

UCSS

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

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*This project is dedicated to Ruth Dimuna,
and
every freelance artist out there.*

ATSI ATITI

LEVENIER



1970 – Madame Tina's Place.

Everywhere smells like fabric.

Evbodaghe is sitting at a desk, by the corner of the large sewing room, completely oblivious to everything around her. Her head is buried in a book and she seems to be colouring something.

'Madam wants to see you,' a teenage girl announces. 'In her office, she said you should come with your designs.'

The girl disappears just as quickly as she appeared.

Madame Tina never sees anyone outside her office, even her most important customers. When she started working here, Evbodaghe used to wonder if Madame Tina ever left her office.

As she walks through Madame Tina's twin doors, the strong smell of lavender welcomes her, reminding her of the first time she was in this office. She had never smelled so much lavender perfume in her life and had to ask why it was so strong.

Madame Tina had looked up at her over the top of her glasses without lifting her head. 'Oh, you're a bold one, that's good because to be a designer one needs courage.' She paused as if waiting for Evbodaghe to admit some sort of intellectual credence to her last statement.

At getting none, she continued, 'It's for the smell. At some point, you get tired of the smell of cloth.'

'Are these all the designs?' Madame Tina's question draws Evbodaghe back to the present.

'Yes, ma.'

Madame Tina continues to flick through the pages of the design book with moments too short to digest what her eyes see. The flicking stops. She brushes a loose grey loc behind her ear and sighs.

'These designs are . . . not what we do here, my dear.'

‘Yet.’

Madam Tina shakes her head, ‘There’s something wrong with them. I don’t know what but something is wrong.’

‘Ma, I agree the designs are edgy and they go against most of the things society has defined fashion as, but that’s the point. They only look wrong because no one has done them before?’

‘My dear, what we do here is make designs based on our customers’ descriptions. Then we can please them, not through trials.’

‘But what if we pleased them with something different, introduced it into their consciousness and let them live it. They could love it. A person is only as much as they know.’

‘I’m not going to run my business on a gamble.’

‘With all due respect ma, everything is a gamble. You told me once, on my first day here, that to be a designer one needs to be courageous.’

‘And I’m telling you now that we are not making these designs. Stick to normalcy. You have three days to get me new designs to review.’

She motions for Evbodaghe to leave.

‘I’m sorry, I can’t do that.’

‘What?’

Evbodaghe inhales and repeats quietly, ‘I’m sorry I can’t just push these designs to the side.’

‘Well, you won’t make them under my enterprise.’

‘I don’t mind.’ Evbodaghe replies, unfazed. ‘In fact, I quit.’

As she picks her book and gets up to leave, she stops. ‘You know what, Tina, I didn’t know I could like lavender. At first, I hated it, and then over time, I hated it less until I didn’t hate it at all. Then one day, I realized that I like the fragrance, not because I’m particularly fond of you but because I was exposed to it through you. Although unintentionally, I know it’s not the same for everyone and that there are people here that still do not like the smell of lavender and that’s okay, too. I want my designs to be edgy and, like lavender, for the few people that would like or love them.’

Still, in shock at being called her first name, Madame Tina scoffs, ‘And you think people will like those—?’

‘Yes. Even if not immediately, but eventually. Art is fluid.’

Evbodaghe pauses just before the pretty doors and adds, ‘Also if you hate the smell of fabrics so much maybe you shouldn’t be making clothes.’

PRECIOUS IDEH

WELL



Present day - Tim's balcony

The sun was on its way out of the sky by the time Tim looked up at it. He could already see the outline of the eager moon travelling the same path to stand where the sun once stood. He didn't look up at the sky for long, nor did he have the time to focus on the solar politics that went on between the heavenly bodies. Instead, his attention was commandeered by the quick buzz in his pocket.

