

POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND THE PARADIGM SHIFT OF IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART PRAXIS.

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Abstract

This article examines the political and institutional dynamics shaping contemporary African and African Diaspora artistic praxis. It reconceptualizes politics as a field of symbolic power that structures visibility, legitimacy, and value within global art discourse. Drawing on postcolonial theory and cultural studies, the study explores how colonial visual regimes historically framed African artists through ethnographic and essentialist narratives that obscured individual agency. Although formal colonial rule has ended, structural asymmetries persist in museums, biennials, and the international art market, where African artists are frequently mediated through discourses of authenticity and difference. However, contemporary African and Diaspora artists actively negotiate these conditions through aesthetic innovation, strategic self-representation, and institutional critique. The article argues that African artistic production is neither peripheral nor derivative but central to global modernity. By reframing identity as historically constructed and representation as politically charged, the study positions contemporary African art as transformative within international cultural discourse.

Keywords: African Art, Diaspora, Politics, Representation; Identity and Postcolonialism.

Introduction

The space of African and African Diaspora artists within global contemporary art has been sculpted by an intricate history of colonial encounter, theory of knowledge ranking, and institutional mediation. For much

of the twentieth century, African artistic production was carved within ethnographic ideas that collect identity over individual authorship and cultural variations over new innovation. These models were not just neutral, but they were inculcated into larger

political framework that interpret whose art could be identified as recent, intellectual, or universal.

In recent times cross-border have expanded the visibility of African artists within biennials, museums, and art markets but this increased visibility has not totally disintegrate structural inequalities. African and Diaspora artists continue to accept expectations that shape how their work is categorized, exhibited, and valued. The questions of identity, authenticity, and representation remain central to this negotiation.

This article discourses how politics is comprehended as the spread and negotiation of symbolic power which operates within contemporary African artistic praxis. This search the historical building of African identity in visual culture, the perseverance of occidental accepted influence, and techniques through which artists assert agency within global spaces and positioning African contemporary art within postcolonial and cultural theory frameworks as it argues that African artistic production is not a marginal supplement to Western modernism but an active force in redefining global contemporary art discourse.

This abrupt termination Africans by Western artists has introduced political conversation to the front line of the present day African art scene. Sparking the interest in this topic, *"Politics of Representation and the Paradigm*

Shift of Identity in Contemporary African Art Practices," is a strong personal standpoint on African artists and their practices within African and Western spaces, as it showcases African artists and their works which further reveal a tension between the identities they seek to express or preserve and the politics of representation they confront.

Alternatively, an image of a contemporary African artwork that directly challenges these misrepresentations as seen in figure 1 is contemporary African portraiture reasserting subjectivity and challenging colonial misrepresentation which is suggested a modern form of re-colonization that make elements prominent in a scene or image as multiple black figures rendered with unique observation, countering colonial visual traditions that focused on African subjects. The central figure's depicts hostile attitude as a site of power rather than objectification, reversing the asymmetrical gaze described by Frantz Fanon in Fuss (2023). The layered background, populated with smaller historical references, suggests collective memory and intergenerational continuity, aligning with Stuart Hall's (1997) view of identity as historically constructed through representation. Adornment and painterly scale truly confired the artwork as contemporary global art discourse tthat is against the reductive ethnographic framings.

