



Contemporary
Arts Center

A still life painting depicting a collection of objects on a wooden table. In the foreground, there is a large, dark brown wooden bowl with a green interior. To its right is a pinkish-red ceramic cup. Further back, a silver metal pot sits on a stack of white plates. A blue lantern is visible in the background. The scene is set against a red wall. The painting style is expressive and textured.

**NJIDEKA
AKUNYILI CROSBY**
PREDECESSORS



Trade brought immigrants and Islam to West Africa in the 11th century, establishing mosques in a robust zone of exchange that included caravans of up to 3000 camels which “would disgorge their exotic burdens after the arduous Saharan crossing.”¹ The Andalusian poet architect Abu Es Haq es Saheli (1290-1346) traveled these routes and in 1327 is said to have designed the Djinguereber Mosque in Timbuktu, which rose from the very soil on which it stands today. The maintenance of this mud-brick structure has, however, been long delegated to the locals who manually reapply coats of mud on a yearly basis to prevent it “from,” in the words of *Bricks and Mortals* author Tom Wilkinson, “melting back into the desert sands.”² In this way it is remarkably similar to the Great Mosque of nearby Djenné, which integrates French influence, and which has been rebuilt numerous times since its inception in the 12th century. At this complex, but deeply resonant intersection of architecture, colonization and renovation, Wilkinson provocatively asks if the most “authentic” essence of this structure is the gradual metamorphosis of its skin at the hands of the townspeople who have left their own impressions? As the subject of ongoing, centuries-old squabbles surrounding its origins and legacy, this hand-wrought structure is the literal and figurative ground upon which indigenous culture is built, modified and contested.

The complexion of Timbuktu, Djenné and countless other African cities change too with every added handprint and experience, illuminating Wilkinson’s prescient observation that “every monument is made and remade like the melting mosques of Mali, and every monument can be a

counter-monument superscribed by memories of our own.”³ The continent has continued to be reshaped by its constituency well into the present day, as young and gifted Africans began to venture globally in the 1960s in search of higher education and happiness abroad. In her 2005 article *Bye Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)*, Nigerian-Ghanaian writer Taiye Selasi describes the modern African emigrant who seeks to develop an identity inside and outside this increasingly porous place, and from wildly disparate sources. Defined as much by their hybridity as their trail of addresses, these “Afropolitans” are “not citizens, but Africans of the world.” Working and living around the globe, “they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many.”⁴ “What distinguishes this lot and its like, is, in Selasi’s words, “a willingness to complicate Africa – namely to engage with, critique, and celebrate the parts of Africa that mean the most to them.”⁵ Rather than “essentializing” the geography and planting their feet in the metaphorical mud, they embrace cultural complexity and selectively “choose which bits of a national identity” to internalize into the architecture of identity.

There are few better examples of the Afropolitan in action than artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby, who left her home country of Nigeria at the age of 16 to study medicine in the United States. After her vocational path turned instead to art, Akunyili Crosby felt, in her words, “an urgency to tell my story as a Nigerian in diaspora.”⁶ That story is a mutable, evolving and at times contradictory one, as this artist confronts as many post-colonial misunderstandings as she does the rigid enshrinement of so-called “authentic” traditions in Africa. In the places she was raised, the migratory paths she has traveled, and in the marriage she presently occupies, Akunyili Crosby moves continuously through porous, negotiated cultural spaces that professor and theorist Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zones.”⁷ In “a post-colonial country” where over 200 tribes increasingly co-mingle with European and American culture, Akunyili Crosby grew-up in this motley nexus, and admits: “Even what people now call *tradition* is cobbled together from many things.”⁸

As a former British colony, a now burgeoning economy propelled by oil money, and the subject of numerous military dictatorships following its political independence in 1960, Nigeria is a hub of cultural influences that include English tea ceremonies, American television, Dutch portrait fabrics, and vernacular dialects of Christianity.⁹ Akunyili Crosby grew up in this eclectic constellation with five siblings, a father who practiced medicine, a mother who became a national hero for her pioneering work in the country’s Food & Drug Agency, and summers spent in a rural village with an influential grandmother she called “mama.” The latter environment resonates as her most vivid, and yet fleeting repository of Nigerian history. Her grandmother and life in the village she inhabited her entire life are embodied in a table full of simple domestic objects, dishes, religious icons, and the only source

of artificial light in this house – a kerosene lamp. Since her mama passed away in 2012, Akunyili Crosby has been obsessively photographing her living space on every return visit – stockpiling images that connect this Afropolitan to the Nigeria she once knew. As that past country blurs with time, however, an ersatz history takes shape as Akunyili Crosby explains, “In my generation there’s a move back to tradition, but it’s a very hybrid, cobbled tradition because things have already been lost.”¹⁰ Rather than a lament, however, she builds and embraces hybrid worlds that, in her words, “encapsulate how convoluted histories intertwine in countries that were a former colony.”¹¹

