

DAUGHTERS OF ESAN

The Alpha Generation

Marcellina Akpojotor



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Los Angeles

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Rele Gallery is pleased to present the second solo exhibition and first in the United States of Marcellina Akpojotor titled *Daughters of Esan: The Alpha Generation*. The works presented here are rooted in ideas of affection and the familial, engaging notions of lineage and legacy. Building upon the artist's previous explorations of her maternal bloodline across generations, this exhibition focuses on her daughter, presenting us with scenes of intimacy and family life.

Presenting familiar and idyllic scenes, Akpojotor takes the viewer on a journey through parenthood. A journey that leaps across time, documenting intimate lives in stages. Here, she creates vivid compositions focused on capturing the immediacy of a moment, engaged simultaneously in the act of creating and archiving memories.

The works in the exhibition also dialogue with genealogy, being part of a larger exploration of Akpojotor's matriarchal lineage. Situated against her great-grandmother's radical vision for literacy and the subsequent realisation of this vision in varying degrees among later generations, the paintings feature scenes of study and tutoring, echoing the artist's own fascination with education as a tool for liberation and empowerment.

Done in her signature mix of fabric collage and painting, *Daughters of Esan: The Alpha Generation* feature densely-layered and intricately detailed characters shown in composition against flat, brightly coloured backgrounds. The idea of the familial space here is one rooted deeply in acts of companionship; A daughter braiding her aunty's hair, a father riding a bicycle with his daughter. These moments become a way for the artist to relish the proximity that childhood offers as well as a means to record the passing of time.

In *Daughters of Esan: The Alpha Generation*, Akpojotor draws from the domestic, creating snapshots of daily life: from acts of play to scenes of study, support and intimacy. These moments, seemingly frozen in time, allow the viewer a glance into private spaces, weaving narratives of childhood and growth.



After School Hour
(Kesiena's diary),
Fabric & Acrylic on Canvas,
60 x 48 Inches,
2021



Beauty in the Curls (Kesiena's diary),
Fabric, Paper & Acrylic on Canvas,
60 x 48 Inches,
2021

Daughters of Esan: Alpha Generation



Fly Baby, Fly! (Kesiena's diary),
Fabric & Acrylic on Canvas,
77 x 60 Inches,
2021

Kesiena's diary:

"I'm watching her become herself"

Kemi Falodun

There are distances that exist between strangers such that a simple nod, a wave, or a plastic smile is enough to dismiss others without being questioned. People often move through public spaces with their private borders erect. At home, however, there's a duty to interact with our surroundings, to see others and allow ourselves to be seen. These familial spaces, with their discomfort and trauma, joy and intimacies, serve as Marcellina Akpojotor's canvas.

In "*Daughters of Esan: Alpha Generation*," her second solo exhibition for Rele Gallery, Akpojotor explores family histories, womanhood and legacy. "Kesiena's Diary," which she began in 2019, is an offshoot of the body of work, with a focus on her immediate family—her first daughter in particular. Her central concern is how the past shapes the future, as she travels back in time to her great-grandmother, and returns to her two daughters—the fifth generation. "I'm intrigued by the phenomenon of growth," Akpojotor says. "I want to capture her growth, those moments that seem mundane."

Family dynamics are some of the most explored themes in literature, film, and other forms of art. The material is inexhaustible because every family is unique and the individuals who make up each unit are incredibly complex. Akpojotor's great-grandmother had a dream of acquiring western education but never did. That dream is a reality for her

daughters—Kesiena and Amiede. In one of the paintings, "*The Dining Table*," Kesiena sits at the dining table, wearing a blue uniform. She holds a pencil, head bent over a notebook. Her mother sits with her, watching closely.

The socio-economic status of parents is one of the early markers of how children will move through the world. It determines the school they attend, their neighbourhood, their friendships, the physical backdrop of their childhood, their audacity to dream and what these dreams are composed of. Emotional stability is another marker. The formative stage is a complex intertwining that molds. "We look at the world once, in childhood," Louise Glück wrote. "The rest is memory." Knowing the significance of childhood, Akpojotor is deliberate about her children's upbringing, while also acknowledging the role of community. "Everybody is playing a part. It takes a village to train a child."

Akpojotor is interested in how legacies are passed from generation to generation and how life progresses. "I'm watching her [Kesiena] become herself." She paints her family dynamic with tenderness, inviting us to see. Blue, yellow, red colours with grainy surfaces. She uses paper, acrylic and vibrant fabrics, mostly sourced from Lagos markets. Not only because of their uniqueness and her love for patterns, she's also fascinated by the histories of the material. Most of them

are used by Nigerians as *aso-ebi* during special occasions, especially weddings. Before turning to fabric, in 2013, she worked with pastels and made portraits.

Kesiena, now five, has begun experimenting with colours and pastels. She sees art, according to her mother, as “what you do when you’re happy or what one does to be happy.” They collaborated in creating some of the works. Kesiena’s markings and doodles relax the surface of the paintings and create a path of entry for play. “It’s like showing her she has the agency to write her own story. That she matters.” In *“Papa’s Girl,”* Kesiena’s father is crouched beside his daughter, adjusting her socks. In another painting, father and daughter are riding bicycles. One comes away with a feeling of oneness, affection and freedom.

“Fly Baby, Fly!” captures Kesiena leaping in the air, face in the sky, hands reaching for a balloon. Play is crucial in the development of children. However, what constitutes play has evolved in the past decade, especially since the advent of social media. Five years-olds in average families in Nigeria spend more time tapping away at screens compared to five-year-olds in the ‘90s who were actually feeling around their environment with their bodies. Millions of children around the world cannot enjoy their childhood because of insecurity and political instability in their countries. For some, there’s limited freedom because of parental and societal expectations. Akpojotor reminds us that children should be allowed to be children.