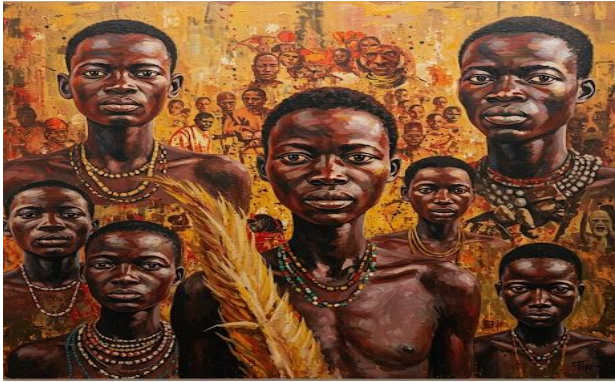


Fig1

Artist :Olu Oguibe

Artwork Title:*Painting from the Biafran War series I*

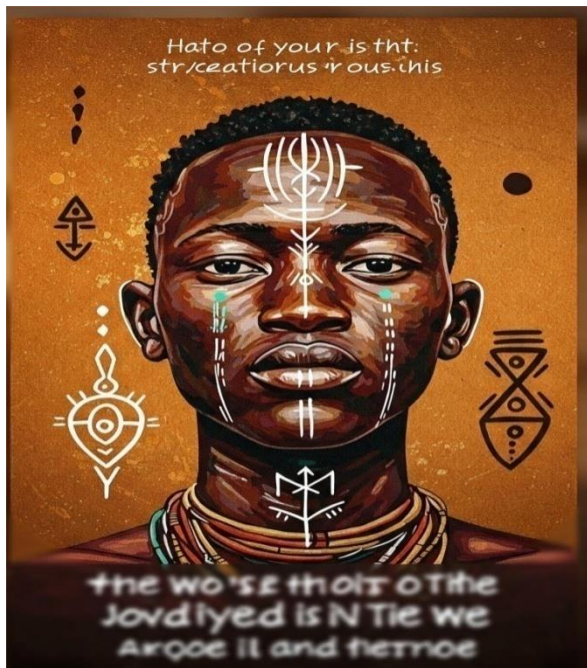
Year : c.1990s

Medium:acrylic on canvas

Source: Retrieved from Contemporary African Art Archive with assistance from Google Images.

In the essay "Terrain of Difficulty," Oguibe critically discourses the struggles that Africans artists endure when working within the Western cultural spaces. He spelled out the frequent constraints that African artists face in bargaining their place in cultural environment such as galleries and museums, as well as among art brokers and curators. These custodians of the Western art world shape the cultural landscape of the metropolis, often manipulating the game to their advantage. Oguibe highlights how African artists are deliberately thrust into a "Terrain of Difficulty" by these Western forces, leaving them "neither free at home nor accepted abroad." This ongoing denial of representation subject African art under the continuous Western critics.

Figure 2 demonstrate an inscribed identity and the reclaiming African Gaze is a portrait of a solid single Black figure, whose direct and unwavering gaze suggests subjecthood and psychological depth. The symmetrical white markings inscribed across the face evoke scarification and symbolic coding, transforming the face into a surface for cultural inscription rather than ethnographic views. Unlike colonial portrait conventions that rendered African bodies as objects of anthropological curiosity, this composition centers agency and self-definition. The stylized motifs surrounding the figure suggest ancestral memory and cosmological knowledge, reinforcing identity as historically grounded yet contemporarily rearticulated. The controlled palette and frontal composition further intensify the confrontational gaze, reversing what Frantz Fanon described as the asymmetrical colonial look. Here, representation becomes political: the work reclaims visual authority and challenges institutional narratives that mediate African identity through reductive frameworks.

**Fig2****Artist :**Olu Oguibe**Artwork Title:***Painting from the Biafran War series II***Year :** 1990s**Medium:**acrylic on canvas**Source:** Retrieved from Contemporary African Art Archive with assistance from Google Images.

The Concept of Politics

Politics remains a contested and multidimensional concept shaped by historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Classical interpretations trace the term to the Greek *polis*, referring to the organization of the city-state and the governance of collective life. However, contemporary political theory emphasizes that politics extends beyond formal governance to include systems of power, negotiation, and contestation within social institutions (Heywood, 2019). Similarly, Max Weber conceptualized politics

as the striving to share or influence power, whether between states or within a state (Weber, 2004). This understanding foregrounds power relations as central to political processes, as Hannah Arendt argues that politics emerges wherever human beings act collectively in the public sphere, negotiating authority, legitimacy, and representation (Arendt, 2018).

In today's world, politics is increasingly understood as rooted in cultural and traditional structure instead of restricted to governmental systems. Chantal Mouffe (2013) viewed politics as a system established through ongoing struggles over meaning, identity, and power within society. From this view, cultural production which includes art becomes a political space where representation, validity, and notability are contested.

Within postcolonial contexts, politics may also operate through subtle system mechanisms that control access, recognition, and authority. In the same vein, Mbembe (2017) postulate that postcolonial strength often manifests through symbolic and cultural control rather than subjection and authoritative command. In view of this, politics stretched to curatorial practices, market structures, and discursive frameworks that shape how African art is interpreted and valued globally.

In favour of this article, politics is therefore conceptualized not merely as state governance or partisan competition but as the structuring

of power relations within cultural institutions. It encompasses the mechanisms through which artistic identities are framed, validated, or marginalized within global art systems majorly against the African Artists.

