

SYLVESTER OKWUNODU OGBECHIE

VICTOR EHIKHAMENOR

CHRONICLES OF THE ENCHANTED WORLD





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With contributions from
Dan Hicks
Emmanuel Iduma
Toni Kan
Barbara Plankensteiner

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VICTOR EHIKHAMENOR: CHRONICLES OF THE ENCHANTED WORLD

Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie



INTRODUCTION

Victor Ehikhamenor is a Nigerian American multidisciplinary contemporary artist and writer known for his vibrant and incisive artworks that engage African cultural patrimony and the postcolonial politics of global Black identity. Born on February 19, 1970, in Udomi-Uwessan Irrua in midwestern Nigeria, his Esan (Ishan) ethnic group is part of the ancient Benin Kingdom, a polity famous for its acclaimed bronze casting traditions.¹ Educated in Nigeria and the United States, Ehikhamenor descends from a line of artists and artisans. His mother was a traditional muralist, his grandmother a cloth weaver, his maternal grandfather a blacksmith, and his uncle a US-trained photographer whose large archive of photographs documented important events in the reigns of two Benin kings. The creative ambience of his upbringing contributed to his decision to become an artist, but strangely he did not attend art school or receive a formal art education. Instead, Ehikhamenor studied English and literature at Ambrose Alli University in Ekpoma, Nigeria, and received an MFA in creative writing from the University of Maryland, USA. He learned to paint through self-education and what amounts to an apprenticeship system with the Washington, DC-based African American painter Bernard W. Brooks, who introduced him to formal protocols of art practice and the study of modern African and African American art. Brooks also taught him about the business of art marketing.

Ehikhamenor amalgamated his personal history into a sophisticated narrative of contemporary artistic and entrepreneurial

practice that has brought him significant global recognition. Hailed as one of Africa's most innovative contemporary artists and a true polymath, he has produced artworks in diverse media, including painting, sculpture (bronze and mixed media), photography, graphic design, video, fashion design, neon, stained glass, perforations, and installation art.² He uses radical techniques to construct artworks specifically focused on the history and aesthetics of the Benin Kingdom but also documenting his own transnational artistic career. His paintings and mixed media installations combine lines and symbolic imagery with ancient scripts, incised materials, Catholic symbolism, and references to contemporary social and political issues. They also allude to Africa's colonial past and the implications of Nigeria's complex geopolitical position as an oil-producing nation on its economy and environment.

Ehikhamenor's career straddles his indigenous traditions and his sensibilities as a Nigerian American contemporary artist who engages the postcolonial politics of African identities across a wide range of media. His vibrant artworks comment on social, political, and cultural

Opposite:

1. View of the artist's studio,
Lagos, Nigeria

Right:

2. The artist in his studio, 2023





3. *Sunday Morning Glory*, 2001
Acrylic on paper, 52 × 40 in. (132 × 101.6 cm)

issues of interest to Africans and the global African diaspora. Their formal and conceptual strategies are equally complex. In recent large-scale, mixed-media installations, Ehikhamenor uses Catholic rosaries to construct imposing portraits of Benin kings and queens that speak to the kingdom's history of interaction with Europe but also address contemporary debates about restitution of African cultural patrimony from Western museums. Juxtaposed against canonical sites and images of British colonial power, these rosary artworks explore the bitter clash of the icons and cosmologies of two powerful empires. Ehikhamenor uses their intertwined histories to interrogate the vicissitudes of Black lives in the global context and probe the intersection of

African traditional religion and Western (Catholic Christian) beliefs.

Ehikhamenor is a global citizen who feels at home anywhere in the world and his artworks have been exhibited worldwide.³ In this regard, he has been described as an Afropolitan, a term he both embraces and contests. Attributed to a concept advanced by philosopher and cultural theorist Achille Mbembe, Afropolitanism refers to a way of being “African” and “cosmopolitan” in the world and understanding African cultures as hybrids formed from many different influences and roots.⁴ Mbembe notes that Afropolitanism refuses in principle any form of victim identity despite the historical injustices and violence inflicted on the continent and its people. Instead, it takes a political and cultural stance in

relation to the nation, to race, and to the issue of difference in general. Conscious of the continent's rebirth in the global imagination, the Afropolitan seeks always to be a healthy enabler of Africa's viability as a font of transformation and triumph.⁵ Ehikhamenor's art reflects an Afropolitan sensibility on his transnational practice, use of diverse media, and entrepreneurial attitude. At the same time, the artist insists on the importance of his location as a transnational artist working within established indigenous African traditions of art and cultural practice. As such, he maintains studios in Lagos, Nigeria, and Maryland in the United States, and moves frequently between these locations through the UK to other sites of practice in Europe and Asia.