Reaching into his right pocket, he took out his phone, pulled it closer to his face, all the while ignoring the buzz that came from it. At the top bar of his phone, was the icon of a message. He opened it without a second thought, as he stood up from the chair he had been sitting on and sauntered into another room.

He was soon surrounded by canvases of different sizes; some small, others bigger in contrast. There were also a few empty ones while there were some that were fully saturated with the brightest colors possible. The majority of the canvases were positioned along the wall to his left; most of them left open to display while the rest were covered up underneath dust-stained cellophane. But despite all their differences, they were married in 2 commonalities: dusty and Tim's.

Often, he would remember how much time and effort had gone into their creation, how this wasn't the original plan for them. They weren't meant to sit and occupy space in the same four walls they were made in. He sometimes wondered if they got bored of him and joined the others in his life to snicker at him when he wasn't around. He wished they didn't, after all, the whole suffering was just to get them on the walls of a reputable gallery.

The canvases closed in around him. Their eyes and caricature figures seemed to stare back at him. They appeared like a sea of people, and yet,

he had never felt more alone in the world. His mind thrust itself back to a time before this became the reality that he had to live through.

“Yes sir, I will get right on it sir,” Tim said as he ended the call and redirected his attention from the receiving end of the intercom to the rest of the office in front of him. Like some market day pattern, there were loads of people moving forth and back from their tables to other tables, and as they moved, documents accompanied. Except this pattern was daily. He worked in a financial institute; the hubbub in the office was something he had gotten used to during the years that followed his letter of employment.

The open folder in front of him was closed and placed on the pile of other files right beside it. Tim moved the files a little to the left corner of his narrow desk to create space for his next task. He shifted focus to his computer.

The information he had been asked for, according to the voice on the other side, was going to be used in a meeting the next day and it had to be ready before then. The process was slow and so was the job. Most times he found himself staring into blank space or at his computer screen, lost in thought of things he had no control over. He held up his head with one arm while the other absentmindedly played with a pen and paper.

Coming to, after a few moments of daydreaming, he grabbed the printed paper from the printer but paused as he caught the little scribble on his desk. He'd realized that his other hand wasn't just playing around, seeing as a little caricature scribble was staring back at him. Staring at it for a short while, he cocked his head to the corner whilst admiring the little work of art. He made a mental note to examine it better once he was through with his boss' errand.

As was customary, he arrived home late from work due to the city's traffic.

Yet, he found himself staring at the little drawing that seemed to engulf his thoughts for the entirety of his day. The way it had been made from muscle memory alone seemed to fascinate him. How he had not even given it much thought, yet, it was remarkably pleasing to stare at. The entire scenario made him go to bed with a new resolve for the next day. One with a driving urge to create, to bring forth life with his paint brush.

The new day came too quickly for Tim, but he welcomed it with positivity. The thought ran by his head to paint something quick and instant, but the time had already been far spent. He was running late already and the presentation due for the day would not present itself. He would, however, rush through his office work for the day and ensure he got enough time for himself to paint afterward.

Tim moved up to the e-board, pulled out a stylus, and began his presentation. Barely into it had he frozen. The room was soon filled with fake coughs and awkward murmurs from his work colleagues. “Timothy Yakubu, do you need time to refresh the details of the assignment in your head?” His boss asked, with sarcasm seeping through every word uttered. Silence.

Tim stood, legs planted. He didn’t need to scramble his head for the words to say regarding the presentation. He knew every sentence and every equation, he was the one who prepared it after all. He was certain it was not stage fright as well, this wasn’t his first presentation. Yet, at that moment as he stared into blank space, a cataclysmic array of emotions flooded his mind and all he could see at that moment was his little caricature scribbling. Releasing a breath that he didn’t know he had been holding in, Tim turned back to the table behind him and said with all manner of relief;

“I’m done.”

He grabbed his bag and walked out the door.

