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Nigeria's new SOHO

THE visual frame is more memorable, than even the now familiar mode of spelling his name, his signature, all in the lower keys — dele jegede, the artist, cartoonist and scholar, was in his first visit to Lagos from the United States in seven years.

An enthusiastic, even if sparse presence in 'the circuits' during the weeks of the visit, the bushy hair and sweeping beard now speckled with white grays could be picked easily either in the bookshop leafing through recent local publications or in scores of art galleries dotting the landscape of Lagos island, mulling over works by some upcoming and promising artist who some seven years back might have been a mere junior high pupil.

What jegede sees is a bubbly scene filled with activity and business. It is even to the credit of the scene that a few galleries opened but shortly closed down, giving place to galleries with more enduring vision, combining artistic with business vision.

He could not catch up with all the often simultaneous exhibitions and art shows but regrets however that the system has not evolved a process for selection and possibly elimination, where, he says, artists and their works could face critical evaluation, and collectors also find good guidance.

By dele jegede

In the halcyon days when Lagos was the only credible centre in Nigeria where a rarefied European breed - the cognoscenti and the literati — gathered once in an advertised while, wine in hand, to talk in muted tones, strain their necks, remove their glosses and sniff at the new art produced by

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few Nigerians who threw reason to the winds and decided to become contemporary artists in an era when every parent’s wish was to produce a medical doctor, an engineer or, at worst a lawyer, the necessary structure upon which the new art was supposed to rest was virtually non-existent.

Patronage was almost exclusively a non-Nigerian concern. There were, of course, some noble Nigerians who reposed confidence in the new art. But theirs was a tiny tribe. Galleries? There was none. Not in the sense that Ikoyi is now defining the concept.

Please, do not let us reopen that wound, still fresh in contemporary discourse. I refer to the non-existence, or the ineffectiveness, of a critical clan: those who, by temperament, training or disposition, are well suited to moderate, energise or railroad the art scene.

Things are changing. I have seen, in the few weeks that I have spent after an absence of nearly seven years in Lagos, that Ikoyi seems poised to re-invent itself as Nigeria’s new SoHo. This development seems to signal a welcome departure from the hit-or-miss approach of the past. Compared to what obtained a few decades back, Ikoyi becomes a metaphor, a yard-
Galleries have continued to emerge; some have gone under while others continue to flourish, in tandem with public perception, artists’ reactions and economic undulations. Regrettably, there does not seem, as yet, to be any concerted attempt to cultivate taste, with a view to informing, reforming and moderating gallery practice.

Chike Nwagbogu, the energised spirit behind the idea, deserves our encouragement and support. The idea is not only sustainable, it holds significant promise for influencing trends in the field.