

Abdulrazaq Awofeso



Broad Streets



Abdulrazaq Awofeso: *Broad Streets*

March 30 – May 6 2023

Ed Cross, 19 Garrett Street, EC1Y 0TY

Ed Cross is delighted to present *Broad Streets*, new portrait works by British-based Nigerian artist Abdulrazaq Awofeso (b. 1978, Lagos, Nigeria).

Building on concepts explored in the artist's 1-54 Marrakech presentation of the same name, *Broad Streets* comprises sculptural figures and tableaus collaged from discarded wooden pallets. Based on characters observed and encountered by the artist on two roads with the same name – one a hub of nightlife and socialising in Birmingham, UK, and the other a commercial centre in Lagos, Nigeria – *Broad Streets* draws parallels between the cities and the people who inhabit them.

Used for the transportation of goods around the world, Awofeso's pallet portraits are loaded with connotations of human migration, as well as referring to the artist's own frequent journeys through Africa and Europe. Dismantling the pallets, Awofeso uses the timber to represent human figures in wall reliefs, freestanding sculptures and installations. Individually carved and painted by hand, their physical traits and vibrant colours are inspired by encounters with people in different cities and subcultures. Any suggestion of uniformity – or a kind of universal portrait – is contradicted by the distinctiveness of each figure, conveying the artist's resistance to simplistic cultural or racial categorisation.

In *Broad Streets*, Awofeso collapses the distance between two bustling thoroughfares, all the while underscoring the unassailable specificity of the individuals who comprise the subjects of his portraits. Shown en masse, the effect is of encountering a crowd; considered singularly, each figure reveals their own impossibly specific traits, tied to time, place and circumstance. Counterintuitively, it is this infinite variability that Awofeso's Broad Street patrons have in common.

Discrepant Figuration: Notes on Abdulrazaq Awofeso's Art

by Athi Mongezeleli Joja

I first came across Abdulrazaq Awofeso's work in a group exhibition at Museum Africa, Johannesburg, in 2010. The show was called *SPace: Currencies in Contemporary African Art*, a Pan-African themed project curated by Thembinkosi Goniwe and Melissa Goba. This project was amongst the public events commissioned by the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) in conjunction with the FIFA World Cup tournament hosted in South Africa that year. In that show, Awofeso had exhibited *The Lost Tribe* (2010), a subtle but provocative sculptural artwork made of colourful wooden figurines that were asymmetrically arranged on the museum's floor. This arrangement enabled the work to interrogate the wide-ranging contemporary issues confronting and unfolding in postcolonial Africa, including those leading up to the event.

Since winning the FIFA World Cup bid in 2004, the South African government had painted and sold a rosy picture of the economic, moral, and national dividend that awaited its people, especially the poor. Over USD 6 billion was spent in the preparations – an expenditure that would soon be cast with critical doubt as stories of corruption and neglect of civil services unfolded and, in the process, caused unspeakable destruction, desolation, displacement, and disillusionment. What couldn't be predicted, though, were the violent outbreaks of xenophobic attacks on African foreign nationals in 2008.¹ According to political analyst Andile Mngxitama:

Blacks in the ghettos keep saying, "After the World Cup amakwerekwere [a slur that refers to African foreign nationals] must go!" We await the floods of mad violence to follow. A people kept in the dark, hungry, and angry, fed a blind nationalism and imbued with self-hatred is bound to unleash its venom on the closest targets it can find. The irony is that we Black South Africans will kill other blacks from the African continent for jobs - low paying jobs in factories, farms and mines mostly belonging to white settler capitalists...What is most disturbing about South Africa

hosting the World Cup is the fact that our political leaders, the media, artists, academics knew from the moment when we celebrated being awarded the bid, that the event was going to be nothing more than an expensive party to entertain White people from around the world.²

Though entrusted with the responsibility of constructing a narrative of legitimation, *SPace* took a far less quixotic and celebratory route. According to Goniwe, *SPace* ‘undertook not to curate works of art pursuing naive sorts of positive representations and aesthetic registers that render serious human experience and social conditions in society romantic narratives.’³ The project conceptually highlighted underprioritised notions like “space” and “pace” to apprehend the vicissitudes of contemporary African arts as well as reading those terms as constitutive and organising elements. In other words, it also interrogated how systems of classification and processes of mobility have shaped African futures and most importantly, how the artists have had to learn to grapple with those dynamics. Elaborating on “pace”, Goniwe would additionally note that:

Artists have different paces in the ways in which they process ideas and produce work, and the ways in which the effects or affects inherent in their artistic representations are engaged by viewers are also different. Some artworks are quicker to decipher while others demand time, patience and effort, let alone professional skills or specialised knowledge.⁴

The Lost Tribe typified the kind of artwork that required a slow interaction, by virtue of its aesthetic, its critical disposition, and – despite being arguably far more damning in its critique – the work’s temperament was less confrontational than art collective Gugulethu’s performative intervention in the show, described by art historian Massa Lemu as biopolitical militancy.⁵ These were two different paces: one ephemeral and impatient, the other unwavering but tolerant. *The Lost Tribe*’s placement on the floor privileged its viewer, offering her a sort of topographical perspective as both potential judge and participant. Here was an example of an artwork that, despite its deceptively simplistic figurative representation of a civic gathering, demanded more from its audience in both its ambivalent commentary and its hybrid, intermedial visual form. On the one hand, it merged sculpture with painting in a non-hierarchical manner (all while smuggling contemporary installation methods into the equation), while complicating the artist’s own classification

and ambiguating the work’s commentary on the other. I will return to this issue of ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty later.

Around the time I met Awofeso, his practice comprised simple block figures cut from wooden pallets, basically layered with newspaper clippings, paint and ink to give them their idiosyncratic, childlike appearance. From afar, Awofeso’s figurines tend to look uniformed and indistinguishable – arguably another aesthetic tactic the artist employs. However, upon scrutiny, these figurines can be disimbricated based on their characterological qualities vis-à-vis their shared serial appearance. In this aspect of Awofeso’s practice, collectivism is hardly a means of subsuming individual subjectivity – a motif that is retained in recent works, e.g., *Avalanche of Calm* (2022). In *The Lost Tribe*’s figurines, however, this distended subjectivity was differently corporealised, in a way almost reminiscent of what philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva might call ‘difference without separability.’⁶ Who were these distracted people and where were they headed? What was the cause behind the stultification in their journey? According to Awofeso, his ‘figures don’t usually relate to particular people. They are more abstract.’ In other words, his work abstracts from the lived human experiences without succumbing to the allure of mimesis, naturalism, and iconicity. Despite its subtlety, *The Lost Tribe* interrupted the euphoric slogan of the day – “feel it, it’s here” – not only by portraying a bewildered and chaotic assembly, but also one whose mission seemed to have gone astray. A timely portrayal of the day’s events. Thus, the work wasn’t just a metaphor through which we could read the empty rhetoric of a neoliberal pan-Africanisation in the wake of Afrophobic violence and state corruption. It was, possibly, an interrogation of the political waywardness of postcolonial Africa writ large.

Since that first and fascinating encounter, Awofeso’s oeuvre has morphed quite significantly. However, any study of its morphological changes must acknowledge that these shifts have been slow, careful, and recursive rather than curt. By that I mean, while certain things have changed, others have not – for example, some materials, motifs, and themes remain relatively persistent. Take for instance the artist’s use of wooden pallets, started during his stay in Johannesburg. Pallets are contraptions generally used for very specific forms of service, namely, the support and movement of goods. What Awofeso calls ‘the economy, history and identity of pallets’ speaks to these objects’ predisposition to service. As objects, pallets are always labouring and on the move. They embody both functionality and mobility. Thinking

of the pallet from this perspective, one can't avoid the complex metonymic invocations opened by these conceptual vistas. That is, such a perspective corresponds with the precarious labours and highly regulated movements of the racialised body in the wake of colonial capitalist modernity.

In Awofeso's work, these pallets are disentangled and prepared anew towards a different articulation of the same function. That is, they acquire a new aesthetic utility that transforms their previous use without necessarily eliminating the pallets' material trace. Like an unprimed canvas, this materiality is usually integrated, pictorialised as a kind of visual abscess bleeding out into the foreground of his recent relief pieces – especially in such works as *Komole* (2022). Another constant in Awofeso's work is figuration. Although over the years we've seen the constant configuration of his characters – say, the *Skothane* series (2022) versus *The Lost Tribe* – figuration as subject matter has remained despite formal variations.

