

CULTURE

8 Must-See Exhibitions This Black History Month

From mid-century portraiture at MoMA to Ming Smith's jazz-inspired photography, these shows celebrate the breadth of Black artistic expression.

by **Daria Simone Harper**
Feb. 13, 2026



Courtesy of the Ming Smith Studios and The Gund at Kenyon College

This month marks the 100th anniversary of America's first national observance of Black history (February was designated Black History Month 50 years later, in 1976). Art galleries and institutions worldwide have mounted exhibitions that underscore the distinct contributions of Black and African diasporic people while exploring elements of interiority and selfhood still too often treated as afterthoughts. These presentations commemorate the complexity and beauty of Black American and African diasporic history while offering visionary possibilities for shaping Black futures.

Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu: “Manuscripts of Tradition” at Jack Shainman Gallery

In “Manuscripts of Tradition,” Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu returns home by way of oil paintings and works on paper. The exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery continues themes central to the artist's practice, including portrayals of members of the Igbo community where she is from and the subversion of stereotypes surrounding Africa and the diverse groups of people who live across the continent. Raised in the Anambra state of Nigeria, Chiamonwu's works examine the "contemporary relevance" of the cultural and mythological forms of her hometown.

In earlier works, Chiamonwu employed vivid color and precise details to transform family and community members into deities and mythological figures, representing the complexity of life in Africa while preserving the importance of local customs and identity. While working with the same formal techniques, this new group of dazzling portraits sees the artist depict her family and friends in the more subtle splendor of their quotidian lives. Through works that highlight her loved ones, Chiamonwu asserts a form of representation antithetical to the commonplace and problematic portrayals of African individuals. Instead, she presents depictions that are not only "confident and celebratory" but also decenter the values and comparisons to Western standards.

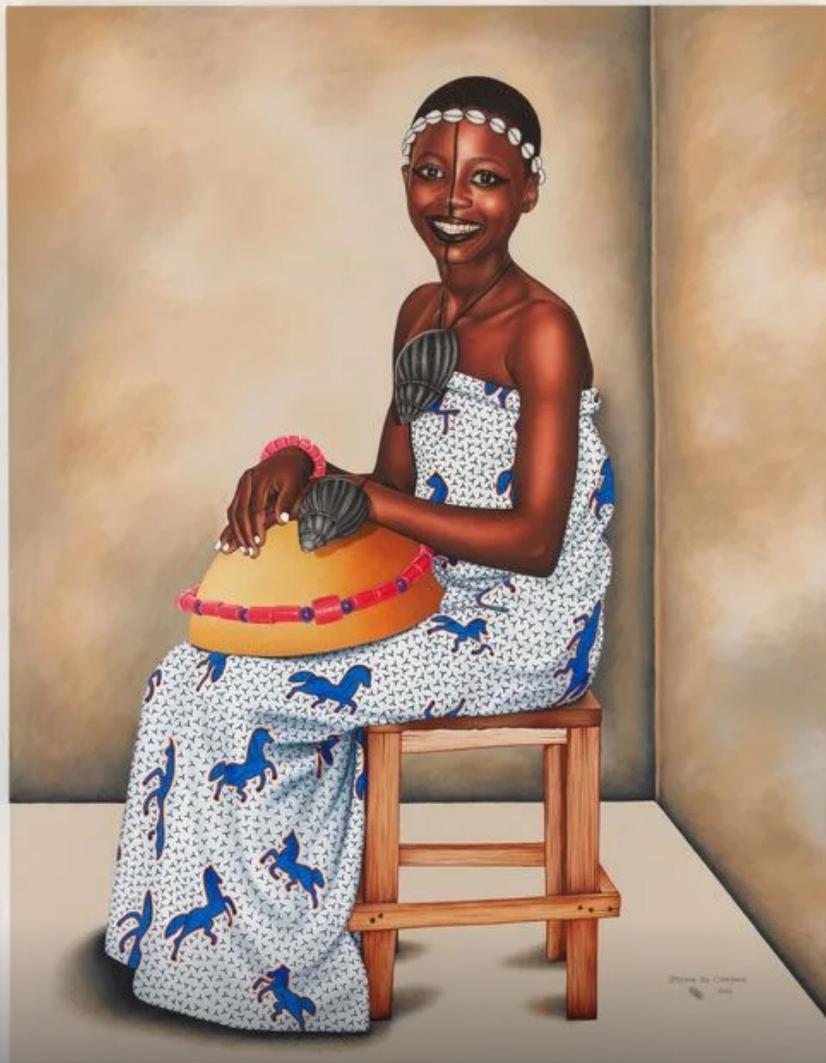


Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *Mgbeke (A Woman born in Eke Market Day)*, 2025
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

On view February 20 through March 28, 2026.

Regal, precious, pure: Chiamonwu's Nigerian art displayed at Mattatuck

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN June 25, 2023



"Akwaugo and Her Favorite Horse Lappa (wrapper) 1910" (2022) by Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu's (b. 1995, Nigeria). Sepia, charcoal, and acrylic paint on canvas, (Private collection, China; courtesy of Mattatuck Museum)



In the Igbo language of Southeastern Nigeria, “Akwaugo ” is a term of endearment. It means “Eagle egg,” or in other words, something pure and precious.

Only one of Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu’s lively portraits bears the title “Akwaugo,” yet all of the eight paintings in the Mattatuck Museum’s newest exhibit seem imbued with it.

These bold, vibrant works – all of people Chiamonwu knows – are not just monumental, majestic and buoyant. They also exude a sense of joy and power.

The self-taught Chiamonwu, not yet 30, seeks to celebrate her Igbo traditions in the exhibit, “Ancestral Heirloom: Art of Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu,” and does so with images that are so exuberant, self-possessed and expressive that a visitor could not be blamed for wanting to know these people. Or, frankly, wanting to *be* these people.



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu (b. 1995, Nigeria), “Obidia (Her Husband’s Heart,” 2022. Sepia, charcoal, and acrylic paint on canvas.(Courtesy of Lizzie and Steven Blatt, the Mattatuck Museum)

All of the 8 images are similarly presented – painted dead center on enormous canvases against a single flat color. The composition itself, with the central figures magnified, gives the works a regal element. Then there are the figures themselves, regal and abundant, with

clothing (“wrapping”) so richly detailed and colorful that if it weren’t for their riveting faces, one could lose oneself in the ornamental detail.

To focus on the ornament of a gown is a common European trope. In the 15th through 18th century, it was a way for the pedigreed 1 percenters to flaunt their gargantuan wealth.

Chiamonwu has inverted that contrivance in portraits that underscore the joy of her figures, which their wrappings seem only to amplify. For the Igbo people, royalty, Chiamonwu seems to suggest, is not in the lapidary representation of rubies, emeralds and pearls, but in the infectious delight that these figures convey, as reflected in their garments.

Chiamonwu studied education at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Nigeria, and only began drawing a few years back out of pure fascination with art. The artist has taught herself how to create photorealistic art, largely by watching YouTube tutorials, Art News reported.



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu (b. 1995), “Nwa-oja (The flute boy)” 2022. Sanguine, sepia, charcoal, and acrylic paint on canvas.

Born in 1995, Chiamonwu has said her photorealistic portraits are an effort to reconnect members of the African diaspora with their roots. These portraits, based on members of her family, reference some of the belief systems of the Igbo, as expressed by simple, elegant ornaments – carrot-colored beads and charcoal gray snail shells, associated with prosperity and tradition. Most of the figures wear bracelets of cowrie shells, sometimes used as headbands, as in “Akwaugo and Her Favorite Horse Lappa (wrapper) 1910.” Here, a slender young woman with short-cropped hair turns toward the viewer, her linen-white wrapper

dotted with blue “Y” glyphs, a traditional pattern, over which Chiamonwu has painted bold, cobalt Franz-Marc like horses.

These modernistic equines gallop and trot over this traditional garment, a nod to Chiamonwu’s integration of the traditional and contemporary. Like Marc, these are richly expressionistic horses, skipping over a gown laden with tradition. The wrapper or “Iappa” is a key element in all of Chiamonwu’s works.

Chiamonwu explores the physical and traditional heirlooms passed down to the artist both by her family and the ancestors of the Igbo people. She has created this particular body of work to celebrate her African cultural identity in the hopes of “win[ning] back the minds of our brothers and sisters who have intentionally or unintentionally turned their backs on, or have lost touch with, their heirlooms.”

Harvard University estimates that more than 3.5 million slaves were shipped from Nigeria to North and South America and the Caribbean colonies. Igboland was a major source of slaves for Virginia and the American south, according to the Council of Foreign Relations. The Igbo, sometimes called Ibo, are one of the largest single ethnic groups in Africa, largely based in southeastern Nigeria, and constituting about 17 percent of the population.

Two of the most searing images, “Agbala Mmiri (The Great Priestess of the Sea)” and “Portrait of Nwokeabia, the young Ozo-titled man,” reference elements of the Igbo belief system. An Ozo chieftain is a sacred designation for a fraternity of men the community has designated as most respected and influential. The leopard cap worn by the figure in the painting is reserved for such men.

The sensuous “Agbala Mmiri” depicts a woman emerging, mermaid-like from the rippling caramel sea. The topless figure covers her breasts with her left forearm, her abdomen richly shaded in glossy hues of auburn, umber and sienna. Her right arm extends upward, steadying the clay pot that sits atop her head. Like many of Chiamonwu’s figures, the woman’s face has been painted with a black line through her forehead and white dots and arcs around her eyes. The work represents the ceremony Igbo girls endure as they pass through girlhood to womanhood. When over, the girls are required to drink the water inside the clay pot.

The whole diaphanous, muscular grace of the piece oozes with a sense of welcoming feminine agency.

That distaff power is exemplified by Chiamonwu’s most revealing image, “Omuluzuo and her Child Ifeyinwa,” an unflinching assertion of maternal ferocity. This is a “Madonna and Child,” complete with luminous halo, Igbo style. Here, a new mother sits cross-legged and



bare breasted, her infant resting between her legs as her massive hands support the wriggling infant's elbows.

"In Igbo society," Chiamonwu says in the wall text, "we believe that the bond between a mother and her child or children runs deeper than what we see physically." The name "Omuluzuo" means "may who ever gives birth to children lifelong to raise them." Viewers may be drawn to the figure's ample, pendulous breasts, but the real power emanates from her gaze – steady, controlled, assertive.

Life, the portrait suggests, and the ability to give it, resides within the woman. And in Igbo, that's recognized as power.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu: Ancestral Heirloom"

WHERE: Mattatuck Museum, 144 W. Main St., Waterbury

WHEN: Through Aug. 20

HOW TO LEARN MORE: Visit mattmuseum.org or call (203) 753-0381

ARTnews

February 15, 2022
By Salome Gómez-Upegui

Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu on Depicting Family and Friends in Detailed Portraits: ‘When You See Them on a Wall, You Actually See Me’



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *The Portrait of an Igbo Woman - Nwanyi*, 2021. ©IFEYINWA JOY CHIAMONWU/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

[Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu](#) sees herself as “a vessel of her Igbo ancestors.” The Nigerian artist, who [joined Jack Shainman’s roster last year](#), set out to honor this sentiment with “Genesis,” her debut at the New York–based gallery. For the exhibition, Chiamonwu aims to elevate and preserve her Igbo community’s rich tribal customs and cultural practices by depicting those closest to her, reimagined as traditional Igbo characters and mythical deities.

In *Nne Mmiri (Igbo Water Goddess)*, 2021, one of the show’s most striking paintings, a naked Black female figure—modeled after the artist’s best friend—stands powerfully, her back to the viewer as she holds two glasses filled with deep-blue ocean landscapes. The creases and pores on her back are so meticulously depicted, the image could be readily mistaken for a photograph. In the 2021 painting *Umunne (Siblings)*, two of Chiamonwu’s younger siblings stand together with their flawlessly drawn eyes closed. Gorgeous snail shells, cowries, and beads adorn their bodies. In a recent interview, Chiamonwu said that she chose to depict the sitters’ eyes closed to “represent they are blinded by the love that they have for each other.”

The choice to portray friends and family members is deeply important to Chiamonwu, who speaks passionately about the meaning of this essential element of her work. “They are close to me—they are a part of me,” she said. “So when you see them on a wall, you actually see me. They understand the stories I want to speak about.”

