

ONYEKA IBE: CREATING HARMONY ON CANVAS

by Koleen Kaffan

The use of color to artist Onyeka Ibe is how he tells a story in his contemporary abstract work. Creating layer upon layer of reds, blues, and yellows, help to convey the emotions and depth of the often overlooked simple things in life that the artist is portraying.

"Color is the primary characteristic of my art followed by the pattern and outline," he says. "As yeast is one of the most important ingredients to baking bread, so is color to my paintings."

Born in Anambra State located in Eastern Nigeria in 1971, not long after the country's civil war, Ibe's childhood was full of ups and downs. Surrounded by political instability, his family was close-knit, but struggled as his parents, both college professors, were left without jobs for months at a time. The oldest of five children, Ibe would watch his father draw and paint, teaching him throughout his childhood. Something else that he was taught by his parents was the importance of cultural identity.

"Africa is a continent that is very rich in traditions, history, and customs and my mother and father always made sure that we were all well educated in them. As teachers, they also instilled in us the importance of an education, a trait that has followed me throughout my entire life."

Ibe's grandmother was also an artist, making pottery, as well as creating traditional designs called Uli on the bodies of people in her village. The strongly linear designs of Uli represent a balance of positive and negative space, and are often painted spontaneously using dark

dyes to prepare people for events, such as marriages, title taking, and funerals. As a child Ibe created



Artist Onyeka Ibe in his Duluth, GA, studio.

some drawings and paintings, but it wasn't until he reached high school that he truly gained confidence in his work and pursued it in his studies. At the age of 16, he entered an art contest and was chosen to show his work at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Lagos, Nigeria.

"That exhibit was a really big event for me. I was chosen as the best among all high school students in the state and the victory resulted in my work being featured by a number of media outlets."

Part of the attention he received enabled him to study art on full scholarship. As a result, he went to the University of Benin in Nigeria where he graduated summa cum laude in fine arts studies. "The course load was very diverse and provided me with a new and different perspective on the world in which we live."

Ibe began to travel all over the world after college, bringing with him his own culture, while taking in new ideas learned from the

places he visited. "My travels were mainly a search for ideas, new directions, and materials," he says. "My movements represented an inherent ritual transition to seek newer levels in my life and my work. As a person, I reflect the story of Africa, which for centuries has been in perpetual passage, journeying from one social, political, and cultural experience to another."

After visiting museums from around the world featuring work by the great Masters, he decided to settle down in the U.S. The first stop was New York, and then Atlanta, where Ibe lives today. "In college I had studied many different mediums of art, including sculpture. And in my travels, I saw so many different types of art and techniques. It wasn't until I moved to the U.S. that I decided to concentrate on painting.

"I wanted my work to be like that of da Vinci or Rembrandt. Their paintings can be compared to great sculptures as they have so much depth to their work. Their techniques and style are a great inspiration to my work today. I used to watch my father paint when I was a child and he had such a passion for it. That's what I feel today when I work."

Inspiration for Ibe is not strictly reserved to the influences of his fellow artists. "What inspires me above all is the beauty that I see around me. I try to create harmony on canvas by depicting harmonious scenarios that I experience in life. I find that people tend to forget the simple things in life and that is what my paintings thrive on."

Spending nearly seven days a week in his studio, Ibe works on a few paintings at a time, finishing around six a month. World music helps to pass the time, and when not working he enjoys sports and being out in nature. "I'm happiest when I'm in my studio, but I am an avid nature lover and find so much inspiration in its beauty."

Living in the U.S. is very different from Nigeria, but he has also seen some distinct differences in the art business between the two countries. "Here in the U.S., you have the opportunity to meet artists and collectors from around the world. It's more about different cultures coming together to create, show, and buy art. In Nigeria it's very much based on the country's culture."

It's hard for Ibe to imagine not being an artist. "My work means the world to me, literally! I can honestly say that I am blessed because I make a living out of doing my favorite hobby. Words can't capture or accurately describe my love and drive for painting. When I am away from my studio for long periods of time I make use of



"Suburbia," an oil on canvas measuring 48 by 30 inches.

anything that I can find to map out new ideas that come into my mind. Napkins are a very useful resource for me.

"My hope is that my work conveys the power of simplicity and abstractness to my audience," he says. "I want them to be the interpreters of my work which is why I make my paintings abstract. I stay away from paintings that tell people exactly what to think because I believe that each person should use their own experiences. My views are simple—love, compassion, and understanding. I feel that these three things can be applied to anything in life."