That said, the reliefs denote a serious formal transformation in Awofeso's visual corpus, a shifting from one visual mode to another. Although it might appear a wholesale swing, the newness of the reliefs isn't severed from some of the artist's established tropes: his colourful palette, or figurative focus. Furthermore, the new work has particularly distinguished itself at the level of genre – that is, the shift from full-bodied geometric figurative shapes to portraiture. However, Awofeso's portraits aren't normative; the artist isn't interested in recording appearance as likeness, or providing the forms of evidentiary identification typical of the genre. According to him, these reliefs vacillate between being portrayals of random people and depictions of friends. Interestingly, clues to the subjects' familiarity are found in their name-titles: Dilim, Vicky, Kuruba, even *Selfie*. While these subjects are nominally invoked and recognised, their identities are revoked and withdrawn. As in all Awofeso's figurative art, facial (and even bodily) likeness is deliberately evaded, distorted and/or merely suggested. In pieces like *Karuba* (2022) and *Komole* (2022), we see this allusive, simplistic visual itemisation of human countenance. For lack of a better description: in these reliefs, what was previously a sculptural interpretation of painting – and whatever else in between – has morphed into a painterly interpretation of sculpture. The work takes on dimensional variations, which are expressive of the dynamic and ambivalent disposition that characterises Awofeso's overall creative method and approach.

As mentioned, this ambivalence, reluctance and ambiguity is germane to Awofeso's aesthetic playbook and tactics. Speaking more specifically to this liminal space in the context of *Avalanche of Calm* – a space I've maintained is generic in his work – Awofeso says:

There are always good and bad forces at play and I try to maintain a neutral position. I like to occupy an in-between space. I see my work as interconnecting the positive and the negative, regardless of what it brings forth. After all, nothing lasts forever.

Tentatively, I also want to relate this ambivalence to the Yoruba concept of "oriki", beautifully described by the late philosopher Olabiyi J. Yai as African art's "invitation to infinite metonymy, difference, and departure, and not a summation for sameness and imitation."⁷ First, I say tentatively because I do not want to ascribe to Awofeso's work a spontaneous ethnographic reading. Secondly, I would like to think that contemporary African art, as a discursive field, must trouble such easy associations. Awofeso's constant departure from normative forms of representation and classification – mimesis, artistic reportage, and genre specificity – is an attempt to evade some tendencies of conventional modes of artistic address. Arguably, that evasion typifies a fugitive praxis that has become endemic to contemporary African art; since that first encounter in the Johannesburg winter of 2010, I've understood ambivalence to be another lens through which we can read and understand not only Awofeso's approach to figurative art, but political issues far beyond it too.

Footnotes

- 1 "In May 2008 xenophobic violence broke out in Alexandra, Johannesburg, and rapidly spread to seven of South Africa's nine provinces, resulting in 62 deaths, including 21 South Africans, 11 Mozambicans, five Zimbabweans and three Somalis; thousands were injured. Some 40,000 foreign nationals left the country and a further 50,000 remain internally displaced." See Human Rights Watch, 2009, South African Events of 2008. Accessed here: www.hrw.org/world-report/2009/country-chapters/south-africa
- 2 Andile Mngxitama, The People Versus Phillip: How the ANC Sold us for a Cup, in New Frank Talk: Critical Essays on the Black Question. vol 6, 2010. Self-published. Pg 2
- 3 Thembinkosi Goniwe, Debating and Framing SPace: Currencies in Contemporary African Art, in SPace: Currencies in Contemporary African Art ed, Thembinkosi Goniwe (Pretoria, UNISA Press, 2012).
- 4 Ibid, pg
- 5 Massa Lemu, Gugulective as Biopolitical Collectivism, Third Text, 30:3-4, 2016. Accessed here: www.doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2017.1304686
- 6 Denise Ferreira da Silva, 'On Difference Without Separability,' in 32nd Bienal de São Paulo – Incerteza Viva. Catalogue. Edited by Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças. São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016.
- 7 Olabiyi Yai, 'In Praise of Metonymy: The Concepts of "Tradition" and "Creativity" in the Transmission of Yoruba Artistry Over Time and Space', *Research in African Literatures* 24 (4), 1993.



