



NELLY ATING

EKA IBAN

(MOTHER OF WOMEN)

13 - 27 JUNE 2025



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LADUN OGIDAN IN CONVERSATION WITH NELLY ATING

Can you share your journey into visual art? How did you first decide to use photography to document trauma, conflict, and migration in Nigeria, and what early experiences or influences led you to focus on these themes?

I began my work documenting the rise of Boko Haram assaults in Adamawa State and from then travelled to Yobe and Borno State. I was determined to have comprehensive documentation of the massive displacement crisis at the time. After Biafra, Nigeria had not experienced such a scale of displacement. About 2.5 million people who were displaced towards the end of 2014. No other medium could

have captured that number as clearly as photography did. The images captured loss of identity, family separation, trauma, and religious groups trying to co-exist. My early influence came from having a background study in print journalism. I leveraged my knowledge of storytelling.

Your work spans documenting survivors of Boko Haram and exploring the aftermath of historical conflicts. What draws you to these subjects, and how do you find the balance between representing collective trauma and telling individual stories?

Nothing really pulls one to such a story as I would imply other

than time and circumstance. It is not a fair pull that anyone should search for. Most of the images I captured were taken while living in Adamawa, specifically in the community that served as the first responders to the crisis.

At the time, I worked for the American University of Nigeria (my alma mater). Before then, I was unaware of the existence of war photography. It was heavily influenced by the mere fact that 2014 became a politicised issue about Boko Haram, and I felt photographs were the only evidence to show that lives were indeed lost and this was more than a religious war, as the political debate had favoured such a narrative. It was such a narrative that was divisive and aimed to steer compassion between Christians and Muslims. This shift from ignorance to awareness when people saw my images was a profound transformation for me.

Your images often deconstruct themes of trauma and displacement while also hinting at healing. How do you use visual language (like black-and-white aesthetics, de-focus, and shadow)



Untitled Me II
2023
Charcoal and ink on paper
83 x 60cm

to express the duality of darkness and hope in your work, and what impact do you hope your images have on Nigerian communities and on audiences around the world?

Healing is not linear, and so is hope unseen. It could go either way; you would only strive. You would find, in the middle of displacement, young people attempting to pursue education. Or farmers braving being abducted to return to the farmland. Or the pastor who preached forgiveness to a congregation of displaced

persons in Benue State. Those were the sort of stories that signalled hope. You would also find stories of rape or stealing in the camps. The fact that one is an internally displaced person (IDP) does not dissolve them from being human. The fact that one is traumatised does not dislodge them from daily abandonment of their pain for a brief moment of hope. My work is binary in that it evokes compassion and fosters a sense of humanity.

Your work often intersects with themes of humour, identity, and the nuanced Black experience. Could you discuss how humour functions as both a narrative device and a form of resistance within your projects?

The concept of humour as a Black experience originated from my observation of Nigerian skit makers. It began when Buhari was in power, and the quality of life in Nigeria slowly deteriorated. # ENDSARS was also a pivotal moment. From the music produced to the skits about Buhari, it was clear that humour was very much a cultural and social practice. We mask



Inward Outward
2024
Charcoal and ink on paper
83 x 60cm

and unmask, but more often, we mask the sense of disbelief and hopelessness behind our screens. There is something incongruous about Nigerian humour that feels more resistant to how the political class seeks to weaponise hopelessness.

In your self-portrait project “A Life with Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (Self Portrait),” you turned the camera on yourself. What inspired you to explore such a personal subject, and how has this self-examination influenced your broader practice as a documentary photographer?

A self-portrait is a capture of an appearance that we either want to admit is flawed or reject entirely. It has something to do with how we expect the camera to embellish our beauty, and we turn to the photograph to produce our best selves. In reality, the camera will show you what it is set to see. The camera captured a moment in my life where women’s health is often dismissed. I documented my struggle with Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) in a way that helped me understand the struggles of reproductive health.

Through this project, I met women who connected and found a visual grammar to articulate their reproductive health challenges. This project is my token of contribution in producing images that mime the changes in women’s health and, of course, the solidarity that one is not alone.

Ethical representation is a key part of your process. How do you ensure that your subjects are portrayed with dignity and that consent remains central, especially when documenting

vulnerable communities affected by conflict?

