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“Kindred Spirits: A Gathering of the Aka Circle of Artists”

Kó Gallery

By Ayodeji Rotinwa

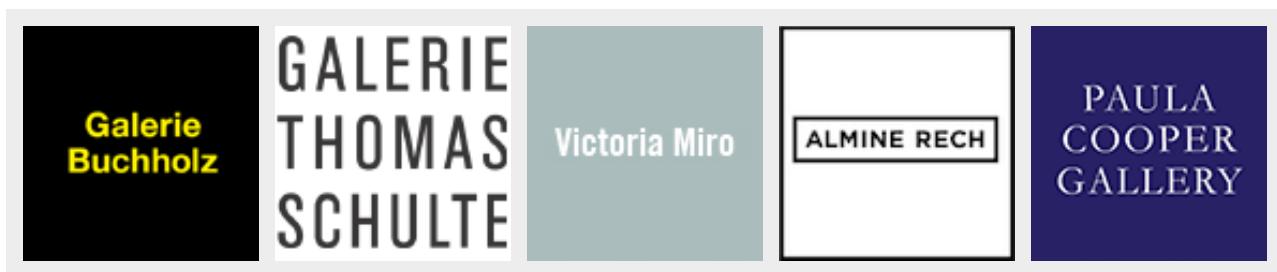




Ifedioramma Dike, Mgbedike, 1984, tapestry, 77 1/8 × 26 3/4". From "Kindred Spirits: A Gathering of the Aka Circle of Artists."

Seeking to preserve and eventually to amplify an obscure portion of Nigerian art history, former Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos artistic director Iheanyi Onwuegbucha quickly found this undertaking was not without challenges. As part of his ongoing research into Nigerian art history, Onwuegbucha focused on Nigerian artists trained in the Nsukka approach to art, which has produced some of the country's most prodigious artists.

Some of the art associated with the school is at risk of being lost or damaged; some of the artists, retired and now in their eighties, had shipped their works from the predominantly Igbo town of Nsukka to their remote ancestral villages. Onwuegbucha came up with a plan: To preserve the works, he would *personally* collect them. In undertaking this mission, he encountered Aka, an artist collective that included now globally acclaimed artists such as El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu. He then decided to bring his research to the public by exhibiting some of the works he had collected and honoring this historic collective with the exhibition "Kindred Spirits: A Gathering of the Aka Circle of Artists."



Formed in 1985, Aka (which means *hand* in Igbo) sprang up while Nigeria was in the midst of an economic downturn: Resources for art institutions had dried up. Collectors and philanthropists had less disposable income.

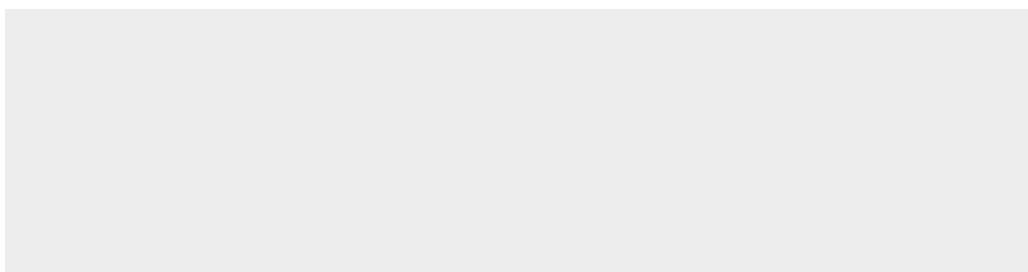
Artists, already vulnerable, had to come together to exhibit and propagate their ideas. Aka was made up of fifteen artists who taught or studied at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and the Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu. In terms of philosophy, style, and medium, each member of the group was unique—and insistent that Aka was not a movement.

What they did have in common was a desire to challenge artmaking orthodoxy, especially the Western models that stubbornly remained in circulation even after Nigeria gained independence. Each artist sought not only to update the canon, but in some cases to shatter it completely. They exhibited together from 1986 to 2005, in annual showcases that they had hoped “would grow into a major art event, one that the public would look forward to every year,” according to the first catalogue published in 1986. “Kindred Spirits” paid homage to these artists’ oeuvres over the years—and reminded us of their significance to Nigerian and global art history.

