time, People and Change 2*, 2019.

PL: Have you studied Western art history?

KN: I wouldn't say studied, but I've read books on it and looked at things on the Internet. I try to read whatever comes my way on art.

PL: Are you also referencing African art in your work?

KN: Yes, the motifs on the figures—the marks—and the fabrics they wear reference African art, mostly indigenous Nigerian and Ghanaian tribal arts.

PL: Are the marks on the bodies related to scarification?

KN: Yes, I chose to represent them that way because I'm scarred, emotionally. If you see someone on the road who has a big scar on his head that mark is part of him; it tells a story about that person. Tribal marks in African tell a lot about a person's identity. That's why I started marking my subjects. I'm symbolically telling you something about them. Along the way, I also started using the marks aesthetically, for what they add to the overall image.

PL: When did you first start showing your work?

KN: The first exhibition that I had was in 2016, but it was a show related to a service program that I had to do after graduation. At that point, I didn't really understand what an exhibition can mean to an artist's career. The first real serious exhibition that I had was a 2018 group show at a gallery in Lagos.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Lavender*, 2020.

PL: What was your first big break?

KN: In late-2018 I won a competition at the Spanish Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. It provided the opportunity to go to Madrid, which was my first trip outside of Nigeria. I became more confident, more convinced of my ability. And then, prior to my leaving for Madrid I got an invitation to be in a show at SMO Contemporary Art, an important gallery in Lagos. Those two things had a big impact on me. Coming back to Lagos, I was excited to have the show at SMO. I wanted to come up with better ideas for my work. Ever since that show, more things have happened.

PL: What are some of the subjects that you explore in your work?

KN: I started out wanting to paint something about Afrofuturism, something that's a bit sci-fi. I wanted to create images that weren't totally realistic, but that still dealt with real issues, like mental health. There were things affecting my personal life that took a toll on me. It took a long time to recover, and during that time I channeled my thoughts towards art. I made a series of portrait paintings—titled *Time, People, and Change*—presenting people that I know with different phases of the moon, from a new moon to a full moon, to show how people can change over a period of time.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Ebony/Curated

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Empty Pockets, Dreams & Helpers*, 2020.

PL: And doesn't another series deal with climate change?

KN: Yes, because there are things affecting the world around me, like global warming, that I also find troubling. The deforestation in Brazil and recent fires in Australia and the United States are related to global warming. The rising oceans have caused flooding around the world. I made my first *Flooded Apartment* paintings in response to flooding in Lagos and I'm researching the devastation caused by recent floods in Venice, where I'm now in residency, to continue that series. I've represented these concerns in several of the paintings on paper and canvas in my Ebony/Curated show through the addition of wind towers, which provide clean energy, and flowers and plants, which are needed to protect the environment against climate change.

PL: What do the satellite dishes, radio towers and eccentric buildings convey in the paintings at the gallery?

KN: I use them to show that we live in a time of extremes, a time of technology and crazy architecture. It's along the Afrofuturist line—with technology anything is possible, even floating houses and someday floating cars. I want the work to appeal to someone living in the year 2098 and see if they could tell the time when it was done. It shows the age that I'm living in while making these paintings.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Ebony/Curated

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Retreat & Perseverance*, 2020.

PL: There are also a number of surrealist references in your works, particularly to the Spanish surrealist Salvador Dalí. Is he a big influence on your work?

KN: I reference Dalí a lot in the Ebony/Curated show, which is why I titled the exhibition *Modern Marks*. You see his inspiration in paintings like *Portrait of a Human Skull*, where figures, fabrics and flowers construct a skeletal head under an umbrella, and *Retreat and Persevere*, which shows a headless character reading a melting book. I've referred to Dalí in the past, and I've referenced Magritte, whom I also admire, in such paintings as *The Kiss*, which appropriates the veiled couple in one of his most famous paintings, *The Lovers*. However, I'm interested in using these references in an African context. I'm combining cultural references to create new imagery, which narrates a story in an unusual way.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Ebony/Curated

Kelechi Nwaneri, *Portrait of a Human Skull*, 2020.

PL: How do these surreal scenarios come to you?

KN: The first thing that comes is the story. Take for instance the one with the melting book, I wanted to show the persistence of someone trying to succeed through hard work and study. I cooked up the picture in my head. Basically, the whole picture begins in my mind. I sketch it out in my drawing book to see the placement and to match the proportions before transferring it to the canvas. But it often changes in the process of realizing it on canvas, as I usually make modifications along the way.

PL: I love the fact that you studied one thing and then made the shift to something else. Are you working harder at becoming an artist so that you can prove yourself to be good at it—first in your own eyes and then to the world?

KN: Yes, I'm almost a recluse. I spend most of my time at it—morning, noon, and night. Once I start something I want to see how it will turn out in the end, so I push and push.



© Kelechi Nwaneri, Courtesy the artist and Ebony/Curated

Kelechi Nwaneri, *The Kiss*, 2020.

PL: How did good galleries in far off places discover your work?

KN: Marc Stane of Ebony/Curated contacted me about two days after the SMO show opened and said that the gallery was interested in my work and wanted to show it.

Kristin Hjellegjerde was in Nigeria for the Art X Lagos art fair, where she was looking for new work. Some people suggested she look at my art and she loved it. She contacted me on her way back to London at the airport in Lagos and showed my work in a group show this spring. Next year I'll have a solo show there. And AKKA Project, which really did a lot to make sure that I could come to Venice for the residency, contacted me late last year, showed my work in a group show in March, and we're planning a one-person exhibition for next year.

PL: How does your vision of dreamlike imagery fit what's happening in Africa now? Is it wishful thinking for another reality?

KN: Yes, that's basically what it is for us there. That's why I made the painting *Empty Pockets, Dreams and Helpers*, which illustrates the connection between a dreamer, his helpers, and his dreams. The headless figure in the painting is in a dream state. He has no pants, which symbolizes his empty pockets; but his helpers support a stairway that serves as a shortcut to his dreams. That's basically what life is, you have to dream, you really have to dream, and hope that one day those dreams come true.

KELECHI NWANERI: MODERN MARKS

Start Date:

October 28, 2020

End Date:

November 28, 2020

Venue:

Ebony/Curated

About the Author

Paul Laster

Paul Laster is an artist, critic, curator, editor, and lecturer. He is a contributing editor at *ArtAsiaPacific* and *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art* and writer for *Time Out New York*, *Galerie Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, *Architectural Digest*, *Cultured*, *Garage Magazine*, *Ocula*, *ArtPulse*, *Observer*, *Conceptual Fine Arts* and *Glasstire*. He was *Arkrush's* founding editor, started *The Daily Beast's* art section and was art editor of Russell Simmons' *Oneworld Magazine*, as well as an Adjunct Curator of Photography at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, now MoMA PS1.

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