



Jeremiah Onifade, courtesy of the artist.

Jeremiah Onifadé's first solo show, "surreal figures" opens Saturday, January 9, 2021, at SITE131

Editor's note: This story has been updated to include the artist's perspective on the mob violence that occurred at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Seeing a violent mob storm the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday felt like a flashback for Dallas artist Jeremiah Onifadé.

The painter, who now lives in southern Dallas, was thirteen years old during the Kaduna Riots of 2000. Civil unrest gripped the Nigerian state after it introduced sharia law in a region where non-Muslims made up about half of the population.

"We saw people protesting peacefully, but within the first hour, we saw a counter-protest," he said. "And before you knew what was happening, it was gunshots and gunfire. Every other time I looked out the window, it's like a neighbor with a machete to the head, another one with a gunshot to the knee. We started hearing people screaming "Fire! Fire!" They had started burning people's houses."

Thousands of people died during the riots. Onifadé and his family fled to a camp in southern Nigeria.



Jeremiah Onifadé's "Midday Sun, Anikulapo," courtesy of the artist

"Corruption ate me up in Nigeria. Ate my family up in Nigeria," Onifadé said. "That's something you can grasp onto. That's what the work speaks of."

He says his purpose as an artist—what he calls his consciousness—was born out of that experience. The riot in Washington, D.C. is not comparable in scale or violence to the Kaduna riots, but it still stirs up memories for the artist.

"If we don't fix this division right away, those issues of wanting power for yourself and not wanting other people to enjoy the office, they'll start spewing out information that will cause more riots," he said. "That's not good. That's what happened in Nigeria."

Onifadé's paintings are a visual treat full of colorful, alien characters, but they're ripe with real world questions:

about the violence he's witnessed, both in Nigeria and the United States; about human nature; and about the weight of our actions.

It's been a long, twisted road for the painter. Onifadé immigrated to the U.S. eleven years ago to study art.

After joining the National Guard, earning multiple degrees, and starting a family, he's finally hit his creative stride.

He got a grant from the City of Dallas in 2019 to mount "Blue Dot," a show in a small house in South Dallas' Bonton neighborhood.

"The whole goal of it is to bring something into a neighborhood like that, where nobody literally will come to or thinks about because I know how it feels growing up in Nigeria," he said. "Nothing will come there. It will never come there. Why are we not wondering why things don't go there?"

Like much of his work, the project created connective tissue between a childhood in Nigeria and his life in the U.S.. 2020 brought even more links, when Onifadé saw protests against police violence unfold in both countries.



Jeremiah Onifadé's "Portrait of a Young Boy With a Faltered Smile," courtesy the artist.

The spread of misinformation during Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. also felt familiar to the artist.

"It directly took me back to Nigeria," Onifadé said. "Politicians that were on the TV saying Black Lives Matter is not a real thing. Social injustice doesn't exist. Systemic racism. It's a smoke. It's not real. It's the same with the leaders in Nigeria saying, 'Hunger? What hunger?'"

Calls to defund the police in the U.S. mirrored protests in Nigeria demanding the end of a notorious police force called SARS. Critics say the unit has long acted with impunity. There've been documented cases of torture and extrajudicial killings.

"Right now, I look at the news in Nigeria, and there's just so much fight just to make the government believe that SARS kills people and

don't do the regular police job," he said.

These events are not spelled out in Onifadé's paintings. Instead, he offers symbols and clues. A wheelbarrow in one of his works alludes to Nigeria's booming crude oil industry, which comes at the cost of the country's poorest citizens.

He mines his own memory for inspiration, but to Onifadé, the individual is not far from the whole.

"For every action there is a reaction. You can't run away from it," he said. "It's tied to the community and the community is tied to the laws and the laws are tied to the state and the culture and the country. We're slowly losing that first layer, which is the emotion."

Emotions drive actions, good and bad. It's the philosophy that ties Onifadé's magical works to the real world.

<https://artandseek.org/2021/01/07/artist-jeremiah-onifades-work-captures-life-between-two-worlds-south-dallas-and-nigeria/>



Jeremiah Onifadé's "Recushioning With Panadol Extra," courtesy of the artist