Heeding cultural theorist George Gerbner’s (1919-2005) admonition that “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence,” Akunyili Crosby ardently states: “I felt a need to claim my own social existence by making the representation happen.”¹² In one of her first mature paintings, Akunyili Crosby declares *I Refuse to be Invisible* (2010), wherein a centrally positioned, short-haired, ebony-skinned avatar stares intently at the audience as she separates from a dark background and dances within a crowd of abstracted individuals. This ostensible surrogate is clad in a pale dress of photo transfers, and this image-laden “skin” continues across her partner’s face, the clothes of surrounding figures and the window boxes above. With this multi-faceted technique, Akunyili Crosby creates a quilt of references that complete her representational body and composition, while simultaneously complicating its palette and autonomy. As her artistic voice is self-professedly “rooted in a very Western tradition of image-making,” she continually renovates her training and tools to forge a more intersectional voice of an artist/existence in flux.¹³ Knowing that painting alone could not speak in all the ways she desired, the artist integrates printmaking, stenciling, drawing, collage and photo transfers to create materially dense patchworks (on paper) that often resemble textiles.¹⁴ In so doing, Akunyili Crosby mirrors the rise of the popular portrait fabric tradition in Africa, where colorful cloth imported from Europe (particularly The Netherlands) has been adapted into local customs, ceremonies and practices. At this bustling intersection, in what Akunyili Crosby calls a “weird, buzzing in-between space; a kind of no man’s land,” she assembles a trans-cultural nexus straddling customs, times, places and references while belonging exclusively to none.¹⁵ Like the “third space” of cultural cross-pollination that Indian post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha describes, the seemingly ordinary domestic settings she crafts percolate with pan-cultural meaning translated through a highly personal lens.¹⁶ The position of that lens grew all the more intimate following her marriage to American artist Justin Crosby, creating a heightened tug-of-war between loyalties and love. Bringing the negotiation of post-colonial identity into her most personal space with added stakes, Akunyili Crosby wrestles with the



Opposite: *Then You Lost Me*, 2016.

Right: *I Refuse to Be Invisible* [detail], 2010.



Ike Ya, 2016.

complexities of this relationship in works like *Ike Ya* (2016), where representations of she and her husband face different directions in their home life – holding one another as broader tides of race, nationality and family wash in and out of shore.¹⁷

There is an increasingly close, symbiotic, and sometimes contested relationship between the artist and her ever growing inventory of photos as well.¹⁸ She gathers images that, in her words, “give me a feeling of recognition” of her Nigeria, from album fronts, popular advertisements and Nigerian Idol marqueees to magazine covers, political posters, religious symbols and newspaper event photos. When woven together with photos of herself, her family and her wedding, the composition verges on the claustrophobic as curator Cheryl Brutvan observes: “These dense, animated swaths comprise small images placed tightly next to each other, leaving no room between smiling faces of glamorous pop stars, models and despised dictators in uniforms, berets and sunglasses.”¹⁹ This density continues in the application process as well as the artist employs a rubbed acetone technique, akin to printmaking, to go beyond surface level collage (which she felt fractured her page). These transferred photos “appear embedded and integrated with the surface” according to curator and professor Erica Ando, who highlights how the ink of the image “gets absorbed by the paper and becomes part of it.”²⁰ In so doing, with an intensity she likens

to “syncretism,” Ando argues, “the repetition is an attempt to sear or reify the images” that Akunyili Crosby feels slipping away.²¹ Said images are materialized and made manifest in the process, but they blur in the transfer much like memory does with time. With inescapably fleeting impressions, she compiles a quivering archive of references and recollections that flow through the clothing, bodies and architecture of her variegated chambers.

