

# FANTASIES OF THE OTHER SIDE

A M E H E G W U H



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LAGOS

# Ameh Egwuh

## Fantasies of the Other Side

Rele Gallery is pleased to present the second installment of contemporary Nigerian artist Ameh Egwuh's two-part meditation on death and the afterlife. Where the first part, held in Los Angeles dialogued with mortality and transcendence, the works in *Fantasies of the Other Side* offer imaginative considerations on the afterlife. Here, Egwuh creates surreal landscapes and new realms, from lush greens to sandy dunes, presenting vivid scenes of the otherworldly filled with metaphorical imagery and expressionless figures. The works presented offer a glimpse into the artist's engagement with world-making through the juxtaposition of diverse elements. His paintings feature illogical, surreal scenes lending a dreamlike yet decidedly materialist feel to his works. The folds of the fabrics, the contours of the hills and the vivid blueness of water all serve to create an environment that is at once familiar yet distant.

In *Fantasies of the Other Side*, Egwuh imagines new worlds rooted in varied beliefs of the afterlife across several cultures. Exploring ideas of reincarnation, ancestral veneration and nothingness, the works fictionalise the unknown, creating a hybrid space of memory and continuity. With this exhibition, he moves the conversation beyond initial considerations on mortality, into transcendence and subsequent immortality. His exploration of the afterlife imagines it not as a singular place or narrative but as a site of remembrance. A place that continues the story, even after death.

Egwuh's use of colour and spatial composition situates his characters in serene, fantasy spaces echoing his belief in

the afterlife as 'a happy space'. The figures are shown in relaxed poses lost in the immediacy of the moment and while draped in outfits ranging from the contemporary to the traditional, they present hardly any clue to their identity, yet remain undeniably present. The artist's reference of family photographs also grounds the work in the personal. An act of remembrance and veneration.

With this exhibition, Egwuh ushers the viewer into a collective performance of remembering and preserving memory. A place to dream and acknowledge what has come before. *Fantasies of the Other Side* dialogues with the unknown and the familiar, presenting shifting yet unified perspectives on continuity.

The series *Fantasies of the Other Side* imagines new worlds rooted in varied beliefs of the afterlife across several cultures. Exploring ideas of reincarnation, ancestral veneration and nothingness among others, it fictionalises the unknown, creating a hybrid space of memory and continuity. Here, the artist moves the conversation beyond his initial considerations on mortality, into transcendence and subsequent immortality. His exploration of the afterlife imagines it not as a singular place or narrative but as a site of remembrance. A place that continues the story, even after death.

*Fantasies of the Other Side* dialogues with the unknown and the familiar, presenting shifting yet unified perspectives on continuity.