Likewise, while offering them guidance and attention, sometimes, too, children can be left to sit with themselves. They learn early the virtues of boredom and the capacity to keep their own company. Doesn’t aloneness constitute a chunk of one’s existence? This is excellently depicted in *“Letters and Doodles,”* where Kesiena is sitting alone doodling in a notebook.

“Daughters of Esan” takes us to rediscover the beauty in our daily lives. To be an adult is to be consumed by the activities our capitalist society demands. As we grow older, burdened by cares and wants, we starve the child in us. But what if we could turn to look back, see ourselves as kids and re-enact the moments that brought us joy? Children call us to listen to ourselves, to strive to retain our creativity, openness and wonder. Feeding our inner child is what will sometimes carry us through difficult days. What’s with the hurry to grow up? The last lines of *“Childhood,”* a poem by John Burnside, excellently captures this misplaced eagerness: *Now I’m sure that I’d know / how to be a child, I’d know / how to see the frost-covered trees / how to live holding still.*

The relationship between parents and children is one of the most complicated in humankind. While this series is specific to Akpojotor’s family, it reflects family intimacies, generational bonds, and a call to live up to this sacred duty as guardians. It also shows that healthy co-existence of vulnerability and respect for boundaries is how we bridge the gap between us.



Letters and Doodles (Kesiena's diary),
Fabric, Paper & Acrylic on Canvas,
60 x 48 Inches,
2021



Papa's Girl (Kesiena's diary),
60 x 48 Inches,
Fabric, Paper & Acrylic on Canvas,
2021



Wheels on the Street
(Kesiena's diary)
77 X 60 Inches
Fabric & Acrylic on canvas
2021

Notes on Motherhood

Amara Okolo

I am the voice of my mother as she admonishes me to stay away from the cords of electricity plugged into the outlets of the walls. Her feet sink into the cream rug as she walks over, pulls me up. I am laughing, she is not. She smells of Kenyan Arabica coffee. Her form is soft, her arms strong. When she kisses my cheeks, I smell peppermint. The curls of her Afro tickle my forehead. Her chin is dusted lightly with Pears Baby powder. Lipstick, the color of mauve, stains the front of her teeth. We giggle under the shard of sunlight from the open windows. *Baby Shark* envelops the room. The air is cool, frosty with the air conditioning. Rose diffusers spread their fragrance over us like an embrace. I close my eyes to remember this moment. But I will not, for the memories of a toddler are like sepia-colored photographs—they fade away with the histories of time. So now, I will remember for as long as my brain allows.

She is my mother. Mine. Hers. Mother, Supreme. Daughter. Forever.

II

I watch my daughter climb onto the seat of her bicycle, complete with its training wheels, and I wish her a safe journey. She grips the handles, giggles at me, and the road of possibilities open up, like arms seeking embrace. As mothers, the world is fickle with our desires. We wish for a world of abundant love for our children, where the human eye can see the glory we see each day of our lives. The bodies we molded in our wombs, carved out by God Himself as He pieced flesh

upon flesh from the mitochondria of ours and our partner's DNAs. And slowly, they formed. Eyes, teeth, hair. Little fingers with long fragile fingernails gripping yours as they suckled on you for food. That pleasant weight of my daughter, never too heavy and never too light, sitting on my bosom as she whistles out her breath in sleep. I smell her. That peculiar scent of warmth and newness, all mixed with love and milk. Nothing else smells as gracious. Soft. My mother once said that if softness had a smell, it was the scent of newly born babies. "Be careful," I warn, my eyes never leaving my daughter as she weaves around the hibiscus and ixora bushes. She giggles again, this time almost like she's telling me, *I've got this. I'm no longer that baby you held, warm, drowsy from milk formulas. I'm me, stronger now. Aware.*

"Look Mummy!" she calls, her arms outstretched as she hops off her bicycle and runs around the . "I'm flying!"

And just then, you see it. You see the paths of life pave through, and your daughter walks through it. It cradles her, guides her. And as the lights show her the steps to follow, you realize no...life did not pave those paths. It was you who paved these paths. You did your part as the parent you are. The lights will guide her through. All you have to do is watch, and protect.

III

I love my mother's hair. It's coarse, black Afro, coily like telephone wires. When I slather grease on it, it entwines

around my fingers, yearning to be held, to be touched. My mother lets me touch her hair. The comb digs into her short tresses, moistened with paraben-free conditioner. I carve a line across, enthralled at how the hair separates, like the Red Sea in *My Book of Bible Stories*. She lets me play still, my mother. She guides my hands when I comb out each section. With the mirror in her hands, she watches my efforts, offering advice, but mostly allowing me the grace to take care of her. She trusts me.

What do I know about trust? I know this much: I see it in the eyes of my mother as she hums in a concerto voice to the tune of Simi's Duduke. Trust is her smiling at my failed attempt

to braid her coils. It is the calmness of her voice as she says, "You'll get better in time,". But moreover, it is the connection my spirit feels towards hers. My mother is my kindred, but blood surpasses this connection. It is ethereal, life between women. She knows things I do not know, but I trust she will teach me. We speak not of these things, but I learn everyday, recognizing her in a million of women. The way she walks into a room. The jaunt of her hip as she leans over a pot of tomato stew on the gas cooker. The smell of her hands when she peels oranges for me. Her heartbeat beating against my ear as she hugs me to her.

And like the umbilical cord cut at my birth, I connect with my mother in the beauties of our hair.



The Dining Table
Fabric & Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 inches
2021

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