



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Installation view at the *Sobey Art Award* exhibition, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 3 October 2025–8 February 2026.
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SOBEY ART AWARD 2025: CHUKWUDUBEM UKAIGWE

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Chukwudubem Ukaigwe employs various media in his artistic practice, embracing the process of experimentation that comes with conveying overlapping and expansive ideas. He views media as visual languages – or dialects within the same language – in which he is fluent, communicating freely and with confidence. The artist creates work that grapples with the multiplicity of experiences within the Black/African diaspora and beyond. This layered commentary is expressed through richly coloured canvases, patterns, texture, sound, sculpture, and a variety of other technologies and media.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Still from *Time Off*, 2022. Single-channel video, 1 min 33 sec. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Chukwudubem Ukaigwe Photo: Courtesy the artist

The formal elements of Ukaigwe's work are impossible to overlook. In the video *Time Off* (2022), however, attention shifts to the quieter and less visible aspects of his work, such as his approach to relationality, ritual and gathering as transformative practice. A single-channel video depicting swimmers in an indoor pool, *Time Off* embodies Ukaigwe's explorations into the relationality of ritual. For the video, the artist brought together a group of young immigrant African men whom he had befriended while pursuing his studies in Winnipeg. As a Nigerian artist who moved to Canada to study at the University of Manitoba, Ukaigwe understands the key to surviving in an unfamiliar city is to create bonds with others who share that struggle. He explains that the men would gather every Thursday night at the same time and location to swim and enjoy camaraderie.

In the video, individuals swim back and forth in a reversed sped-up motion on one side of the frame, occasionally pausing to jest with one another and compare pace. On the other side, a trio of men float in a circle, their hands resting on each other's shoulders. They make synchronized movements before submerging their heads underwater, breaking the circle as they drift apart, and eventually reemerging from below the surface. The image of the young men of African descent bobbing and weaving through the water evokes transatlantic crossing and the ways in which enslaved African people relied on each other for collective survival. Connections can also be made to *Zong!* (2008) – a poem by Barbadian-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip that recounts the tragic events of the *Zong* massacre, in which enslaved Africans were thrown overboard into the Caribbean Sea by the crew of the eponymous British slave ship. The men in *Time Off* only pause for a few moments beneath the surface of the water, spiritually embodying the ancestors who perished during the *Zong* massacre as they collectively re-emerge. The men's movements in the video are accompanied by a soundtrack of improvised jazz. Recorded at a 2018 jam session with Ukaigwe and friends,

the music reflects the artist's love of experimental genres and African diasporic music. The historical roots of jazz as an expression of collaboration, mutual understanding, improvisation and interplay further emphasize the scenes of camaraderie on the screen.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, *Ain't I at the Gate (Titled after Lubrin)?*, 2023. Oil on canvas, looping audio featuring Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon (A Capella)" (1970), Charles Mingus, "Please Don't Come Back from the Moon" (1962), Dorothy Donegan, "How High the Moon" (1959), Canisia Lubrin, *Voodoo Hypothesis* (2017), Grover Washington, "Moonstreams" (1975), Ornette Coleman, "Moon Inhabitants" (1970), 182.9 x 152.4 cm, 9 min 32 sec. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view, *No Exit*, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2024. © Chukwudubem Ukaigwe Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

It is not unusual for Ukaigwe to title his artworks after writers and other cultural producers – both to pay homage to them and to invoke their presence within his largely citational and compositional practice. For example, *Ain't I at the Gate (Titled after Lubrin)?* (2023) honours the work of Canisia Lubrin, a writer and poet of St. Lucian descent, and refers to her book of poetry *The Dyzgraphxst* (2020), which is divided into seven

acts. The first act in the book, titled “Ain’t I at the Gate,” considers the “I” as an individual as well as multiple beings, while recognizing individuality within a larger collective. Through Ukaigwe’s work, we see how his worldview is informed by this practice of recognizing individuality within collective identity, as shared authorship is present throughout much of his practice.

The artist often takes on the role of convener, bringing together community members and other artists, at times with no specific objective other than to share time together. *Ain’t I at the Gate (Titled after Lubrin)?* reveals the artist’s inner contentions with ubiquitous matters, yet it is also critical of external circumstances affecting Black communities. It comprises a painting resting on a pair of speakers from which an edited soundtrack plays a track of songs and spoken poetry on the theme of the extraplanetary, including the upbeat staccato rhythms of Charles Mingus’ “Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon” (1962) and Dorothy Donegan’s piano playing in “How High the Moon” (1959). A repeating chorus from Gil Scott-Heron’s spoken-word poem “Whitey on the Moon” (1970), unapologetically critiques extraterrestrial exploration in the face of terrestrial abandonment: “A rat done bit my sister Nell (with whitey on the moon) / Her face and arms began to swell (and whitey’s on the moon).” The sheet music for the song “I’ll Fly Away” (1929) is placed within a spotlight in the middle-left of the painting. The song, a popular gospel hymn often performed at wakes, captures the idea of spiritual transcendence, and by positioning the lyrics prominently on the painting, Ukaigwe further elevates the viewer into another faraway realm.

Ukaigwe’s affinity towards an ever-evolving range of Afro-diasporic sounds is highlighted in this work as he blends sonic and visual textures, all interwoven to communicate an interpretative layering. Partitioned into segments, the painting creates the effect of different topographies or multiple thresholds. Each region contains its own set of patterns and textures, like an aerial view of the moon’s surface. In the bottom centre of the work sits a distorted silhouette of Viola Davis gazing upward from a scene in the film *Fences* (2016); hence, the disparate parts of the installation come together as her probable manifestation, or perhaps part of a fever dream.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, *Untitled (Windrush 1)*, 2023. Oil paint and gel image transfer on canvas, 122 × 122 cm. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. © Chukwudubem Ukaigwe Photo: Leif Norman; and *Hopes and Impediments (Titled after Achebe)*, 2023. Oil on canvas, looping video, 152 × 91 cm, 1 min 46 sec. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver. Installation view, *No Exit*, Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver, 2024. © Chukwudubem Ukaigwe Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Beyond the visual arts, Ukaigwe's exploration of the transformative potential of ritual and gathering also extends into artistic leadership. In 2019, while still a student at the University of Manitoba, the artist organized an activation at the Winnipeg Art Gallery with a group of colleagues to draw attention to the under-representation of Black artists' work in gallery collections. During the activation, Ukaigwe and others slowly walked into the main gallery, surrounded by European Renaissance paintings. As Olivier Macharia played the saxophone, the other participants recited a chorused wail, holding a singular note, their shirts removed as they lay on the floor of the sound-filled gallery. Twenty minutes into the performance, several security guards arrived and escorted the group out of the gallery. Despite its abrupt ending, the performance resonated nationally and prompted institutional action to increase the representation of Black artists in permanent collections and exhibitions.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, *Coltrane's Leap*, 2022–23. CMYK screenprint quadriptych, CD changer playing John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme," library of books from museum collection, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver Installation view, *While Black: A forum for speculation on what the gallery can't hold*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 2023.
© Chukwudubem Ukaigwe Photo: Kemi Craig

Ukaigwe's work deserves recognition for its visual complexity, composition and formal strength, but also for its contextual depth. Equally important are the quieter and relational aspects of his practice. He is an artist who offers gifts both seen and unseen. In a society that often prioritizes individuality and distance over connection and depth, his work provides alternative ways of relating to one another – pathways that, in turn, open the possibility of reaching another realm.

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