A Better Place I  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021



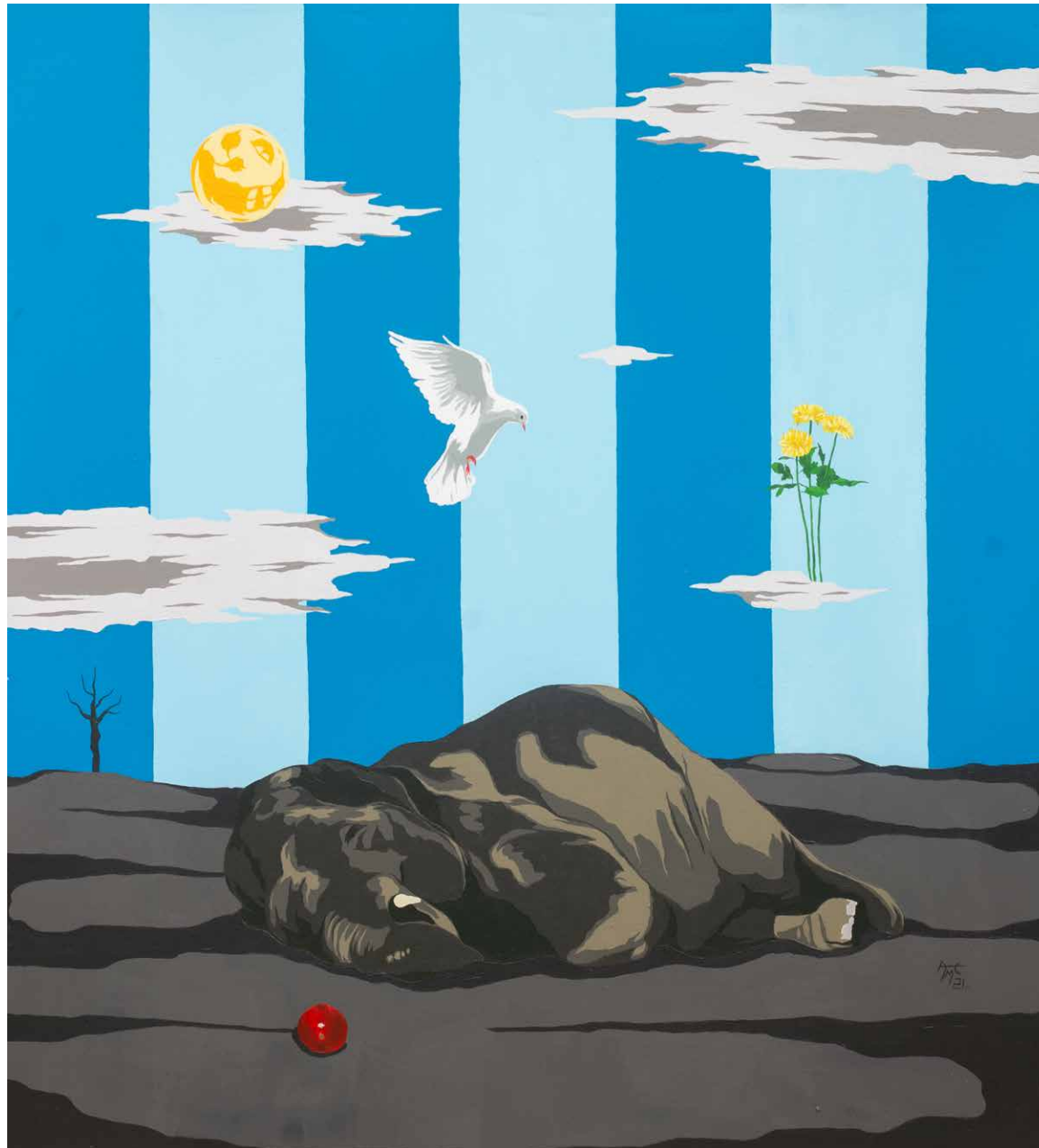


A Perfect Circle ( Rebirth I)  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021





A Perfect Circle ( Rebirth II)  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021



Absolute Peace and  
Quietness I  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021

# Even in Death, We Do Not Part : On Ameh Egwuh's Fantasies of the Other Side.

Yaa Addae

"Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give, but cannot. All of that unspent love gathers in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in the hollow part of your chest. Grief is just love with no place to go,"

Seeing Ameh Egwuh's work, I'm reminded of this viral quote of science fiction writer Jamie Anderson. *Fantasies of the Other Side*, is ultimately, an act of love. With his artistry, Egwuh says, 'I love you enough to imagine eternal joy for you'. This too, is a form of ancestral veneration. In this series, we witness ancestors in communion, resting, lounging, and free, giving new meaning to the idea of 'heavenly peace'. Here, the afterlife is multi-faceted: not just a home for lost human souls, but representative of a number of lifecycles from the moment a seed first sprouts to the underwater ecosystem depicted in *Infinite Rest II*(2021). Egwuh is a visual anthropologist of sorts: translating ideas he grapples with into images that allow for collective exploration, from cartoon depictions of everyday objects as a curious teenager in secondary school to speculative provocations around death through painting in his latest body of work.

*Alekwu*, understood as the link between the living and the dead in Idoma cosmology, is tended to through memory, community, and performance. Every year before the period of harvest, three days are set aside to honour ancestors and welcome abundance in what is known as the *Eje-Alekwu Festival*. With roots in Benue State, Egwuh explains to me the significance of this practice and how although he struggles with speaking his native tongue (Idoma) , he has found a way to connect with his patrilineal lineage through his art and speculation of the afterlife. This is not only an intellectual exercise, but a sentimental one too. In 2015, Egwuh's father passed away leaving 5 sons behind. Mortality has been on his mind since.

