

FASHION IN LAGOS





YADI & MUKTHARA

Words by Claudia Paterson

Lagos is a city of hustle and struggle. As with all places and indeed all bodies experiencing rapid growth, it can feel strained at times. There is a febrile intensity to the atmosphere that inclines most people to drive rather than walk through the streets, unable to handle the hubbub or heat. Life in the city is characterised by colour and noise. On the sides of busy roads, marketplaces spring up as if from nowhere and suddenly the air is filled with bartering cries and the scent of spices and roasting meat.

Amidst this tumult, a fresh crop of creative endeavours have managed to take root and are flourishing, despite the blistering sun. Art, fashion and music are experiencing a surge of productivity and steadily beginning to garner international attention and support, with a few figures leading the charge and drawing the world's eyes towards Lagos as a burgeoning cultural capital.

A third-generation Indian immigrant and the child of a Parsi (formerly Persian) mother and Sindhi (hailing from Pakistan) father, Tushar Hathiramani grew up between Lagos, India and the United States. At the time, life in Lagos was frustratingly insular due to the lack of cultural meeting points, and Hathiramani recalls endless days spent playing tennis at the local country club or at friends' houses, simply killing time. After school he moved to New York to study and remained there for a couple of years, encountering the city's various artistic spaces and collectives. He observed that by diversifying their creative outputs and building sustainable business models, these groups were managing to create and promote experimental work whilst surviving in one of the toughest cities in the world.

On his return to Lagos, Hathiramani found that his native city had undergone some remarkable changes of its own and was experiencing the first flutters of a major creative boom. Integral to this boom was a space called Stranger, founded in 2013 by husband and wife Yegwa and Bibi Ukpo, which began its life as a concept boutique inspired by the couple's travels but subsequently expanded to include a co-working space, café and bar. Stranger stocked an eclectic mix of local and international designers including Kenneth Ize, Kelechi Odu, Umi-1, and PeirWu, while the café-cum-bar became a crucial watering hole for local creatives and those passing through. Hathiramani describes Stranger as the birthplace of Lagos' new energy. "When you were there, you felt like shit was finally happening," he recalls. Stranger closed its doors in 2018, after five seminal years, but its legacy lives on in the many like-minded spaces that have popped up since and for which it paved the way.

Hathiramani began work at a company that traded commercial seed and fertiliser. After nine months, he had saved enough to launch a venture of his own and started looking for potential spaces. 16/16 — named after its location as the 16th apartment at number 16 on Kofo Abayomi street — was initially intended to function as a restaurant and guest-house, but as Hathiramani began to frequent environments like Stranger, which had by then fostered a growing community of artists and musicians, he decided to reconfigure his space into a multidisciplinary platform through which local artists could exhibit. The restaurant shifted downstairs to make way for a gallery space and an in-house Airbnb residence on the floor above, providing a holistic base for artistic individuals passing through the capital. Many who come to visit one facet of the space end up engaging with the others, and thus a visitor to the residence may also host a workshop or exhibit at the gallery whilst they are there — culminating in a constant hum of vibrant activity.

With the success of 16/16, which now hosts photography workshops, yoga sessions, supper clubs and tattoo parlours alongside regular exhibitions of non-traditional local artists, Hathiramani has since helped open two additional spaces — hFACTOR and hiddenbar — both geared towards carving out inspiring environments for creative people.

During the annual Lagos Photo Festival a few years ago, Dutch photographer Jan Hoek was exhibiting a portfolio of his work at the original 16/16 space on Kofo Abayomi Street and staying in the Airbnb residence upstairs. Hoek was profoundly energised by the scene he encountered in Lagos and was enthusiastic when Hathiramani suggested that they host a workshop together. The concept was to assemble a group of promising Nigerian creatives and put them together with Hoek, who would oversee a project that they would produce together in designer-photographer pairs. Tushar and Hoek intended for the workshop to grow into an ongoing transfer of knowledge, drawing upon Hoek's experience as an internationally renowned artist and encouraging the participants to form collaborative bonds with one another in order to further expand their own goals.

Through 16/16, Hoek and Hathiramani put out an open call for Nigerian photographers and designers, specifying that they were looking for projects with a strong element of storytelling, which is central to Hoek's work. Five were selected from each discipline and, under Hoek's guidance, were paired up and asked to convey a narrative via a visual story. Hathiramani was particularly keen for the participants to use fashion to deliver a new story about Nigeria, which he feels has suffered from a spell of unwarranted "bad PR" over the past few decades. "Although the nation's creative voice has never disappeared, it's been masked by our grapple with commerce," he explains. "Having access to a wealth like oil has a habit of wiping creativity out and replacing it with industry."