Though she studied education at the Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Nigeria, Chiamonwu began drawing a few years back out of pure fascination with art. The young artist—she was born in 1995—has spent countless hours teaching herself how to create photorealistic art and perfecting her impressive technique. Though at first she worked mostly with graphite and charcoal, as in *Onyinye 2* (2018), depicting a rock and a shell, Chiamonwu has gradually incorporated new mediums to her work, including sepia pigments, pastels, coffee stains, and acrylic paints. Still, the artist said she feels a special affinity with charcoal, which she still uses alongside her newly adopted mediums. “Charcoal is a medium that understands me,” she added.

No matter the medium, Chiamonwu portrays hairs, wrinkles, pores, and facial expressions with exacting precision. “It’s hyperrealism,” she said. “I draw [these pieces] to look real. It takes a lot of time because you have to get the details, the pimples, the pores, the reflection, the skin —everything. You have to pay attention to detail, and [that] takes time.”



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *Onyinye 2*, 2018. ©IFEYINWA JOY CHIAMONWU/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND [JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY](#), NEW YORK

One of the pieces that took her the most time to complete is *Lost Page* (2018), which shows a woman, modeled after Chiamonwu’s mother, in the midst of laboriously weaving a large, highly detailed basket. The drawing took her about five weeks to complete: she spent three weeks alone carefully rendering the enormous basket, which appears on the cusp of completion.

Chiamonwu’s portraits always include red beads, snail shells, and cowries, which adorn her subject’s necks, wrists, earlobes, and heads. The artist adds these bodily decorations as a way to honor her Igbo heritage. “They show the identity of where I come from, the story that I want to speak about, and of the people [I’m drawing],” she said. “Beads and cowries are commonly used for beautification,” while snail shells are used for ritual and protection.

“Back in the day, in Africa, we practiced Juju, we practiced black magic,” she said. “If you felt that you weren’t safe, that you needed protection, success, a child, or just wanted to know spiritual things, you could go and meet a shaman who would bless the shells [you brought]. So whenever you see the snail shell in my drawings, it’s an indication of tradition and rituals.”

Though Chiamonwu is no longer teaching in the classroom, she sees her drawings as a valuable opportunity to educate others about her Nigerian heritage. Reflecting on this sustained passion for education that she carries into her work, she said, “I want to educate others on themes of identity, cultural appreciation, love, acceptance, tradition, diversity in culture, Blackness, Black Africa—everything about Africa. These are the themes I’m here to explore, until forever, until I’m gone.”

New exhibition at The School opens Sunday in Kinderhook

'Stressed World' features 31 artists exploring human struggle, ecological strain and sociocultural stress. The Times Union got a sneak peek.

Barbara Reina

June 3, 2022 | Updated: June 3, 2022 1:40 p.m.



— “Stressed World” opens at Jack Shainman Gallery: The School on Sunday, June 5 in Kinderhook.
Barbara Reina

Jack Shainman Gallery: The School kicks off its latest exhibition, “Stressed World,” with a special public opening from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday in Kinderhook. Some 160 works by 31 artists will be showcased on three floors of gallery space.

Kinderhook is preparing for about 800 visitors to the museum and village during the four-hour exhibition.

“Great art often comes out of tumultuous times,” said gallerist Jack Shainman, who gave an exclusive preview of the show to the Times Union. “Stressed World” speaks to the universal issues of human struggle, ecological strain and sociocultural stress, Shainman says, but “there’s hope in this exhibition, too.”

“Stressed World” features works by El Anatsui, Shimon Attie, Radcliffe Bailey, Yoan Capote, Nick Cave, Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, Gehard Demetz, Pierre Dorion, Paterson Ewen, Vibha Galhotra, Barkley L. Hendricks, Hayv Kahraman, Anton Kannemeyer, Lyne Lapointe, Deborah Luster, Tyler Mitchell, Meleko Mokgosi, Adi Nes, Jackie Nickerson, Odili Donald Odita, Gordon Parks, Garnett Puett, Claudette Schreuders, Malick Sidibé, Paul Anthony Smith, Michael Snow, Hank Willis Thomas, Carlos Vega, Andy Warhol, Leslie Wayne and Carrie Mae Weems.

As visitors enter The School, they are met with a 180 by 400 by 200-centimeter cast-bronze measuring scale, a work entitled “Status Quo” by Yoan Capote. The piece evokes philosophical thought about opposition and harmony, equality and difference. In the same space, a small black and white photo by Malick Sidibé hangs on the wall at a distance. Sidibé is known for his pivotal role in sculpting a fresh, global appearance of the African diaspora.

Painter Carlos Vega was assembling his work, “The Maimonides Wall,” downstairs at The School this week. His work combines “divinity with physics” and “fragments in time,” he said. It takes the form of a freestanding wall, with the cosmos on one side and a visualization of the studio space of Jewish philosopher, scholar, astronomer and doctor Maimonides on the other. “It’s the philosophy of introspection that we tap into when we face challenges,” said Vega.

Upstairs, a series of American-born Jackie Nickerson’s photographs, “Field Test,” depict figures and spaces shrouded in plastics to address the anonymity and alienation produced by techno-industrial commercialized globalization. In another room, another photography installation, “Tooth for an Eye: A Chorography of Violence in Orleans Parish,” was inspired in part by the 1988 murder of the artist Deborah Luster’s mother. It explores corruption, loss and hope by documenting sites of recent and historical homicides in New Orleans.

Some artists’ works fill entire rooms, while others punctuate the space throughout. Despite having no formal artistic training, Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu’s meticulous use of charcoal, sepia, pastels, acrylic paints and coffee stains on paper and canvas immortalizes the rich and eloquent histories, traditions, cultural values, myths and practices of the Igbo people of Nigeria.



— Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu's drawings showcase Igbo culture.
Barbara Reina

Downstairs, El Anatsui's "Stressed World" fills one wall as a 180 by 240-inch large-scale wall hanging sculpture. The work is composed of thousands of folded and crumpled pieces of aluminum bottle caps sourced from local recycling stations and bound together with copper wire. Much of Anatsui's work interrogates the legacy of colonialism, drawing connections between consumption, waste and the environment.

Two contemplative and celestial works by Carrie Mae Weems invite reflection. "Down Here Below" is a series of five framed prints with convex glass glazing that depict clouds in the sky with an ominous feel. "North Star" is seven ink-jet archival prints in oval frames, inspired by the northward journey of Weems' grandfather, Frank Weems, a tenant farmer and union activist presumed dead after being attacked by a

white mob in 1936, but who survived and made his way to Chicago. Take a few steps back to admire the optical art and see the North Star reflected in the glassy, optical images. Take a few steps forward to see your reflection and become part of the view.

“My hope is that visitors will come, open-minded, willing to think about what they are seeing,” said Shainman.

Normal visiting hours at The School are Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. and by appointment. Visitors and staff are required to wear a mask inside the gallery. Admission is free.

THEGUIDE.ART

January 26, 2022
By Osman Can Yerebakan

Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu Genesis



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *Ihu Nwata Nwanyi (The Face of a Young Girl)*, 2021. Charcoal, sepia pigment, acrylic paint on paper, 27 x 35 inches. © Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Kola nuts are on offer at Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu's new exhibition, "Genesis," at Jack Shainman Gallery, where piercing gazes and determined postures usher us through the Nigerian artist's drawings and paintings of friends and family. A sign of hospitality in Nigeria's Igbo community, the bulky seeds appear in the larger-than-life drawing *Onyinye 2*, in graphite and charcoal, demonstrating that even the show's rare illustrations of the non-human still operate with the fragility of portraiture. Though they are missing both eyes, which function as wells into the soul, and wrinkles, which signal the passage of time, Chiamonwu's depiction of kola nuts almost breathes as flesh and soul. Due to the artist's masterful command, the offerings burst out of the surface of the paper.

"He who brings Kola, brings life," Nigerian author Chinua Achebe writes in his seminal 1958 novel about Igbo life, *Things Fall Apart*. Life, in Chiamonwu's work, runs through faces, bodies and costumes, through the artist's siblings, close friends and fellows. Realistic on a photographic level, the depictions of skin, expression and attire revel in their precision, each smear of sepia pigment, acrylic paint or charcoal contributing to a cosmos of history and memory.

Umunne (Siblings) (all works 2021) shows two siblings dressed in colorful attire. The patterns on the sister's dress are rendered with an impossible vivacity, bright hues of yellow, blue and red radiating a morning light. The boldness of the fabric speaks to the subject's energy, hidden behind her closed eyes. The brother joins his sister in calmness and choice of accessory—they both wear pink-colored bead necklaces and shell jewelry—though he seems to focus his potential, also behind shut eyes, to the sound of a far-off whisper.

Films, books and songs have borrowed the expression “portrait,” but *The Portrait of an Igbo Man - Nwoke* and *The Portrait of an Igbo Man - Nwany* truly do justice to the word’s essence. The two portraits carry gazes fixated at opposite unknown horizons, captivated by something we fail to see. The posers’ symmetry expands to their sartorial traits, each wearing traditional Igbo garb across one side of their torsos. The fabrics unite in their star-patterned motifs yet diverge in their colors, the man sporting orange and the woman, green. Chiamonwu’s meticulous delivery of skin shines in her rendition of hair as well—each strand in the man’s beard is distinguished. The immersive depth behind the figures stems from the artist’s choice of pigment: coffee. Grainy and mysterious, coffee conveys a sense of both infinity and ethereality, seeping into the background like liquidity of remembrance. Ceremonial, romantic, but bitter, coffee rhymes with the sentiments of kola nuts: a gesture of welcoming and serenity, at home or elsewhere.

SURFACE

January 5, 2021
By Ryan Waddoups

Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu: Genesis

January 6, 2022 - February 9, 2022

Jack Shainman Gallery: 524 W 24th St, New York, NY 10011

<https://jackshainman.com/exhibitions/ijc-genesis-2022>

Seeking to uphold the tribal traditions and cultural practices from her close-knit Igbo community in the Anambra state of Nigeria, the self-taught artist is presenting her relatives and close friends as painted reflections of mythological Igbo deities and modern-day customs. One of the most striking from the series is *One Mmiri (Igbo Water Goddess)*, queen of the marine world who carries these realms in her hands and embodies beauty, fertility, and wealth. Joy renders her subjects with razor-sharp precision and verisimilitude, imbuing them with warmth and life that reflects her love and dedication for each.



ELEPHANT

January 3, 2022
By Ravi Ghosh

The Artists To Watch in 2022: Part 1

From paintings to performance, from the virtual to the very real, this is Elephant's pick of the artists heading for great things in the next 12 months. Part 1 of 2



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, Lost Page, 2018

[Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu](#)

The Nigerian artist uses charcoal, sepia, pastels, paints and coffee to create vibrant portraits of friends as family recast as mythical figures from the narratives of her Igbo heritage. Often photographic in their detail and sharpness, Chiamonwu's works are acts of preservation and documentation as well as expression. "My art tells a story of typical Igbo culture before Westernisation and globalisation," she says.

That makes presentation in Western galleries especially delicate and intriguing, a task the artist will undertake with New York City's [Jack Shainman Gallery](#) for a January 2022 show. One work depicts Anyanwu, the Igbo deity responsible for knowledge and spiritual awakening. Chiamonwu allows the stories around these characters to influence her depictions: "I came up with the idea to present the artwork as an archaeological antique painting, which was lost a long time ago but finally found and preserved for future generations," she writes.

Jack Shainman Gallery Adds Rising Nigerian Artist Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu to Roster

BY **MAXIMILIANO DURÓN**

September 16, 2021 3:29pm



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu.

New York's **Jack Shainman Gallery** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/jack-shainman-gallery/>) now represents the rising artist **Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/ifeyinwa-joy-chiamonwu/>), who will have her first solo exhibition with the gallery in January.

A self-taught artist who learned to hone her craft by watching art instructional videos on YouTube, Chiamonwu has quickly established herself as an artist to watch for her hyper-realistic portraits of Nigerians in charcoal, acrylic, and other mediums. Her work was recently shown in a group exhibition at Black Wall Street Gallery in New York.