Self-taught, I made a lot of mistakes when I first started learning photojournalism. Along the way, I recalled attending a workshop where issues of objectivity and agenda-setting were raised and thoroughly debated by artists and academics. This workshop was where I also began reflecting on my role as a producer and constructor of knowledge. I began to realise that I was not only a photographer but also one who could shape realities, and I needed to approach my work with care. Consent is also a touchy subject, as most of the time, people you work with may not speak English, but they would still offer verbal consent through a translator. To navigate this meant always showing the images I took to the people and asking if they felt comfortable with this portrayal.

In most cases, they would say yes, and in some cases, they would ask me to delete their images. It was never a one-dimensional approach. I am also learning that not every story requires an image,



In Her Cooperative
2024
Mixed media collage on cardboard
6 x 4 inches glossy prints and threads
20.75 x 29.25cm

and text with vivid descriptions can offer a sense of visuality to tell a story.

You wear many hats—as an artist, curator, activist, and even as a Ph.D. Student and lecturer. How does your academic research and teaching influence your artistic process, and in what ways do you see your work contributing to broader social and cultural conversations?

That's a long list of hats to wear. My practice and research background closely align with each other. I immerse myself in the study of affect and the use of images for advocacy, and I also produce such

images. This connection enables me to apply theoretical insights directly to my work, thereby enhancing my curation of images from and about Africa. This process allows me to regularly review the representations and unintended meanings that arise, even in my work and the galleries I collaborate with in curation.

In a broader sense, I believe that in my practice as a researcher or artist, I am constantly examining the sublime yet unassuming everyday socio-cultural practices. For instance, when I documented Notting Hill Carnival, I was seeking out perceptions and behaviours that mimicked what we are used to. It is a way of ensuring that we do not become accustomed to specific visions, which we overlook when something in them changes.

An example of such an attitude is why we have the rise of fascism, which has slipped into our daily vision and naturalised. I am passionately interested in images as a vision and the materiality of photographs as an object, which is why archives will always be the starting point of my projects

moving forward.

What are some of the biggest challenges you've encountered in your career, and how do you navigate them?

At times, I engage with my work too personally, assuming the role of a moral adjudicator. It is draining, and I am slowly learning to step away.

Looking ahead, what projects or themes are you most excited to explore next?

Simply put, painting Efik mythology.

Ladun Ogidan

Curator

Omenka Gallery

CATALOGUE



Greenland, 2025, mixed media collage on canvas paper, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints and papers), 29.25 x 41.25cm



