

The New York Times
March 22, 2023

GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

History and Humor Inspire Victor Ehikhamenor's Art

The Nigerian American artist is debuting rosary tapestries at Art Basel Hong Kong this month. The works examine the disappearance of historical memory.

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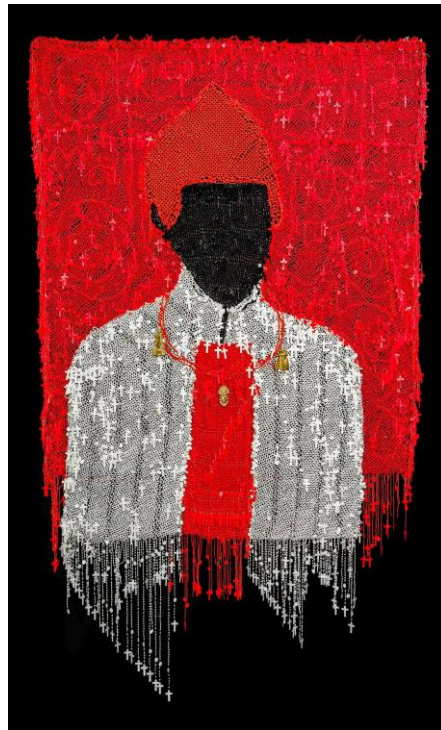
The artist Victor Ehikhamenor within the installation of "Do This in Memory of Us," his tapestry of a slave ship. The acrylic mirrored floor he was standing on reflects the tapestry and creates the appearance of rippling. Credit...Jake Green, via Gagosian

LONDON — Victor Ehikhamenor remembers the first time he was called an artist. Born in 1970 in a small village in Edo State in Nigeria, Mr. Ehikhamenor was given a plastic camera when he was 9. Trying to mimic one of his uncles who had emigrated to the United States in the 1960s to study photography, he would line up his friends and pretend to take pictures of them.

Mr. Ehikhamenor would go home and draw the scene on pieces of paper and then hand the

drawings out to those friends. “Some would pay me; some would allow me to play football with them,” Mr. Ehikhamenor, 53, said with a chuckle.

An older schoolmate soon started calling him an artist, a term he had never heard. “I was like, ‘What is that?’” Mr. Ehikhamenor, who splits his time between Lagos, Nigeria, and the United States, said during a video call from his studio in Maryland. “He said, ‘What you are doing means you are an artist.’ So, then I went back to my friends and said, ‘Don’t call me anything else; call me an artist.’”



“Ogidigàn, Knower Of Celestial Things,” by Mr. Ehikhamenor will be on display at Art Basel Hong Kong. Credit...Victor Ehikhamenor and Retro Africa

That word, however, does not entirely capture the essence of Mr. Ehikhamenor, who is also a writer, poet, art collector, social activist and information-technology specialist. (He has a master’s degree in technology management from the University of Maryland and worked for a time at National Geographic, helping migrate its systems over for the year 2000.)

The versatility of his award-winning oeuvre has been exhibited at shows around the world, including in Senegal, Poland, France, Indonesia and the United States, and he was one of three artists who represented Nigeria during the country’s debut at the 2017 Venice Biennale.

“A lot of artists call themselves multidisciplinary, but Victor is one of the real multidisciplinary artists, from photography to collage to paintings to experimenting with even lithographs on prints,” said Kola Aina, a Nigerian collector who is the chairman of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art near Lagos.

This week, Mr. Ehikhamenor’s work will debut at Art Basel Hong Kong when Retro Africa, a gallery based in Abuja, Nigeria, presents his solo show, “Always at the Edge.” It will feature several of his large tapestries made with rosary beads and crosses. The works, which examine the

disappearance of historical memory, were partly inspired by the poems of the Hong Kong writer Leung Ping-Kwan, who also explored themes around how traditions disappear and become only memories.

Also during the fair, Mr. Ehikhamenor and Dolly Kola-Balogun, the founder and creative director of Retro Africa, plan to participate in a talk titled “Locating the Continent: Representations of/from Africa in Hong Kong.”



“Èdèwèdé — Morning Yet On Creation Day,” a bronze sculpture by Mr. Ehikhamenor. Credit... Victor Ehikhamenor and Retro Africa

“I enjoy the fact that he celebrates history, celebrates tradition, celebrates culture, in his attempt to create a contemporary narrative,” Ms. Kola-Balogun said in a video call from Nigeria, adding that storytelling was at the heart of everything Mr. Ehikhamenor did.

“He’s elevating our history as a people, and he’s showing us its splendor and glory and richness. And the depth of what he’s portraying, and significance, is what makes people listen and want to learn more,” she said.

Some of that history is on display at one London location of Gagosian Gallery, which this month debuted “Do This in Memory of Us,” Mr. Ehikhamenor’s 30-by-15.5-foot lace and canvas tapestry of a slave ship. It was hand-stitched with thousands of blue, white, black and purple rosary beads suspended from the ceiling and is part of the group show “Rites of Passage.”

An acrylic mirrored floor reflects the tapestry, and, when walking across it, the ship appears to ripple and ebb. In the background, “Amazing Grace” plays on a loop. The song was “translated and recorded by a choir in the local language, Edo, from Benin City,” Mr. Ehikhamenor said in a later interview as he walked across the mirrored floor.