“When Nigerians see my art, I want them to immediately feel the connection that these are my people,” said Chiamonwu, who is based in Anambra.

The 25-year-old artist is set to join a roster that also includes a number of well-established figures, among them Carrie Mae Weems, Kerry James Marshall, Hank Willis Thomas, Malick Sidibé, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. In the last few years, the gallery has also been influential in supporting a younger generation of rising artists, including Toyin Ojih Odutola, Paul Anthony Smith, and Tyler Mitchell. Chiamonwu’s show next year will mark her first solo exhibition ever.

“There is a striking sense of vivacity and intimacy in her sitters, and the technique and skill required to achieve this is well beyond her 25 years,” said the gallery’s founder Jack Shainman in an email. “At first sight, I noticed how each image included figures that are deeply personal to Ifeyinwa. While I was not aware of just how close she was to them—she draws inspiration from her family, close circle, and culture—I could easily see the care and intimacy she utilizes to construct compositions that draw you into her world and space.”

Though she has been drawing since childhood, Chiamonwu only began to seriously focus on her art in 2015. She attended the Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka, Nigeria, and received her degree in education. Her experience in learning how to teach has become an indelible part of her artistic practice.

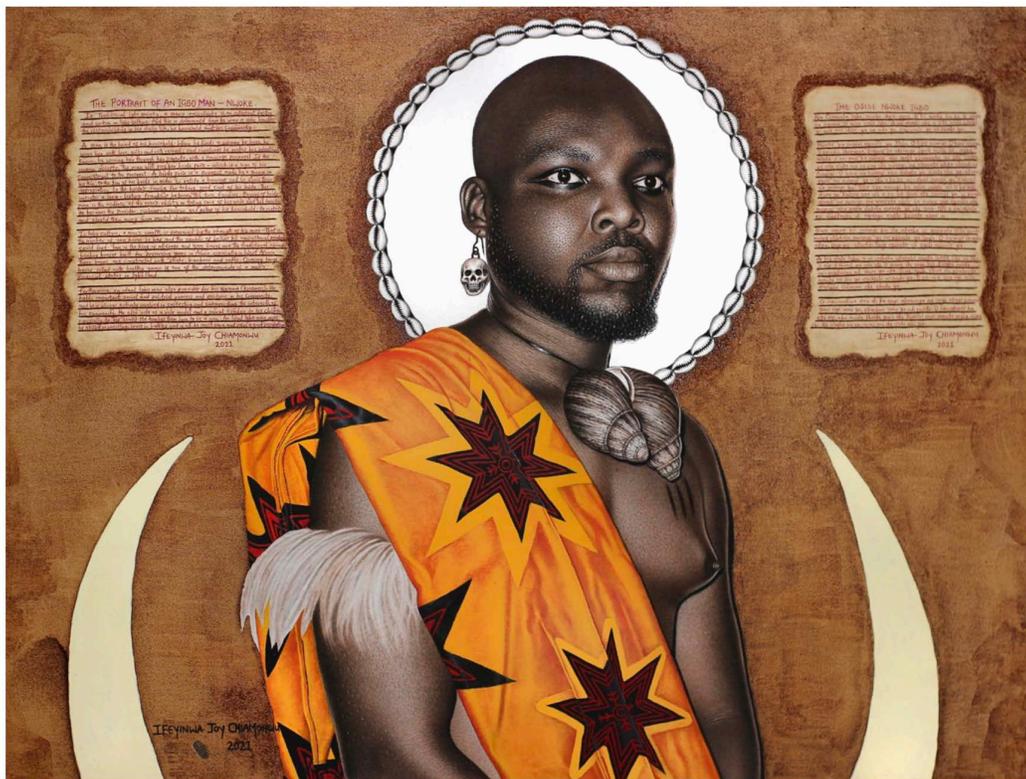
“I love storytelling, and I try to incorporate that into my art,” she said. “I’m trying to educate people through my artwork. I’m focused on showing my traditions, my culture, my heritage because it’s going through a form of extinction now because of Westernization and technology. I’m trying to preserve that.”



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *Lost Page*, 2018.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

In works made between 2018 and 2020, Chiamonwu depicts Black Africans dressed in traditional Igbo clothing with painstaking detail. In *Lost Page* (2018), a woman whose natural hair is bedazzled with seashells weaves together a basket, while *Abundance* (2019) shows a man's hands holding a surplus of seashells. For Chiamonwu, she wants to show her fellow younger Nigerians—both those living in the country and those who are part of its diaspora living abroad—their own culture. The goal is to portray “who we are and where we come from, as in everything about that in terms of the myths, the traditions, the culture,” she said.

For a new series, Chiamonwu has begun to incorporate text alongside her portraits in both English and Igbo to provide further context for the people she is depicting. Text that is part of the composition for *The Portrait of an Igbo Man—Nwoke* (2021) reads, in part, “[A]n ideal Igbo man also provides for his umunna (kinsmen). He holds important social and political powers and positions in his community, and he is always actively involved in protecting and safeguarding the interests of his community.”



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu, *The Portrait of an Igbo Man – Nwoke*, 2021.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

Chiamonwu said that her decision to incorporate text into her work is partly a way for her to experiment within her practice, as well as a way to educate “people who are not from my place, who are not African, who are not Black,” she said. “The more I write on the work, the longer it will stay for years to come.”



WE PRESENT

[menu](#)

Art

Chiamonwu Joy My art tells a story of typical Igbo culture before westernization

Chiamonwu Joy's astonishing artworks could easily be mistaken for photographs. It's only when you see her works in progress – the paper-white outline of an unfinished arm, or the Nigerian artist's hand adding a finishing touch – that you realise the optical illusion.

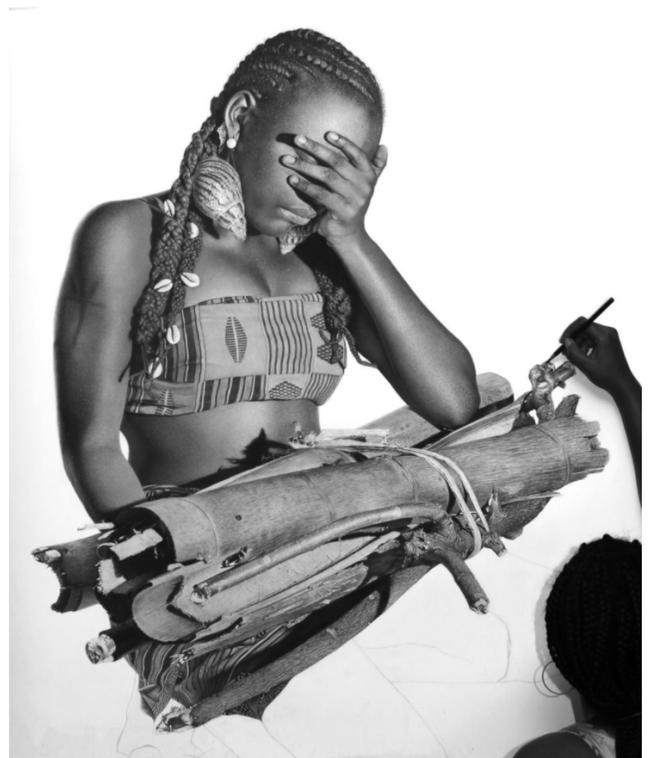


While a picture takes a fraction of a second to appear in digital form, a drawing can take Chiamonwu from three weeks to two months to complete, depending on its size and subject. Daily realities dissolve when she picks up her pencils to draw. "It's like time doesn't matter," she says.

Chiamonwu first discovered hyperrealism on Instagram and immediately fell for the style. She practised drawing this way by following online tutorials and it's taken her four years to get to this level, but she's determined to improve even further.

There's one downside to drawing hyper realistically though; training your eye to notice such meticulous detail means you also see the minute mistakes that others wouldn't. It's become a habitual part of her process to scan her works for areas that could be improved upon. "I'm the first and biggest critic of my artworks," she says.

Faded



The people in Chiamonwu's pieces are mostly family members and a few friends who she considers her muses. She styles, stages and then photographs them to create the reference material from which she draws. "I decide who and what to draw next depending on how physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically attracted I am to the subject or object," she says.

Using graphite or charcoal, Chiamonwu begins at the top of the page working her way down – incrementally adding light and shade to replicate the luminous skin you get when using a flash camera. Every hair and fibre is eventually revealed in crisp detail.

“I learnt to be more patient,
to be cautious but also to
take risks for what I believe
in.”

Chiamonwu was born and grew up in Maiduguri in the northern part of Nigeria and now lives in Awka in the south east of the country. Her incredible skill aside, at its heart, her work is about documentation and preservation of her Igbo culture. Her drawings feature a woman wearing cowrie shells woven into her braids; two hands hold up an offering of kola nuts; a boy wears painted markings under his eyes.

“Everything they’re wearing is a symbol of my culture,” she says. “The attire, the hair-do’s, the accessories and all. They all represent the Igbo culture and traditions and what we value.” Some of the rituals she recreates are dying practices. “I have read lots of historical books about my culture,” Chiamonwu says.

“My art tells a story of typical Igbo culture before westernization and globalization.” It’s become her mission to immortalize these customs that will surpass even her own lifetime.

Onyinye



As much as her work is art, the painstaking practice is also discipline. “What I like about this genre is the patience and dedication that comes with the skill,” she says. Her training has revealed qualities in herself she didn’t know she possessed.

“I learnt to be more patient, to be cautious but also to take risks for what I believe in. It has shown me how limitless we humans can be when it comes to nurturing or harnessing our passions and our skills.”

Words by Alix-Rose Cowie

Omenala (Tradition)



Ollie-Anya (Hope)



Deeper Than This





ARCTIC PAPER

INTERVIEW WITH CHIAMONWU JOY

CHIAMONWU JOY'S HYPER-REALISTIC ARTWORK CELEBRATES NIGERIAN CULTURE

Nigeria 29 Mar, 2019. Photos by Chiamonwu Joy Art



Every one of Chiamonwu Joy's artworks tells a story. With her hyper-realistic charcoal drawings, she portrays the early history and culture of her homeland Nigeria and the Igbo people. Her art is so similar to real life that most people think they are looking at photographs.

Chiamonwu's creative process rarely changes. She makes both small and large drawings and everything starts with her picking out people to portray. She dresses the models herself, and explains the story she wants to tell. She brings the customs and the accessories together - the shells, cowries and beads - to create the perfect outfit for the story. When she starts working with the charcoal it can take up to six weeks to finish each piece.

- I have always been fascinated and proud of the rich culture and traditions that the Igbo people in Nigeria have. Due to technology and the advance of westernization, the rich traditions, culture and ethical values of the Igbo people are slowly dying out. So, I made it my duty to preserve them the only way I know how - through my drawings, says Chiamonwu Joy.



"I really love hyperrealism since I feel that people

can connect to my artwork in any way they want"



Nigeria is widely known for being the most artistic country in Africa. It certainly has the highest number of artists, galleries, exhibition events and art exposure. Hyperrealism is a popular genre in Nigeria, and Chiamonwu is one of its most well-known proponents.

– We have so many hyperrealism artists and artists that work in different genres. I really love hyperrealism since I feel that people can connect to my artwork in any way they want, both historically, culturally, emotionally, spiritually and even psychologically, says Chiamonwu Joy.

Self-taught artist

Chiamonwu has been an artist for the past five years. She first started by drawing cartoons, but soon realized she wasn't very good at it. However, her passion for making art was too strong to let go – so she practiced and later advanced to drawing life-like drawings which later developed to Hyperrealism. She found talented hyperrealism artists on Instagram, and started following their processes and techniques.

– To learn more about the genre, I saw many tutorials which really intrigued me. I began to practice and today I would say that I'm very good at it, and I'm completely self-taught. If you are fascinated and dedicated you can come a long way towards pursuing, building and developing a talent, says Chiamonwu Joy.

Since then, Chiamonwu has had a handful commercial assignments, such as being part of an exhibition called "Insanity" in Lagos in 2016. She has also been interviewed by TV stations, newspapers and magazines all around the world after her artwork went viral on Twitter about a year ago.



