



Breakout Artists 2024: Chicago's Next Generation of Image Makers

BY NEWCITY | APRIL 2, 2024

As I was reading the profiles that comprise this twenty-first edition of Breakout Artists, I was struck by one thought: painting is not dead after all, as four of the ten artists are primarily concerned with what happens with a brush, a palette of pigments and a canvas.

It's not a zero-sum game, however, as all other forms of artistic expression continue to thrive in this group, too, from photography to performance, from installation to textiles. Isn't that a great thing?

As we hone the process each year of finding who's next in the Chicago art world, it gets more, not less challenging. That's a reflection of the breadth and depth of that world; for this selection of ten artists, we consulted hundreds of artists and art leaders for their suggestions, which we added to our own critics' choices. From that larger list, we culled it down to a shortlist that still ran more than 200, from which our editors and our twenty-five critics made final selections to get to ten. Whew.

Agree or disagree with our choices, you should find some new artists to follow or even collect in these pages. And as great as our words and pictures may be, nothing beats seeing the work and meeting the artists in person, which you'll be able to with the Breakout Artists exhibition opening April 10 at the Chicago Artists Coalition. (Brian Hiegelke)

Newcity's Breakout Artists 2024 was written by Susan Aurinko, Frank Geiser, Annette LePique, Ciera Alyse McKissick, Nicky Ni, Vasia Rigou, Mána Taylor, Erin Toale, Jen Torwudzo-Stroh and Charles Venkatesh Young.



Luke Agada/courtesy the artist

Luke Agada

An encounter with the word “gallery” in a French magazine that belonged to his mother is Luke Agada's first memory of contemporary art. At least, as far as he remembers. Growing up in Nigeria, he tells me, “Painting was more accessible for me for many reasons, so I began to give my whole self to it.” He spent years devoted to perfecting his skills, which eventually led him to find his style. He had a “voracious appetite,” to learn and understand art history, the art industry and more. While he went on to pursue veterinary school, he continued to paint and study art on his own during that time, but soon realized that art could become his career. He graduated from SAIC with an MFA in painting in 2023.



Luke Agada "Arms, Feet and Fitful Dreams," oil on canvas, 72×96 inches, 2023/Image courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery

In his studio in Chicago, Agada puts pictures on the wall to serve as inspiration. His "visual vocabulary," as he describes it, includes pictures of his hometown, family and events that he wants to remember. He immerses himself in this world of memory, building collages from what he might want to hold onto and capture through new visual means. "It's like a deck of cards in front of me," he says of his mood board. What inspires Agada the most, these days, are bodies in space: their depiction in many forms, but also distorting the conventional and anatomical image of a figure. His paintings of bodies in motion in a liminal space are reflections of questions he poses to himself while adapting to a new culture. Yet, despite questioning a lot, Agada speaks eloquently, articulating his every thought with a clarity. He chooses his words precisely, just as I imagine he might choose the colors or where to place lines on his canvas.

"Making art, making a painting, does not only have the purpose of depicting something. It's also a way to express your thoughts and opinions. So I began to think about this in terms of the human figure." Naming Picasso, Brecht and Frida Kahlo as inspirations for his style, Agada has found his visual vocabulary to be apt for depicting his reality. Though the cubist and surrealist movements are about a hundred years old, Luke Agada sees them as new. "Coming to the U.S. was a bit of a culture shock for me. There was not much to hold onto in my physical environment other than memories. I

began to explore this idea, how do you express memories? How do you hold onto memories? What are the tactile qualities such as sound and smell that you can hold onto and constitute a memory?" The feeling of impermanence can be seen in his most recent work as ephemeral shapes that have the faint resemblance of a figure in motion, never quite settling, almost turning into a fleeting cloud.

His figures, upon a closer look, appear to be in rooms. There is a sense of a floor, a wall, a window, a couch or even a staircase in the background. This is the only thing that grounds them in a time and place. In this light, Agada's paintings resonate as something deeper and more complex than what's on the surface—the portrait of someone looking for somewhere to belong. A floating figure, hovering in the air, searching for a spot to land. His paintings are echoes of what once was, places he once called home that are now merely memories—the fading ghosts of moments past. Using his paintbrush, Agada is also able to capture a fleeting memory and store it in a painting. The painting becomes a window into the past.

Agada says that though his paintings come from his experiences, he hopes that viewers can also look beyond all these associations. "When I began to explore a different way of image-making, I got stuck many times—pigeonholed to certain stereotypes, especially stereotypes of identity. The stereotype of identity as an African. There's expectations. But for me, I do not want to limit my work to biological stereotypes. I believe that as a Black artist, your current work might not always be linked to the way you identify yourself culturally or geographically."

Agada's work delves into the complexities of belonging, the perpetual search for home, and the figures in his paintings "traverse the delicate balance between existence and displacement." Perpetually in flux, they are barely bodies anymore but lines on a canvas, portraying "the liminal space of diasporic experience." And though Agada describes to me the difficulties of immigrating to a new country, of finding a home, and a sense of belonging, I can already see his paintings resonating with a multitude of individuals and a larger conversation. Looking back to when he first encountered the contemporary art world in a magazine in Nigeria to now, Agada has found an incredible way to articulate something so difficult to put words to. His paintings feel universal and pertinent, memories that become our own. (Mána Taylor)