In *A Better Place V (Portrait of My Dad)* (2021), we meet Egwuh's father once again; a grey-scale figure full of thin vertical lines like the pattern of TV static when no transmission signal is obtained. How thin the lines between the living and the dead are - once here and now seemingly unreachable. He stands in the middle of the canvas with a lily in one hand and the other in the pockets of his creased trousers. The



image is in 3 parts: the dark muddy banks of a river, a dual-patterned blue sky, and the water body that separates the two. When Egwuh and I speak, he explains the significance of these demarcations in the visual language he is developing in relation to Nigerian aesthetic history. During his time studying art at Delta State University in Abraka, he became intrigued by the recurring patterns of contrasting blocks of colour woven into Idoma Aso-oke fabric as well as the linework that informs Ife sculptural tradition. There are clear connections to these inspirations in his work, such as one of the Ife copper alloy masks in the lower right corner of the desertscape in *A Better Place IV (2021)*.

Ultimately, what does Egwuh hope we take away from *Fantasies Of the Other Side*? “I hope people can find solace in death, connect with those they’ve lost and consider their love. [I hope] it pushes you to enjoy life. Not just exist in this space, but allow the consciousness of death for us all to make us want to enjoy life for itself,” he says, again centering the everlasting power of love and joy.

Yaa Addae is a British-Ghanaian writer, dreamer, and curator currently living in London and constantly considering the ways in which art is technology.



Absolute Peace and  
Quietness II  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021



Communion of Ancestors  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021





Infinite Rest I  
Acrylic on Canvas  
60 x 84 inches  
2021



Infinite Rest II  
Acrylic on Canvas  
60 x 84 inches  
2021

# Fantasies of the Other Side

adeoluwa oluwajoba in conversation with Ameh Egwuh

***ao: First, congratulations on the first part of your show in LA as well as the upcoming second part here in Lagos. How do you feel?***

AE: I feel good, especially with the reception I got from LA, I didn't see it coming. I usually just create art to feel good and express myself and then wait to see what happens. Most times, I don't know what's going to happen because I like playing with new themes and spaces. I'm feeling really good about the next exhibition, I think it's going to come out nice.

***ao: It has been interesting to see the various responses the viewers have had to your work in LA and it'll be equally interesting to see how people would respond to your work here in Lagos. What prompted this series of conversations on death and the afterlife?***

AE: First, I would say losing my dad and trying to connect and converse with him. Even though he's gone, there are times I feel like having a conversation with him. I've also had to reflect on a lot of things he said to me while he was alive, and this prompted me to imagine what happens after death.

The series was also borne out of curiosity. I am a very curious person and I'm always trying to know more. If you bring up a topic right now, we could start talking for hours. So, I was very curious about what happens when we die, where are we going to? Is it abject silence or something more? I don't like the idea of judgment. I didn't choose to be in this world, yet I happen to be and hopefully I'll be here for about 80 to 100 years, then at

the end of that, someone judges me and I'm placed in abject condemnation for eternity. I have about 80 years to make a decision whose consequences last for eternity.

Interestingly enough, even at the end of this series, I'm still figuring out my beliefs which is why the exhibition doesn't try to answer any questions. Almost every single idea I read about of the afterlife makes sense to me and I realised it's all some sort of fantasy. Right now, I have no idea what would happen when I die, but whatever happens, I just want to be in a beautiful space.

***ao: What are some of the places you drew from in thinking about this body of work?***

AE: I drew a lot from African religious beliefs of the afterlife. You can't talk about the afterlife without mentioning religion because it feels like the foundation for the concept. I also explored a lot of other religions too; Christianity, because I'm a Christian and it served as an important point in the conversation. From there I started checking different beliefs from Islam to Buddhism — some of my works that explore reincarnation are drawn from Buddhist ideas of the afterlife. I also explore the idea of ancestral veneration drawn from traditional African religions.