In Ifedioramma Dike’s *Mgbedike*, 1984, we see textile as sculpture. *Mgbedike* refers to an Igbo masquerade performed during funeral rites. Between two bronze dowels, a woven cotton textile in green, black, blue, and brown depicts a masklike form that traditionally would be carved or painted, but here is realized in a medium that is more germane to everyday life. Boniface Okafor’s *Untitled*, 1995, and Tayo Adenaike’s *Up There, Down Here*, 1985, in oil on canvas and watercolor on paper, respectively, present psychological, almost ghostly phenomena. But Okafor’s and Adenaike’s works tell us *it’s all not in your head*—it also involves your living environment. Then there’s the transgressive use of ceramics in Chris Escheta’s terra-cotta sculpture *Untitled*, 2019, and in Chike Ebebe’s glazed *Lamentation*, 1988. Ebebe, especially, abandons all conventions to create ceramic works that are both beautiful and, at first glance, formless. He marries Igbo folk pottery—used, for instance, to store and carry water—to Western fabrication techniques, such as the use of a kiln. What would

otherwise have a clear form is imbued with expressive lines, curves, and depressions, in grayish-purple amethyst tones that make it seem, somehow, not a form.

El Anatsui—whose works on view include a wood piece as well as one of his more famous bottle-cap tapestries—is now known the world over for his monumental sculptures. Lesser known is how they came to be. Safe in the company of other risk-taking artists—those who were painting beyond the frame and continuing an artwork on the wall, manipulating clay in unprecedented ways, and crafting materials into previously unimagined metamorphic sculptures—Anatsui felt emboldened to try a hand at his grand-scale bottle-cap tapestries and other experiments. “Kindred Spirits” invited a critical look back at such moments and the remarkable work that emerged from them.



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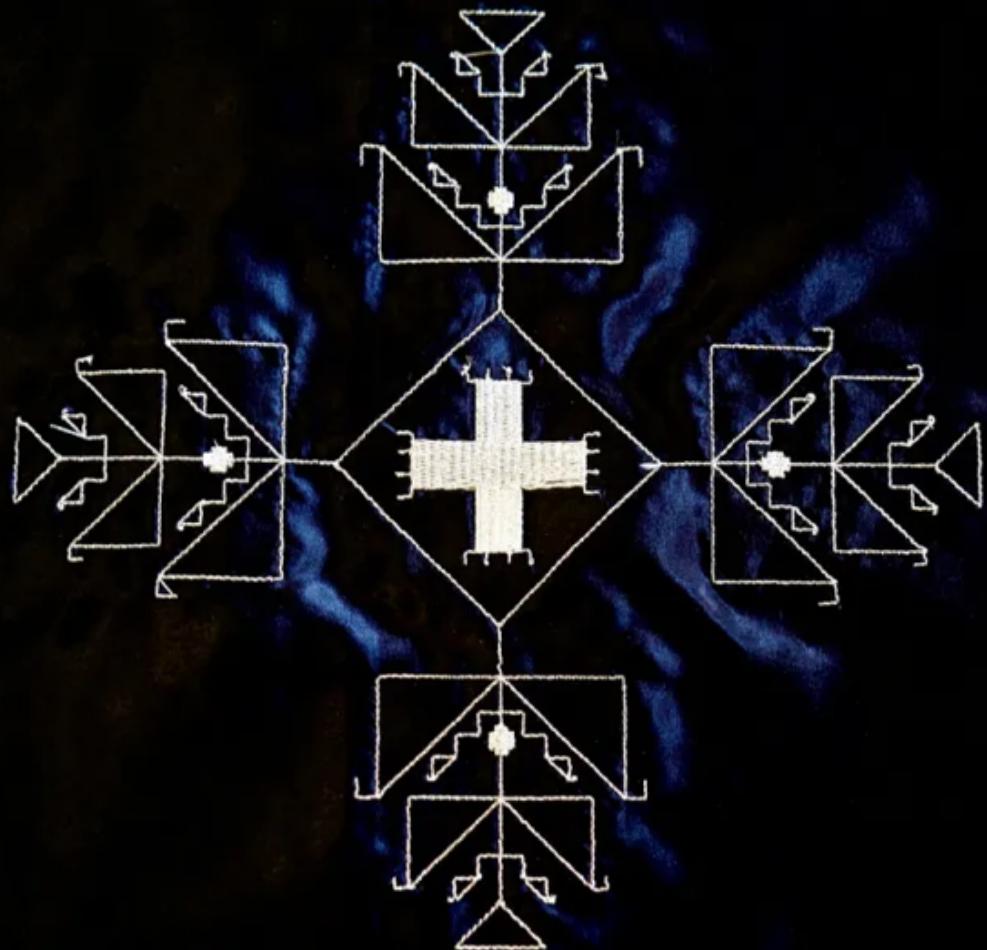
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Kite, *Wichahpih'a (a clear night with a star-filled sky or a starlit night)* (detail), 2020, silver thread on blue satin, 24 x 24".

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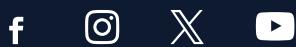
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