Fig.01: *Alicia*, 2022
Pallet wood
65 × 58 × 6 cm



Fig.02: *Mabel*, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
72 x 56 x 4 cm



Fig.03: *Obi*, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
66 x 63 x 4 cm



Fig.04: *Peace, Love and Light*, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
101 x 90 x 13 cm



Fig.05: *Nico*, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
83 x 61 x 5 cm

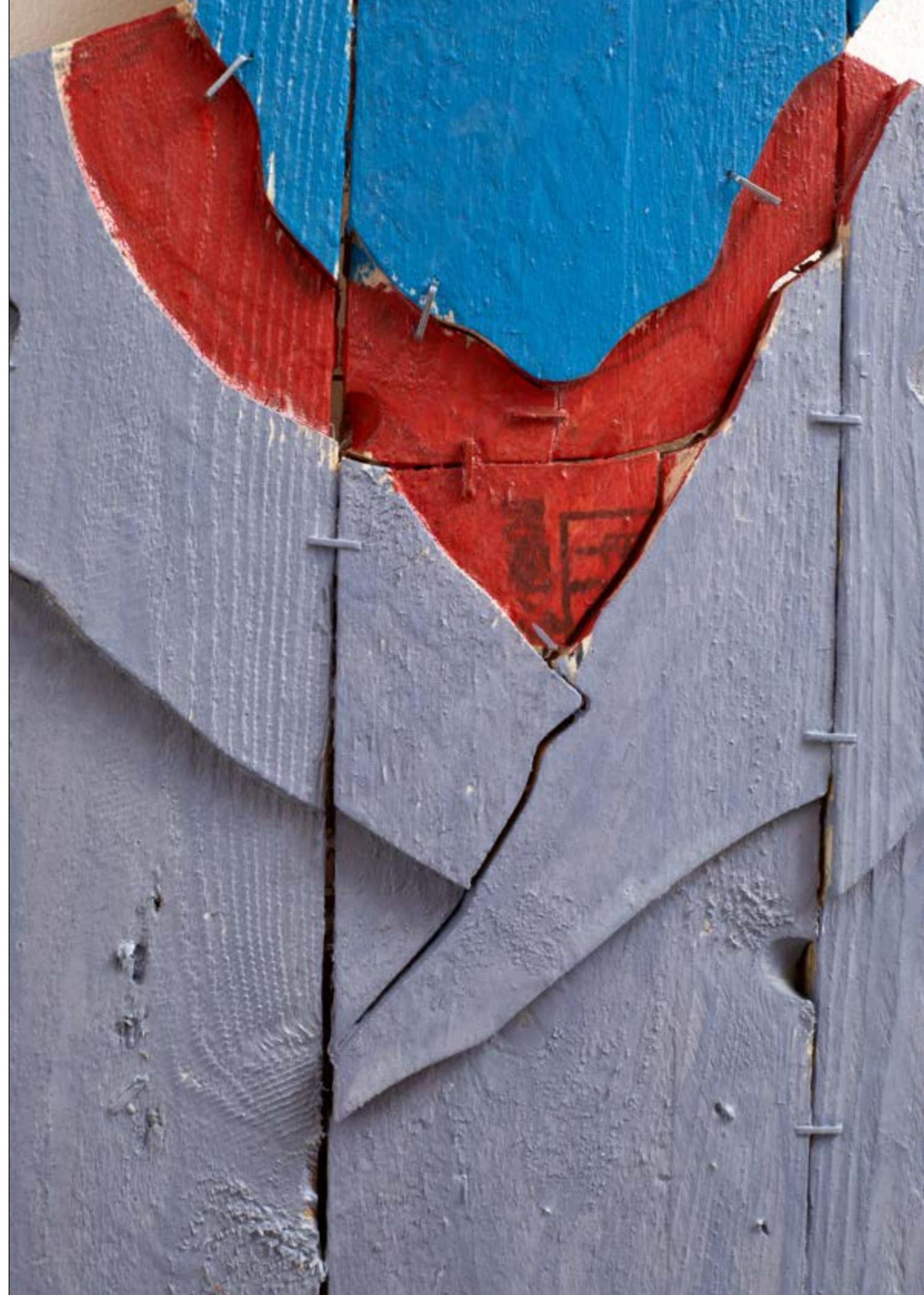


Fig.06: *Benjamin*, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
74 x 32.5 x 4.5 cm

