

SPEAKING OUT: CHEKWUBE OKONKWO ON EXPRESSING AFRICAN IDENTITY

‘The concept of Africa in your head is different to the one that is in mine, so if I make it, you might not see it for what it is.’



Figure 12 Chekwube Okonkwo, 29, is the co-founder and art director at Lagos-based Magic Carpet Studios
Credit: Fati Abubakar

'Our culture is very rich in so many ways. It is so diverse, so many tribes, so many countries. We can't sum it up to one. Even in Nigeria, the southern Igbo culture is very different to the north. So where do you start from in defining African identity?

One thing that has summarised it all is abstraction. If you look at the *woodwork and paintings from the past*, you see they were not going for a realistic approach. They were trying to draw an image with simple lines. It's a very beautiful and sophisticated form of art. You wonder, from what realm were they getting this from? What I understand about the traditional process is that it is very spiritual. It's been said that they would go to a secret place to make these sculptures. They would pray to the wood, and so on.

What I say is, that works for us today, too. We should also look to ourselves. You don't start with the intention that you want to make African art; you start it by going to a secret place within yourself, spending time, digging down and something will birth. I do a lot of research, I do a lot of reading of African literature and away from reading, I just look around a lot. I try to see the world around me. The truth is that times have changed, and this should reflect in the art. Good art tells of the time and season in which it's made – it is not in the *costuming or African attire or pattern*.

A lot of people have come to me and asked me: How do we make it ours? There is a way that we use colours, the colours are just so rich, so perhaps that's something. The colour of our skin, too, gives it an African identity.

But really, the question is not how to make it ours. The question is: If I make it, are you open enough to accept it? What is the concept of Africa in your own head? The concept of Africa in your head is different to the one that is in mine, so if I make it, you might not see it for what it is.'