

**ART @ BAINBRIDGE**

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM

Victor Ekpuk: Language and Lineage

July 22–October 8, 2023



# Victor Ekpuk: Language and Lineage

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Victor Ekpuk is a multimedia artist born in 1964 in Eket, southeastern Nigeria, a crossroads of various cultures and languages. Ancient rulers of this region, called the Cross River, developed Nsibidi, a language that was used in written and other unspoken forms to facilitate administration, trade, and exchange. Nsibidi is composed of ideograms that are inscribed on the ground, on walls, and on everyday objects; printed on textiles; and mimed through gesture. Nsibidi has survived to this day and is used both as an elaborate system of communication in the Ekpe (Leopard) Society, which comprises a community's spiritual leaders, and as a simplified version that is more universal. When Ekpuk studied visual art at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), he was encouraged to explore his cultural background in developing his visual style. Fascinated by the aesthetics and the power of Nsibidi ideograms to convey complex ideas, Ekpuk began experimenting with the language. *Victor Ekpuk: Language and Lineage* tracks the inspiration Ekpuk has taken from Nsibidi along the artistic journey that brought him from Nigeria to Washington, DC.

## GALLERY 1

Inspired by the efficiency of Nsibidi in conveying intricate ideas, Ekpuk combines simplicity of shapes and complexity of interpretation. The works in this gallery reveal the artist's fluidity in shifting from one medium to another as well as his exploration of form. Building on the genre of portraiture, Ekpuk explores stylized depictions of human heads and masks, in which carefully planned compositions leave space for chance and improvisation in the drawing of the background script. From this dense network of signs, Ekpuk selects forms that will morph into subjects for new works of art.



***Mask, 2022***

Hand-painted steel  
Collection of the artist



***Mask Series 1, 2018***

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art,  
Washington, DC



***Mask Series 2, 2018***

Acrylic and mixed media on canvas  
Collection of Jeanne Adu-Brako. Courtesy  
Morton Fine Art, Washington, DC

Victor Ekpuk reflected on his abstract heads in a recent interview:

For some time, I've been really interested in the idea of painting portraits, but in a different way, one that is not realistic. I've gone through several iterations of representing the head, so to speak. All portraits in general, whether I call them portraits, masks, or heads, bear the idea of the human head as the center of human consciousness. Through the years, I have devised ways to portray the head, to stylize the form and make it abstract, looking for the essence of the form of the head.

## GALLERY 2

This gallery features Ekpuk's drawn explorations of the human head, in which he reduced his palette to two or three bold colors in order to focus on the lines. *In Deep Water*, the monumental print on canvas of a digital drawing from about 2012, depicts a black profile filled with indecipherable white symbols. Without a body, the head serves as a metaphor for consciousness, memory, and knowledge.

As Ekpuk explains:

When I learned about the history of Bainbridge House and its association with enslavement, I decided to recreate a drawing inspired by my visit to a boys' high school in Washington, DC. The architecture was very jarring to me. It was a brutalist architecture that from the outside looked like a huge bunker. It felt inhuman. To get into the school I went through several security gates. I thought that because it is a school for boys that might have issues at home, putting them in this environment felt like they were already in prison. The history of Bainbridge House and its association with slavery made me think about the condition of these descendants of enslaved Africans, who are themselves still struggling for air in America. I called this piece *In Deep Water* because it pictures the head of a Black person with water just under their chin, so they can either sink or swim.



***In Deep Water, ca. 2012, printed 2023***

Digital drawing printed on canvas  
Collection of the artist



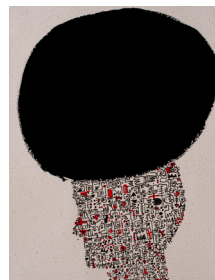
***Portrait #1 (Portrait Series), 2015***

Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the artist



***Portrait #5 (Portrait Series), 2015***

Acrylic on canvas  
Collection of the artist



***Untitled, 2020***

Ink and gouache on handmade paper  
Collection of the artist



***Code Talker 7, 2021***

Ink on handmade paper  
Collection of the artist



***Ibibio Girl, 2022***

Hand-painted steel  
Collection of the artist

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### GALLERY 3

The works in this gallery bring together important symbols of Pan-African religious and cultural traditions. The arresting presence of *Matriarch 2* asserts the central figure's agency as well as her seminal role in transmitting cultural values and assimilating new ones into local traditions.