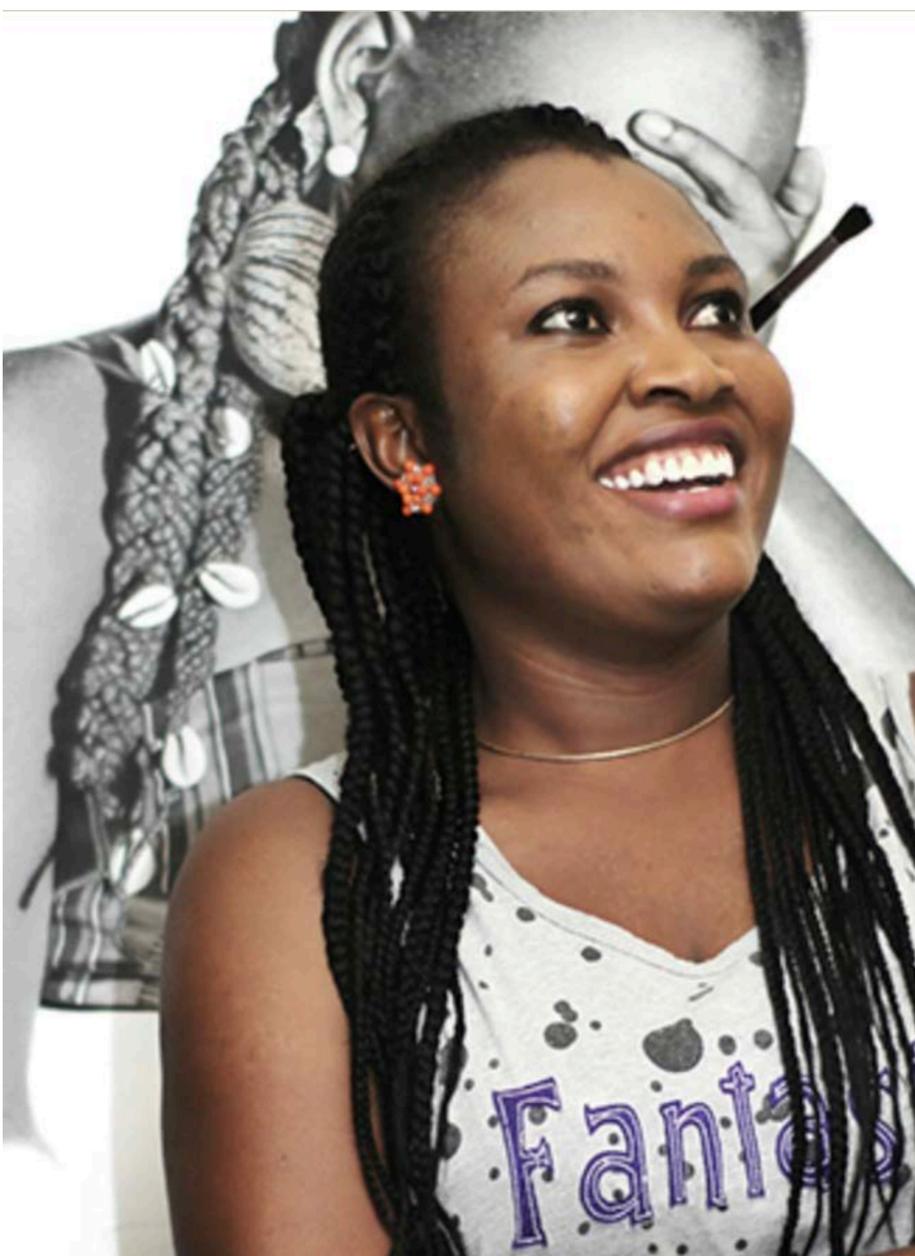
Her artworks going abroad

Chiamonwu says that the hardest part of working with graphite powder and charcoal pencils on paper is that you need to have the ability to control the spread of the graphite and the charcoal. Paper is also a fragile medium to work with, compared to tougher materials like canvas or metal.

– You need to handle the piece with extra care when drawing on it. I have now come to a place in my work where I have mastered the art of using charcoal, but it's definitely a long learning process, says Chiamonwu Joy.

Chiamonwu's artwork is starting to be recognized all over the world - and soon they will be shipped of to Nashville, Tennessee, as a part of a group exhibition.

– I really look forward to what the future has in store for me. I see myself having a decent gallery representation and art consignment with reputable galleries – and also attending more art shows and fairs, says Chiamonwu Joy.



FACTS

Name: Chiamonwu Joy

Title: Hyper-realism Charcoal Artist

Favorite material: Charcoal and Strathmore Paper

Favorite tool: Graphite, Conté a Paris charcoal pencil, Tombow mono elastomer eraser, I headed eraser, cotton buds and blending stumps.

Web: chiamonwu.com

Inside Nigeria's hyperrealist art scene

By Munachim Amah and Meron Moges-Gerbi, CNN

Updated 6:19 AM ET, Fri April 6, 2018

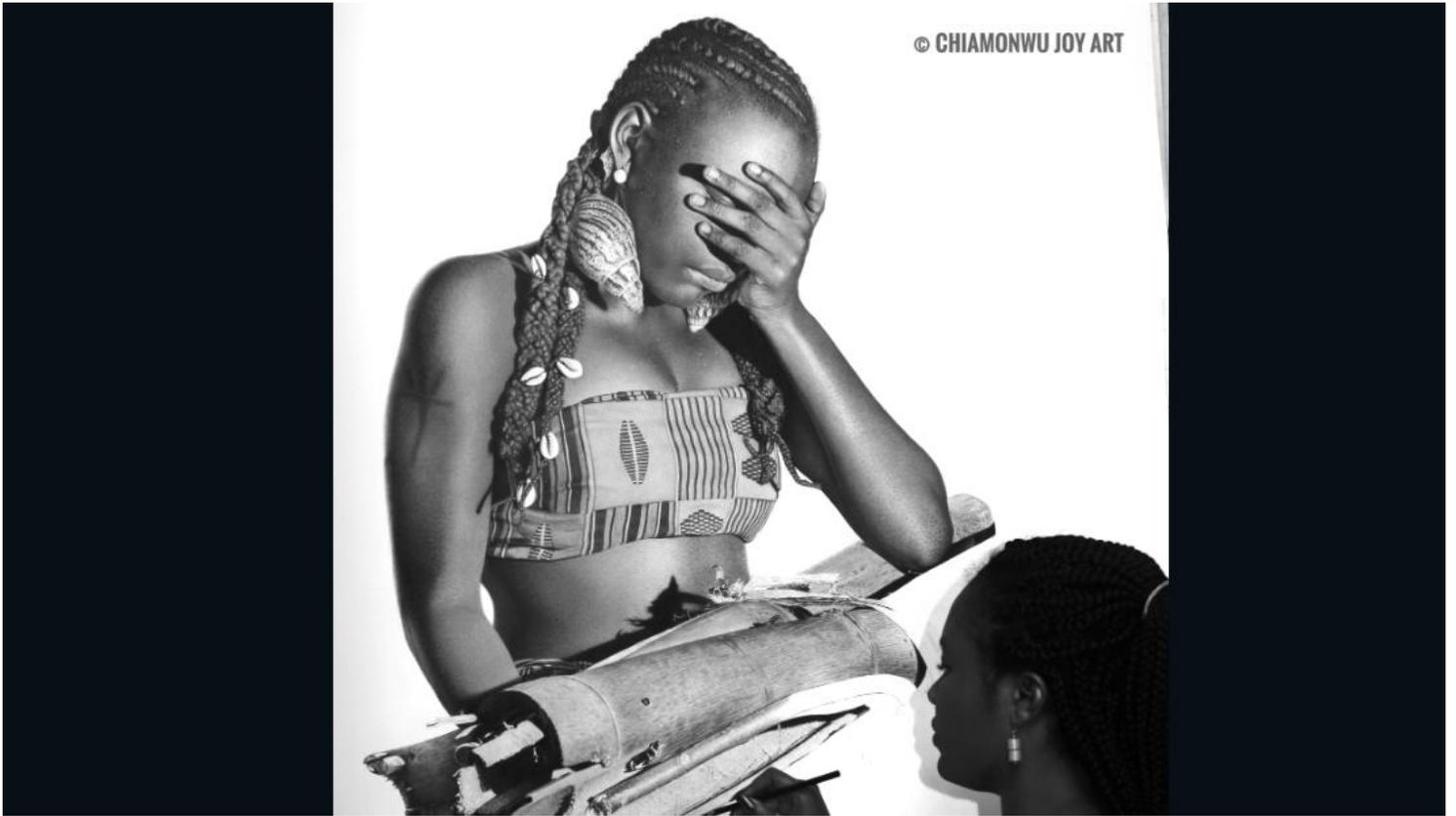
Chiamonwu Joy is another Nigerian hyperrealist artist. She is one of a few female artists in the scene.

Joy was born in Borno, the northern part of Nigeria where she lived until the age of sixteen, where the Boko Haram group is active.



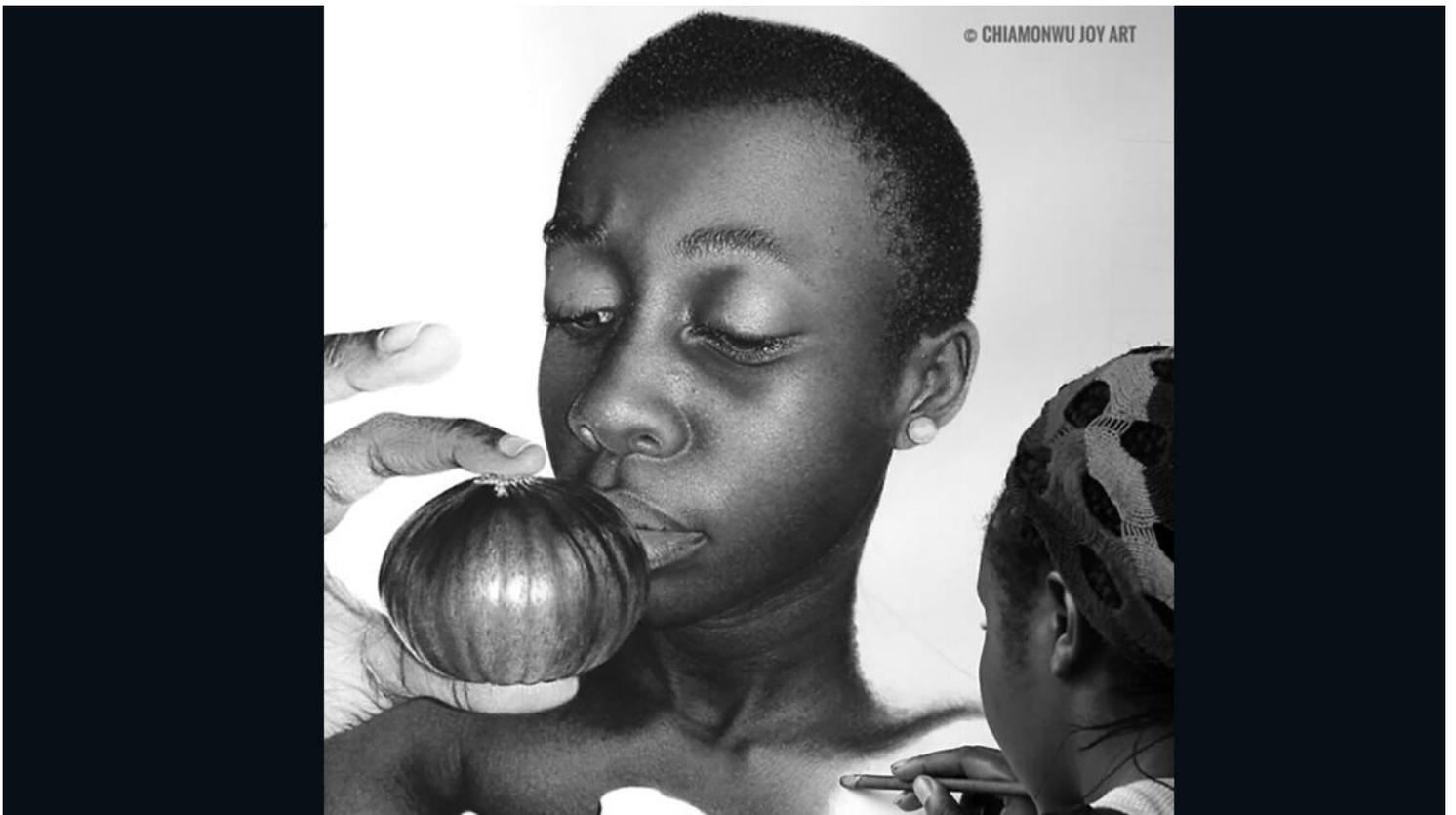
Chiamonwu Joy has over 30,000 followers on Instagram.

