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PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet 41

LAWRENCE MEJU'S EZE GOES TO SCHOOL



Eze goes to School Digital painting printed on Canvas, 34" x 46" Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

Eze *Goes to School* is a visually arresting and conceptually layered work by Lawrence Meju, a rising Nigerian artist whose innovative approach to digital art and coloured paper collages has garnered attention in the contemporary African art scene. The work initiates critical conversations around identity negotiation, the pursuit of knowledge, and the complexities of educational exploitation.

THE ARTIST

Born and raised in Nigeria, Meju's journey as an artist is deeply intertwined with his academic background. He attended the prestigious Kings College Lagos, an institution renowned for its rigorous academic standards and historical significance in shaping Nigeria's intellectual elite. He later pursued a degree in architecture at the University of Lagos, where his exposure to design principles and spatial aesthetics likely informed his artistic practice. However, Meju's passion for art led him to pivot from architecture to a full-time career as a didactic artist, using his work to educate and provoke thought on themes of identity, education, and cultural hybridity.

Meju's artistic career has been marked by rapid growth and recognition. He has participated in high-profile exhibitions, such as the +234 Art Fair, which showcases emerging Nigerian talent, and a solo exhibition in 2024 that solidified his reputation as an artist with a distinctive voice. His work reflects the vibrancy of Nigeria's contemporary art scene, which has gained global prominence through artists like Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Yinka Shonibare, who similarly blend African and Western influences (Enwezor, 2009). In *Eze Goes to School*, Meju engages with these dialogues, offering a narrative that is both personal and universal, rooted in his Igbo heritage yet resonant with global audiences.

STYLE OF ART

Meju's artistic style is defined by a deliberate rejection of traditional blending techniques in favour of flat, bold colour fields and layered compositions. Exploring paper layering and digital media, he employs ways of creating crisp, graphic-like images that evoke the immediacy of pop art while retaining a painterly quality. His approach draws parallels with the work of Kehinde Wiley, whose vibrant portraits reimagine classical European compositions with African-American subjects (Murray, 2019). Like Wiley,

Meju reinterprets Western art historical tropes, specifically, the equestrian portrait tradition epitomized by Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801), through a contemporary African lens, infusing them with cultural specificity and modern sensibilities.

In *Eze Goes to School*, Meju's use of flat colour blocks creates a striking visual rhythm, with each hue standing in sharp contrast to its neighbours. This technique not only emphasizes form and silhouette but also mirrors the layered complexity of African identity, where tradition and modernity coexist in dynamic tension. His 2024 solo exhibition marked a continuous exploration of the paper medium in his practice. Using the layered coloured paper technique, he creates tactile, almost sculptural works. This shift from digital to material shows Meju's versatility and his desire to push the boundaries of his medium, aligning him with artists like El Anatsui, who transform everyday materials into monumental art (Oguibe, 2004).

Meju's didactic approach is evident in his choice of subject matter and symbolism. His works are not merely aesthetic exercises but pedagogical tools, inviting viewers to reflect on issues of education, cultural heritage, and self-determination. By reimagining classical European iconography, Meju challenges the Eurocentric canon while asserting the validity of African narratives, a strategy common among postcolonial artists seeking to reclaim agency in global art discourses (Bhabha, 1994).



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ANALYSIS OF THE WORK

Eze Goes to School is a dynamic composition that commands attention through its bold imagery and intricate symbolism. At its centre is a young man astride a rearing

horse, its brown and silver coat gleaming with vitality. The horse's front legs are raised in a dramatic, almost theatrical pose, while its hind legs bear the weight of both rider and steed, evoking the energy of a charging warrior. This equestrian motif immediately recalls the grandiose portraits of European monarchs and generals, yet Meju subverts this tradition by placing an Igbo figure at the forefront.

The rider is dressed in a contemporary Igbo ishi agu fabric, a traditional textile adorned with lion motifs symbolizing strength and leadership. Over this, he wears a voluminous cape that swirls around his torso, adding a sense of movement and grandeur. His black trousers and shoes, paired with a pair of modern glasses, introduce a cosmopolitan flair, bridging the traditional and the modern. In his left hand, he grips the horse's reins with authority, while his right hand raises a massive pen aloft, a potent symbol of intellectual triumph. This gesture transforms the rider from a military conqueror into a scholar-warrior, wielding knowledge as his weapon.

