



BLAQUE

AN EXHIBITION OF BRONZE SCULPTURES BY

**OLAYEMI
FAGBOHUNGBE**



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BLAQUE

A solo exhibition of bronze works by

OLAYEMI FAGBOHUNGBE

10-17th October, 2021

@

Artpantheon Gallery
12D Bosun Adekoya Street.,
Oniru, Lagos

Written contributions from:

Joseph Omoh Ndukwu
Bunmi Babatunde
Abiodun Olaku

Page Layout/Design:

Adewolu Abdul-kazeem

Catalogue Production & Photography

Nana Sonoiki
Olayemi Fagbohunbe



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FOREWORD

YEMI'S ADVENTURE in [with] Bronze

Yemi Fagbohunge is an architect who graduated from the premier architecture school at Ahmadu Bello University domiciled in the Faculty of Environmental Design. (I would use his first name here for ease of reference). The departments that make up the Faculty of Environmental are, Architecture, Building, Fine Art, Geomatics, Industrial Design, Urban and Regional Planning. I believe that his experience of the rich Zaria art school brought him into a conscious appreciation of the interrelatedness of his chosen field with the visual arts. Some of his colleagues often take courses such as General drawing, and Landscape drawing as electives in the Department of Fine Art, and I have been privileged to take some architecture students in these courses. I must say that a number of them did not only enjoy their experience but went on to expand their architectural training with artistic embellishment, thereby distinguishing their professional practice. This is no ordinary experience; because there are so many of his colleagues, even his lecturers whose relationship with art is not only remote, some even seek to deliberately distance themselves from any relationship with Fine Art. Yet we know that historically art and architecture have always had a symbiotic relationship. It is of pleasant delight that today in Nigeria there are a number of architects who have turned into artists and creating great and fascinating works.

Blaque is Yemi's first Solo exhibition. His bold ambition and journey into sculpture, and with the bronze medium for that matter, mirror his personality, professional orientation, and sense of direction. His creative process goes through all the rigorous processes of bronze casting using the best of Benin bronze casting tradition. He conceives and creates these works at the famous Universal Studio Iganmu, Lagos, and casts them in Benin. They are later returned to Lagos for the final finish. This is a fascinating tale of two cities. The works themselves speak brilliantly of painstaking journeys, laborious dedication to the process with an almost perfect finish that Brancusi would approve.

In this season of our sixty-first independence, as I meditate on Yemi's works, I see his works engaging with the fragile history of our country graphically captured in somewhat skeletal figures. The figures reference the delicate nature of our current human existence as a country and by extension the fragile state of the country. These figures reflect not only our material poverty but also the all-pervading poverty of a rich corrupt nation. I have often defined corruption as a human state where a person is unable and has deliberately refused to make a distinction between what is wrong and what is right, also the person is unable or unwilling to distinguish between good and evil. Right and wrong are the same and interchangeable, so also is good and evil, they all can conveniently perform the same function.

Yemi's figures appear naked, empty, and hungry. Some with muscle would appear tortured, tormented, and in an excruciating struggle. These works are existential narratives of various states of human sufferings. As these forms evoke a common sense of loss, they immediately also mirror another world, of obese figures with fat bank accounts, figures with accumulated material wealth, masquerading leaders in thick and loud embroidery remotely connected with any constituency except their personal interests.

Yemi's own explanation of these works suggests an artist desiring to understand the struggle of the black race struggling out of a colonial past. He presents defiant a black (Blaque?) race seeking answers in its cultural roots through physical and mental protest. The bronze medium provides an apt visual tool that connects and creates a rebirth of our plundered Benin cultural treasures, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife bronzes, and Bida brass works. Postcolonial history continues to provoke this type of inward journey.

In this sense, the work titled, OMINIRA (Freedom), a skeletal acrobatic figure captured in a cage projects a combination of mirth and defiance, an imprisoned figure, yet being able to express freedom that is beyond physical limitation - caged yet free.

