

# ART REVIEW CITY

## Nigerian-born artist and architect Peju Alatise on her back-to-back Venice Biennales, Yoruba influences, and giving back to Africa

We recently sat down with Nigerian-born artist and architect Peju Alatise at her new Glasgow studio to find out more about her back-to-back Venice Biennales, how she juxtaposes being a contemporary architect and fine artist, and how Yoruba culture has helped her work stand out in today's global art world.

**“You need a little bit of luck, as we know arduous work isn’t everything. Do what you do because you love it, and because you can’t live without it.”**

– Peju Alatise

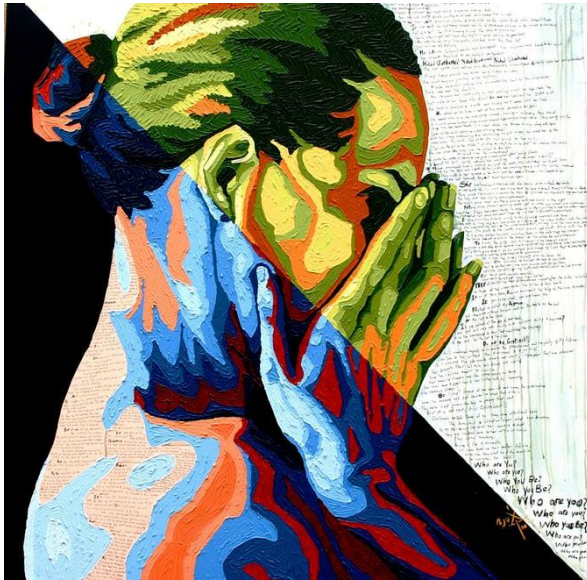


“Alagemo” sculpture, part of “Alasiri” installation at the Arsenale of the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2021. Photo credit: Adeyemo Shokunbi

Alatise is an interdisciplinary artist, architect, and author of two novels. She started her professional career as an architect while running a private art studio. These days, she is a leading voice in contemporary art on the African continent. Her practice is relentlessly experimental and labor-intensive. She produces works across a variety of mediums, techniques, and materials, including but not limited to paintings, film, installations, sculptures. Her work is also pointedly political, often asking damning questions, and provoking reflections about the times, the state of affairs at home and abroad. The artist's work has, in the past, explored exploitative labor practices in Nigeria, child rights with a focus on young girls, state-sanctioned violence against citizens, migration and the policies that ensure that many die at sea, seeking a better life. Alatise now produces through the lens of spirituality and Yoruba cosmology, leaning into ancient storytelling traditions and crafting alternative social imageries.

When asked about some of her favorite artists, Alatise hesitated for a moment, and eventually offered the answer that it changes from season to season. Right now, she is looking at Mexican sculptor Javier Marín and continues to be impressed Chiharu Shiota whose work she first discovered at the Venice Biennale in 2015. Marín's expressive depictions of the human form, combined with the immersive installations with string and three-dimensional objects, tell a remarkably interesting tale of where Alatise is in her story.

She also speaks highly of David Dale, one of Nigeria's most influential artists who was known for his textile and stained glass, and of Piet Mondrian, who 100 years later is still one of the most inspiring artists to the architectural community.



“What the f\*ck!”, 2010

Her earliest days of creating art were not defined by any one movement. When she was a teenager, her older sister had a friend who was in architecture school, and she became fascinated by his chosen profession. While always interested in drawing, she saw his tools as an enhancement to drawing by hand, and immediately understood how they could improve her abilities as an artist. She started taking technical drawing classes in secondary school, and before AutoCAD and CorelDRAW, she learned how design things, and draw straight lines without a ruler. At first her father discouraged her from taking this road, but he eventually came around and encouraged her to follow her talents. Her mother had a more insightful vision and understood that

her destiny was already spelled out for her.

She decided to study architecture, and minor in fine art, at Ladoke Akintola University in Oyo State. Here she learned the twofold way of understanding how objects come to life, how they are designed, and how they are created. Suddenly she was drawing with a purpose, and with an end goal of bringing functionality into her art. After finishing her training, she began to work for a family friend's architectural firm. They had new fancy design-aided computers, but she always chose to stay hard at work on a drafting table. Alatise knew her path and stuck with it.