Victor Ekpuk on *Matriarch 2*:

I did not want to finish the script and did not fill the background the way I usually do. I wanted to leave it as an unfinished story, illustrating how cultures and assimilation continue. [*Matriarch 2*] was actually inspired by a picture I saw of a Sakalava woman in Madagascar in colonial times. What I saw was how similar her dress was to [those worn by] the women in southeastern Nigeria when they came in contact with Europeans and their way of dressing, and how [the Nigerian women] converted it into their own style.



***Royals and Goddesses, 2019***

Acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Morton Fine Art, Washington, DC



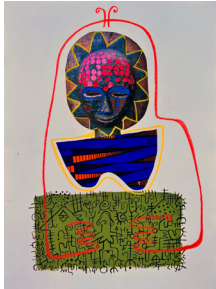
***Matriarch 2, 2022***

Acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery,  
New York, NY



***Blue Head, 2021***

Collage and acrylic on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Morton Fine Art, Washington, DC



***Earth Mother, 2021-22***

Textile, pastel, and acrylic collage on paper  
Courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art,  
Washington, DC

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## GALLERY 4

Upon graduation from the University of Ife, Ekpuk joined *The Daily Times*, then a government-controlled newspaper, as an illustrator. The visual lexicon that he had developed during his artistic education helped him transition to the role of sociopolitical commentator. *Prisoner of Conscience* is inspired by a 1994 drawing he made for the *Daily Times* that illustrates conditions for people incarcerated in Nigerian jails (fig. 1). In 1993, the results of the Nigerian presidential election were annulled, and in 1994, after a period of turmoil, General Sani Abacha established a dictatorship, sending his opponents to jail; in the same year, on the other side of the continent, Nelson Mandela, who had been detained for decades as a prisoner of conscience, became president of South Africa. Ekpuk's drawing is a message of hope. As he explains, "If you look closely within that dark space with bars, there is a window where I created a light that came into the prison, while the background is filled with scenes of brutality. On top of the prison there is the representation of an eclipse where the darkness is sitting on one side of the sun. For me, it is to say that the situation is temporary, that one day it will all go away." In 2002, Ekpuk retold the story by replacing the drawing's hatched areas with his own script.

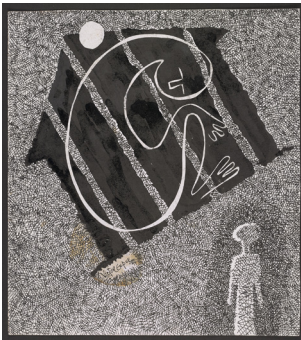
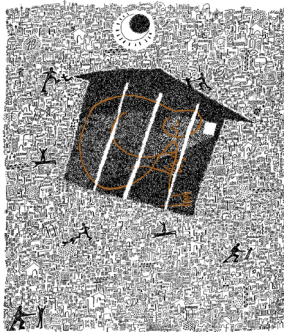


Figure 1. *House with Crouched Figure Inside*, ca. 1994.  
Ink and marker on paper, 21.3 × 19.3 cm. National Museum of African Art,  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Gift of the artist (2013-9-384)



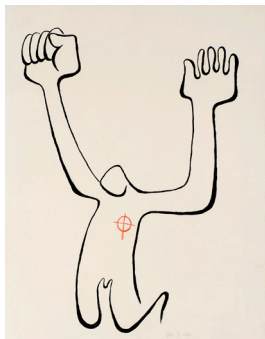
The works in this gallery are paired with a soundtrack, compiled in collaboration with Ekpuk, that features the Nigerian musician and activist Fela Kuti (1938–1997). Both Fela and Ekpuk’s artistic explorations include a fusion of cultures—Fela combines jazz, funk, and African rhythms while Ekpuk draws on Nsibidi-inspired script and modern art forms. Fela’s lyrics also resonate with Ekpuk’s drawings, such as *Still I Rise*, that comment on police brutality and postcolonial political oppression.