AILOPIN (Limitless), could be seen as relating to OMINIRA. Certainly, the common thread that seems to connect Yemi's exploration of the human form would be with the acrobatic rendition of the figures. The figure takes the form of struggle, protest and defiance. Athletic postures in Yemi's forms gradually assume a language with which he engages space and form to kiss.

GBARALE is another bronze cast in an acrobatic bow. It reminds us of Yoruba's expression of respect for elders. The treatment of the figure still retains its human essence, yet its austere minimalist rendition also expresses strain, distortion, even torture. In this work, there is no grace in the form as may be found in other works. Could this be a modernist protest against the traditional dobale?

LOVE WITH BOLDNESS is a male figure posed in what looks like an embrace of a stick figure. It is difficult to figure out if this is a female form because all that may allow us to see the female form is not clearly given to us. So we can only assume. But once you consider the title of this work you may be willing to see the stick form as female. This is even more so when the hands that gently wrap around the stick are considered a symbolic expression of loving protection. Could the artist be revealing a personal state of romance? The cubist rendition of this particular work, like most of the other works may betray a romance the artist is experiencing or a romance with Universal Studio.

But the work titled, QUESTIONING IV maybe Yemi's most interesting conceptual piece. Composed of skull-like heads with ring-like lines to suggest the skeletal body, he stretches our imagination on how we may be able to strip ourselves of physical weights and question the very meaning of life itself. Like the philosopher would say, all, after all, is vanity.

The formal renditions of Yemi's bronzes with their highly polished finishing are clearly expressive of a human condition that presents multiple reading. On the one side we see naked forms in an austere state, which reference and reflect our original godly character – open, disciplined, honest, and transparent. The works could also point to the artist's search for truth and its eternal singularity. The almost non-existent stomach in most of the Yemi's forms may suggest figures in a perpetual state of fasting from physical luxury and desires, rising to a state of spiritual piety. The process through which these works were created further underscores the artist's invitation for us to see that we attain the best of our aspirations through moulding, firing and polishing, processes that brings out the best in all of us. Could this be what we as a country are going through?

REVIEWS

Who is **OLAYEMI FAGBOHUNGBE?**

A creative hybrid, I dare say, having been certified in the field of architecture up to the Master's degree level, before his daring adventure into the mesmerizingly-unpredictable world of visual art.

But since his unobtrusive introduction to Universal Studios of Art seven years ago, ostensibly to satisfy his yearnings and curiosity about that latent side of his being, beyond his architectural knowledge and exploits, Yemi has grown in leaps and bounds in knowledge, expression, and sagacity as a practising visual artist.

In his arduous evolutionary journey from the lecture rooms of architecture in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and University of Lagos, (where he meritoriously acquired his first and second degrees respectively), to the sculpture studios of the Universal Studios of Art, National Theatre, Lagos, he has metamorphosed into a full-blown actor in the industry.

Through his inaugural solo exhibition, 'BLAQUE', he announces himself as a visionary artist built with a formidable 'alloy' of dogged industriousness, evocative and arresting philosophical chest, tenable media savvy, and production stamina – A unique creative DNA that guarantees an unbroken stream of exciting works that exudes timeless worth.

Certainly, the trajectory of his professional potential and integrity looks quite encouraging and laden with positivity.

At this point it should be silently but instructively noted that, this fresh brand being confidently introduced to the art market by Nana Asumah's 'Art Pantheon', on the pedestal of 'BLAQUE', can be said to be another beautiful feather to the cap of the Universal studios of Art, (ably led by my respected friend and renowned sculptor, Bunmi Babatunde), in her ascending success story. With benefit of hindsight, it was Babatunde who 'engineered' the acceptance of Yemi into the fold of the established and veteran artists in the Universal Studios, through one of our structured training programmes. In the process, he enjoyed comprehensive professional tutelage and mentoring directly from Babatunde, who paid special attention to him, having spotted his latent attributes, and work ethos very early. On this account, we gladly celebrate this remarkable transition and landmark progression into professionalism with Yemi, as he marches to glory.