Joy did not go to school to study art but had the passion to develop her skills on her own. She was also the only student to sit for a Fine and Applied Art examination in West Africa.



The artwork is hyperreal.

She told CNN, "I have always had a passion for art and creativity in general, when I was in primary school I drew on any surface I saw be it paper desk and even my clothes".



Her work was featured in TeenVogue.

Joy uses graphite and charcoal and paper just like Nwadiogbu. Her work gained international notoriety when it was profiled in [TeenVogue](#).



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Nigerian Artist Captivates Twitter with Hyperrealistic Charcoal Drawings

By Sara Barnes on January 24, 2018



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

[View Profile](#)



[View More on Instagram](#)



3,476 likes



Add a comment...



When you first look at a hyperrealistic drawing by Nigerian artist [Chiamonwu Joy](#), you'll find it hard to believe that it's a work of fine art and not just a photo. Her ongoing series of portraits have such a convincing three-dimensional quality that they appear to be captured with a camera—as if at any moment, her subjects could seemingly come to life and walk off the paper.

So, how does Joy create her hyperrealism drawing? She opts not for graphite, but rather a [charcoal pencil](#) instead. This utensil offers her the control of a conventional pencil with the ability to achieve rich black tones that give her work roundness and depth. With super dark shadows and bright highlights, the range of tones mimics a camera's flash to produce the illusion of reality.

Once you see Joy's work in progress, you'll have no doubt about her amazing artistic skills. The internet is blown away by her abilities, too. One of her [latest tweets](#) sharing her work has gone viral; it's earned over 83,000 retweets and more than 180,000 likes from people around the world praising her drawings.

Nigerian artist Chiamonwu Joy creates hyperrealistic drawings that look so real, you might think these people are going to walk off the page.



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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2,964 likes



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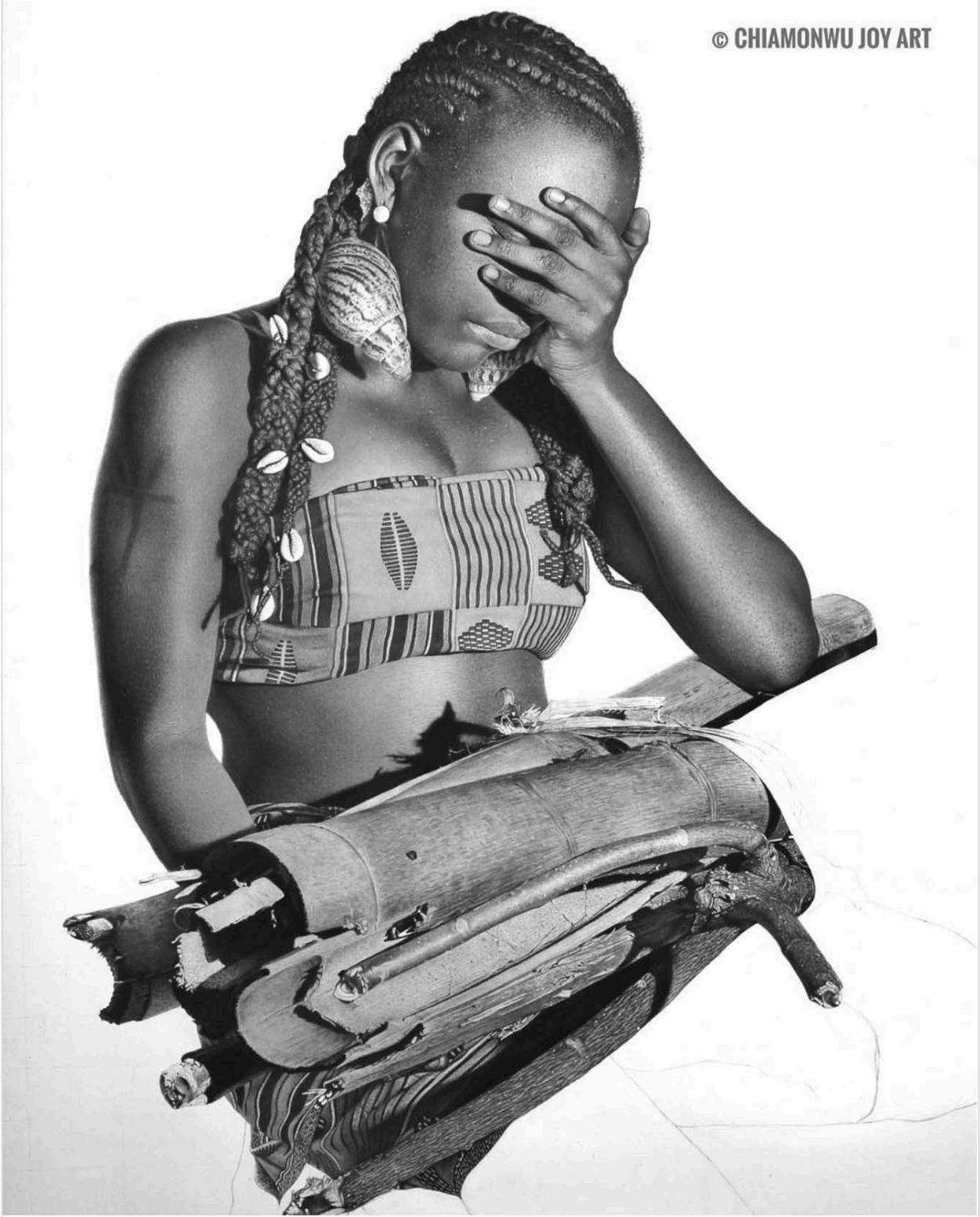




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5,329 likes





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45.5K followers

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890 likes



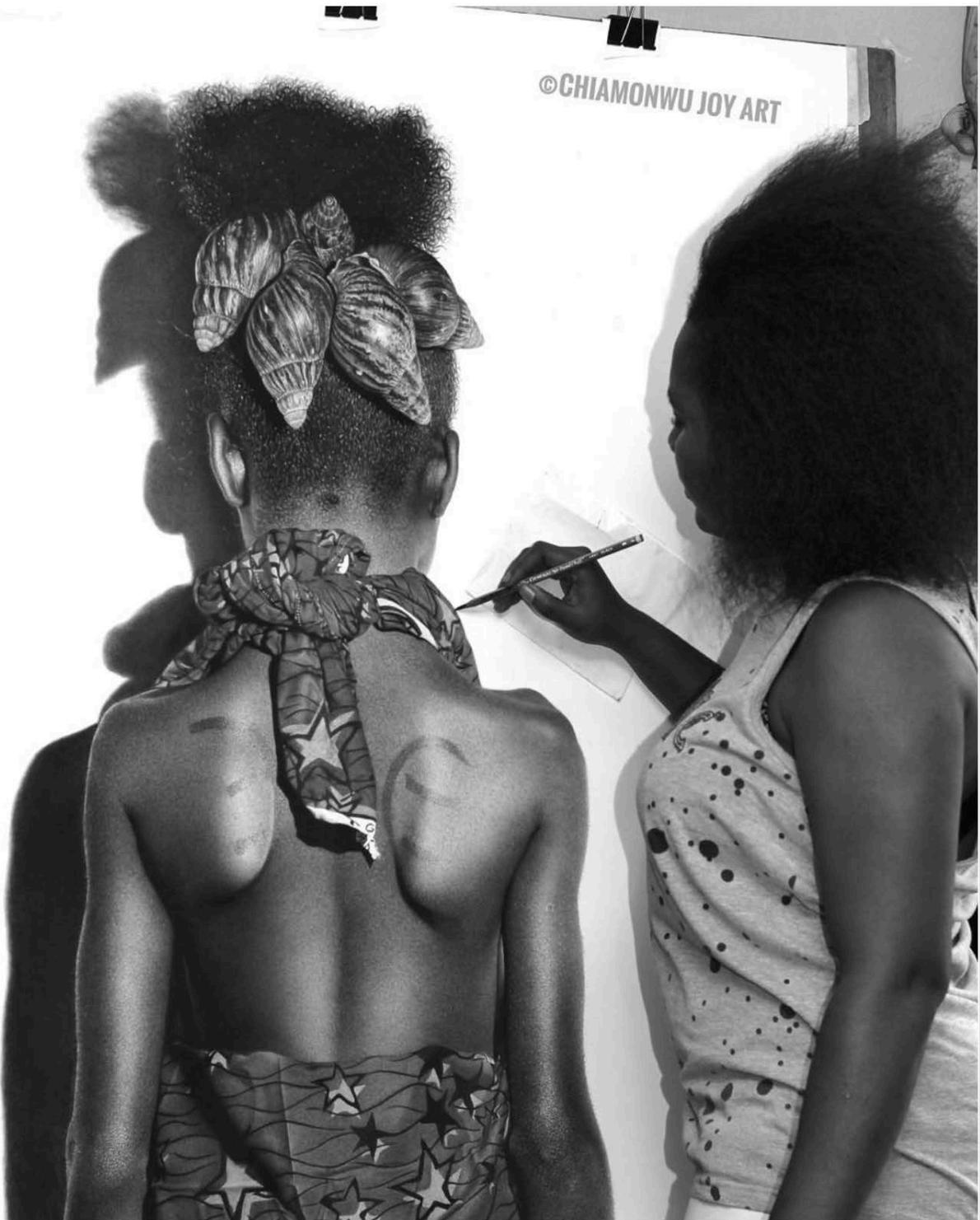
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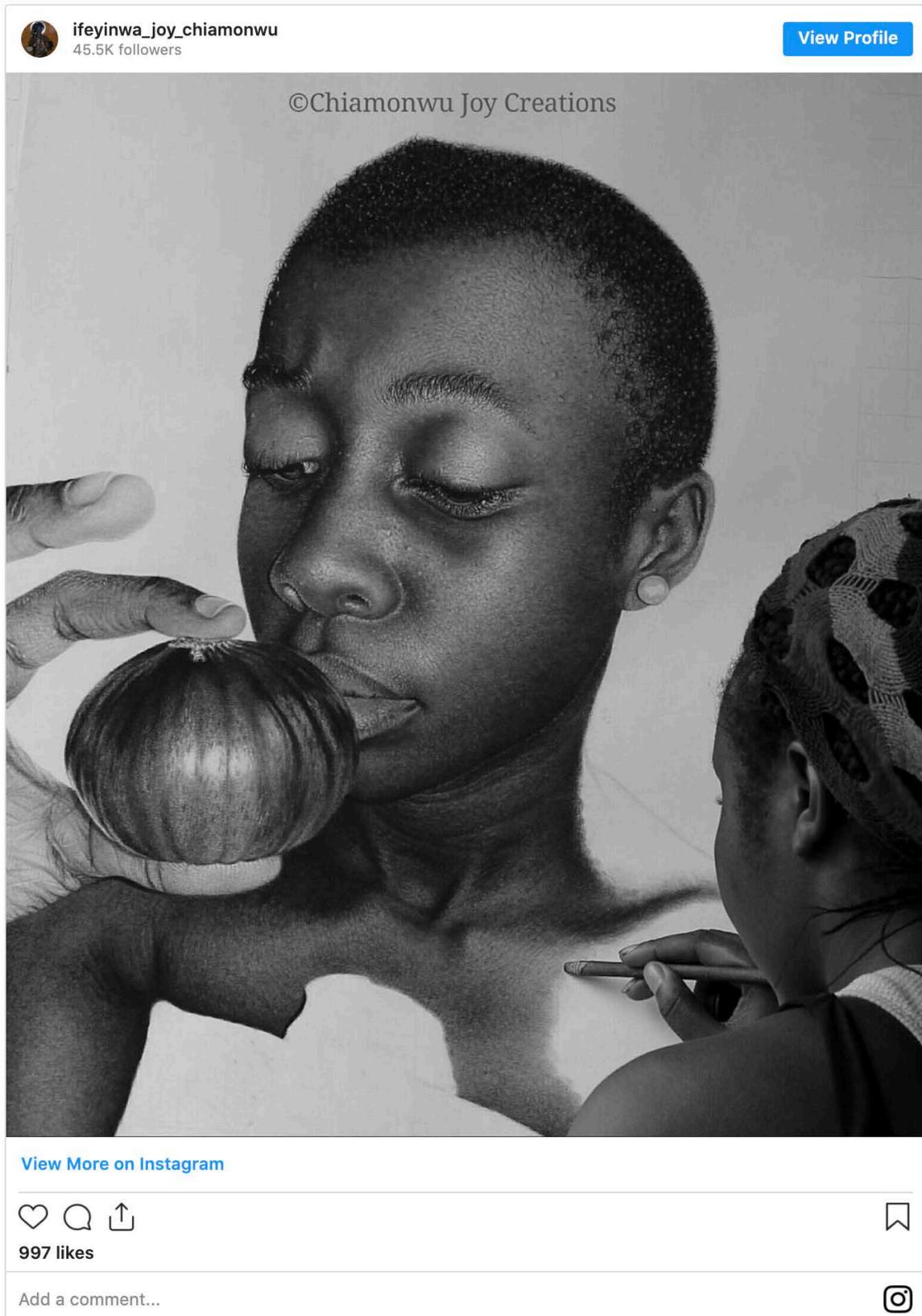


2,287 likes

Add a comment...



