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ISSUE 111 UK £16.50 RTW  
€20.50 EUROPE £18.50



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# BUBBLES OF DELIGHT

*Samuel Nnorom's social fabric*

Nodules of riotously hued and ornamented fabric are clustered together in a hectic conglomeration of pattern and colour. They resemble a mad vertically suspended fruit bowl, overflowing with strange, multi-coloured apples, oranges and grapes or perhaps aerial views of a Nigerian market or clusters of huts in village compounds. These are the textile works of the young, award winning, Nigerian artist Samuel Nnorom.

Born in Nigeria in 1990, his success is in large part down to the making skills of his parents. His father ran a cobbler's where the young Nnorom sketched portraits of customers. At his mother's atelier, he played with the colourful remnants of the textile she used in her tailoring business. "I was inspired by my mum's workshop," he said. I saw some of this material known as Ankara fabric. It is very colourful and has African motifs on it." Ankara is the cotton wax resist cloth used throughout West Africa,

he uses scrap fabric from neighbourhood tailors, supplemented by finds in local markets and used clothes. He doesn't pre-plan his work. "I get involved in my bubbles and then I hear a voice giving me direction," he said. "Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

His employment of Ankara echoes its use by Yinka Shonibare. "When I got the idea of Ankara I researched its use by other artists, and he is one of my inspirations," Nnorom said. "I keep an eye on what he is doing." He even undertook a residency founded by Shonibare. His assemblage of multiples of waste resonates with the work of El-Anatsui, the Ghanaian artist who works with massed metal bottle caps and taught at Nsukka University where Nnorom received an MFA. "I was influenced by a professor at Nsukka, Eva Obodo, who had been an assistant in El-Anatsui's studio," he said. "We have a culture in Nsukka

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printed in local designs often in the Netherlands. "The material is important not because it's an African fabric or because it's a fabric concerned with my society but because I see fabric as a structure where everyone is being intertwined," Nnorom said. To Nnorom, textile denotes a social structure or social organization that weaves humanity into society; "the fabric of society" or "social fabric."

"My work process is all about cutting, stitching, rolling and sewing," he said. "In my mother's workshop, we had to cut fabrics into pieces, joining them into big forms; however, I tend to use them to make bubbles, to make statements and to talk about conditions." These 'bubbles' are made of remnants of foam, discarded by local upholsterers, and covered in Ankara textiles. His bubble technique suggests a structure that holds or stores something for a period of time.

Having completed his degree, Nnorom was questioning his future practice. He happened upon some local rubbish dumps, scattered with pre-loved textiles, this together with the fabric from his mother's workshop provided his new language. Today

coming from Igbo culture that there is 'Unity in Strength and Strength in Numbers,' so many of us use multiples in our work."

Nnorom's multiples, fabric-covered foam balls, are methodically stitched together to make convoluted assemblages that refer to the 'Fabric of Society' composed of closed social structures forming the bubbles in which people's daily lives are enclosed. "I am mindful of what a bubble is and aware of what a bubble holds before it is busted, (burst)," he said. "So material and concept are brought together, getting this material from my environment and getting the form, which is a bubble. It's a discourse about humanity at large."

The bubbles or stuffed nodules have assumed increasing importance. "I became more interested in my work during and after the pandemic," he said. "I asked myself what kind of bubbles are we being trapped in? My bubbles began to make sense to me. People stay in their own bubbles or comfort zone. I want to connect people back to themselves. There are a lot of bubble conspiracies, a lot of truths that are being concealed." Especially it seems in Nigerian politics. Nnorom freights his ▶





use of textile with enormous meaning and responsibility, “It is,” hesays, “the material most used by humans showing how a people live. It reveals their culture and history; it affects the environment and speaks of the everyday life of people; it is about humanity and how we can be human.”

Nnorom is keen that his work should provoke questions. “My work looks at individual communities and speaks about humanity,” he said. “To me, it’s very important that humanity comes first in every practice. That is why recycling comes into play and how fabric talks about the people who used them. That is where my interest lies. I want people to engage with my work and ask questions. To ask why this, why that? I’m very much excited when people engage with my work. I want my work to make society a better place.”

He has been remarkably successful, but his father was not originally impressed. As Nnorom was a star maths student, his father wanted him to be a banker or an economist and refused to pay for his Fine Art university fees at the University of Jos, only relenting when Nnorom won an art prize. He is now keenly proud of his son’s achievements, especially his sojourns in London. The last was for the Royal Over-Seas League and Art House Residency in 2022. “It was a liberation and gave me time to reflect on my practice,” said Nnorom.

He is busy developing new ideas. His work is as well constructed on the back as the front but is generally hung against a wall so he is working on suspended clusters of textile, (influenced perhaps by Yinka Shonibare’s flying sculptures.) Nnorom recently bought some net used for fishing in a local market and is developing a body of work *Fishers of Men*, where bubbles are stitched in a more open way onto the knots of the netting.

Yet another project is based on skin. He cast his own skin in silicone and then created multiples which he coloured, cut up, and re-formed by stitching into strange map-like shapes. He’s fascinated by how skin can be pulled off the body, becoming shapeless, combining this with an interest in Igbo tattoos. He’s also looking at Okirika, second-hand European clothes imported into Nigeria, with resonances of colonialism, history and economic consequences. His mission, for now, is “to engage viewers in self-interrogation, critical thinking and questioning of socio-political structures and the human conditions of what truth and conspiracy connote to our daily lives wrapped in bubbles.” ---

**Corinne Julius. See Samuel Nnorom at Gallerie Revel, Collect 3–5 March, Somerset House, London.**

Image above: *Creation*, 2022, African Wax Print Fabric, 76 x 130 x 20 cm.