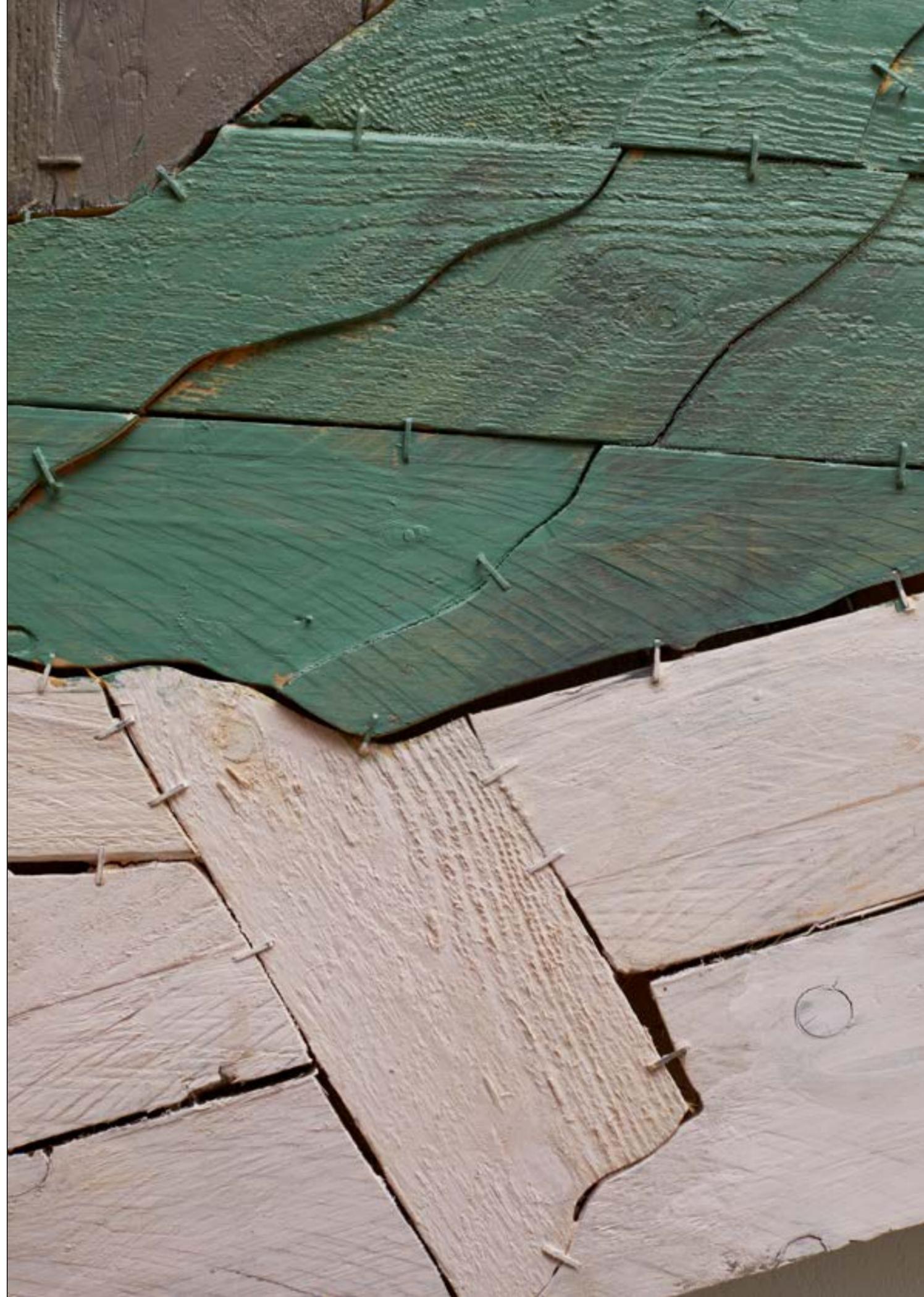


Fig.07: Mueez, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
70 x 48 x 5 cm