Okun Ajah Artist's residency, 2017, Lagos, Nigeria  
Photos credit: Art Twenty-One, Lagos

She quickly got to the point where she began getting recognition as an architect and was working with private clients, but her calling was still pulling her towards the less structured areas of art. It was time for her to open a fine art studio. Alatise also understood how important the cultural impact of her work could be when she

combined her fine art and architectural background with her cultural heritage. Purely a painter in these, but she slowly but surely began to fuse art and architecture in her work. Making time for each vocation was challenging at this time, but her passion drove her forward. Her unique combination of talents led her to a creative path that was more spatial, becoming more installation focused, and grew into a manner of creating art that occupied, and became one with, the space around her objects. Alatise's works today are mostly defined with a specific space in mind, which is a clear understanding that she is designing as an architect and creating as a fine artist.

When our conversation got to the topic of personal politics, which is ever-present in today's art world, she began to explain that as a Nigerian-born artist, your entire life is political. Whatever is happening at any moment of time, there is a political response, and you have no choice but to stay aware of the social issues there are that day. It is not a matter of choosing; it is just a natural way of being.

Politics were acutely present in her early works, but that all started to change a few years ago when she had her first child. She no longer wanted to always be fighting for some cause or belief, and always having to use her art as a powerful form of activism. Today, Alatise believes that her work is more based in social commentary, particularly about what is happening to children and in Nigeria. Her messages have started to get more universal, and with a particular focus on stories that adults and children can both understand and learn something.



"Nation Interrupted", 2016.

Photo credit: Adeyinka Akingbade

When she had her child two years ago, it changed everything. In addition to the focus of her artwork changing directions, she also had to make the decision on where she was going to raise her son, and how. Alatise wanted him to grow up in a world where he could thrive and grow, and having become a successful architect and fine artist working on an international level, she was going to have to travel a whole lot more. There

was also a growing need for much more space to be able to create large works, and to be able to ship works easily across Europe, and to the United States and Asia from a more central location. Moving art out of Nigeria was becoming more difficult, took far too long, and things were damaged far too often. She decided the United Kingdom checked all her professional and personal boxes, and she chose Glasgow as her new hometown. Being invited to the Glasgow International, the largest festival for contemporary visual art in Scotland, and receiving an artist residency to go along with it, helped make her decision easy. Then of course on her first visit back to Lagos, COVID-19 overtook the world, and she was stuck there for six months. When we spoke with her, she had just finished her mandatory quarantine upon arriving back in Glasgow.

While she was back in Nigeria, she spent a great deal of time building a residency program in Lagos. Focusing on a mentorship program for alternative artists, she created Alter'NATIVE Artist Initiative (ANAI) Foundation, the largest initiative of its type in the country. Training artists is not a source of pride for her, as she feels this type of artistic training should be available at every school and university in the country. While knowing that she is providing a valuable service to the young people that she is training, she still proclaims that she is ashamed someone else has not done this years ago. Giving back to her community has always been a part of her practice, and now that she is back to Glasgow, she is creating a similar program here that will be a community centric residency program that will focus on creating a greater sense of cultural exchange in her new homeland. She is an artist with multiple visions, and is finding her way in a new place, all while helping others find themselves and their true potential.





"Rapture of Olurombi's Daughter", Wraapture Exhibition, 2013

Photo credit: Adeyinka Akingbade

Growing up in Nigeria, Alatisé was deeply influenced in Yoruba traditions, even though she was raised in a traditional Muslim family. Christians and Muslims reside in equal numbers in the central region and southwestern states, including Lagos, where the Yoruba ethnic group, whose members include both Muslims and Christians, predominates.

The Yoruba beliefs melds traditional practices and spiritual concepts which has evolved into a robust

religious system. The Yoruba religion believes that all human beings pass through what is known as Ayanmo, which translate to destiny or fate. This means that humans are eventually expected to become one in spirit with their divine creator who is also the source of all energy. This final state is known as Olodumare. Life and death in the Yoruba religion belief system is a continuous cycle of existence in different forms of physical bodies while an individual's spirit evolves towards transcendence.

The Yoruba people believe that before one is born, they determine their destiny. They decide long before they ever arrive on Earth on what they will be doing in the physical world, where they will live, who they will love, and how they will die. The religion also states that after one is born into the world, all their plans, promises, and destiny are forgotten. An individual, therefore, tries to remember and claim the future they mapped out before they came into the world.

In 2006, Alatisé published her first book Orita Meta: The Crossroads. In Yoruba culture Orita Meta is the point where three footpaths meet in literal sense. It is a place of momentary physical confusion where strangers and visitors are likely to be confounded. It is a place of spiritual supplication for those whose path to divine favor must be accessed. It is the crossroad of the spiritual and the physical world. Her book is comprised of poetry, anecdotes, fables, and short stories about life's hardships, economic hardship, love, feminism, shared wisdom, helping others find their path, and most telling from Yoruba tradition, finding and following your calling. These tales are all told through the interwoven lives of three women.