***Prisoner of Conscience, 2002***

Watercolor and archival inkjet on  
cotton rag paper

Courtesy of the artist and Morton Fine Art,  
Washington, DC



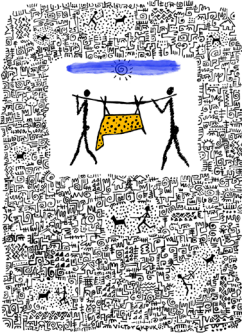
***Still I Rise, 2020***

Serigraph

Collection of the artist



**Head 2, 2022**  
Hand-painted steel  
Collection of the artist



**Scape Goat, 2005**  
Acrylic and inkjet on rag paper  
Courtesy of the artist and Aicon Gallery,  
New York, NY

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All works are by Victor Ekpuk (born 1964, Eket, Nigeria; active Washington, DC) and are © Victor Ekpuk. The photograph in fig. 1 is by Brad Simpson.

*Victor Ekpuk: Language and Lineage* is curated by Annabelle Priestley, curatorial assistant.

Art@Bainbridge is made possible through the generous support of the Virginia and Bagley Wright, Class of 1946, Program Fund for Modern and Contemporary Art; the Kathleen C. Sherrerd Program Fund for American Art; Joshua R. Slocum, Class of 1998, and Sara Slocum; Rachelle Belfer Malkin, Class of 1986, and Anthony E. Malkin; Barbara and Gerald Essig; Gene Locks, Class of 1959, and Sueyun Locks; and Ivy Beth Lewis. Additional support for this exhibition is provided by the Africa World Initiative; the Program in African Studies; the Graduate School—Access, Diversity and Inclusion; the Department of African American Studies; the Princeton African Humanities Colloquium; the Department of Music; and the Program in Linguistics.

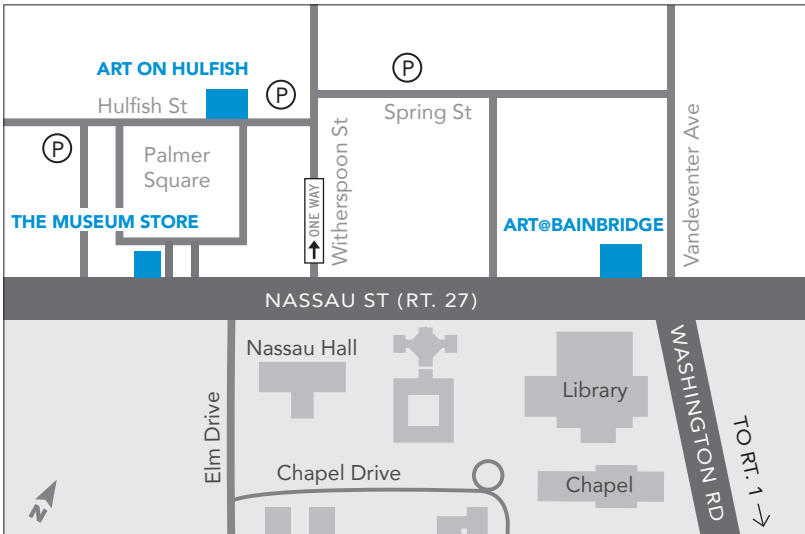
We thank Amy Morton for her unwavering support of this project, and Victor Ekpuk for generosity with his time.

Victor Ekpuk's work has been exhibited at several museums and institutions worldwide, including the New Museum, New York, NY; the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; the Dakar Biennial, Senegal; the Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; the Museum of Arts and Design, New York, NY; Somerset House, London; and the 12th Havana Biennial, Cuba.

Ekpuk's work is included in numerous collections, including those of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; and the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

Art@Bainbridge is a gallery project of the Princeton University Art Museum, located in historic Bainbridge House in downtown Princeton. Please also visit Art on Hulfish, our photo-forward gallery and programs space in Palmer Square, open daily. Our main building is under construction as we build a bold new Museum, designed by the architect Sir David Adjaye and anticipated to open in spring 2025. Visit our website for online exhibitions, videos, live programs, and more.

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