The background is a vivid tableau of natural and symbolic elements. A blue sky, streaked with gray and silver clouds, partially obscures a radiant yellow sun, suggesting a moment of transition or revelation. To the left, a rugged mountain looms, its stark presence grounding the composition in a sense of permanence. At the foreground, a traditional Igbo white and red cap lies at the horse's feet, a poignant detail that invites interpretation. On the mountain's face, the Latin inscription *Spero Lucem* ("I hope for light") is painted in a diagonal form, adding a philosophical dimension to the work. Together, these elements create a rich visual narrative that speaks to themes of aspiration, identity, and transformation.

Eze Goes to School is a multifaceted exploration of the pursuit of knowledge, the negotiation of cultural identity, and the power of education to transcend boundaries. The work's central figure, mounted on a rearing horse, exudes confidence and authority, his pose echoing the imperial grandeur of Napoleon in David's iconic painting. Yet, Meju's rider is not a conqueror of lands but of ideas, as symbolized by the pen he brandishes. The adage "The pen is mightier than the sword" resonates here, positioning education as a tool for empowerment and self-actualization, a theme central to postcolonial African art (Fanon, 1963). This intellectual victory is further emphasized by the rider's glasses, a modern accessory that suggests clarity of vision and scholarly pursuit.

The inclusion of Igbo cultural elements the ishi agu attire and the white and red cap, grounds the work in Meju's heritage, reflecting his pride in his origins. However, the cap's placement on the ground is a provocative gesture, potentially signalling a rejection or re-evaluation of certain traditional values in favour of Western education. Meju explains that his use of Igbo motifs reflects an awareness of his origins, even as he pursues knowledge beyond them. The motifs speak to a journey of learning that requires discernment and personal sacrifice, holding on to what grounds him while releasing what might hinder intellectual and personal growth. This tension between tradition and modernity is a recurring motif in contemporary African art, as seen in the works of artists like Romuald Hazoumè, who juxtapose indigenous and global influences to explore hybrid identities (Enwezor, 2009).

The contemporary adaptation of the ishi agu fabric further underscores this synthesis. While rooted in Igbo tradition, the fabric's modern styling reflects the artist's assimilation of a globalized Igbo identity, one that embraces both ancestral pride and cosmopolitan sophistication. This duality mirrors the broader experience of many young Africans navigating the complexities of postcolonial identity in a globalized world, a theme eloquently articulated by Homi K. Bhabha in his concept of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994).

The Latin phrase *Spero Lucem* ("I hope for light") adds a profound philosophical layer to the work. Historically associated with enlightenment and hope, the phrase evokes the transition from ignorance (darkness) to knowledge (light). In the context of *Eze Goes to School*, it can be interpreted as a reflection of Meju's own educational journey, particularly his time at Kings College Lagos, an institution synonymous with academic excellence and social mobility in Nigeria. The inscription thus positions the rider as an autobiographical stand-in for Meju, celebrating his triumph over intellectual challenges while acknowledging the ongoing quest for wisdom.

The background elements the mountain, sun, and clouds further enrich the work's symbolism. The mountain represents stability and permanence, perhaps alluding to the enduring value of education, while the partially obscured sun suggests a moment of revelation or the dawn of understanding. The clouds, with their silver and gray hues, introduce an element of ambiguity, hinting at the challenges and uncertainties that accompany the pursuit of knowledge. Together, these elements create a narrative of

resilience, aspiration, and transformation, positioning *Eze Goes to School* as both a personal manifesto and a universal ode to learning.

CONCLUSION

Eze Goes to School is a tour de force of contemporary African art, blending bold aesthetics, rich symbolism, and profound cultural commentary. Through his innovative use of flat color fields, digital media, and layered Igbo motifs, Lawrence Meju crafts a narrative that celebrates the transformative power of education while grappling with the complexities of cultural identity. By reimagining the equestrian portrait tradition through an African lens, Meju challenges the Eurocentric art historical canon, asserting the validity and vitality of African narratives. The work's autobiographical undertones, rooted in Meju's own journey from Kings College to the global art stage, lend it an intimate resonance, while its universal themes of aspiration and hybridity speak to audiences worldwide.

As Nigeria's contemporary art scene continues to flourish, Meju emerges as a vital voice, bridging tradition and modernity, local and global, personal and collective. *Eze Goes to School* stands as a testament to his ability to navigate these intersections with nuance and vision, offering a powerful meditation on the role of knowledge in shaping identity and destiny. As Meju's practice evolves, this work will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of his oeuvre, a beacon of hope and a call to embrace the light of learning.

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