Identity and Authenticity in Contemporary African Art

Identity is mostly described as different terms such as "me," "personality," "self," and "I." These concepts serve as a starting point to comprehend who we are, both internally and external. Theories have been propounded to help us easily understanding the factors that contribute to our identity as Africans and past experiences that shape and change our identity (Hassan 1999). Strangely, the European and European-American art galleries often display African art works without attributing it to individual artists, but tribes or regions. Rarely were these art works produced by more than one person, yet the history of the regions from which African art originates is frequently downplayed. This practice suggests that museums and zoos are mainly interested with ownership and the financial gain of African arts rather than the African people behind the artworks.

In similar research, Jenkins (2014) confirmed that identity is broadly acknowledged as a socially formed and relational happening rather than a fixed or essential attribute. Recent scholars highlight that identity is formed through interaction, representation, and negotiation within social structures, it is

shaped not only by personal experience but also by external categorization, institutional frameworks, and historical conditions.

Stuart Hall (1990) further argues that cultural identity is not an essence rooted in a stable past but a "production" that is continuously constituted within representation. From this perspective, identity in art is not merely inherited but actively constructed through artistic symbolic practices. For African and African Diaspora artists, identity therefore emerges within a field shaped by colonial histories, migration, globalization, and transnational exchange.

Similarly, Paul Gilroy (1993) conceptualizes diasporic identity as fluid and hybrid, particularly within the context of the Black Atlantic. His framework challenges essentialist notions of Africanness by emphasizing movement, cultural entanglement, and historical interconnectedness. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding contemporary African artists whose practices reflect multiple geographies and layered affiliations.

In the same vein, the need for authenticity in African artworks became very necessary so as to confirm the reliability or artistic validity of a work, determining whether it is genuine or not, as it is closely connected to identity in art discourse, which go through notable theoretical re-examination. Pre modern art documentary

highlights authenticity particularly authorship and originality. Nevertheless, recent argument acknowledged that authenticity is also culturally generated and politically produced (Jones, 2016). According to UNESCO (1994) in Nara Document on Authenticity expand the concept exceeding material originality to include cultural context, spirit, and intangible heritage. This shift acknowledged that authenticity meant different to all culture but must be understood within specific cultural frameworks. In relation to African art, this perspective reject earlier ethnographic models that reduced artistic production to tribal anonymity. Recent scholarship in African art history further critiques the historical tendency of Western museums to attribute works to ethnic groups rather than individual artists (Ogbechie, 2021). Such practices contributed to the anonymization of African artistic agency and reinforced perceptions of African art as collective or “primitive” rather than contemporary and individualized. Within contemporary African art practice, authenticity is increasingly negotiated rather than assumed. Artists actively reinterpret tradition, hybridize materials, and engage global discourses without relinquishing cultural specificity. To this end, authenticity also involves identifying the artist or tracing the time and place of work creation as accurately as possible.

The image in figure 3 shows a large-scale painting in an earth-toned palette primarily ochre, sienna, and brown depicting a line of stylized human figures adorned with body markings, geometric patterns, and ritual objects. The figures appear elongated and rhythmic, arranged in a frieze-like composition against a textured background. The work is displayed in a minimalist Western gallery space, framed and isolated on a wall with no visible attribution to an individual artist.



Fig3

Artist : Olu Oguibe

Artwork Title: *Monument for Strangers and Refugees,*

Year : 1990s

Medium: Concrete installation with multilingual inscriptions

Source: Retrieved from Contemporary African Art Archive with assistance from Chat GPT AI tool.

Representation and the Negotiation of African Identity in Contemporary Art

The representation of African identity in contemporary art operates within a complex terrain shaped by global art market structures, where identity is negotiated through cultural

shift and acceptable intervention. In a personal thought, the strenuous and often confused crossroad of African artistic framework fold the identity of many African artists, especially those in the Diaspora. These artists, who are trapped among their African heritage and the Western world, battled to showcase their identity which became so difficult.

Frantz (1991) in his research, he analysed the colonial biasness which remains the basis in understanding the mental and cultural displacement caused by colonial modernity. In a book, *“The Wretched of the Earth”*, Frantz critiques the emergence of colonial exclusives who encompass European worth, always witnessing a disrupt between indigenous identity and imposed Western plans. This tension generated by western plans continues to resound even in today's conversation of African artistic identity within global art discourse.