The next couple of months after the two-worded resignation had not gone as he thought they would. He had received multiple talks from his family members and anyone else who thought it was a bad idea to leave a stable job for something as unsure and uncertain as a career in painting. That was the good way they put it when he was in their presence. He had heard the way they talked about him when they thought he couldn't hear them. 'Tim is stupid. Sure, he is an excellent artist but how can he leave that job, not even for a better one but nothing at all. Well, I blame this on his mother for supporting this.'

'Oh no, his mother also thinks he is being a big idiot for leaving the job o.' On some days, he listened. And doubt does what it does best: gradually make repetitive words sound like the truth. On a day he didn't, he took his latest piece with him and moved towards the city center; his destination: a renowned gallery that was one of the best in the country. He had no doubts that his works were exhibition-worthy. When he got there, just as he expected, they loved it. The curators of the gallery told him that his work was fantastic. But just as much as he expected, but now, feared, he was told the same thing he had heard a lot in the past few months of trying to submit his artworks to several other galleries.

"It's just not inspiring enough. We're sorry."

Things continued like this with every gallery he went to. They always found his work refreshing but it was always the same thing. A year had passed since he left his past job, and his savings were running thin. That was when he considered getting a job again, but this time, one with flexible hours that would no longer distract him from what mattered. He split his days equally between painting and working. And on weekends, when he went to scope the galleries, the reply was always the same.

Although Tim already knew what was coming next, he wanted to hear it

again. So he asked, “Why?”

“As I said before, your art is not only beautiful, the skill behind it can be seen with the way the brush flows, and the way it terminates into one another leaving me to wonder where it began and where it ended—However, the gallery is not receiving any new art.”

“New art?”

“I mean contemporary pieces inspired by modern times. We would like to accept it and display it on our walls but we only accept historical and ancient art.”

The irony of the situation had not been lost on him; the woman had called his work a breath of fresh air but seemed to imply that the gallery was satisfied with art that most people in the present, aside from art historians, could not relate to.

“I know ancient art is important as it helps us understand where we came from. However, art is supposed to be a mirror and not a one-way mirror at that. So if ancient art helps us understand where we come from and if you do not accept modern art, how are the people who come here expected to understand where art is at the moment?

“How does the gallery intend to show this generation the way, and how does it expect to show the generation beyond this path we took if every gallery is filled with ancient arts from a time far beyond ours?”

The curator stared at him as though she was thinking of an answer. Tim did not wait—he wasn’t going to sit and wait for a justification. He moved out of the gallery and texted Olivia on his way out, *Another one bites the dust.* He had gotten home to stand amidst his finished works that were rejected because they were breaths of fresh air.

Sitting, now, in a room filled with both complete and incomplete breaths of fresh air, he opened the message on his phone, only now realizing that

the buzz from earlier was from the messages that Olivia had sent him. The first message was a cut from a video. He opened the video and shook his head on seeing the now familiar face of Speed Darlington or Akpi as he called himself. “Take risk and succeed!” It was a video that was meant to inspire, in the way and manner that only Speed Darlington could do, of course.

Regardless of what had happened in the gallery, there was a smile on Tim’s face. Tim went on to Olivia’s next message. It was the email address and website of an individual named Tejiri; apparently, she was the curator for Evbodaghe’s house—a gallery that was focused on amplifying the voice of the youths.

I am not sure this will work, Tim replied.

It will, came Olivia’s reply.

Okay, let’s see how tomorrow goes.

And just as promised, he was there the next day. The gallery was a lot smaller than the ones he had visited earlier. If any of his works were to be accepted here, it meant that they were going to be seen by a smaller crowd than he had hoped for. But Tim did not mind, it was a start towards his goal. And for what seemed like the first time in a long while, he sighed a breath of relief, this time, with a smile plastered on his cheeks.

AIST AT IT

TIME AFTER TIME



2050 – Fergie’s House

With her hair in a manageable bun atop her head, Ronnie is eagerly gulping coffee in the back seat of her ride. She didn’t think last night’s drinks would knock her out as hard as they did. Luckily her ringer was on and her phone by her ear, or else she would not have heard the driver calling this morning. Why did the driver tell her to wait in the car though?

