artist portfolio

Peju Alatise

Karen E. Milbourne

all photos courtesy of the artist

A fearless artist who works across painting, sculpture and furniture design—and who has recently experimented with video and time-based installation—Peju Alatise has wed piercing social commentary with technical sophistication to create a prolific and diverse corpus of work. As she has said, “My art is my journey, my commentary is to question the hypocrisy within all societies and my country” (Labidi 2013). For this, she has proved controversial in some circles. While her work has represented Nigeria in its first national pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale (as one of three artists, along with the male artists Victor Ehikhamenor and Qudus Onikeku), and in that same year (2017) received the prestigious FNB Art Prize at the 10th installment of the Johannesburg Art Fair, there is little published critically on her practice. Nevertheless, Alatise is an artist emerging in international arenas who merits debate and who, through her launching of the Alter/Native Artist Initiative (A.N.A.I Foundation) joins the other women in this issue in seeking to fill a gap she recognized within the contemporary art world.

With A.N.A.I, Alatise sought to create a space through which Nigeria’s artists might ponder what is “native” about contemporary Nigerian artistic practice. Like Yinka Shonibare MBE, Victor Ehikhamenor, George Osodi, and the other artists who have set out to open distinctive new spaces within the creative landscape of Lagos, A.N.A.I’s goals are manifold. It began with the intention of bringing together emerging and established artists, breaking down barriers for women creatives, facilitating local community development, and reinvigorating Nigeria’s legacy in clay forged by such artists as Ladi Kwali. Alatise fundraised and drew upon her architectural background to build a space in Okun Ajah (off the Lekki-Epe expressway in Lagos) in which artists might exhibit and have residencies. She overcame importation laws to bring in kilns and establish a world-class space for the pursuit of ceramic arts. But she remains first and foremost a visual artist. With her own visual arts production—whether more intimate or intimidating in scale—each work of art is characterized formally by the inclusion of naturalistic treatments of the human figure, frequently handpainted with patterns that evoke the resist-print textiles of Vlisco or other manufacturers whose vibrant colors can be found across west Africa. In terms of its subject matter, Alatise’s work takes on a biting edge in its advocacy for the rights of women and girls.

Alatise came of age as an artist at the end of nearly twenty years military rule in Nigeria. She obtained a degree in architecture from Ladoke Akintola University in Oyo State in 1998, the same year as General Sani Abacha’s death. As the nation sought to redefine itself, Alatise focused on her studio practice, renovating buildings, and publishing two novels. In each endeavor, she has asked probing questions about what kind of country Nigeria is to be—both in how it treats its most vulnerable citizens and in how it should overcome its shortcomings. In her first novel, Orita Meta (“the crossroads or three-way intersection”), which interweaves the stories of three women, Alatise set out “to dispove the unfortunate words ‘women are their own worst enemies’ [for] women have been [the artist and author’s] channel for growth, support, and strength” (Alatise 2006: dedication). The book would go on to be nominated for the ANA/Flora Nwapa Award for Writing Women in 2006.

Throughout her career, Alatise’s efforts to shift narratives and mindsets in recognition of the rights and power of women and girls has remained unwavering. It permeates her oeuvre. Within her three-dimensional practice and activism, she has created wall-engaged and free-standing sculptures, installations, and wearable art that have drawn attention to the missing Chibok girls, the plight of children married or sent into servitude before they come of age, the harm that comes from gossip, and the strength found by women when they band together.

On the night of April 14, 2014, up to 276 female students were kidnapped from their secondary school in Chibok, Nigeria by...
Boko Haram terrorists. To this day, 112 girls remain missing. Appalled by the inability of the Nigerian government, and their international allies, to restore these girls to their homes, Alatise created the work *Missing* (2014) (Fig. 1). In it, two walls are consumed by six rows of silhouettes of girls with pigtails, *irun kiko* (threaded hair twists), and other fashions. Some are blackened and surrounded by the artist’s trademark fields of vibrant patterns, others have their silhouettes formed from the colorful paintwork only to be surrounded by blackness. Most haunting are the empty frames and blank spaces interspersed amongst these silhouettes. Like Aimé Mpane’s haunting *Ici, on crève* (2006–2008) or Zanele Muholi’s *Faces and Phases* (ongoing since 2006) and other works that share the formal device of gaps within a grid of portraits, the impact on viewers when confronted by Alatise’s ninety-six absent faces is visceral.