Like rooms in a never-ending house, these uncanny domestic alcoves collectively evoke the *memory palace*, a Greco-Roman technique where the subject builds imagined architectures with memories they subsequently retrieve by “walking” through the manor. Victorian art critic and influential social thinker John Ruskin (1819-1900) considered architecture an essential repository of human thought, arguing: “We may live without her and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”²² In the same breath, however, he was adamantly opposed to the unavoidable renovations that take place with human fancy – those which, for the aforementioned Wilkinson, “inevitably recreate the past as we want it to be...both to remember and to forget.”²³ For this is the inherently unstable nature of both the urban condition and the memory palace, continually rearranged by the occupant much like Akunyili Crosby disorients her apparent domesticity. As a case in point, she explains, “I may include screen-walls

and louvers, which I associate with 1980s houses in Nigeria, and houses are not built that way anymore. If I'm thinking of the flooring of a space, whether it's terrazzo or tile or carpet, I consider the time period and socioeconomic implications of each, and then I play with and mix these things."²⁴ Moreover, it is crucial to note that as doors, windows, screens and frames proliferate in her settings – inviting our simultaneous arrival and departure – her work functions as an overarching portal “through which mutable ideas about trans-cultural identity flow.”²⁵ Akunyili Crosby likens these perforated time capsules to “wormholes,” many of which eschew physical figures in favor of portrait fabrics, photo-laden structures, wallpaper, houseplants and views of foliage that blur the threshold between interior and exterior. In this porous place, “real,” solid rooms are replaced with hyperlinked hubs, where every space begets a plethora of links, references and invitations to another place, and another place after that.

In the ensuing network, the so-called “still lifes” by Akunyili Crosby are anything but static as she saturates every object, setting and stare with meaning that oscillates between the anecdotal and the archetypal. There is no better example than *The Twain Shall Meet* (2015), a parallax derived from a merger of two photos she took of her grandmother's dining room table from opposing angles, replete with the objects and photos that have become her ad hoc memorial. Orbiting around a plastic orange food container (which takes on sun-like responsibility here), we see mirrored representations of “tea things,” a plastic water bottle, the familiar blue kerosene lamp, icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary, and framed photos of Akunyili Crosby's “mama.” These items collectively tell the story of how 19th century British tea culture was adapted by villages in Nigeria, where the trend was “to have a lot of stuff on your dining room table” as both a display of prosperity and storage for small quarters.²⁶ The number of dishes, bowls and capsules go beyond their function, though, symbolically pushing back against an imperial reading of the colonizing culture filling the “empty” vessels of the colonized. On Akunyili Crosby's table these two entities meet and merge on more equal terms – renovating existing histories and hegemonies much like she does the Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) quote from which the title of the work is derived. She mines deeper into this controversial British poet and writer's 1889 *Ballad of East and West*, extracting a quote from the ostensibly polarizing opening line “Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...” to channel Kipling's more reconciliatory third and fourth lines, where “there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!” In so doing, she renews a closed Imperial chapter with an invitation to her cross-cul-

From top:

Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Interior*, 1899.

The Twain Shall Meet [detail], 2015.



“It’s about a simultaneous opening of multiple spaces within one work”

tural gathering, and opens the doors that Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916) keeps tightly closed in the painting that inspired the architecture of *The Twain Shall Meet*. In Hammershøi’s 1899 piece *Interior*, a subdued female figure keeps her back towards the viewer in a cramped, seemingly airless room where a familiar round table remains conspicuously empty. And yet Hammershøi’s spare, ascetic chamber evokes Swiss architect and Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer’s (1889-1954) ideal vehicle for a nomadic life, where rootlessness could create freedom of movement and eradicate the nationalism that produces territory and war.²⁷ And while Akunyili Crosby admits that the perspective of her constructed setting cannot exist in this world – “You’re seeing something that is impossible” – its underlying aspiration is no less compromised for being so.²⁸ As she elaborates, “It’s about a simultaneous opening of multiple spaces within one work” – literally and figuratively inviting us to a seat around her de-territorialized intersection.²⁹