Joy uses charcoal pencils to produce her portraits. Here's a look at her process:

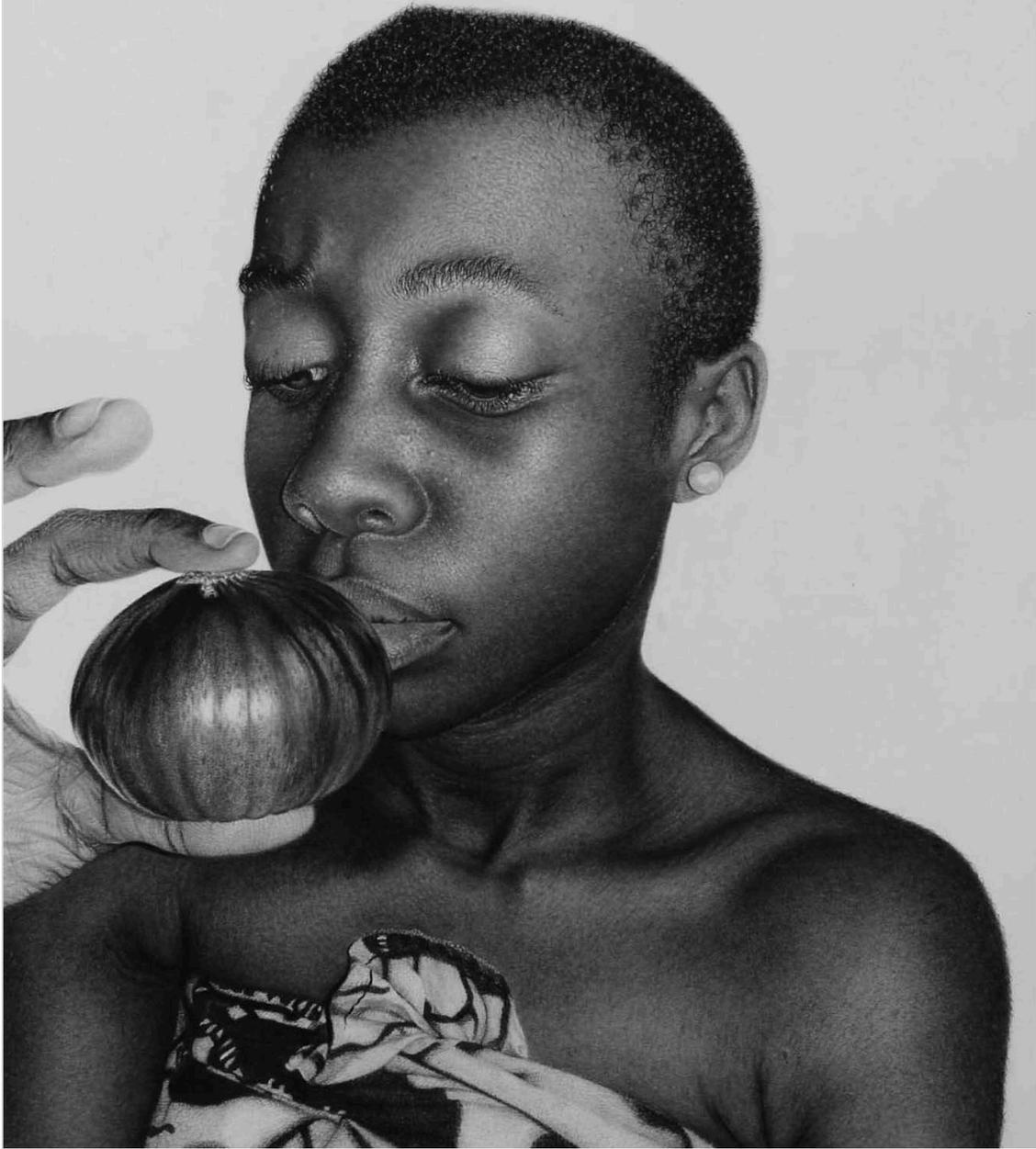




ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

[View Profile](#)

© CHIAMONWU JOY CREATIONS



[View More on Instagram](#)



1,303 likes



Add a comment...



The artist recently gained a great deal of attention on Twitter for her incredible charcoal pencil drawings.



People on Twitter couldn't believe the talent this young woman possessed and needed her to know how in awe they were.



Lamar
@lamar_ralph



Replying to @ChiamonwuJoy and @ChiamonwuJoyArt

This is the best art I've seen all my life...

2:37 AM · Jan 18, 2018



377 10 Copy link to Tweet



BOG
@BOBOBOG



Replying to @ChiamonwuJoy @ChiamonwuJoyArt and @Naijabiggz

Brilliant! Your gift will take you before kings..🙏

6:37 AM · Jan 18, 2018



45 2 Copy link to Tweet

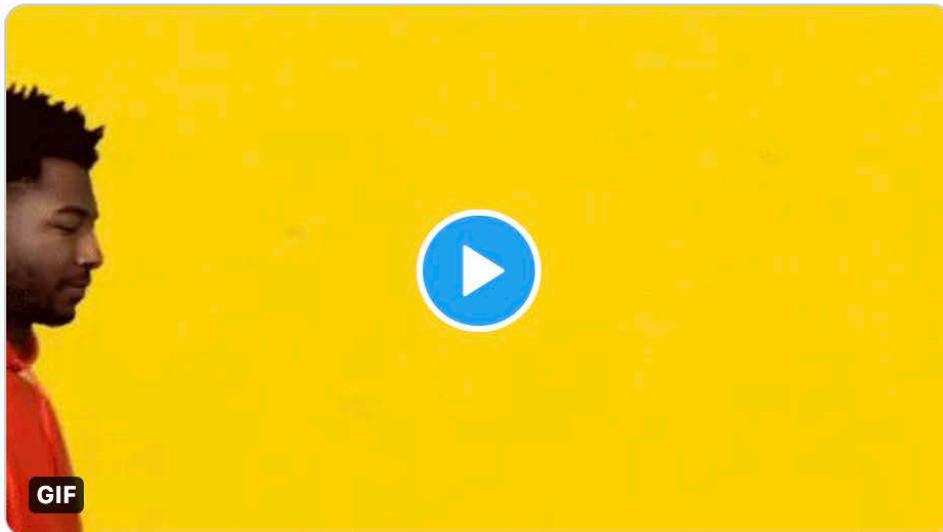


Hodan
@hyfreelance



Replying to @ChiamonwuJoy @ChiamonwuJoyArt and @knox_o

Wait what those are not photos??!! Wow sis you are soooooo incredibly talented and skilled !!!



6:34 AM · Jan 18, 2018

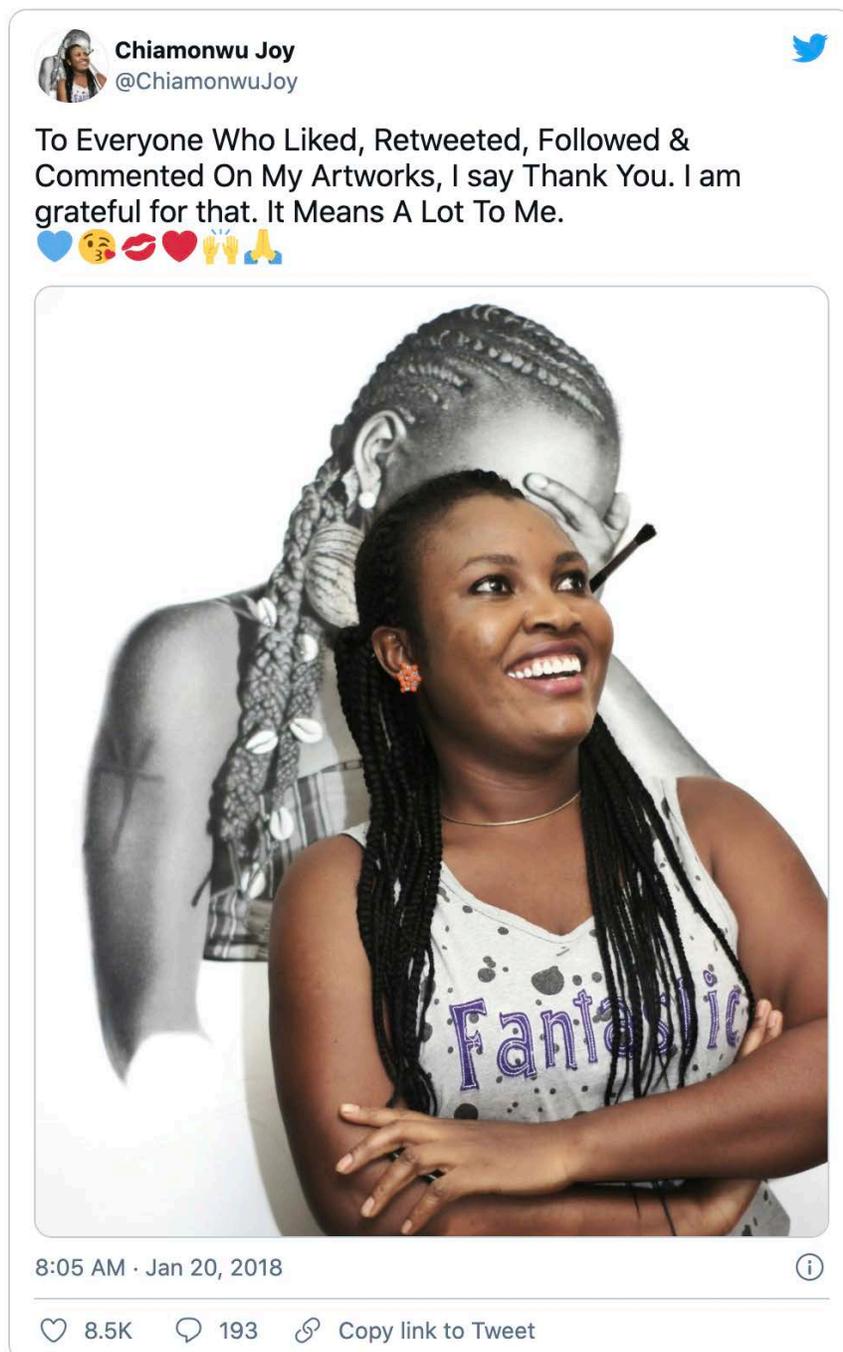


846 3 Copy link to Tweet

It's refreshing to meet an excellent, brilliant lady artist. Keep up the good work sis! 💪

– Jovita Akahome (@HijoLuz) January 18, 2018

Joy then took the time out to thank the thousands of people who helped make her work go viral.



