

Q & A: Chukwudubem Ukaigwe

Engaging Winnipeg's arts community with questions about inclusion.

by Lindsay Inglis

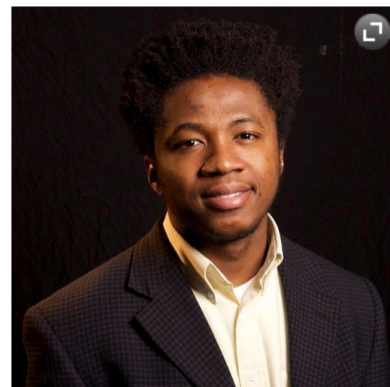
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Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, "Once deep and twice shallow," 2020 (courtesy of the artist)

Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, guest editor for the inaugural issue of the Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art's new publication, *Plug In Editions Online*, is offering the Winnipeg arts community questions about art and inclusion. His engaging interviews with five emerging BIPOC artists, which are being posted online every two weeks this winter, address issues related to art and identity at a particularly turbulent time.

Ukaigwe, a Nigerian-born student at the University of Manitoba's School of Art, first came to wider attention when he organized a 2019 performance at the Winnipeg Art Gallery to make a statement about the lack of diversity in gallery collections. He visited the gallery one February afternoon with a group of fellow students, who hummed as they walked around the space. One played a saxophone, while the others removed their shirts and began lying on the floor. A video of the performance was posted online by the [CBC](#) and [Canadian Art](#), widening the performance's



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe

impact. Gallery director Stephen Borys told the CBC at the time that he was listening and would welcome the chance to work with them.

As the recipient of a one-month **residency** last fall at Winnipeg's Video Pool Media Arts Centre, Ukaigwe experimented with sound and space. During this time, he created *How High is the Moon*, a film that examines civil rights issues from history to the present day. He has also been chosen for a residency later this year by the **Salt Spring Arts Council** on the West Coast, where he plans to continue his exploration of art and semiotics, the study of signs and what they mean.

Winnipeg writer Lindsay Inglis spoke with Chukwudubem Ukaigwe in a Zoom call at the end of January. Their conversation has been lightly edited for clarity and length.



The inaugural issue of Plug In Editions Online features a conversation between Winnipeg emerging artists Chukwudubem Ukaigwe and Ekene Emeka-Maduka, pictured in her studio.

For your **editorial work with Plug In, you chose the artists based on their emancipation from Western academia. Is this something you strive for in your own work?**

Yeah, I try to. But before you can depart, you have to understand Western academia and what it has to offer. I feel academia in general is great, but also limiting in different ways. Especially as an artist, because the arts scene is super dynamic right now and things are constantly changing. I think it's hard for academia to keep up.

A lot of art movements reflect the times in which they were created, and academia has the tendency of keeping you in the past. Western academia is also very colonial, so

breaking out of certain artistic ideas also means breaking out of colonial practices. There's also an anti-colonial connotation when I try to move away from academia.

As a society, we come from very different places and have diverse backgrounds that academia doesn't cover or understand. I believe focusing my work on colonial academic markers would be pretentious, and I think true art comes from a place that exceeds academia.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, "Dugabedandela," 2019, corrugated iron, aluminum and wood, installation view (courtesy of the artist)

In your article, *Eviction Notice: Colonial Statues, a Signifier of Racism*, for *Toned*, a Black Canadian online magazine, you wrote: "We are fortunate to live during this era and witness an important segment of history, where the 'erotic' will for freedom is the order of the day. Just like sex, the will for freedom is innate in human nature." Can you expand on that and explain how this is influencing your work?

I strongly feel the will to be free is something that's human – even with survival instincts, we are innately programmed to want to be free. When particular demographics are directly or systematically targeted for a period of time, there might not be constant retribution or continuous grand uprisings, but those raging emotions are always there, suppressed.

We are trying to find time for joy, time to go about our daily lives, trying to figure our finances in spite of the odds being stacked against us. Our mere thriving existence in these spaces are indirect forms of resistance.

But there is always a tipping point, and we've seen this at different times. In 2020, it was the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The uprisings weren't only a reaction to these terrible and senseless killings, they were explosions of different things that were related and unrelated to these tragedies. The uprisings were aimed at abolishing white supremacy, which is the constant factor of these various forms of oppression.

The drive for freedom and liberty can be compared to the sex drive. Looking at this from a psychoanalytical lens, this collective explosion or 'eruption' can be spoken of in sexual terms. The scary rush that happens at the precipice or climax of constant injustice can be theorized in orgasmic terms. There is that innate satisfaction that comes with dismantling systems that were made to suppress you. There is something exciting about toppling the statue of a slave master into the same harbour that brought our ancestors here in nauseating conditions.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe and other students in a 2019 performance at the Winnipeg Art Gallery that drew attention the lack of diversity in galleries.

While inclusive representation in galleries is a long process and can't be done overnight, have you started to see a change since your performance at the Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2019?

The performance wasn't targeted to any specific gallery per se, it was intended to start a conversation. I've seen certain changes here and there in Winnipeg, throughout Canada, and outside of Canada. It is also empowering to see that there are other people who are making the same conversations in various contexts. The year 2020 was an interesting time with lots of changes, but at the end of the day, I think these changes should be done properly, and not out of fear or in an attempt to check boxes.