With all things being equal, and by all means, I foresee 'BLAQUE' as the opening of a 'dam' of explosive creative energies, inimitable ideas, and tales of possibilities and successes, fulfilment and bountiful rewards for Yemi, the creative entity bursting at the seams with timeless, heading-turning, and mind-blowing concepts.

Joyfully, with open arms and sincere warmth, we welcome Olayemi Fagbohunbe to the art family. May you never be limited!

ABIODUN OLAKU (Artist)
Universal Studios of Art.

REVIEWS

I consider mentoring as a metaphor of the travail of a pregnant woman who would swear with the heavens that she would never venture treading this tortuous path again! Howbeit, as she beholds the beauty of the infant treasure, the thought of the prenatal anguish soon thins out; she ventures again, this time desperate for an encore! However, like in pregnancy, not every mentoring effort ends happily; several miscarriages, stillbirths, etc. My close to 37 years in the mentoring business is near encyclopedic. Many types of mentees are ever present in the Studios: the not too talented, the averagely talented, the seriously talented and industrious.

A trainee may be very talented but when lazy and lackadaisical, he's abhorrent! It's like the parable of the Swine and the Pearl; Treasure in the wrong place. The averagely talented or not too talented needs much of hard work and can become the best if they are given to industry. In all, the darling of the Mentor is any level of talent whatsoever; mini, average or maximum, but must possess keen, resolute and rugged spirit. Such trainees provide a veritable ground for cultivation for content and culturing. Yemi falls into the category of the seriously talented and industrious.

Trying to do some background check, that one may be equipped adequately to meet his peculiar need, I asked to see his architectural folio to determine if all he wanted was an escape route from a difficult terrain. But I found an amazing gift who without mincing words, would be a revelation for Architecture in the 21st century. So, I was confronted with one of the deepest tasks of my job as a mentor: to access his inner recess; to discover his need, passion and drive.

He made it easy for one to explore as assignments and various tasks were not only concluded on time but with surplus. His first attempt at creating a sculpture of his own after two grueling years of the basics, I identified a signature in his approach beyond the natural eclecticism associated with budding Artists.

Yemi is quintessentially the darling of any mentor: a keen observer; a fertile, receptive heart; tireless and submissive to instructions and a result-driven inquisitor. How Yemi combined his time consuming architectural practice with time-jealous Sculpture still baffles me; when full-time Sculptors struggle to catch up with time! I can't wait to see what the future has to unravel for Yemi; certainly glory beckons!

BUNMI BABATUNDE (Artist)
Chairman, Universal Studio of Arts

GALLERY STATEMENT

MEET THE ARTIST

Olayemi Fagbohunbe: Deconstructing Stereotypes, Reaching Higher

I see the man before I see the works. But in seeing the works, I see more and more of the man. The pieces, sculptural works in bronze, are arranged in a dimly lit room. They exude the aura of actors behind the curtains ready to come on-stage for some deep, slow drama. Each piece is mysterious, pulsing with energy.

Olayemi Fagbohunbe is an artist and architect. He was born and raised in Zaria, Nigeria, where he also trained as an architect, obtaining his bachelor's at Ahmadu Bello University. He then moved on to obtain his master's, still in architecture, from the University of Lagos. His academic ambitions bear testimony to his drive and spirit: one could always reach higher, far past mediocrity.

He believes that the boundary of what is achievable can be pushed and should be pushed. "I look at many of the great buildings and architectural designs in Ahmadu Bello University, for example, and they're all by foreigners, Europeans mostly. It makes me wonder: where are our own great architects?" The thought may seem a little uncharitable,



but the sentiment is genuine. The firmament of artists making great work here could do with several more brilliant stars.