Alatise brings this same unflinching approach to her extensive campaign to end child marriage in Nigeria. Although Nigeria’s 2003 Child Rights Act asserts that children under the age of 18 cannot be married, section 29 of the constitution offers a troubling loophole. It reads that “any woman who is married shall be deemed of age” and according to a 2018 UNICEF report, more than 22 million Nigerian girls are married each year before the age of 18. Children younger than 11 are married. In response, Alatise has been active in the Child Not Bride campaign. For it she produced t-shirts that she asked her friends to wear (Fig. 2). In addition, she created multiple works of art. *Nine Year Old Bride* is among them. Seven figures lie close together in *Nine Year Old Bride* (2013) (Fig. 3). Their forms are mere impressions under a cloth that appears to be draped like a bedsheets. Six torsos belong to grown women but amidst them—out of place—lies a child with arms pulled protectively around her waist. Like the Johannesburg-based artist Nandipha Mntambo, Alatise works with molds taken from life to harness a poetics of absence. As Gilles Deleuze so admired in relation to the filmmakers Resnais and Straubs, both Alatise and Mntambo possess a commanding awareness that the power of representation “is not through the presence of the people. On the contrary, it is because they know how to show how the people are what is missing, what is not there” (Deleuze 1989: 215–16). For Mntambo, sculptures cast from her own body and that of her mother explore ancestral and genetic memory. Alatise, by contrast, casts her molds from unnamed models, an erasure that reinforces the sense of loss evoked by the absent bodies. In *Nine Year Old*
Bride, we are left to wonder who these faceless, nameless, bodiless figures are—and we are left to fill them in with the possibility of too many names.

Nine Year Old Bride had been prompted by a July 16, 2013 meeting of the Nigerian senate to revisit its 1999 constitution into which section 29 had already been written. After two votes, senators elected to keep the clause intact, setting into motion the #childnotbride movement. Alatise’s anger against the abuse of children had already been building, however.

Unconscious Struggle (Fig. 4), with its two empty-headed men seated on a bench alongside a small girl curled under a blanket, was produced a year earlier. The life-size sculpture is a critique directed against wealthy individuals who ask a child to stay up late to serve them alcohol—after a day of cooking and cleaning instead of attending school—or to request Panadol for their hangovers. For Alatise, the casual indifference of her male figures—who are encased in pill tablets as if the concerns of the child are but a headache—and the vulnerable position of the child speaks to two concerns: first, the moral ambivalence built into a sociopolitical system that would allow young girls to be placed in servitude to wealthier relations or married; and second, a concern that religion could be used to justify or excuse gender inequality and the violation of human rights.

Unfortunately, in the case of the Nigerian senate’s series of two fateful votes in July 2013 regarding section 29, the results flip-flopped. In the first vote, a majority opted to eliminate the clause. Several Muslim senators protested, however, stating that removing the clause discriminated against Muslims. They called for a second vote, and in this next round the clause was retained. For the artist, who attended mosque with her family during her youth, her artworks are not a condemnation of either faith or religion but an indictment of hypocrisy and willful neglect. For her, Unconscious Struggle renders visible the lack of protection for young girls and the need for intervention from governments and organized religion. She asks viewers to face the reality of adolescent pregnancy and consider whether practices such as child marriage can be morally correct.

Concern in relation to how corrupt social, political or institutional systems can ensnare any among us drove Alatise’s 2014 Nation Interrupted (Fig. 5), a large-scale work in which

---

4 Peju Alatise
Unconscious Struggle (2012)
Plaster cast, panadol tablets, resin, acrylic paints, wood, mild steel
National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

5 Peju Alatise
Nation Interrupted (2014)
Fiber glass, resin, mild steel
Collection of the artist

5a Nation Interrupted (detail)
crumbling grey figures navigate a web of doors and wires. The crude figures do not look at one another but appear lost in their own thoughts, moving through turnstiles as one loses his feet, another an arm, and others their head and heart (Fig. 5a). Alatise’s mastery of the uncanny—that “class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 1919: 2–3)—comes to the fore in this work. These faces feel so familiar, and yet they unsettle. Not one figure bears a trace of Alatise’s trademark painted textile patterns, however. Instead, their surfaces echo the conformity of bowl after bowl of oatmeal; it is only when they are broken open that we see color.

Not all Alatise’s works are so scathing, however. While she has condemned the hypocrisy of self-congratulatory gossips who might get on their “high horses” when they preach against others (Fig. 6), she has also created works that honor the communal spirit of her compatriots or allow for a raw intimacy with a deeply personal experience of her own.

