

**Ayobola Kekere-Ekun. *Another Life***

Solo Show

**07.11.23 – 07.01.24**Curated by **Domenico De Chirico****C+N Gallery CANEPANERI**

Foro Buonaparte, 48

20121 - Milano

**Opening November, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, 6 pm****Critical Essay**

Between empiricism and partiality, with a particular focus on exploring the intangible and enduring interactions among space and time, gender equality and power, social configurations and popular culture, chauvinism and internationalism, advertising and portraiture, mythology and tangible human condition within the complex and asymmetrically heterogeneous contemporary society, the very young visual artist **Ayobola Kekere-Ekun**, born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1993 and currently residing in Johannesburg, South Africa, frequently grants herself the subversive possibility of discovering a new world filled with characters and situations close to her everyday life. Generating her art through remarkably fertile and masterful processes, Ayobola Kekere-Ekun perceives technique as a mere three-dimensional manifestation of a harmonious profusion of lines, which, in turn, allow her to shape defined realms of light and shadow, circumnavigating the entire surface on which all of this occurs. Using a paper crafting method known as *quilling*, she creates images and shapes that are always novel and astonishing, evoking the frivolities of selfie culture in conjunction with deeper themes like self-perception, self-determination, voyeurism, escapism, and the authoritative processes typical of propaganda. The diligence of her work indisputably becomes a visual metaphor for the complexity of the subject she perpetually engages with.

Therefore, when she entrusts printed material as a tangible visual emblem, the necessity for conscious and necessary knowledge allegorically emerges as a form of organic life ready to manage all the stages of its life cycle, including birth, growth, decay, and ultimately death, only to be reborn in an unending labyrinth seemingly without exit. Moreover, Kekere-Ekun steadfastly confronts both the complex, acute, and vulnerable issue of the externalization of femininity within the Nigerian community, starting from its history steeped in phrases and mythologies, as well as the struggle to break free from entrenched power dynamics and resulting inequalities within the social framework, which has become increasingly prejudiced against women who simply desire independence from a corrupt society. Thus, the gracefulness of all the portrayed characters allows the artist to shift the focus to strong and courageous African women, vain and worldly, avoiding the somber and unfair stereotype of the hardworking, victimized black woman in society. Probably by choosing herself as the reference model, within a process of autobiographical analysis filled with confessions and inquiries, never detached from the context to which she belongs, breathing it in, to better describe this attempt at self-awareness of the dimension of her own body and consequently her image, in addition to the will of the mind, one could use the words of Frida Kahlo, who said, "Since my subjects have always been my sensations, my mental states, and the profound reactions that life has produced in me, I have frequently objectified all this in images of myself, which were the most sincere thing I could do to express what I felt inside and out."\* On the other hand, the ability to self-portray, through deeply felt processes of empathy and identification, is nothing more than a guarantee of both mental balance and a conscientious self-recognition. In light of all this, paper, the primary material of Ayobola Kekere-Ekun's entire production, laden with meaning, reliable and ordinary, resurfaces, affirming its unquestionable importance, allowing her to write a new story, her story, composed of shorter and lighter tales within broader and more tangled narratives, interconnected by a crossroads of lines that simultaneously connect and separate, include and exclude, direct them towards the right path or lead them astray. Following this strongly empathetic predisposition towards others and the world, Kekere-Ekun enriches her artistic production by using various fabrics typical of the Yorùbá society, which currently makes up about 30% of the Nigerian population, and according to which the origin of their culture is attributed to a mythical figure, a man named Odùduwà. Historically, according to some popular beliefs, Odùduwà was both the leader of an Eastern army that unified numerous peoples under his command under a monarchical system and the envoy of the god-creator Olorun, who first fashioned the first humans from the clay of Ile-Ife and founded the city of the same name. Furthermore, this second variant can certainly be connected to the nearly identical figure of Odudua, the goddess of the earth.

Therefore, as an emotional manifestation of belonging, Kekere-Ekun uses these fabrics as a reference to the practice of *Aṣọ èbì*, typical of Nigerian society. *Aṣọ èbì*, which can be translated as "family dress," refers to the careful selection of a fabric that serves as a family "uniform," a recognizable and highly identity-driven parameter, worn by families and friends during common participatory ceremonies such as weddings, birthdays, and funerals. By similarity, it is meant to be a tribute to these intimate and shared events filled with love, support, and camaraderie. However, even this pleasant and flourishing dimension has fallen victim to economic corruption in modern times, becoming a source of controversy as fabric prices have officially skyrocketed for profit, and various community members, unable to afford these exorbitant costs, are no longer willing to purchase the fabrics needed to continue writing the pages of their family stories. In other words, the use of these fabrics references that challenging process ready to undermine even what should be safeguarded, as it generously contributes to composing the pages of an entire people's story, filled with traditions and customs. Thus, the visual complexity of her art becomes a visual metaphor for the difficulty of the themes she addresses, even though it presents itself visually as playful and engaging, characterized by whimsy and vibrant colors. Big, bright eyes that scrutinize the present and dig into the past, whose intensity generates the illusion of discovery, magnetically attract the viewer's gaze only to trap it in a connected series of unresolved traumas, between individual and collective memory, in an attempt to redefine the difference between childhood and maturity, between reality and imagination, and to demonstrate that it is still possible to think of "another life."

**Domenico De Chirico**

(Translated by Tatiana Martyanova)

\*From "Frida" Biography of Frida Kahlo di Hayden Herrera (p. 197)