The laziness in displaying work by Black artists horrifies me in a lot of spaces worldwide. It's ridiculous to have people's work in spaces only because they're Black,

neither contextualizing their work nor being willing to digest or go through their work. I feel the care and the scholarship and the research that goes into the work of White artists is the same care and scholarship that should go into presentation of the work of Black artists.

It's great to see an influx of Black artists showing in major museums, but more care should go into these processes. I hope these changes aren't just reactionary, but I've seen a lot of dangerous moves that are disguised as progressive. If we stop at simply checking the boxes of 'representation' and 'inclusion,' there is a tendency for the recycling and dumbing down of Black art.

"There is a plantation pattern in the way Black works are shown and collected these days."

If you randomly pick artists from random parts of the world and throw them all in a group show, with no concrete research and no scrutiny, what happens is that the artists who are doing the work are either overlooked or misinterpreted. There's been a hilarious surge of paintings in a lot of galleries and it's just so funny. You have a whole show that's meant to be informative of Black voices in a major museum, with 20 to 30 artists, but all the artists are portrait painters. Where the hell are the conceptual artists? The photographers and video artists? The performance artists? The installation and mixed media artists?

There is a plantation pattern in the way Black works are shown and collected these days. I think the way forward is conducting proper research and understanding in order to have meaningful conversations. But you can't have proper understanding if the staff in these places don't have any connection to these works. It's not about just about getting a lot of Black artists in a space; the gallery staff should also reflect understanding of the works. Diversity in staffing is very important, not only in temporary roles, but also in major positions – curators, directors, editorial heads and so on. Maybe we're getting there. Like you said, these things can't come overnight.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, "Mmiri" (still), 2018, film, 5 min. (courtesy of the artist)

You're a painter, and you've been expanding into performance, film and writing. Could you talk about this development of your practice? How do you decide what form of expression works best for the message you're portraying?

It's been a great experience and privilege being able to work with different media. The interdisciplinary approach is something that is very important to my work. For me, I first think about conversations and about what I want to express. I think there are particular things you can express in paintings that you can't get with sculpture, and things you can capture with writing that you can't with video. I'm interested in the conversations that emerge when all those media interact.

I am obsessed with semantics and the way things are expressed, but also how they are displayed. My work can have multiple meanings when put into different situations, which also happens with words in a lot of African languages. The meaning of an artwork can change with positioning. When placed across from another work of art, the conversations that are created affect the work's meaning.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, "How High is the Moon" (still), 2020, film, 45 min.

Your film, *How High is the Moon*, took an archival approach, using footage from previous decades. A lot of your art not only refers to art history but also hints at your previous work. You've discussed this idea as something you've borrowed from jazz. Could you expand on that? And would you consider this to be a fundamental part of your art practice?

How High is the Moon, like my other works, takes an archival approach in trying to make sense of things. It was interesting to juxtapose various happenings from different times, including contemporary times.

I always see art as a conversation, so I take the approach of my work as something that leads to something else, that leads to something else. I think this is something that is profound in jazz music, being able to reference and build off something, to take something you've done before and ask, how can I continue this conversation? How does this act as a point of citation for what I'm doing in the future?

Having those continued conversations and building from past work is something that has been very important to my work. These connections can sometimes happen subconsciously, but I try to make it more intentional and profound. The cross reference I spoke about earlier defies media – my video may be in conversation with a painting or piece of writing, etc.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, "Portrait of Shaneela," 2020, oil paint, egg tempera and sewn-in buttons on canvas (courtesy of the artist)

Through your work with Winnipeg's [Graffiti Gallery](#) and by founding the [Patterns Collective](#), you've been very involved with the arts in Winnipeg. Can you talk about the importance of community work and collaboration?

I think collaboration has always been very important to everything in general, not just in the arts, but even scientific innovation. The iPhone didn't just appear, it was created based on older devices that were based on older devices. It's not just an effort of one person – there have been invisible collaborations through the generations that led up to the iPhone.

It's great to have been involved in the art scene in the past few years. I've been able to see how things work backstage, which has helped educate me and helped me figure out what I can offer. Being involved in my community has been an important part of my artistic thought process and is integral to my practice.

I'm always bringing people in and working with people. I've had the opportunity to work in different capacities, as a curator, a teacher, and also to meet with, collaborate, and learn from different people. When you meet somebody, there's always the opportunity to work with them again in a different capacity and to create something together. Impacting the younger generation is important, and also learning from them, because they are ahead in many ways.

Patterns Collective started with bringing communities together from far and near to increase artists' engagement by defying the limitations of location. It started with the idea of bringing people together during the pandemic but has grown into a portable gallery that isn't bound to a location. Patterns Collective executes programming by collaborating with various institutions. After the pandemic, it would be great to travel and bring our projects to different institutions in different places. The way we think of arts institutions now is very different. I like to think of the Internet as a location. I like to think of it as another dimension.



Chukwudubem Ukaigwe works in his studio. (courtesy of the artist)

How do you hope to expand your practice in the future?

I want to continue developing Patterns Collective. I think everything we do is getting better and I'm excited for what's to come.

For my practice, I'm not really thinking about scaling. I hope that comes naturally as I focus on creating meaningful work. Recently, I've been thinking about who I'd like to work with and what conversations I'd like to have. Residencies have been a big part of my learning process, and I just want to improve as a person. I want to get better at writing and in various mediums – not in terms of skill, but in context. I spend a lot of time thinking about my work and what I'm creating, past the aesthetics and what it is, to what conversations it ignites. ■