This spirit is what animates his exhibition *Blaque*: the desire to inspire a renewed belief in the potential of the black race. *Blaque*, through patient artistry, brings to the fore works that deconstruct deeply entrenched stereotypes and inferiority complexes: black as second fiddle, black as the "dark," black as stuck in the past. This deconstruction is careful not to be reactive. Rather, it is celebratory, moving away from mere rebuttals to reductive narratives to tell the larger story of African ascendancy and agency.

Working as an artist and architect, Fagbohunbe straddles two closely related fields with key points of overlap and departure. Each practice influences the other, and both find expression in each of his pieces. He is deliberate about ensuring that they do. "I went deep into art to broaden my imagination," he said, "so whenever I design something it's just there—that creativity, that depth of imagination."

The conversation moved onto his work process and sources of inspiration, and he said: "Every piece I design, every artwork I create, begins with a narrative. If there is no narrative, the work

cannot be made. There has to be a story." As he explains, it becomes clear that story and narrative are as important as the material out of which his sculptures are made or the digital tools with which he creates his designs, if not more so.

He tells the story behind his conception and design of a church building in Kaduna. The building is an unassuming structure with a front of evenly spaced colours arranged in a rectangular array. The idea and aesthetic of the building, called Coat of Many Colors, was drawn from the Bible story of a coat of many colours. Jacob gave his son Joseph a coat of many colours to show how much he loved him. The church building was a gift from God to show his love for the people of that community in Kaduna. Each time they worshipped in the building, they would be draped in a coat of many colours, embraced by God's love.

Love with Boldness, a bronze figure of a woman holding a pole, is similarly sculpted through and around a story. The figure is slim, defiant, and sensual. Her chest is puffed out, her arms forming a love-shaped arc. Her pose speaks of defiance and of intimacy; it confronts the viewer, in one breath, with a fierce gaze and an inviting embrace.

I am moving through his pieces as through a room of sinuous dancers. I look at them. They invite a caress. His work is committed to fluidity. A fluidity delineated by lines. Everything conspires to lead you from one idea to the next to the next.

Fluidity, though, is not always ease or smoothness. The figures in a series of sculptures titled *itẹ síwájú I & II*, translated *Leap* by Fagbohungebe, are about to lunge forwards, but they also seem, with strenuous exertion, about to rise up. The complex contortions of their bodies work to complicate our looking—and our unchecked ease. Form delivers a sensation of flow, and composition a reflection on complexity.

To know a life, one ought to look at the lines that have marked it. One ought to look too in the direction where the lines point. The lines that mark a life can also shape the course of that life. Fagbohungebe is walking the lines of his life.

He has not walked alone, though. He counts among his influences Demas Nwoko, Frank Gehry, Le Corbusier, Bunmi Babatunde, and Alberto Giacometti, artists and architects whose vision of the world and of art are larger than their personal situations. The admiration is not limited to artistic talent or creation alone. There is also,

perhaps even more so, an admiration for the continuous pushing against societal expectation and personal indulgence, for complete ease is not necessarily a desirable condition.

Two of his thoughts are relevant at this point. The first: I like to deconstruct rigid notions, and automatic assumptions; it is essential that the work makes people re-examine their opinions and assumptions. The second: Life is and would, for all we can tell, remain difficult, we have to embrace that and continue creating within that constraint. These thoughts feed into every piece he sculpts and inform their appreciation.