Like Nine Year Old Bride, Care Takers (Fig. 7) dates to 2013. This work, however, recognizes the “sisterhood” within Yorùbá communities whereby women rally to support one another throughout pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing. It is the very ethos that gave rise to the saying, “it takes a village.” In this composition, three garments float ethereally, united in their coloration but as distinctive in style and proportion as any three women might be. Each is a pristine white at the top but appears dipped in blood, with the red hues deepening as they descend toward the foot of the cloth. The pigment seems to allude to parturition, while the combination of figures and foliage suggest a feeling of hope and beauty. The fullness with which each curve was formed and the delicacy of each lacy opening and dot of paint reveal Alatise’s technical prowess (Fig. 7a). Her figures look to be growing—like life, community, and the delicate vines that caress each form.

Alatise’s commitment to community and heritage lies at the root of her dramatic Wrapture of Olorumi’s Daughter (2013) (Fig. 8). Looking like a tangled swirl of rainbow-colored cloth panels and recalling Egun, that form of Yorùbá masquerade
that joins together gifts of fabric from across a community to give shape to and embody the ancestors, and then honor them in performance. With this intricately painted and precariously balanced form, Alatise offers a vision of a Yorùbá folktale. She wanted Yorùbá girls to know Olorumbi’s story as well as they do those of Snow White and the Little Mermaid.

According to legend, Olurombi was a young mother who cavalierly offered her beautiful daughter to a mighty iroko (iron-wood) tree in return for record sales of her produce at market. The spirit in this tree was known to grant requests in return for gifts and offerings. Olurombi had not meant her oath but the tree took her beautiful child, nonetheless. So now the young girls who encounter Alatise’s sculpture will remember that promises to the gods and spirits are kept. The “wrapture” in the title is a pun on the Christian Rapture, in which believers are caught up in a cloud to be met by the Lord in the air. For the artist, the pun reverberates with her hollow figures (which evoke wrappings), and the title became the name of her body of work during that period and a subsequent exhibition.

Giving back, and thinking of the generations from which we came—as well as the ones we are to raise—prompted Shrouded (2012) (Fig. 9). It is one of the most personal of Alatise’s works, created while her father was grappling with Alzheimers. Reminiscent of Missing in structure, each square refers to the different faces of the artist’s father’s shifting personality as he dealt with the disease. Here, however, there is no gap to signal a missing person. Instead, the painted surface works like a veil with the barrier evoking the painful distance enforced by this disease on the families who live with it. This particular work of art also foreshadows a radical shift that would take place in Alatise’s work after her father’s passing.

Alatise attributes her prodigious output to dreaming. Subsequent to her father’s death, however, she stopped dreaming in color. Her only fully monochromatic work, Flying Girls (2015/16) (Fig. 10), was created in the wake of this loss. It is the work that would go on to be featured at the Nigerian Pavilion in Venice in 2017. It is also the first work to include a video component. In its fullest iteration, the sculptural installation is accompanied by a dreamy video projection of two girls at play outdoors. This animates and provides a sonic component to the ring of winged statues as they look up toward the strings of birds in flight. In Flying Girls, Alatise seems to stretch beyond the pointed condemnation of society to imagine a new world. She envisions a place in which all children can don toy butterfly wings, string chains of leaves, and gaze at creatures who soar beyond their horizons.

Together, Alatise’s projects do bring visibility to the issues she holds dear. A quick Google search links her name readily to the Child Not Bride campaign and the artist’s broader activism regarding the rights of women and girls. Despite the absence of a monograph or scholarly treatise on her practice, Alatise has been effective in reaching widening audiences. Her paintings and sculptures
Peju Alatise has grown her sculptures tall, spread them across a room, and even shrunk her figures until they might fit in the palm of the hand. She has also taken command of materials ranging from the organic to the synthetic, from clay to wood, fiberglass to steel—and even Panadol tablets—to make statements that are seductive in form yet morally unambiguous in position. While she credits such artists as Do-ho Suh, Antony Gormly, Piet Mondrian, and Mama Nike Davies-Okundaye as her inspirations, her hand is distinctive, her message passionate and timely. Like the other women whose stories are contained within this volume, this artist has looked for gaps within an artworld too often accused of the contradictory sins of prioritizing the conceptual over aesthetics or operating from positions of moral neutrality. Alatise combines visual beauty with political punch, and her impact promises to increase over the decades to come.

Notes
1 The number of girls kidnapped was disputed early on. Parents said 234, police 276. Official numbers today stipulate 276 (Fox News, June 26, 2014, "Nigeria Says 219 Girls in Boko Haram Kidnapping Still Missing.")
2 Accounts of how many girls were missing conflicted and changed over time, although 112 are now believed to still be missing. Alatise’s portrayal reflects this discrepancy.

References cited