Stuart Hall (1997) further argues that representation is inherent and not contemplative, as a result it does not merely mirror identity but actively establish it through dialogue. View in the way, the universal exhibition circle, art criticism, and curatorial framing become sites where African identity is repeatedly engaged, negotiated, and sometimes constrained.

An Art historians Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1999) observed that contemporary African

artists often face anticipation of “authentic Africanness” forced by Western galleries and organizations. These expectations can function as restricted template, known for cultural motifs over conceptual analysis. Contemporary research improved on this critique, highlighting that African artists repel such consolidating likelihood through strategies of intersection and re-evaluation (Ogbechie, 2021).

Similarly, artists such as Yinka Shonibare carefully take part in colonial history and postcolonial identity through the use of Dutch wax fabrics materials historically entangled in global trade and colonial trade. Shonibare's work cross-examined the established identity of cultural authenticity and constraints of oversimplifying complex issues into two opposing entities between Africa and Europe rather than supporting a fixed African identity, (Enwezor, 2015).

Figure 4 illustrates the use of Dutch wax textiles in contemporary art installation where Yinka Shonibare exemplifies his sustained interrogation of colonial history through the strategic use of Dutch wax fabric. Although widely associated with “African” identity, Dutch wax textiles originate from nineteenth-century European industrial production inspired by Indonesian batik and later circulated through West African markets. By constructing Victorian-style garments and headless mannequins from this fabric,

Shonibare exposes the layered entanglements of empire, trade, and cultural hybridity.

The absence of heads destabilizes individual identity and disrupts the authority traditionally associated with European aristocratic sketches. Simultaneously, the quality of the textiles resists description of domination and portraying availability around first class museum spaces as was historically controlled by western centrics. In the pictures, the figures gathered around a table evoke understanding congress, yet the materiality of their attire threatens claims to cultural purity or national authenticity. Shonibare's practice demonstrates that identity is not essential but constructed through global exchange. By recontextualizing Dutch wax fabric within imperial iconography, he transforms material into critique, revealing modernity itself as a product of transnational circulation rather than European exclusivity.



Figure 4

Artist: Yinka Shonibare

Artwork Title: *The Swing (after Fragonard)*

Year: 2001

Medium : Mixed media installation with Dutch wax fabric

Source : Retrieved from Tate Modern, London museum archive with assistance from ChatGPT AI tool.

Similarly, El Anatsui transforms discarded bottle caps and reclaimed materials into monumental installations that evoke transatlantic trade, migration, and historical fragmentation. His practice reconfigures material histories into visual metaphors for interconnectedness and rupture, complicating notions of origin and purity (Vogel, 2012; Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

As demonstrated in figure 5, El Anatsui bottle-cap installation is a large-scale installation composed of flattened aluminum bottle caps and copper wire references West African textile traditions while engaging the material history of colonial trade. The use of liquor-bottle remnants evokes transatlantic exchange networks and the circulation of commodities historically linked to Africa's incorporation into global capitalism. The work's draped, mutable form shifts with each installation, emphasizing fluidity and transformation rather than fixed authorship or static authenticity. Through the conversion of industrial waste into monumental sculptural surfaces, Anatsui reconfigures narratives of consumption, memory, and postcolonial identity. The piece exemplifies how contemporary African art negotiates global systems while asserting historical agency and material innovation as well as demonstrating the use of symbolism related to African history and identity.



Fig5

Artist : El Anatsui

Artwork Title: *Dusasa II*

Year : 2007

Medium: Aluminum and copper wire

Source: Retrieved from Jack Shainman Gallery of

Art with assistance from ChatGPT AI tool.

Diasporic identity, as theorized by Paul Gilroy (1993), underscores the fluid and transnational character of Black cultural production. Contemporary African Diaspora artists frequently inhabit what Homi Bhabha (2012) terms the “third space,” where identity is formed through negotiation rather than inheritance. Within this space, representation becomes a strategic act an assertion of agency amid institutional structures that may seek to define the artist from the outside.

Thus, representation in contemporary African art cannot be reduced to the mere depiction of cultural symbols, because it functions as a critical process through which artists interrogate historical narratives, challenge imposed categories, and reimagine identity within global modernity. Rather than existing as passive subjects of Western interpretation,

contemporary African artists actively reshape the discursive conditions under which their identities are understood.