Contact zones swell and proliferate inside and outside her pieces, as Akunyili Crosby also crafts diptychs that incorporate external architecture into compositions that purposefully stretch the limits of plausibility.³⁰ Moving between multiple sheets of heavy paper and faded photos, traversing paint that is sometimes rolled and sometimes brushed, in mixtures that occasionally incorporate graphite and crushed marble, she skillfully “[creates] different textures, so you move across the piece in a very slow way when you come up close to it.”³¹ *Predecessors* (2013) is one of her earliest and most important diptychs, employing paint, charcoal, colored pencil and photo transfers to congregate an inter-generational, cross-disciplinary dialogue between paired panels. For every musician, actor, politician and wedding photo from Akunyili Crosby’s generation seen in the left side, there is a corresponding person on the right side from her grandmother’s generation. The furniture in the left panel references the disposable IKEA table, futon and chairs in Akunyili Crosby’s former Brooklyn apartment, paired with the many economical, but enduring tables in her grandmother’s rural home that populate the right panel. The one IKEA chair that does span into her mama’s panel is conspicuously sheared in the process – creating an asymmetry that speaks to the simultaneous sanctuary and

disorientation that accompanies this aspirational dialogue. Echoing the proverbial Thomas Wolfe caveat that one can never truly go home again, the sole figure in *Predecessors* (and ostensible avatar of Akunyili Crosby) looks away from her table, and longingly to the right with an introspective gaze – seeing more in memory than with her eyes. In contrast, the cast shadows and transitional spaces in this skewed domestic setting are kaleidoscopic – rippling with photo transfers that reflect the respective histories of figures, frames and furniture that are made equal and relative here. This is the fractal looking glass through which we see the artist’s history – and the table upon which *her* mementos are stored – where each item has one foot in this curated composition, and one foot in a collective consciousness.³² One does not assimilate or exclude the other and vice versa, instead leading us to a holistic space where unruly multiplicity finds a home.

“Architectural monuments may seem to be eternal,” but in Wilkinson’s appraisal, “they are as fugitive as memory itself: they can be damaged, destroyed, restored and given new meanings because their users and their significance change as frequently as the discourse they mould in their turn.”³³ In his 1936 book *The Culture of Cities*, American historian and sociologist Lewis Mumford (1895-1990) argued much the same for the urban condition, declaring “Our cities must not be monuments but self-renewing organisms.” On an even broader scale he, like the aforementioned Meyer, championed a transient life, believing that “civilization today... must follow this example of the nomad; it must not merely travel light but settle light; it must be ready, not for merely physical movement in space, but for adaptation to new conditions of life.”³⁴ Akunyili Crosby lives and paints this liminal spectrum that so many post-national citizens travel today – translating her personal history into mercurial monuments that shimmer with every additional image, merger and





experience. In this alchemical arena of overlap and convergence, Ando highlights how Akunyili Crosby's images of domestic life in America are tinged with traces of Nigeria; the artist, in turn, confirms: "There are many architectural details in LA that remind me of home."³⁵ Every work is thusly a piece of herself cast into a reflecting pool, abstracting kernels of everyday life into expansive frameworks that encourage leaps of time and space across cultures and continents. The recurring protagonist is a female character who, while based on Akunyili Crosby's likeness, lives as a perpetual, dynamic other. The artist explains: "I feel like my journey has created a character or person who doesn't fit any box;" "As a character she has become her own person."³⁶ Akunyili Crosby is every single one of her avatars and none at all, since, in her words, "things contradict each other because the character, which is based on my life, has existed in various spaces."³⁷ She, like every person in a state of passage, is "a mélange of them." Marrying person to place, present to past, and hands to primordial mud, she concludes, "I'm all of these things at once."³⁸