***ao: As someone that has followed your work for a while, I've noticed you draw a lot from indigenous cultural and religious practices. From the textile patterns, you use in your paintings, to your treatment of skin which echoes the***



***scarification techniques of ancient life art as well as the incorporation of objects and symbols like masks...***

AE: For me, I don't see myself as a Nigerian or African artist but more of an international artist. If I want to explore a particular issue, there are no boundaries. I can choose to talk about death and use symbols and images from several cultures. Of course, there are 'African' elements in my work, but I wouldn't describe my work as African art. I want everyone to be able to resonate with the works, when someone comes into the space there should be something for them. The whole world influences me and I like using metaphors drawn from different sources to express myself. When I'm working, there are usually no filters. If I'm trying to convey an idea of impending death, I want to present it in such a way that is easily recognisable by the viewer but also subtle, so I employ metaphors and symbols to serve as vehicles for my ideas. The African signs and symbols in the paintings are just part of my explorations in thinking about the afterlife.

***ao: I think that's interesting because the idea of mortality and what comes next is something that is widely engaged by different cultures across the world. Going off what you mentioned about your use of metaphors and symbolism, your show in LA had balloons as a constant element and for the show here in Lagos, it's apples. Could you tell me a bit about what these different things signify?***

AE: I think what connects you to someone you've lost is the love you have for them. Even if the person is a member of your family, if there's no love, there's virtually no connection between you and that person, so when the person finally leaves this world, it doesn't feel like a part of you has left. The apple in these works symbolises love. Love for life and for the ones we've lost.

What connects us to the afterlife is the love we have and our

ability to remember the ones we've lost. That's what the apple represents.

The first exhibition in LA sort of heralded this one because apart from it being about the end of life, it was also about being born into the afterlife. Balloons are a symbol of celebration and it's like the day you die is your first day in the afterlife and just like the way we do naming ceremonies and celebrations here when a child is born, there's also a celebration in this other world when someone passes. I feel like there's a group of people over there waiting for us to come, and there's a celebration when we arrive. The balloons were a way to represent this celebration.

***ao: The idea of death has generally been a very grim and dark subject mostly because of the looming unknown. However, you've chosen to represent the ideas of death and the afterlife with very bright and bold colours. How do you reconcile the idea of death as a thing that causes pain with presenting it as something to be celebrated?***

AE: For me, I feel that the only space we can exist in as humans and experience certainty is death and I feel like that's worth celebrating. Life is full of uncertainty and constant movement, so I feel like the peace and certainty that comes with death are worth celebrating. I am not particularly advocating for death, because I think life needs to be lived and experienced, but it is more of a reassurance that at the end of this journey, there's a place to rest.

***ao: You had mentioned earlier that your celebration and centering of death isn't meant to make people want to die, but more of a way to re-evaluate our lives currently. Which is something I think the world has had to grapple with due to the COVID-19 pandemic.***

AE: Definitely. I like to think the consciousness of death allows

us to be conscious of life itself. It allows us to ask questions about our daily lives and legacy and aim to be better versions of ourselves that would exist in the minds of those close to us long after we're gone.

**ao: What role do the landscape and the space in which the figures are situated play in your work?**

AE: There's something called 'The evolution of the human soul' where it is believed that the soul moves from the earth to plants, to animals and finally to human beings. I made use of elements from nature and situated my characters in these natural spaces to connect to the idea of the evolution of the soul.

**ao: You had mentioned to me earlier that this particular painting *Communion of Ancestors* talks about ancestral veneration and looking at it, I'm reminded of another piece *I'm Still With You*. Could you tell me a bit about these pieces?**

AE: *I'm Still With You* addresses losing someone and wanting to connect with them. The small boy in front is my elder brother and the figure behind is my dad. It basically speaks to the fact that even though my dad is gone from this world, he still feels present, watching us live our lives. In a way, the work also speaks to ancestral veneration, but *Communion of Ancestors* is more direct. The work is my idea of two ancestral beings having a conversation on the other side. There's this belief of the afterlife among the Ashantis that to access the ancestral home, one needs to cross a river and that's why the figures are surrounded by water. In one of the other pieces, there's a mask called the Alekwu mask which is worn for the Alekwu festival among the Idoma people and is used to represent ancestral beings. Due to the fact that their faces cannot be represented, the mask stands as a way to represent them.

Communion of Ancestors is my own fantasy of what an ancestral world looks like.