Occidental Institutional Politics and African/Diasporic Artistic Praxis

The positioning of African and African Diaspora artists within global art systems is historically shaped by colonial epistemologies that privileged European cultural authority. Although formal colonial rule has ended, scholars argue that symbolic hierarchies continue to influence knowledge production, exhibition practices, and market valuation (Mbembe, 2001; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Astonishingly, books and catalogs written by Western authors about African art are often riddled with inaccuracies, presenting a skewed version of African art to Western audiences. These publications rarely reach African communities, where critical scrutiny could challenge these false narratives. Even in the absence of physical Western domination, the insidious "game" of cultural misrepresentation and manipulation persists.

Olu Oguibe (2004), in *The Culture Game*, documents a revealing exchange between Thomas McEville and the Ivorian artist Ouattara. The interview illustrates how African artists are sometimes positioned within ethnographic rather than professional frameworks, asking questions that are directed toward biographical or ritual practices rather than artistic methodology.

The persistence of these dynamics is further linked to structural inequalities in the global “field of cultural production,” as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu (1993). Within this field, validation by Western museums, biennials, and auction houses significantly shapes symbolic and economic capital. African artists are therefore often evaluated not solely on formal innovation but within interpretive frames emphasizing identity, trauma, or tradition (Ogbechie, 2010; Quemin, 2020). While such themes may reflect legitimate artistic concerns, their institutional repetition can narrow the spectrum through which African creativity is read.

Historical attribution practices further reveal this imbalance. Early museum classifications frequently identified works by ethnic group rather than individual authorship, reinforcing perceptions of African art as collective and anonymous (Kasfir, 1999). Contemporary scholarship has challenged this model, emphasizing individual agency and intellectual contribution in African artistic modernisms (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Nonetheless, the legacy of ethnographic categorization continues to shape market narratives and curatorial discourse.

Importantly, African and Diaspora artists do not passively submit to these structures. Many strategically engage, critique, and reconfigure institutional expectations. Okwui Enwezor’s curatorial interventions demonstrated how

global exhibition platforms could be reoriented to decenter Euro-American authority and foreground transnational modernities (Enwezor, 2015). Similarly, Oguibe advocates for artistic production liberated from ethnographic burden, insisting that African artists be approached as contemporary intellectuals rather than cultural informants.

Thus, Occidental institutional politics should be understood as structurally asymmetrical yet actively negotiated. African and African Diaspora artists operate within global systems that both constrain and enable their praxis. Their work reflects critical agency within these frameworks, challenging inherited hierarchies while participating in the redefinition of global contemporary art discourse.

The artwork by Ouattara Watts as seen in figure 6 presents a stylized scene of communal life within an African village. Elongated human figures gather around a central table holding bowls, suggesting social interaction and communal sharing. The composition emphasizes the central group while a dense background of villagers and thatched huts creates spatial depth and a lively environment. The figures’ exaggerated proportions echo the aesthetics of traditional African sculpture. Dominant earthy tones of brown and ochre establish warmth and cultural atmosphere, while patterned garments and beads reinforce

identity and tradition. Overall, the painting symbolically celebrates African community, cultural continuity, and the collective nature of village life.



Fig6

Artist : Ouattara Watts

Artwork Title: *Village Gathering I*

Year : c. 1990s

Medium: mixed media on canvas

Source: Retrieved from Contemporary African Art Collection with assistance from ChatGPT AI tool.

Economic Migration as a Root factor in the Politics of Representation

A comprehensive understanding of the politics of representation in contemporary African art praxis requires careful deliberation of the core economic conditions that have historically framed the migration of African artists. While identity formation and representational blueprints are often transcribe through cultural and rational lenses, economic necessity remains a critical root factor instigate where African artists produce, exhibit, and bargain their identities. The migration of African artists to world art venues is not just an artistic opinion but a intentional response to parallel conomic previlages within the global cultural

economy space (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015; Hracs, Booyens, Comunian, & Brydges, 2025).