"Flying Girls", installed in the Nigerian pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Art, 2017

Photo credit: Buchi Benson

In 2017, Alatisé was selected as one of the exhibiting artists at Nigeria's debut pavilion at the Venice Art Biennial, where she showed, *Flying Girls*, an installation of eight life-size sculptures of little girls amidst a flurry of birds and leaves, with wings on their backs, dreaming of a brighter future, exhibited with a sound installation of little

girls playing. Described as haunting and beautiful, the sculpture "bears witness to the maltreatment, discrimination, and atrocities that have become commonplace in a society where very little attention is given to the development of the girl child."

This was the first biennale to represent Nigeria, and when the curator first called to invite her to participate, she was very skeptical. Not wanting to be the test subject of how everything would work, and more importantly, how their inclusion would be received on a global scale. Curator Adenrele Sonariwo told the artist, “If anyone can do it, it is you.” Alatisé agreed and understood that the hardest part would be finding funding in Nigeria. Government support was nonexistent, so they were one hundred percent dependent on the private sector. The curator and the artists knew that some sacrifices would have to be made for them to participate.

Alatisé proposed her concept of *Flying Girls* to the curator, and they both felt it was perfect to represent Nigeria. They knew the audience would be drawn into the subject, the story, and accept Nigeria into the global art community. *Flying Girl* had been a concept that was years in the making. The passage from her debut book *Orita Meta: The Crossroads* that inspired her to create her monumental sculpture *Flying Girls* was:

“The Father of Creation sees what has become of my Africa, and HE sends her bearers of light. They are children born to her with a lit torch. They come teaching, living a life of example as it was once lived by their mother Africa, each one doing what he or she must do to overcome the dark. To Africa, three daughters were born.”



“Flying Girls”, installed in the Nigerian pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Art, 2017  
Photo credit: Adeyinka Akingbade

In 2016, *Omode Meta Nsere*, a collaborative film with Alatisé, Remi Vaughan-Richards, and Eddie Essang, was created about three 9-year-old girls in Nigeria. They played a game while their mothers busied themselves talking about life and the mundane. The game was “what do you want to be when you grow up?” One girl proclaimed that she wanted to be a dancer, one decided to be a singer, and the third girl, well, she wanted to fly. This is of course densely symbolic of the horrible conditions young girls experienced growing up in Nigeria. The children’s creative inspirations were taken away by their mothers who were too scared to let their children follow their creative and professional dreams. The third girl knew at an early age that she would keep her wings and find the wind to help her fly. Their mothers, who were dissatisfied homemakers, want their daughters to simply conform as they did, and attempt to clip their daughters’ creative wings.

The concept of *Flying Girls* comes from Alatisé’s own life growing up wanting to be a creative being, but it also stems from the harsh living conditions and survival rates of young girls in Nigeria. Girls are typically discriminated against in Nigeria in access to educational, food, and medical treatment. They often carry a heavy burden of both farming and housework. Young girls are married off at far too early ages which interferes with their education and acquisition of life skills needed for survival.

Being a spokesperson for those without voices, Alatisé has expressed those beliefs must be changed about the value of female children. Rapid economic development of Nigeria is dependent upon elimination of gender bias. Educating young girls serves as an investment that will help facilitate the achievement of family planning objectives, and the production of healthier children. Poor female nutrition contributes to greater vulnerability to disease and to poor

physical and mental development. It is recommended that nutrition be improved for females and that illegal child labor be abolished. Early marriage should be outlawed, and all parents should be educated about the benefits of later marriage. The issue of female genital mutilation among girls, by grandmothers and mothers-in-law attempting to curb promiscuity, prepare girls for marriage, and conform to tradition. Women's roles are primarily mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives.

Alatise's early work focused heavily on these issues, but now as an artist in their mature phase, she understood how to use her influence to help solve the issues close to her heart. This was a narrative that both children and adults would relate to, and the space that she created would demand that adults to look at the work and think like children, walking around the sculpture in its space, and be forced to confront the issues head-on.



"Alasiri" installation at the Arsenale, Venice Biennale of Architecture 2021. Photo credit: Adeyemo Shokunbi

In 2019, Alatise was selected as an exhibiting artist for the Venice Architecture Biennale by curator Hashim Sarkis. She was far more excited about this one, as she would be allowed to utilize her dual talents of designing as an architect and creating as a fine artist. The architectural work would become part of the work, but in a more static way. The more subjective art would take the created foundation

and be able say everything she was not able to say with just sculptures in her first biennale.