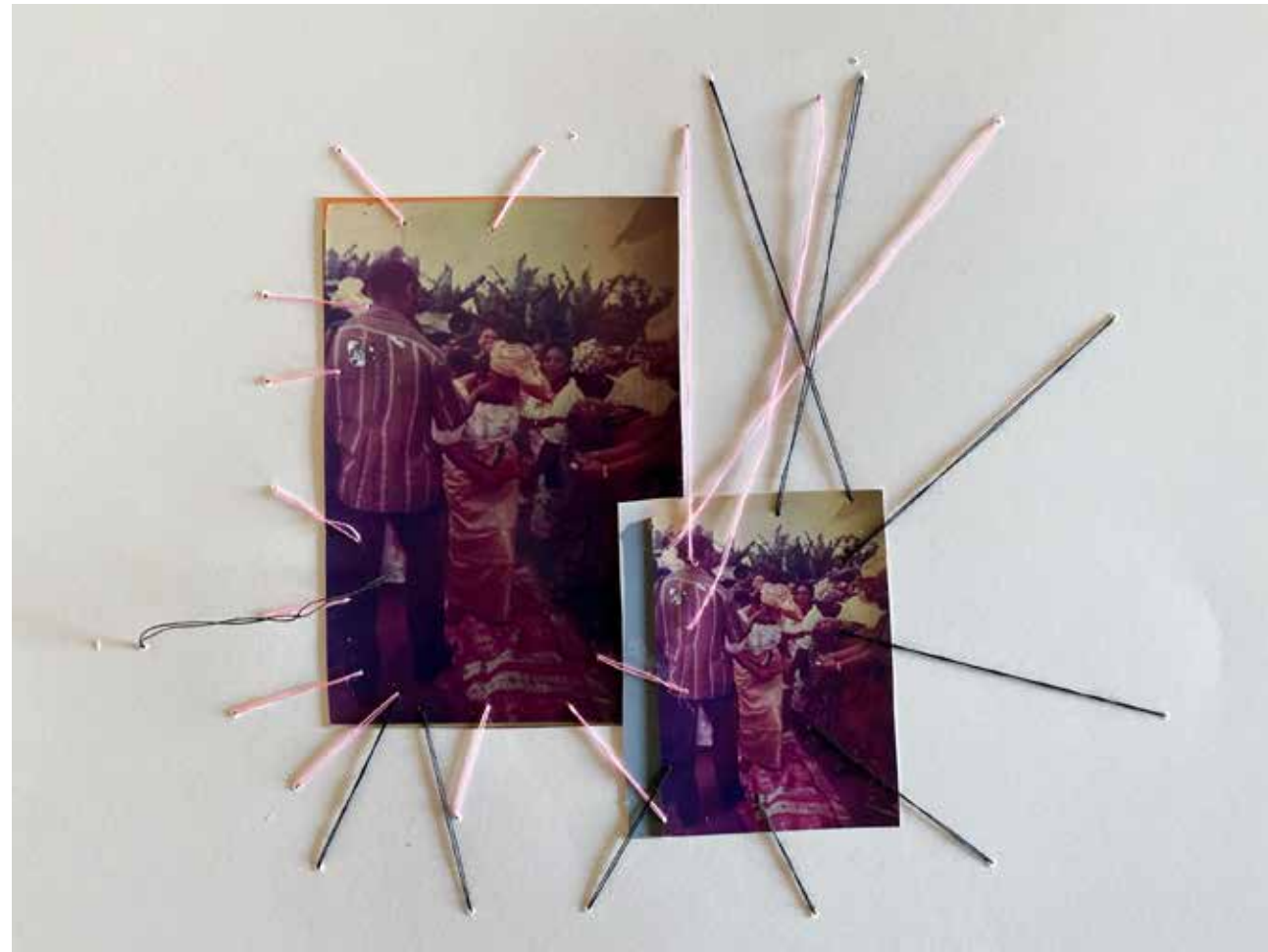
Fragments, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints and threads), 20.75 x 29.25cm



Mama & Friends, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints), 20.75 x 29.25cm



Stitches, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints and threads), 29.25 x 20.75cm



In Her Cooperative, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints and threads), 20.75 x 29.25cm



My Mother's Daughter, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints and threads), 29.25 x 20.75cm



The Birthday, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints), 29.25 x 20.75cm



Eka, 2024, mixed media collage on cardboard, (6 x 4 inches glossy prints), x 29.25 x 20.75cm



ABOUT NELLY ATING

Nelly Ating is a multimedia artist whose work bridges photography, mixed media, and archival research to interrogate themes of identity, education, extremism, and migration. Between 2014 and 2020, she documented the rise of Boko Haram in northeast Nigeria, exploring the intersections of radicalisation and the aftermath of conflict. Ating began exploring mixed media art to address ethical concerns surrounding photography and experiment with self-portraits. Her work has been exhibited locally and internationally. Presently, she is a Ph.D. student at Cardiff University, and her research examines human rights discourse through archival images.



ABOUT OMENKA GALLERY

Omenka Gallery is a leading art gallery in Nigeria and Africa, representing a fine selection of established and emerging contemporary Nigerian and international artists working in diverse media.

With a particular focus on ensuring sustainable presence for Nigerian and African art within a larger global context, Omenka participates regularly in major international art events like; Art Dubai, UAE; the Joburg Art Fair; Cape Town Art Fair; Cologne Paper Art; LOOP, Barcelona; the London Art Fair and 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London.

Omenka also offers to its esteemed clients a range of advisory services including appraisals, collections management, training and professional development, art finance, as well as industry reports and due diligence. Our in-depth knowledge is drawn from our diverse backgrounds built over 20 years, running and managing one of the leading galleries on the continent, consulting for other important galleries, auction houses and museums, and participating in prestigious events all over the world.

In association with Revilo, Omenka has an active publications programme and produces exquisite catalogues with informed, scholarly texts to accompany its schedule of solo, group and large themed exhibitions, through which it stimulates critical thought and discourse centered on contemporary art development in Nigeria, as well as Africa and its diaspora.

Through its well-tailored content, Omenka aims to position Africa as the hub of an increasingly globalised world by stimulating interest in art from the continent as an asset class, while cultivating taste and defining emerging trends in contemporary visual culture.

www.omenka.gallery