Among African countries, artistic practice remain constrained because of the scarcity of needed materials , funding, and not even market development. The government are not investmening adequately in the area of cultural production as in the case of other sectors, which is responsible for restricted access to galleries, grants, professional networks, and exhibition opportunities. These economic constraints have historically influenced in showcasing the African art and support the outward movement of artists seeking for a life long engagements. Okwui Enwezor (2009), opined that the global placement of contemporary African artists is engraved to institutional structures that determine access to resources, circulation, and visibility, often beyond the African continent. Recent researches also confirm that structural inequalities in creative economies significantly shape the global mobility patterns of artists from the Global South (Hracs et al., 2025; Quemin, 2020).

The thick presence of global art markets in Western cultural major cities has propelled the migration patterns, notably in cities such as London, Paris, and New York which function as dominant spaces within the international art economy, hosting major galleries, biennales, and auction houses that

influence artistic identification and financial value. Scholars believed that artists often move to such western spaces not only for exposure but for economic survival and professional legitimacy within the global art system (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015). The economic pull of these cities transforms migration into a strategic response to structural inequality rather than a voluntary cultural displacement (Quemin, 2020).

Not only on financial motivations, economic migration has relative influences the identity formation and representation. When African artists shift their tents to global art spaces, they encounter new audiences, curatorial expectations, and cultural discourses that shape how African identities are produced and showcased. Migration thus becomes a site of negotiation, where artists concorately believe cultural heritage and adapt to global artistic languages. Similarly, Simon Njami (2010) assert that contemporary African artists operating in diasporic contexts often reconstruct identity as a fluid and transnational concept, reflecting both local histories and global encounters. In the same vein, fluidity of identity formation has been further reinforced by scholarship lamenting transnational artistic identities in contemporary African diasporic practices (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Kasfir & Forster, 2018). The economic forms which stirred migration also intersect with the politics of qualities and

identification, which is key to the discourse of this article. African artworks displayed in Western galleries are often framed within organised discourse that focus on aesthetic values over authorship and cultural context. This pattern reflects historical systems in which African creative labour was anonymized and detached from individual identity. As confirmed by Achille Mbembe (2001), the strong hold of colonial modernity continues to shape representational practices, often determining whose voice is recognized and whose identity remains obscured within global systems of knowledge production. Contemporary studies similarly argue that unequal systems of recognition continue to influence representation in global art institutions (Quemin, 2020; Kasfir & Forster, 2018).

Moreover, the movement of African art across the world has opened up a new depiction image portrayal potentialities while concurrently strenthening economic dependency. Artists working within diasporic space more often than not benefit from enhanced awareness and market penetration; nevertheless, such previlages often remain intense outside the African continent. The disparity that exist between production sites and valuation centres add to what scholars opined as a centre periphery relationship within the global art economy, where artistic legitimacy is validated regularly by the

Western customs (Velthuis & Baia Curioni, 2015; Quemini, 2020).

Inline to the paradigm shift of identity in contemporary African art praxis, economic migration must therefore be understood as both a constraint and a catalyst. Were the economic pressures push the artists to relocate, the resulting encounters with different cultural spaces generate new forms of artistic expression and identity negotiation. The migration of Africans in this sense, becomes a changing moments through which African artists redefine representation, challenge stereotypes, and articulate complex identities that is beyond geographical forms (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Hracs et al., 2025).

Primarily, intertwining economic migration into the discourse on representation strengthens the theoretical base of this article. The politics of representation in contemporary African art may not be completely comprehended without identifying the material that truthfully shaped the artistic movement, production, and visibility. By basing identity formation within the economic structures of the global art system, this study projects the various connections existing among financial survival, cultural expression, and the evolving representation of African identities in contemporary art praxis (Kasfir & Forster, 2018; Quemini, 2020).

Conclusion

This article has critically examined the politics surrounding the representation of African identity in the context of Western art, as well as the ethnocentric bias that continues to pervade Western art historical discourse. African artists, whether practicing on the continent or in the Diaspora, have long been subject to these biases in Western cultural official spaces such as galleries, museums, and the art market, where their identities are mostly manipulated or reduce to nothing. The legacy of exploitation and misrepresentation has strained the relationship between African artists and the global art world, leading to a struggle for recognition and fair representation.

To address these challenges, African artists must take deliberate steps to distance themselves from reliance on Western validation. They must assert their agency, reclaim their narratives, and project authentic African identities in their art without succumbing to the restrictive norms imposed by Western curators and critics. By doing so, they will not only redefine their place within the global art community but also contribute to a more balanced and equitable representation of African art on the world stage.

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