Ehikhamenor has participated in prestigious international art residencies and his artworks have been widely

exhibited in major biennales. He represented Nigeria, along with two other artists, in the first-ever Nigerian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 and has presented over twenty-seven solo exhibitions in Nigeria, the UK, and the US. He has also been included in numerous group exhibitions at notable international galleries, museums, and biennials, including the Pinakothek Der Moderne (Munich, Germany), Fondation Blachère (Bonnieux, France), Lehmann Maupin (New York, USA), Gagosian Gallery (London, UK), St. Paul's Cathedral, (London, UK), Tyburn Gallery (London, UK), Rele Gallery (Lagos, Nigeria), Retro Africa (Abuja, Nigeria), the 5th Mediations Biennale (Poznań, Poland), the 12th Dak'Art Biennale (Dakar, Senegal), the Stellenbosch Triennale (Cape Town, South Africa), and the Biennale Jogja XIII (Yogyakarta, Indonesia). Ehikhamenor is a contemporary artist who emerges from



4. *Isimagodo*, 2016
Bronze, 36 × 7 × 15 in. (91.4 × 18 × 38 cm)



Detail of *Isimagodo*, 2016



5. *Harvesting Dreams And Fireflies With My Brother*, 2020
Neon tubing, acrylic, cabinet, and 6ft power cord,
72 × 54 × 10 in. (183 × 137 × 25.4 cm)



6. *Lady Chief*, 2020
Perforation with 24k gold leaf
on handmade paper, diameter: 44 ½ in. (113 cm)



7. *The Chief Who Stood His Ground*, 2021
Perforation and gold leaf on handmade paper,
28 × 42 in. (71.1 × 106.6 cm)

Opposite:

8. *Coronation Of Oba Esigie*, 2021
Rosary beads, thread, gemstones, and bronze statuettes
on lace textile, 60 ½ × 102 ½ in. (153.6 × 260.4 cm)



6.



9. Oba Ewuare II at Iguè ceremony, 2019

a divergent lineage of practice made possible by new structures of art production and mediation. His success illustrates how new media modalities trouble established categories of contemporary art practice and reception.

In addition to his career as an artist, Ehikhamenor is also a prolific photographer, graphic designer, and writer whose work criticizes Nigeria's political corruption and Africa's marginal role in global economics. He travels everywhere with a camera and has documented artists and art exhibitions he attended since early in his career. Continuing a family legacy started by his uncle, photographer Eni Ehikhamenor, he has photographed the reigning Benin king Oba Ewuare II and his predecessor Oba

Erediauwa (1923–2016) in various ritual and court contexts (illus. 9). He is the author of two books—*Sordid Rituals* (2002) and *Excuse Me!* (2012)—and has published fiction and critical essays with academic journals, newspapers, and magazines around the world in venues such as the *New York Times*, *CNN Online*, the *Washington Post*, *AGNI Magazine*, and *Wasafiri*.⁶ He has worked for the National Geographic Society, publishers of *National Geographic* magazine, and was creative director of *Next* newspapers in Lagos (now defunct), for which he oversaw graphic design and wrote a weekly column on Nigerian politics and society. He has designed over thirty book covers for notable African authors such as Buchi

Emecheta, Helon Habila, MacArthur Fellows Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Reginald Dwayne Betts, and for publishing houses in the US, UK, Nigeria, and South Africa. In 2023, he designed a special limited-edition art bottle for the Johnnie Walker Scotch whiskey brand's *Keep Walking* campaign collection, using the environmental company Graviky Labs' innovative AIR-INK technology.⁷

Ehikhamenor combines his prolific art career with community-facing advocacy. He is a convener in the cultural space as the founder of Angels and Muses, a multi-modal interdisciplinary art hub and creative co-working space in Lagos whose stained-glass art, designer lighting, and murals by the artist make for a stunning visual and immersive experience. He also founded Ink Not Blood, a peace initiative designed to discourage violence during political elections in Nigeria. He has received numerous awards for both his art and writing, as well as fellowships from prestigious organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Civitella Ranieri Foundation, NIROX Foundation, and the Norman Mailer Center.

Ehikhamenor's artworks revel in profusion but regardless of how they are rendered—by charcoal, acrylic, enamel, or nail perforations—his images reference an enchanted world inspired by folktales and city life, by stories real and imagined, and by the presentness of history.⁸ Their dense surface and tactile exuberance create what Allan deSouza described as “phenomenological encounters in the present that visually, almost haptically, transfix the viewer.”⁹ It is this capacity for enchantment that most characterizes his art. Emerging from a cultural environment deeply attuned to nature and the supernatural, Ehikhamenor reframes the fractious politics of contemporary Black identity as a phantasmagorical landscape even as he seeks always to locate the dream world in the everyday. His profuse lines cast a spell and the dense surfaces of

his paintings and installations hint at worlds of mystery just outside of the viewer's gaze. He recasts the cosmopolitan African artist, the Afropolitan if you will, as an enchanter. “Enchantment in this sense has nothing to do with fantasy, or escapism, or magical thinking: it is founded on a vivid sense of belongingness to a rich and many-layered world; a profound and whole-hearted participation in the adventure of life.”¹⁰ The enchanted life is intuitive, embraces wonder, and fully engages the creative imagination but it is also deeply embodied, ecological, and grounded in community. Wole Soyinka notes that in the African context, enchantment frames artistic and literary practice since both are rooted in the poetics of myth.¹¹ In this regard, Ehikhamenor thinks of the artist as a priest whose calling is his art: “one can have talent as an artist yet without the calling, not pursue their art. One who has a calling to art will do it in spite of any obstacles or opposition.”¹²

To be enchanted, then, is not always to be delighted or charmed but to be faced with something both real and simultaneously weird, mysterious, awesome, and perhaps even dreadful.¹³ But how do we document enchantment or translate it into a narrative of artistic practice, especially in engaging an artist with such a capacious career? According to Gabriele Guercio, the standard narrative of artistic practice operates mainly as a bio-political analysis of the artist's process of self-conception. As an examination of an artist's life and artworks, it uses the life-and-work model to present the artist both as an individual empirically linked to a body of work through historical facts and as a personality created by that body of work in local and international cultural contexts.¹⁴ In that regard, this book surveys two decades of Victor Ehikhamenor's career and analyzes his artworks within their international contexts of production and reception.