



Painter Julius Agbaje points to a painting of police officer with dog head that he titled 'Mad Dog' at his studio residence in Ipaja, Lagos. — AFP photos



Painter Julius Agbaje paints on canvass at his studio residence.

NIGERIA'S 'SOCIAL SATIRIST' FIGHTS INJUSTICE WITH ART

When in 2019 Nigerian painter Julius Agbaje depicted President Muhammadu Buhari as the Joker, he never imagined that a year later his portrait would become a symbol of youth protest. His image, "Joke's on You," showing Buhari with a red nose, white makeup and a terrifying smile, was the emblem of demonstrations against police brutality that rocked the country last October. "At first it was a joke, just a provocation," the 28-year-old artist said in his tiny studio in a rundown district of Lagos. "Months after, this piece went viral, and resonated with a lot of youth."

Even before the Joker image, Agbaje had already earned a place on Nigeria's vibrant cultural scene. He is also one of its most committed artists. "I always dare to challenge things, especially wherever there is injustice. I love to be provocative, and art gives me a channel though (which) I could express that vexation, to fight those injustices."

'Social satirist'

Nigeria, with its 200 million inhabitants, may well be considered Africa's largest democracy, but it has barely turned the page on its history of military dictatorships. More than 20 years after its democratic transition, the country remains plagued by corrupt politics, rampant poverty and violations of basic rights.



Painter Julius Agbaje poses for a photograph at his studio.

Between acrylic pots and worn brushes, Agbaje rolls out his canvases on the tiled floor of his studio for a visitor. The "social satirist", as he likes to call himself, Agbaje knows few taboos. Take his portrait of a nun painted as a chimpanzee, with a nose piercing, tattoo, and plunging neckline-risky content in a country where religious beliefs are strong and where blasphemy is often branded the worst of sins.

"I wanted to denounce the hypocrisy of religion in Nigeria," says Agbaje, himself the son of a pastor and a teacher. But the strength of his caricatures, which are as funny as they are shocking, is also thanks to their technical skill. He learned his craft at the oldest art school in Lagos, the Yaba College of Technology, from where he

graduated in 2017. His dexterity comes to the fore in a portrait made with knives of two monkeys—the figures, wearing police helmets, are seen in mugshots, with signs around their necks saying "murder" and "duplicitous & theft".

The diptych, entitled "Good cop, Bad cop", was produced long before last year's #EndSARS protests erupted over police brutality, and forced the government to disband the SARS special police brigade. The image is now on display at his art school's museum. "Strangely enough so many people have reacted to this piece. It has drawn a lot of attention and discussion, and also got its own nickname—'The Monkey Piece'," says his former teacher Odun Orimolade.

Trauma and art

The young artist picked up his brushes again when last year's youth protest movement was brutally suppressed. Amnesty International said the army opened fire and killed at least 10 people, a charge the military has denied. From this "trauma" and "this anger" three paintings were born. Far from his caricatures, they are perhaps his most successful, at least his most poignant. With a blood-red background, one of them shows a shirtless black man raising his fist. In place of his face, the artist painted a shooting range target riddled with bullets. On the



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ground, upturned barricades recall those of the Lagos tollgate booth where the army allegedly opened fire on peaceful demonstrators. "It is an account of what happened on the day as the government came out to deny any hand in the matter," he said.

"I felt it is important to document the event with my art, for the sake of posterity." These are the "evils of his society" that the young painter wants to fight with his art. In Nigeria, there is an abundance of artists who criticize the political system, but many use only abstract images, few

do so in such a confrontational way. Among his influences, Agbaje cites the Nigerian performer Jelili Atiku, who denounced extrajudicial executions for years, leading to his arrest in 2016. "It's scary to be honest... it must be said, because I realize that some people sacrificed before I came," Agbaje said. "And because of those sacrifices... I can even enjoy some of this semblance of freedom that I enjoyed today, I feel that is my duty." — AFP

FAMILY, SUPPORTERS HOLD VIGIL FOR HOSPITALIZED RAPPER DMX

Hundreds of fans along with family gathered Monday outside the New York hospital where DMX is in critical condition, holding a prayer vigil for the rapper whose status remains extremely fragile. The acclaimed artist born Earl Simmons was rushed to the hospital in White Plains, a suburb north of New York City, following a heart attack on

Friday. Publicist Angelo Ellerbee told AFP that DMX remains on life support. His fiancée and ex-wife were in tears at the vigil as a prayer was read for the rapper, whose fans chanted "DMX," holding their fists to the sky in honor of the 50-year-old star.

A motorcycle procession later paraded down the street in front of the facility

as DMX hits including "Ruff Ryders' Anthem" rang out. Saying he was "heartbroken," a friend of the family, AB Butler, told AFP that "you can't ask for a better artist." Fan Beverly Bailey echoed those comments, saying, "He's come a long way in life, and he has a hard life, and just to see where he is today, it's very important." "We keep our prayers for him and his entire family."

DMX has long suffered from drug addiction. In 2019, he cancelled several shows and checked himself into a rehabilitation facility. The Grammy nominee known for his distinctive gravelly delivery and dark lyricism soared into the public consciousness in the late 1990s, releasing hit after hit including "X Gon' Give It To Ya" and "Party Up." He continues to boast a strong fan following. His virtual rap battle with Snoop Dogg, a segment of the Verzuz series, attracted more than 500,000 viewers. — AFP

In this file photo rapper DMX performs during week five of the BIG3 three on three basketball league at UIC Pavilion in Chicago, Illinois.



Fans of hospitalized rapper Earl Simmons, aka DMX, hold balloons.



Ex-wife Tashera Simmons (center) and fiancée Desiree Lindstrom (right) surrounded by friends of hospitalized rapper Earl Simmons, aka DMX, attend a prayer vigil hosted by the Ruff Ryders to the Rescue Foundation at White Plains Hospital.



Fans of hospitalized rapper Earl Simmons, aka DMX, attend a prayer vigil hosted by the Ruff Ryders to the Rescue Foundation at White Plains Hospital in White Plains, New York. — AFP photos