For the first one, she had to fit works she created into whatever space was available. In the architecture biennale, she submitted a proposal, and they found the right space for the artwork. The intentions from the beginning were not just to have an architectural response, it was to be a more rounded response that she could deliver. She consulted with other architects and other artists to establish her specific vision. In the end the answer begged for moral inclusion that she felt architecture alone cannot give, and thus, her creative destiny was being fulfilled.

When she first received the curatorial question, "How will we live together?," Alatise immediately knew her response was going to be about the unification of Africa. When developing her concept for the pavilion, a friend asked her if she really believed that this could happen. She again found her answer in Yoruba philosophy and told them:

"If you are a visitor and I open my heart to you, you became a part of my heart. My vulnerabilities become yours, and vice versa. There are 40 doors and 13 secrets to be found. The doors have been that symbol of opening, welcoming, and being included or excluded. A person that is in a space that does not belong feels like an outsider. Find the secrets but keep them to yourself. Share the love and the discovery. We all want the same things; to be loved and for our loved ones to be protected."





“Alasiri” installation at the Arsenale, Venice Biennale of Architecture, 2021. Photo credit: Adeyemo Shokunbi

There is also a Yoruba saying, “A person is like a door: to open it is to become part of its secret. The tiniest room can accommodate twenty men if they have a deep understanding of one another.” The work would be about opening and closing doors, symbolic of what humanity does to each other daily. The onset of COVID-19 proposed a greater challenge as in the finished pavilion, the doors in the work would have to remain open. This would leave the visitors an easier path towards finding Ashari secret for themselves. Unification would be a lot easier if the door was always left open and people could find the light. People should be unified and working together towards their shared goals and dreams. The defining lines of separation including Trumpism, Brexit, and all the other polarizing politics else should be erased in order for us to

live together.

Curator Hahsim Sarkis later joked about his theme of, “How will we live together?,” by declaring “by avoiding each other,” as travel restrictions still saw sparse attendance over the opening days of the 2021 Architecture Biennale in Venice, and some visible gaps in exhibits. “How will we live together?” has certainly been more poignant from COVID-19 times, with the Nationalist view becoming, “to live apart is to die alone”. Alatisé feels the pandemic gave us a preview of what that world could be and wants to re-establish the connectivity we all have with one another. She also questions how we connect as an insider to an outsider, and walking into a space that you may be welcomed into or not. The physical world is clearly tied into something else these days.

Alatisé’s work creates and inhabits a space where both women and men are liberated. A world teeming with nationalist chauvinism that wanted to end human movement was met with a virus that granted its wish, but did not obey national borders. Humanity has been brought back together in the setting of the biennale, but our differences still push us apart. All the doors represented in the work even more symbolism in that, “a person is like a door: to open it is to become part of its secret.” It is up to us if we want to open back to each other. One certainty is that we must overcome our fear of those who are different from ourselves by culture, creed, and color.

The *Alasiri* sculptural installation is made up of doors, figures, birds, masks, butterflies, and drapery, and it allows your own vulnerabilities to come to the fore and offers to give you mutual understanding or misunderstanding. *Alasiri* is the secret keeper that allows you to simultaneously experience being an outsider and insider. The work challenges barriers between people, even in a world where it is still incredibly challenging for people to travel internationally to see it.

“Black Girls Making Magic”. Recent commission by the Elumelu Foundation, Lagos, Nigeria. Now that all the work and traveling that comes along with being in the Venice Biennale of Architecture is behind her, and next things Alatisé is going to be focusing on is investing in making her new Glasgow studio exactly right to accommodate all the upcoming exhibitions, private commissions, and architectural projects that are in the works. She has also found a niche with lots of top architectural firms now adding original artwork directly into their creations, and

this is becoming an area that she is finding to be quite rewarding and lucrative. Combining her many talents and passions by providing works specifically created for a space is what she does best. She is currently working on some public facing works, outdoor sculptures, a college campus, a park, and performing work for an advocacy organization. There is clearly lots more to come, so please make sure you [visit her website](#) and [follow her Instagram](#).

Alatise is an amazing artist and an incredibly strong woman. She is pushing boundaries, bringing positivity to the world, and finding her destiny as both an interdisciplinary artist and architect, and is beacon of light on how art can help bring humanity back together after the world tries to rip it apart.