Her door is suddenly opened so she inhales, clutches her bag and wills herself out of the car to meet an elderly man in pyjamas waiting to receive her. What is this?

‘Hello. Good morning.’ He smiles.

‘Good—morning.’

He giggles nervously, ‘I’m sorry I made Frank keep you waiting in the car. I wanted to receive you myself.’

Wait. Wait! Is he...? Oh my!

The realization hits her, ‘I’m so sorry Mr Ferguson. I had no idea. I didn’t expect . . .’

‘No, no, please. It’s alright. I mean I’m sorry; you seem quite bothered by my appearance. I could change if it’ll make you feel more comfortable.’

‘Oh no, Mr Ferguson, it’s fine. It’s your house. I just didn’t expect . . .’

‘What?’

‘You—receiving me yourself or dressing in pyjamas.’

‘Well, I like surprising people,’ He laughs, motioning for her to follow him, ‘Come, come on in.’

Ronnie follows him through a rather wide and pleasing corridor into a burst of white marble and light. Oh my, his house is breathtaking.

‘Mr Ferguson, your house is absolutely lovely.’ She says it quite loudly because she isn’t sure which of the doors he has gone into.

‘Thank you. And please, just Ferguson,’ he replies, strolling out from what she assumes is a kitchen.

She notices he isn’t wearing his flip flops anymore. Well, I wouldn’t wear them too if I had that rug. I can imagine how soft it is.

‘Please, sit,’ he motions to a couch, ‘Can I get you anything?’

‘Oh no, I’m fine,’ she lies, taking her seat. I could use a coffee. ‘Thank you for sending the driver.’

He smiles, sitting opposite her. ‘This is my first interview ever, so I’m desperate to please.’

‘You’ve never been interviewed before?’

‘Never.’

‘Oh wow.’ She reaches into her bag for her tablet. ‘Let’s begin, then.’

‘Alright.’

‘So, first question. NFTs, Why NFTs? What’s the motivation behind you going into NFTs?’

‘Well . . .’ There is silence. ‘The convenience. It’s convenient, or rather, it makes art convenient. Both for the artist and the art collector. For the artist, they can create without labels, as purely as creativity comes, and without the fear of being restricted to standards that risk your art being exposed or not. For the art collector, it’s a little more literal. They get to be exposed to raw art in their various comforts. For both, the convenience of accessibility.’

Ronnie nods. ‘So, there’s a lot of controversy concerning your work. Some people believe you copy the work of Timothy Yakubu. Would you like to address that?’

‘If I style your hair in a bun and the world loves it, the style is mine. Now, if some other guy comes and styles your hair in a bun but leaves some hair, no matter how little, to fall on the side, then it’s no longer my bun. If Van Gogh’s style of painting inspires me, that doesn’t make anything I do a Van Gogh, it just means my work is inspired by Van Gogh’s style. My work is inspired by Timothy Yakubu’s style. I believe it is called fan art.

Everything that has ever happened is a resource for art. Everything. And you can't copy an original, whether you sell more than it did or not, you can't copy it. Posterity knows. Originality demands itself, no matter how latent. But where you would do wrong is to not let the world know what inspired you, what made you dare to try, or assisted you in trying. It's like a school project. People may get the same topic over the years but it's an opportunity to explore the topic from different angles even while using the same data. However, your work wouldn't be taken seriously if it's not referenced.'

'You're so cool.'

Ferguson laughs.

'Uhm—sorry. What's your favourite thing about being an artist?'

'The fluidity.' He smiles. 'Like time, art flows into itself.'

Urban Cross Series 3 Installment

This project talks about how art evolves from time to time, the importance of self-belief and how everyone has a role to play in the art ecosystem.



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