Due to its insularity, Tushar feels that Nigeria's art scene has gone through periods of stagnation, with artists simply repeating old ideas with a new inflection. One of the hopes for this project was that the collision of cross-cultural perspectives would result in new aesthetic possibilities opening up for both the participants and for Hoek himself, enabling them to examine their respective societies in new and exciting ways.

Streetwear designer Seyi Sanusi and photographer Aàdesokan responded to their brief by casting Lagos' local butchers — the literal lifeblood of the city — as the subjects of their project. Dressed in iridescent reimaginings of their traditional uniform of aprons and brimmed hats, the butchers smiled coyly up into Aàdesokan's lens as flecks of crimson blood sprayed from the cleavers clasped in their hands.

Bubu Ogisi, an art director, designer and fashion consultant who runs womenswear label iAMISIGO, and photographer Sierra Nallo, who also works as a development worker, used couture to pose questions about society's relationship with value and the tension between yearning for luxury and remaining connected to the things that matter. During the development of their project, Bubu and Sierra came across a young rapper named Taiwo. Having finished her education, Taiwo found herself in the same position as a lot of Nigerians, without a job and living on the street. Drawn to her blunt charisma and unusual features, Ogisi and Nallo convinced Taiwo to let them use her as their central character, in exchange for producing a series of video clips for her musical tracks.

For their project, designer, researcher and artist Mukhtara Yusuf paired up with conceptual artist Yadichinma Ukoha-Kalu to explore how Ni-



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gerian identity plays out within digital spaces, particularly focusing on the cognitive dissonance that often exists between people's online personas and their real lives. The pair set up a studio in the street and asked people passing by to tell them how much of their personal information was available online. The idea was to make people consider how carefully they curate their online lives, interrogating what takes precedence when it comes to authenticity, inviability and safety. The imagery they created consisted of hallucinogenic montages of metallic textures and sea tones overlaid onto human faces and hands, suggesting a brave new world of human-mechanical hybrids. One page asked a series of questions about users' profile pictures; what they wanted their picture to suggest about them, how they wanted it to make people feel.

Jomi Marcus-Bello, founder of streetwear label WAFFLESNCREAM and Baingor Joiner, a writer, photographer and DJ, decided to devote their project to the debate surrounding the merging of Western ideals and local traditions within Nigerian culture. Taking instantly recognisable elements from both sides — a judge's wig and formal suit, tribal masks and festival dress — the pair combined them to create a series of arresting tableaux which challenge notions on how and when it is appropriate to mix cultural artefacts.

Papa Oyeyemi, creative director of menswear label Maxivive, and photojournalist Adedeji Hamed, explored the effect that cyberbullying has had on Nigeria's marginal groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community. The pair's work consisted of a series of majestic portraits framed by blurred Instagram pages, around which messages of defiance had been printed. Their subjects, posed like royals in classical portraiture, stare unblinkingly into the camera as the framing mantras — 'This is me, accept it or leave it' and 'Imagine if I didn't have fans to combat for me' — encircle them.

An important vein running through every one of the stories is that of the street — an interesting place for interactions because, historically, none took place there. "Nigeria doesn't really have sidewalks," Hathiramani tells me. If there are sidewalks, they are thoroughfares dedicated to parking or selling, buying food or getting to work. They are not recreational spaces for meeting friends or killing time. In fact, this idea of recreation in public space is faintly ridiculous to Tushar, who grew up

traversing those sidewalks. So hot and hectic are they that growing up, Hathiramani remembers hardly ever setting foot on the street, except to rush hurriedly from Point A to Point B. Nevertheless, the street itself is a vital public space with huge potential and is gradually becoming a more active site for interaction and exchange within Nigeria, as evidenced by its prominence throughout this project. In this sense, the street can be seen as a vibrant microcosm of the wider nation, which is shifting rapidly and constantly, without ever losing sight of its past.

"You have to be hard-nosed to succeed here," Hathiramani says thoughtfully. "You can plan for things but the city may simply say, 'No, not today.' Because of this informality, things can seem nebulous and insecure, but it just demands that you punch through. Nothing is ever at face value here." Like the Wild West in its heyday, for those with the courage and ingenuity to seize it, Lagos today is bristling with promise and possibility. Tired concepts are rapidly being dismantled and replaced with radical kingdoms of ideas and a new wave of engagement, though not everyone can stand the heat. "You might get burned," Hathiramani agrees sagely. "So you have to be tough. You stay, or you don't stay. It comes down to that."