**ao: Looking at these images with the knowledge that these characters are ancestral beings, an interesting element in the works is the attire the characters have on. It adds a layer of contemporariness that is not particularly associated with the idea of ancestors...**

AE: That's the intention. I feel like Christianity has made us quite wary of our tradition. The term ancestor brings with it negative ideas steeped in old traditions. People tend not to realise that we are all going to be ancestors one day. My dad is an ancestor to me and when I leave this world, I'll be an ancestral being to my kids. So the idea of ancestral veneration is not something to cringe at because we do it almost every day, even in churches. I decided to represent the figures in contemporary wear to show that our ancestors aren't always far removed from our time as well as to capture the realities of the time.

**ao: In composing your figures and characters, and I know you referenced a bit from family photos as well as models who sat for you, how did you go about choosing your references and putting the figures and poses together?**

AE: First, the idea comes to me and like I said earlier there's nothing that blocks the process, it's all unfiltered. After the idea comes, I begin to think about the space and what kind of figure or pose would fit the space as well as what attire would the figure wear. The most important thing for me is figuring out what character would work best in the environment I've created.

**-ao: One thing I enjoyed in these works is how the spaces you've created are quite layered in the sense that they contain several different elements in creating this unified**

***but dynamic space. I know you draw from a lot of places in engaging the idea of the afterlife, but what would you say are your own ideas of the afterlife.***

AE: Personally, I want to believe that the afterlife would be a happy space. So, even though there's an idea that guides every single painting I create, at the end of the day I want to make the space look happy. I can't imagine living this life here on earth and then existing further in a space that is not happy. That is what's foremost on my mind in creating these works.

***ao: Could you tell me a bit about the work Absolute Peace and Quteness II?***

AE: This particular work speaks to the idea of nothingness after death, that when we die, we just gradually become dust and disappear. That's why the elephant and the ground share a very similar grey colour and it represents the gradual flow and disintegration of the animal into the earth. With this exhibition, I want as many people to be able to connect with an idea of what comes next after death, which is why I also

decided to engage with the idea of nothingness and oblivion.

***ao: Lastly, looking through your works, both the ones in this exhibition and from your exhibition in LA, there is a very obvious fascination with the colour blue. What does this colour hold for you and what role does it play in your work?***

AE: First, I love cerulean blue a lot, it's a really beautiful colour. Also, as I mentioned earlier, I am very interested in connecting and representing nature; the sky, clouds, water, earth and every other thing that has life and for me, the colour blue is a perfect representation of that.

With these works, I also wanted to alter certain laws of nature, like having my figures able to stand on water, just to add an otherworldly element to the environment, so while I am actively drawing from the natural environment, I am also making changes and pushing the boundaries of physics and reality.

**ao - adeoluwa oluwajoba is a curator at Rele Gallery**





Still With You II  
Acrylic on Canvas  
54 x 60 inches  
2021

# Ameh Egwuh

**A**meh Egwuh (b. 1996, Nigeria) is a visual artist whose practice is characterized by his fascination with lines. Drawing inspiration from the scarification techniques of ancient Ife art, Adinkra, and Nsibidi art signs and symbols, Egwuh's paintings invite the viewer into an expansive, multi-layered world populated with dynamic figures in intimate and casual scenes of family and everyday life.

Exploring concepts of home and familial responsibilities, solitude, and identity, Egwuh utilizes multiple modes of representation from expressionistic painting techniques to his use of lines and geometric patterns — drawn from textile designs from his hometown, Idoma in Benue state — in representing skin and backgrounds. His eclectic visual vocabulary conveys varying textures of lives lived and spaces occupied.

Egwuh studied Fine and Applied Art at the Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State and has been part of different exhibitions, competitions, and trainings such as the ACOEDE International School competition, Afriuture Painting Competition by Ramati Art Africa in 2018 and *Generation Y* exhibition organized by Retro Africa. In 2019 he participated in the inaugural edition of Rele Arts Foundation's Young Contemporaries Bootcamp and was selected in 2020 as part of Rele Arts Foundation Young Contemporaries.

In 2020, Egwuh's work was shown at FNB Art Joburg and South South Veza. His debut solo show *Life After Life* opened at Rele Gallery, Los Angeles in April 2021. Egwuh lives and works in Lagos.

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