In thinking of “Blaque” as a concept, Fagbohungebe notes the riches it suggests. In its various senses, it suggests fullness, life, pride, dignity, creativity, flair, power, irreducibility, black. In a world that undervalues black people and black contribution, it is not a thing of ease to rise above everything—including our own complexes and failures—which keeps black people down. *Blaque* asserts that we are rich and shouldn’t live lives so poor. If we imbibe such a mindset and work with it, Fagbohungebe seems to be telling us, we would move forward. *Amáa tẹ síwájú.*

Joseph Omoh Ndukwu

ARTIST STATEMENT

MY QUEST: My quest to dissect on my imagination leads me to taking an interest in drawing. In drawing I try to understand the very things that affect me on a day-day basis. Growing up in Northern Nigeria and being exposed to both Hausa traditional and modern buildings stirred up interest that led me to architecture; in studying architecture I realized “there’s no architecture without art”. Still in my quest, upon completing my architecture studies I found a thirst to further my curiosity in the arts, and sculpture was so appealing to me because of the creative freedom it offers in three-dimensional expression. In my quest, seeks a deeper journey into the world of my imagination to discover the unknown, so I draw, sculpt, and do architecture. These three have found free expression in my imaginative field.

In the past five years, I have been working largely on abstracted figurative sculptures as a means to push on the emancipation of black people (Africa), by looking at the concept of our ‘Blackness’. There’s great wealth/potential in the black continent. I find sculpture an appropriate medium to portray various narratives on the concept of blackness that portray the wealth and riches of Africa. The medium of casting all works shown in this exhibition in bronze with carefully designed and constructed elaborate bases seek to picture Africa’s cultural heritage. The abstraction of all the body of works gives me

the opportunity for self-expression in an unusual way that captures my thought processes at the given time. There are three installations and a composition titled, QUESTIONING I-IV, they address emancipation – a state of mind where one breaks free from the current state to assail higher ground. In My Quest we must first start by asking the right questions, ‘the why’s’, and if we can provide the right answers to some of these questions asked, backing them with dogged actions, then we are on the right path to positive change.

Blaque brings conscious awareness to who we really are as black people; it celebrates the ‘Afrocentric spirit’. It is moving forward by learning from the errors of the past and being profoundly proud of our identity. The sculptures in this exhibition, all produced in bronze, each with a base that was carefully designed specific to each work, seeks to show the reality of wealth, beauty, strength, life, endurance and power of Africa (Black Continent), but they also pose to ask the question, “Why are we so rich with so little to show”. It is my opinion that over six decades of independence from colonial rule over, we ought to rethink the narrative of blaming the past and take responsibility for our present to forge ahead into a future that we own and should define.