[Art Attack] Hyperrealistic artist Chiamonwu Joy dazzles with her pencil and charcoal artworks

Farida Dawkins | Contributor **ART ATTACK** | January 19, 2018 at 01:09 pm



Ifeyinwa Joy Chiamonwu at an exhibition of hyperrealistic art in Nigeria -- Photo: Kuma Nation

Chiamonwu Ifeyinwa Joy is a charcoal and graphite artist straight out of Nigeria. Her artwork is a delight to the eye because of its realism; you would think you were staring at the image of an actual human being or object. Joy uses her Igbo culture and the traditions present in the culture to inspire her artwork.



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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2,964 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

On this day, being the 1st of December, Chiamonwu Joy was born.

Happy Birthday to Me

🥳🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷 #GratefulToGodForTheGiftOfLifeAndHealthyBody

#ljayng

[view all 220 comments](#)

Add a comment...



In an industry dominated by males, Joy is making her own mark by presenting rituals such as the kola nut offering, the displaying of a hand fan, and coronations in a lifelike and beautiful way.

Take a look at her work and decide for yourself:



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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3,476 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

Happy New Year Wonderful People ♥

Title: 'Faded'

The second from my OLD TESTAMENT Series.

Progress update: Stage 9

Graphite and Charcoal on Strathmore paper.

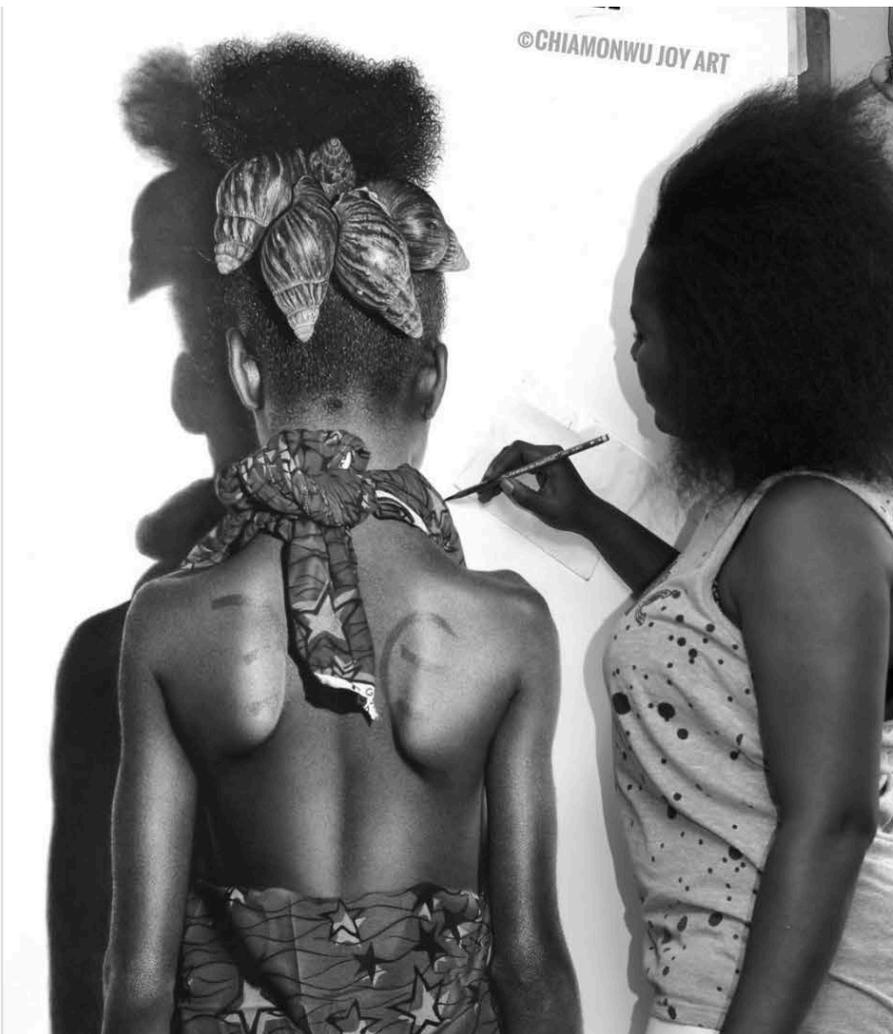
Kindly turn on your post notification to follow the progress journey of this artwork. Thanks.

#Art
#Hyperrealism
#Drawing
#OldTestamentSeries
#ChiamonwuJoyArt
#beautifulbizarre
@therealswizzz
@theshaderoom

view all 168 comments

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[View More on Instagram](#)



2,287 likes

[ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu](#)

Adding up the finishing touches before calling it a finished artwork.

Title: 'GONE ARE THOSE DAYS I'

Progress update: Stage 22

Graphite and Charcoal on Strathmore paper.

Kindly turn on your post notification to follow the progress journey of this artwork and many more.
Thanks ❤️

Comment, Like and Share.

#art
#femaleartist
#drawing
#hyperrealism
#worldofpencils
#art_secret
#sharingart
#worldofartists
#arts_help
#artoftheday
#artsy
#duende_arts_help
#art_supernova
#ijaying

[view all 159 comments](#)

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Chiamonwu Joy
@ChiamonwuJoy



Title: "GONE ARE THOSE DAYS I"

Stage 10

Graphite and Charcoal on paper

Follow me on Instagram @chiamonwu_joy_art



2:13 PM · Sep 30, 2017



♥ 56 💬 1 🔗 Copy link to Tweet



Chiamonwu Joy

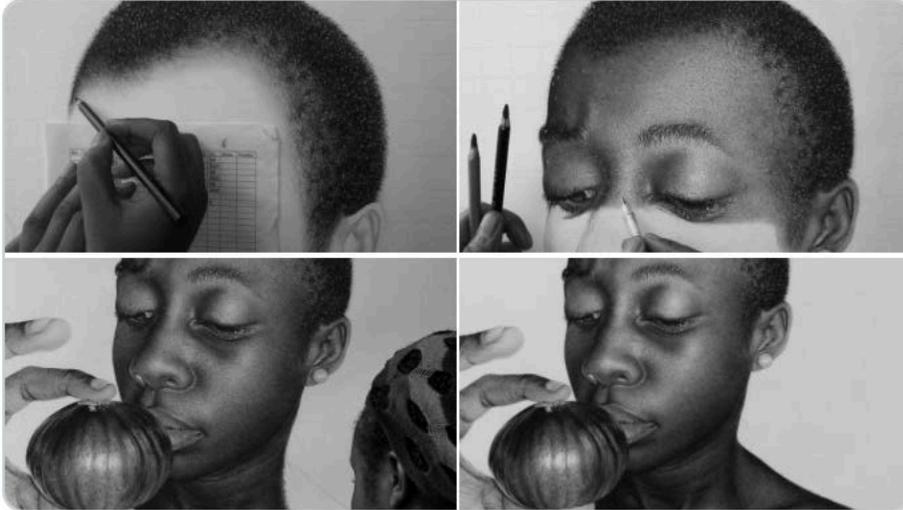
@ChiamonwuJoy



I am Chiamonwu Joy. A Nigerian Female Hyperrealistic Graphite and Charcoal Artist.

[#drawingwhileblack](#)

IG handle: [chiamonwu_joy_creations](#)



4:01 AM · Sep 22, 2017



8.7K



139



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One Facebook user remarked, "If your drawing skills could be compared to the age of your Soul, you'd be an Elder".

We couldn't agree more.

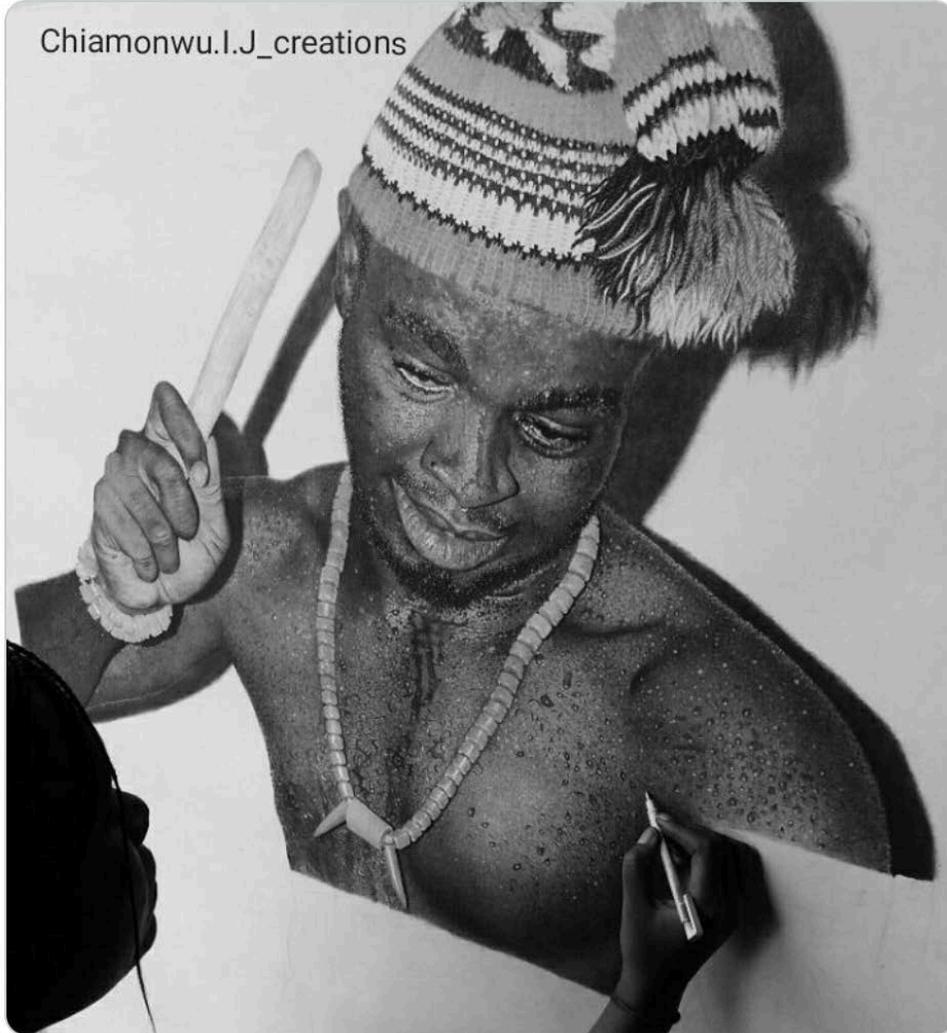


Chiamonwu Joy
@ChiamonwuJoy



I have love for what I do.. This is my call

Chiamonwu.I.J_creations



8:35 PM · May 8, 2017



♡ 120 💬 3 🔗 Copy link to Tweet



IMAGE: COURTESY CHIAMONWU JOY

Lifestyle

Nigerian Artist Chiamonwu Joy's Charcoal Drawings Go Viral

Social media is in awe.



BY **DE ELIZABETH**

JANUARY 21, 2018

The internet loves a good **optical illusion**, and the latest mind-blowing images are from Nigerian artist Chiamonwu Joy, whose **charcoal drawings** have caused jaws to drop all around the world.

Joy, who is known on Twitter as **@ChiamonwuJoyArt**, has shared several examples of her artwork on social media, much to the awe of her followers. Her portraits have earned countless likes and retweets — as well as compliments galore — due to the realistic nature of the drawings. If you look quickly, they honestly seem like photographs, but they aren't. According to **one of her tweets**, the images are made with charcoal pencils on paper.

As for Joy's followers, they've been left stunned time and again. "I am baffled and intimidated at how good these are," one person **wrote**, adding: "Who do I have to sell my soul to in order to get this good?" Another Twitter user **replied** to say: "Wait are you trying to tell me the girl in the second picture is not standing beside you? " And one of Joy's fans even went so far as **to say** that her drawings are more precise than photographs themselves.