- SM 2017



Endnotes

1. Tom Wilkinson, *Bricks and Mortals: Ten Great Buildings and the People They Made* (London: A&C Black, 2014), 85-86.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, 108.
4. Taiye Selasi, "Bye Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)," *The LIP Magazine* (March 3, 2005).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in Interview with Erica Ando, *BOMB* 137 (Fall 2016).
7. Mary Louise Pratt cited in Njideka Akunyili Crosby Interview with Cassie Davies, *The White Review* (November 2016).
8. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in Interview with Cheryl Brutvan, *Njideka Akunyili Crosby: I Refuse to Be Invisible* (Florida: Norton Museum of Art, 2016), 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 21-22. Akunyili Crosby describes a trio of specific Catholic icons that include Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Sacred Heart. All three of these images can be seen on her Grandmother's dining room table in *The Twain Shall Meet*. They are found in the home of almost every local believer.
10. *Ibid.*, 29.
11. *Ibid.*, 24.
12. George Gerbner cited in Jonathan Griffin, "Njideka Akunyili Crosby on Her Breakthrough Year," *Financial Times* (December 08, 2016); Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *White Review*. Gerbner's full quote is actually more dire, stating "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation."
13. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in Brutvan, 23.
14. *Ibid.*, Njideka Akunyili Crosby elaborates that to tell her complex, pan-cultural story, "Painting wasn't enough." "If you think of it as a vocabulary, I needed more words."
15. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *BOMB*.
16. Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004). p. 55. The "Third Space" is a postcolonial socio-linguistic theory of identity and community realized through language or enunciation. Third Space Theory explains the uniqueness of each person, actor or context as a "hybrid."
17. Interview with Brutvan, 27-28. In Nigerian author Chinua Achebe's 1960 novel *No Longer at Ease*, the advice given to a young Igbo man moving to England is that he should never marry a foreigner because, "when they're with you, they'll make you turn your back on your kinsmen."
18. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *White Review*. Shedding light on the intimacy of her selection process for images, Akunyili Crosby explains, "I pick a picture because I feel a connection to it. It resonates with me...they've become closer to me."
19. Brutvan, 11.
20. Erica Ando, *BOMB*.
21. *Ibid.*
22. John Ruskin cited in Wilkinson, 98.
23. Wilkinson, 98.
24. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *BOMB*.
25. Njideka Akunyili Crosby: *Portals*, Victoria Miro website << [- 31. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited Interview with Jane Panetta, "Artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby On Her Billboard Project, *Before Now After*," Whitney Museum of American Art \(May 27, 2016\) << \[>>\]\(http://whitney.org/WhitneyStories/NjidekaAkunyiliCrosby\)
- 32. Erica Ando, *BOMB*. Ando takes special note of how Akunyili Crosby's photos, "reactivate the originals in situ, in dispora."
- 33. Wilkinson, 88.
- 34. Lewis Mumford cited in Wilkinson, 106.
- 35. Ando, Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *BOMB*.
- 36. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in *White Review* & *BOMB*.
- 37. Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *White Review*.
- 38. *Ibid.*](https://www.victoria-miro.com/exhibitions/496/>>
26. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in Brutvan, 21.
27. Hannes Meyer cited in Wilkinson, 106-107.
28. Njideka Akunyili Crosby cited in <i>White Review</i>.
29. <i>Ibid.</i>
30. <i>Financial Times</i>. Njideka Akunyili Crosby self-professedly creates pictorial spaces)

From top:

Mama, Mummy and Mamma (Predecessors #2), 2014.
Predecessors, 2013.

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

NJIDEKA AKUNYILI CROSBY

Predecessors

Co-curated by Ian Berry & Steven Matijcio

On view July 14 – October 1, 2017

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Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b.1983) was born in Enugu, Nigeria and currently lives and works in Los Angeles. She was awarded Financial Times' Women of the Year in 2016, and was on the shortlist for the 2017 Future Generation Art Prize. She is the recipient of the 2016 Prix Canson Prize, Foreign Policy's Leading 100 Global Thinkers of 2015, the New Museum's 2015 Next Generation Prize and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2014 James Dicke Con-temporary Art Prize. Recent solo exhibitions include *Portals*, Victoria Miro, London (2016), *I Refuse to be Invisible*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach (2016) and *The Beautiful Ones, Art + Practice*, Los Angeles (2015), staged concurrently with a solo presentation at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2015). Her work is in the collections of major museums including Tate Modern, the Yale University Art Gallery, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

All works pictured in this brochure are by Njideka Akunyili Crosby unless otherwise noted.

LIST OF WORKS

Then You Lost Me

2013

Oil and acrylic paint on printed-paper mounted on board

Rosen Capellazzo Collection, New York

Mama, Mummy, and Mamma

(Predecessors #2)

2014

Acrylic paint, colored pencil, charcoal and photo transfers on paper

Collection of The New Church Museum, Cape Town, South Africa

The Twain Shall Meet

2015

Acrylic paint and photo transfers on paper

Collection of Victoria and Warren Miro, London

Ike Ya

2016

Acrylic paint, colored pencil, charcoal and photo transfers on paper

Collection of The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Purchase

Predecessors

2013

Acrylic paint, graphite, charcoal and photo transfers on paper

Collection of The Tate, UK: Purchased with funds provided by the Acquisitions Fund for African Art supported by Guaranty Trust Bank Plc 2014

Cover: *Mama, Mummy and Mamma (Predecessors #2)* [detail], 2014.

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