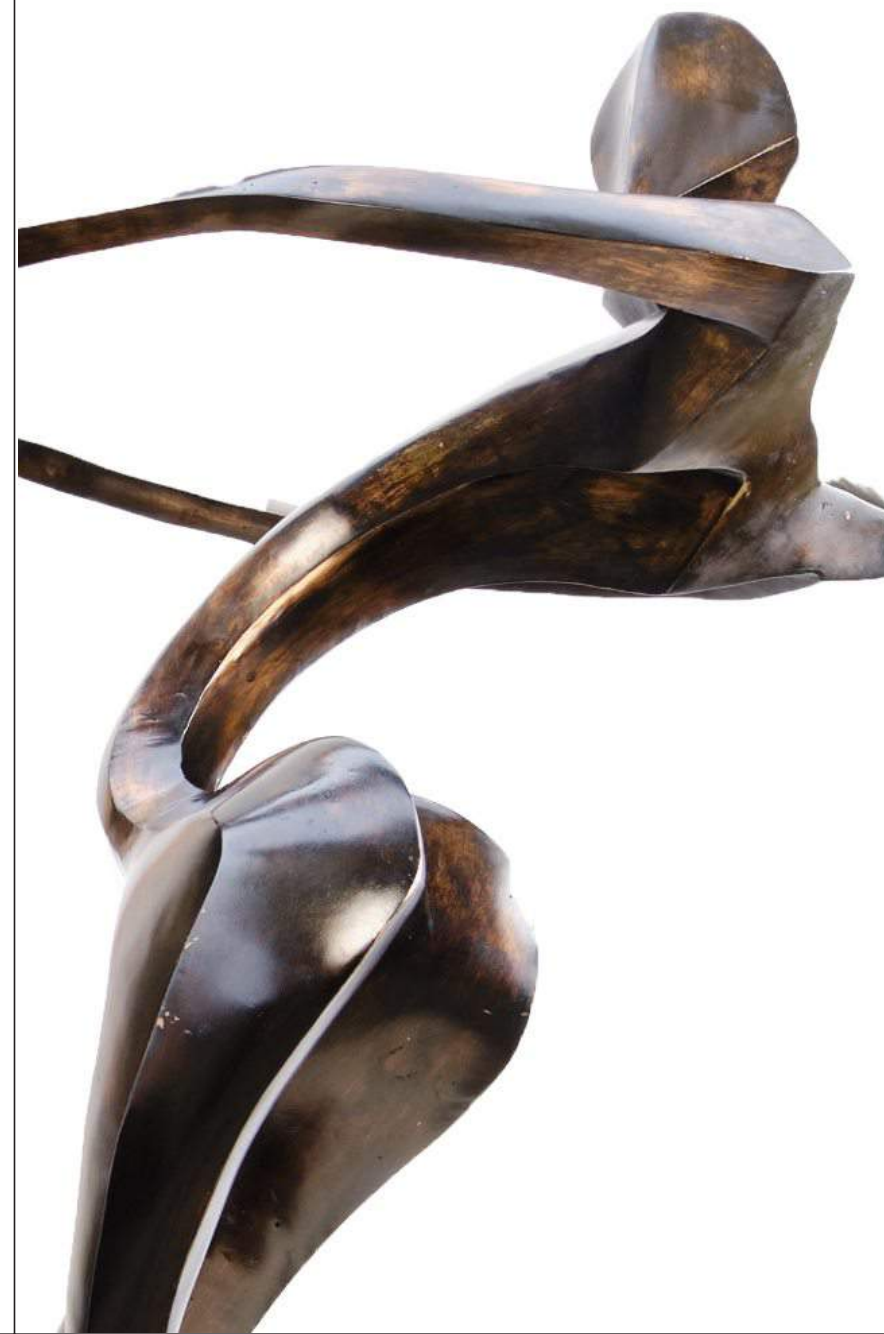


EWA (BEAUTY)
2020
BRONZE
H 135CM X L 35CM X W 35CM



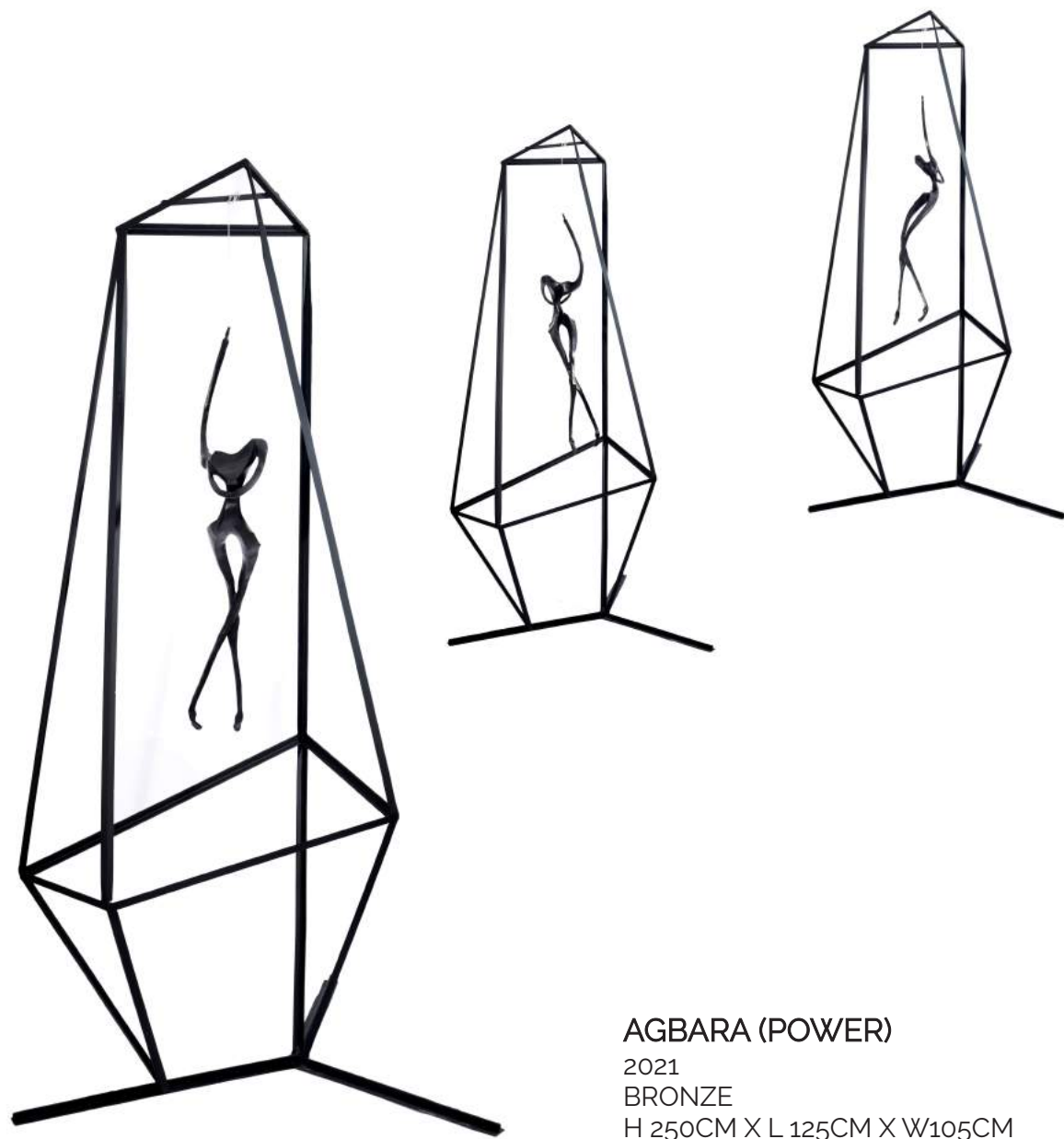


LOVE WITH BOLDNESS
2016-18
BRONZE
H170CM X L57CM X W40CM



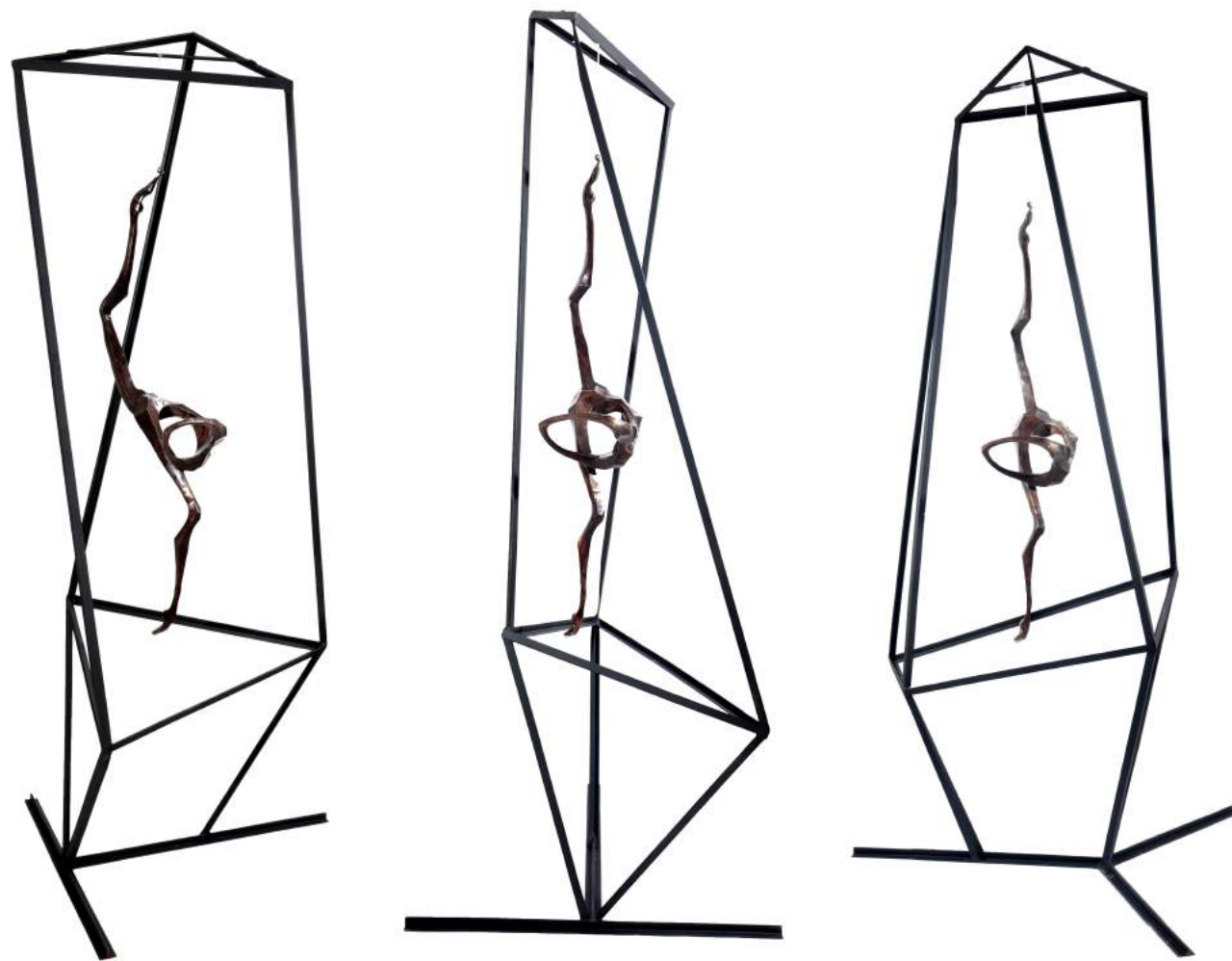
IFORITI (ENDURANCE)
2021
BRONZE
H 180CM X L 66CM X W80CM





AGBARA (POWER)
2021
BRONZE
H 250CM X L 125CM X W105CM





OMINIRA (FREEDOM)

2021

BRONZE

H 250CM X L 100CM X W100CM





GBARALE (LOYAL)
2020
BRONZE
H 140CM X L60CM X W30CM





ITESIWAJU I (Leap)
2020
BRONZE
H 180CM X L 26CM X W24CM





ITESIWAJU II (leap)
2020
BRONZE
H 38CM X L 40CM X W 38CM



AILOPIN (LIMITLESS)
2020
BRONZE
H 185CM X L90CM X W90CM





KARFI (STRENGTH)
2020
BRONZE
H 130CM X L 100CM X W 26CM





SANI (AWARENESS)
2016
BRONZE
H 100CM X L 27CM X W14CM





IGBOYA I (COURAGE)
2019
BRONZE
H69CM X L20CM X W30CM





IGBOYA II (COURAGE)
2019
BRONZE
H 45CM X L 14CM X W14CM



FARIN CIKI (UNBRIDLED JOY)
2020
BRONZE
H 170CM X L 65CM X W65CM



QUESTIONING I
2019
BRONZE
H184CM X L40CM X W45CM



QUESTIONING II
2019
BRONZE
H184CM X L45CM X W45CM





QUESTIONING III
2019
BRONZE
H184CM X L45CM X W45CM





ACKNOWLEDGEMENT





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