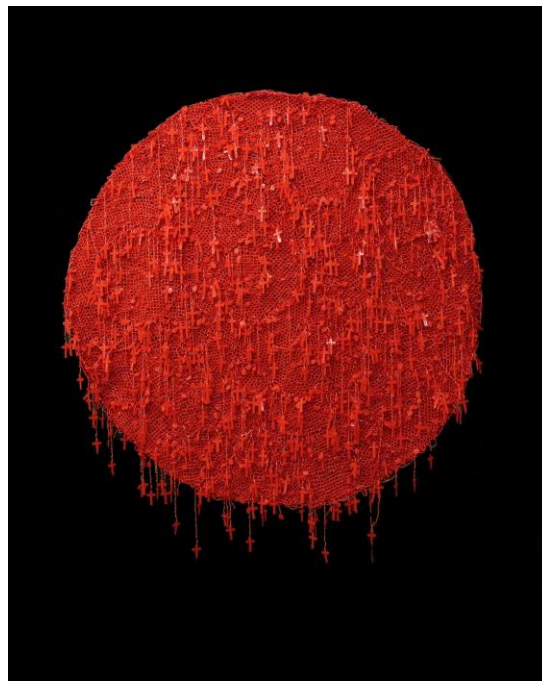
The work examines how religion and spirituality are used as survival tools by oppressed people, and it took more than a year to make.

“Without a shadow of a doubt, we can’t deny Victor’s importance within the context of Nigeria, within the context of West Africa, within the context of the African continent,” said Péjú Oshin, an associate director of Gagosian who curated the exhibition. “But more importantly, he is playing a role globally. It’s partly for the world to do a bit of catching up to be a part of that conversation with him.”

Growing up in Nigeria in the 1970s, Mr. Ehikhamenor was surrounded by the various artistic pursuits of his family. One grandfather was a blacksmith, and the other would hang up the works of Mr. Ehikhamenor’s photographer uncle, gallery-style, in his living room. He also drew with chalk for family ceremonies, a material that Mr. Ehikhamenor uses when he sketches out his ideas for his rosary tapestries.

“My grandmother was a weaver,” Mr. Ehikhamenor said, “and I watched my mother paint her own walls, so I replicated what they were doing.” Visual art was not taught in school, however. So as an undergraduate at a university in Nigeria, he instead pursued a degree in English and literature. “I realized the power that a writer has at a very early age,” he said. When he was a child, women in the village asked him to write letters for them to their family members who lived elsewhere. “Sometimes I would be writing for them, and I would insert, ‘Buy a ball for Victor,’” he said with a laugh.

He has continued to write extensively and has published two books: “Sordid Rituals,” a book of poetry, and “Excuse Me: One Nigerian’s Funny Outsized Reality,” a compilation of essays.



“Elegy To A Red Moon Dripping Lullabies,” by Mr. Ehikhamenor. Credit...Victor Ehikhamenor and Retro Africa

It has been his writing on the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes, though, that has garnered the most attention in recent years — including by starting a debate at the 2017 Venice Biennale over work by the artist Damien Hirst. Mr. Ehikhamenor is the only artist on the board of the Edo Museum of

West African Art. Designed by David Adjaye and expected to open in 2025, it will be a home for a number of the repatriated Benin Bronzes.

That activism and writing have also helped inform his recent work. After being told by an Italian woman that his use of Benin City-created, modern-day bronzes in his work “A Biography of the Forgotten”— shown during Venice — was “fetish,” he decided to start working with rosary beads.

“I’m like, ‘You guys have our bronzes in your museums, but because contemporary artists are creating them, now suddenly they are a fetish?’” he said, adding that a culture cannot move forward artistically if it does not have access to its past.

“I said to her: ‘The whole idea of the rosary — from Italy, from Catholicism, from the Vatican — if I use rosaries to make works that are easily recognizable as Benin kings or Benin situations, is this going to be fetish? Because if you call it fetish, that means that totem that you introduced — the rosary — is fetish.’”

Lauren Tate Baeza, a curator at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, which in April will display his rosary work “The Supreme Protagonist,” agreed with his sentiments. “Often in the West, we find a disproportionate preoccupation with a real or imagined pre-colonial Africa,” she wrote in an email. “This preoccupation suggests that Africa is most interesting in the past and that, as an extension of this belief, we must be precious about objects of the past.

“Victor challenges these ideas, emphasizing that many traditional works never stopped being made by highly skilled artists and craftspeople in the region, directing this global conversation to the living arts of his homeland.”

Despite the seriousness of so much of his work — for a month leading up to Nigeria’s elections in February, Mr. Ehikhamenor spent every morning after his coffee sketching portraits of imagined Nigerians and the struggles they were facing — he is also described as comedic.

“He has an incredible sense of humor,” said Dan Hicks, a professor of contemporary archaeology at the University of Oxford who last year curated the display of Mr. Ehikhamenor’s tapestry of a Benin king in the crypt at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.

“For me, the really interesting thing is that he has these different aspects of his practice where they intersect, and the writing informs the sculpture, and the humor informs the writing,” Mr. Hicks said. “You hear him talk about his work and suddenly he’s convinced you of the next argument, and he’s made you laugh in the process.”