



Uthman Wahaab

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Uthman proved to be as interesting as we perceived him to be on arrival at his studio located at Surulere. Apart from having a beautiful homely space filled with his work, Uthman appears to be an avid collector of antiques ranging from cameras to Middle Eastern tea sets. Born in Ilorin, Uthman is a multi-disciplinary artist whose foremost concern is developing a new visual language that consciously rejects traditional forms of depiction and documents the ongoing history and unfolding reality. His current work focuses on the issues of identity, beauty, sexuality, and cultural influences that inform technological change and social shifts in Africa.

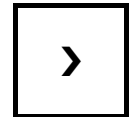
It was on this note that our conversation began..

The first piece of yours I ever saw was one of the ones with the fat ladies. What's the story behind the series?

The series which is called "Phenomenal Woman", was actually inspired by my experience with a plus-sized woman i met in the days of Yahoo Messenger. Upon meeting her in person i could read the insecurity written all over and i found myself

all through that period trying to assure her that she was acceptable and such. This got me questioning what the right size was for intelligence, kindness and beauty. I , also at the time trying was to figure out my style and how to represent myself as an artist fresh out of college. With these things in mind, i decided to break away from drawing accurate and contoured figures which i realized were due to the influence of Western ideas of beauty.

Having started with the women with large body sizes , i started to look for a contradictory feature to add to that , so i chose a fat ballerina? and people reacted asking why a fat ballerina and i said why not? I also thought about how people use facial features as an escape from the body , so i made them faceless thereby confronting the audience with the body they are having a problem with. It also lacks proportion, or accuracy but you don't take note of it . I made the legs smaller than the body as well as the hands and feet but you see it as proportional. That is acceptance.



These themes and notions of acceptance are political as most things are, how important is it for an artist to have a political stance especially as an African artist in these times?

I think it's essential because it is unavoidable whether directly or indirectly. Politics is always reflected in what you do, for instance, the fat ballerina series represents the politics of exclusion. Art would seem shallow without politics, to some degree it should address issues. Speaking of African artists, i believe that when one is confronted with a way of life and you think that is the end and you can't think of a better way to address it , art is a great medium to use. The issue of slavery for instance , some of us still play the victim as opposed to going back to work, whatever it may be , to change that narrative. I know many artists who speak on these things but how come we never speak about our leaders/elites who participated in the slave trade, even presently.

The Yorubas say when you recognize a problem it is half-solved. What we forget is that these people have researched us and come to know us as people who sell ourselves and dehumanize ourselves. Africa still remains the same, and instead of working on something we want to project, we keep complaining and asking for reparations but what are we known for? Consumption of everything that is not ours. It's a difficult situation so there's no way you can't be political as an artist regardless of what form it is.

It's important to create something that could be documented as part of a change in our society.

We believe your Victorian Lagos series is centered around these themes.....

Yes, it was me looking inward, to investigate the Victorian era of the 19th century, and how this period in British history sowed the seed of crisis that manifests globally in the present day. As the Martiniquan intellectual and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon once wrote in *Wretched of the Earth*, decolonization is a process in which “the last shall become first and the first last.” The Victorian Lagos series was conceived to capture not only the conflicting legacies of colonialism on black African bodies, but more significantly the desire of formerly colonized people to modernize themselves in the style of the former Western colonists. I'd like to change the way we approach slavery and colonialism as a topic, as right now we are not in those conditions anymore , but we are dealing with the aftermath, and it's apparent even in the way we treat expatriates who aren't even Europeans, the way we choose them over our brothers.

Back in those times, we had the fellow black man, especially our leaders who captured their own to sell to the other. Meanwhile the reverse is the case when it is them versus us. Many of us fail to have that spirit of brotherhood and we believe that by selling our brothers , we will get more proximity and chances with the others and they understand

that about us. I see this in the art sphere, and many of us are not looking at our brothers who were , and are an important part of this process.

Do you know any of these people depicted in the potraiture?

The people depicted in the Victorian Lagos series are fictitious middle-class Nigerians, i specifically chose to demonstrate the extent to which the Black Identity Crisis is felt and manifested in contemporary African society. I question the way Africa continues to flounder in the global economic forum while being socioeconomically patronized by the West at the same time. Subjects who sit for their portraits exhibit facial expressions that align with the escapism and fashionable detachment often seen in *fin-de-siècle* European portraits. I've had people say the faces remind them of people they know. I'm just trying to make something that provokes our thoughts and has some truth in it , that's why i'm going for a residency in Senegal where i'm hoping to be able to do more research on the slave trade.

You're a Muslim, and with Ramadan having come to an end, how would you say fasting, and just being a Muslim in general influences or deducts from your process?

That month in itself is a blessing to anyone who participates in it, and if you are able to continue with the tradition and

doctrines it's better for you . As a human being it's difficult to let go of things even when we think or believe that we are. This thing called life is a struggle for everyone. But concerning my work, it is only affected in regards to the speed at which i create,especially when i have deadlines that i can't say no to. Regardless of that, I still take my time out to meditate during the day. I have however had fellow Muslims criticize my work especially the fat ballerina series saying that it was obscene but my reply to that is, to ask if they question male gynecologists who have to be in contact with their patients in ways that are uncomfortable. All work is work.

Speaking of work, what is your take on people sometimes requiring that artists create in large quantities in a short period of time, sometimes for the sake of making sales? And what is your advise to younger artists who might find themselves having to do that?

It's because of our economic condition and the period we are in with social media and accessibility , that this is made possible. My advise for them is to own their careers and set boundaries if need be, because at the end of the day it is theirs and they must take control of it, regardless of how young they are. This is how we are taken advantage of in a lot of cases.

Apart from the Victorian series, do you have any projects you're looking forward to?

I'm looking forward to integrating my work with technology, with a focus on science and religion. I would like to be able to portray our traditional practices and rituals in Islam as non-fetish, to normalize them. I find it odd that we accept the ideas of energy and magic in the Western context but have diminished it within ourselves. By integrating my work with technological practices, it will signify progression and be a step away from Afrocentric ideas of keeping things traditional. It stifles creativity as well as growth when a person decides to stick to one way of doing things.

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