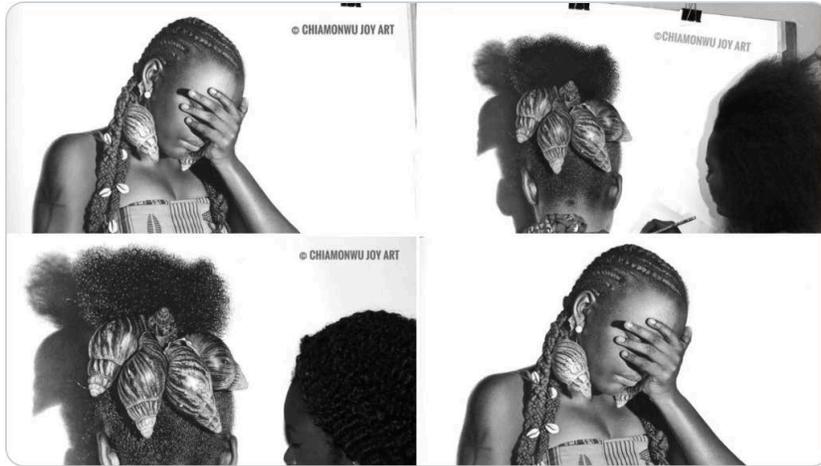
Joy also has an **Instagram page** that's filled with her hyper-realistic drawings, along with tons more adoring comments from her fans. It's definitely clear that Joy has left an impression on the internet — and plenty of double-takes at that. Take a look for yourself, and you'll be sure to feel endlessly inspired.



Chiamonwu Joy
@ChiamonwuJoy



My name is Chiamonwu Joy, A Nigerian Female Hyper-realistic Charcoal Artist. I draw with charcoal pencils on paper. These are all drawings.



5:54 PM · Jan 17, 2018



167.2K 3.3K Copy link to Tweet



Chiamonwu Joy
@ChiamonwuJoy



I am Chiamonwu Joy. A Nigerian Female Hyperrealistic Graphite and Charcoal Artist.

[#drawingwhileblack](#)

IG handle: [chiamonwu_joy_creations](#)



4:01 AM · Sep 22, 2017



8.7K 139 Copy link to Tweet



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

[View Profile](#)

©Chiamonwu Joy Creations



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783 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

This is a section of the commission I have been working on for a client. (though commission work completed)

I really enjoyed the challenges and new things I experienced while working on this artwork.

I will be posting more progress stages of my "deeper than this" artwork, which has been on hold, soon. Do have a lovely day. 😊❤️❤️

[view all 16 comments](#)

Add a comment...

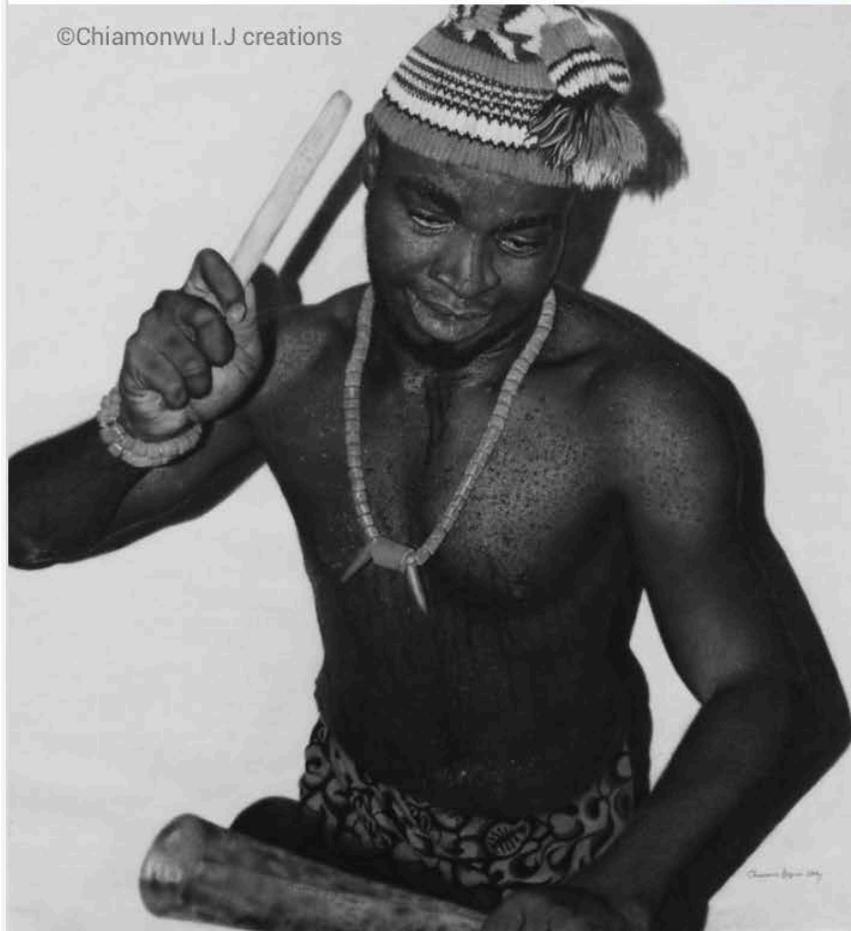




ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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[View More on Instagram](#)



1,110 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

Title - Omenala (Tradition)

Size - 48 x 42 inches

Medium - Graphites and charcoal on Fabriano Academia paper.

I am going to give a brief historical description and importance of three main objects that are of great significance in this artwork.

First, I will start with the Cap; popularly known as the OKPU-AGU among the Igbo people of Nigeria, West Africa. The okpu-agu is made with woollen threads, and its colour is mainly of the colour red, white and black . It is mostly worn by elderly men or men of chieftaincy titles. The Okpu-agu is worn on special traditional occasions like coronations, new yam festivals, marriage ceremonies, title takings etc.

Secondly, The neck and hand beads or coral beads. Popularly called AKA in Igbo dialect. The colour of these beads are mostly white, red, and of the orange colour. They are worn on the right hand and on the neck, by men and women, on special occasions like the fertility dances, festivals, marriage ceremonies, title takings, masquerade dances, coronations, and during traditional religious activities. However, the Aka symbolizes royalty, wealth, honour and indigenous identity. Although the Igbo people wear these beads, only a person born of royal blood is allowed to wear the white bead (AKA). Thirdly, The metal gong. Commonly called OGENE by the Igbo speaking tribe. The Ogene instrument is historically made by the Igbo people of Nigeria which is the most important metal instrument of the people. It is made by specialist blacksmiths. The instrument is flattish, conical shape and is hollow inside. The sound of the Ogene when struck with a wooden stick, comes from the vibration of its iron body. Ogene is not only used as a musical instrument during traditional ceremonies, but also as a means of communication, to pass out messages to the people or to call for village gatherings in different Igbo communities. Furthermore, Ogene is used in summoning up spirits. During the traditional wrestling matches that takes place in these communities , the ogene is used in raising up spirits of the wrestlers to show their manly strength.

This artwork is on sale now. If interested, email me on efynwaaa@gmail.com .

[view all 48 comments](#)

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ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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1,346 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

Title of work - Ollile anya (Hope) 2016.

Size - 46 x 38 inches

The message behind this artwork of mine is based on AGE GRADE.

An Age-grade is a form of social organization based on age, within a series of such categories, through which individuals pass over the course of their lives.. In tribal societies, especially in Africa, entry into an age grade - generally gender separated - is often marked by an initiation rite, which may be the crowning of a long and complex preparation. After a period of some years, during which they perform certain common activities, alone or under the supervision of senior guidance, members may be initiated either collectively or individually into a more senior age grade. This progress is often accompanied by the revelation of secret knowledge. In most cultures, age grade system are the preserve of men, and it is the older men who control a society's secret knowledge, collectively or restricted to a council of elders or specific positions such as medicine men and diviners, entrusted with the preparation of initiates.

References:

Bernard, B (1985). Age Class System: Social Institution and Politics Based on Age. Cambridge University Press.

Shepherd, J.R. (1995). Marriage and Mandatory Abortion among the 17th century Siriya. American Anthropological Association.

The white pendant object that hung on the belly of the boy (my artwork), held in place with a black rope, is called a COWRY; plural, COWRIES.

The cowry is a shell of sea snails, which overall are often shaped more or less like an egg, except that they are rather flat on the underside.

Many people through out history, especially Africans, have found (and still find) the white, very rounded, shiny, porcelain like shells of cowries very pleasing to look at and to handle. The shells have historically been used as Currency as well as being used in past and present, very extensively in the making of jeweleries and other decorative and ceremonial purposes especially in ritual divinations, in several parts of the world especially among Africans.

view all 58 comments

Add a comment...

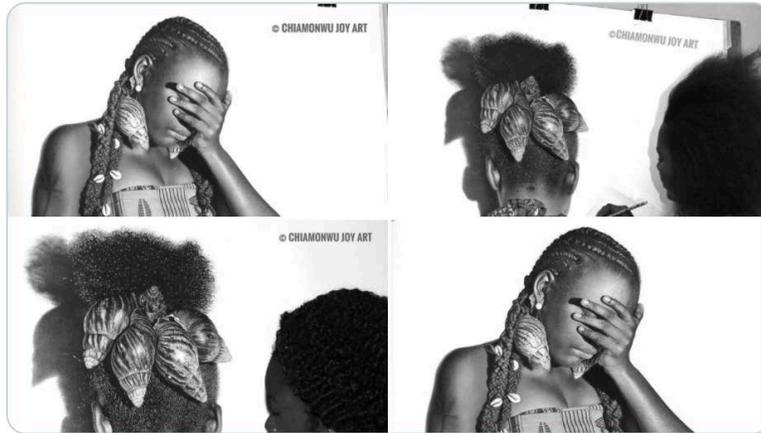




Chiamonwu Joy @ChiamonwuJoy · Jan 17, 2018



My name is Chiamonwu Joy, A Nigerian Female Hyper-realistic Charcoal Artist. I draw with charcoal pencils on paper. These are all drawings.



Malty Meatia
@maltymeatia

As someone who's just finished attempting a photo-realistic portrait using charcoal (partially), I am baffled and intimidated at how good these are. Who do I have to sell my soul to in order to get this good?

7:39 PM · Jan 18, 2018



♥ 1.8K 💬 27 🔗 Copy link to Tweet



Chiamonwu Joy @ChiamonwuJoy · Jan 17, 2018



My name is Chiamonwu Joy, A Nigerian Female Hyper-realistic Charcoal Artist. I draw with charcoal pencils on paper. These are all drawings.



Adultish
@mide_bams

Wait are you trying to tell me the girl in the second picture is not standing beside you? 🤔❤️

5:00 AM · Jan 18, 2018



♥ 1K 💬 9 🔗 Copy link to Tweet

okayafrica.

BY DAMOLA DUROSOMO

Jan. 18, 2018 06:26PM EST

NIGERIA



5 Nigerian Hyper-Realist Artists You Should Know

Here are 5 Nigerian hyper-realist artists whose work leaves us astonished.

It takes a special, perhaps, preternatural gift to be able to produce works of art that look so real they make viewers second-guess their eyesight.

Several African artists are amongst this talented bunch of hyper-realist artists, whose craftsmanship and stringent attention to detail produce some of the most utterly mind-blowing works that we've had the pleasure of seeing.

For these artists, the tedious process is just as meaningful as the outcome.

Blow, check out 5 African hyper-realists whose work leaves us quite astonished. For more, revisit our list of [10 Nigerian hyper-realists whose work will trick your eyes](#).



ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu
45.5K followers

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5,330 likes

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Title: 'Faded'

The second from my OLD TESTAMENT Series.

Progress update: Stage 10

Graphite and Charcoal on Strathmore paper.

Kindly turn on your post notification to follow the progress journey of this artwork.
Thanks.

#Art
#Hyperrealism
#OldTestamentSeries
#ContemporaryArt
#worldofpencils
#art_whisper
#duende_arts_help
#art_insanely
#art_dailydose
#pencilsacademy
#drawing_expression
#arts_promoter
#tacart
#art_toinspire
#worldofartists
#ljaying
@worldofpencils
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45.5K followers

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2,255 likes

ifeyinwa_joy_chiamonwu

Title: 'Gone Are Those Days I'

46 x 42 inches (height x width)

The first from my Old TESTAMENT series.

Graphite and Charcoal pencils on Strathmore paper.

#worldofpencils
#worldofartists
#OldTestamentSeries
#Art
#Hyperrealism
#Artsy
#artoftheday
#ljaying

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