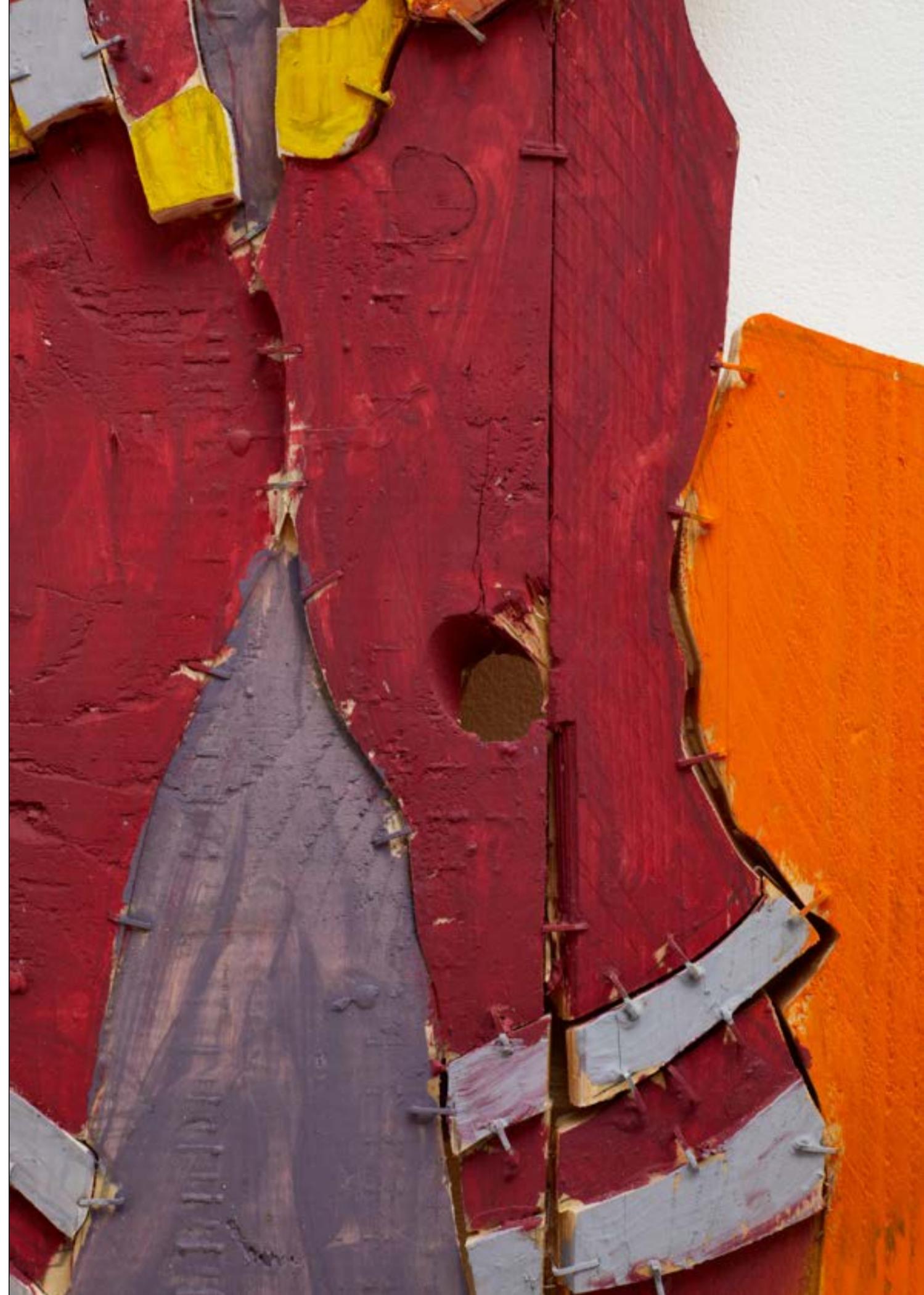


Fig.08: Esho, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
63 x 46 x 4 cm



Fig.09: *Ali*, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
105 x 31 x 4 cm



Fig.10: *Faith*, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
61.5 x 53.5 x 5 cm



Fig.11: *Nana*, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
75 x 45 x 5 cm



Fig.12: Subham, 2023
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
86 x 61 x 5 cm



Fig.13: *Joshie*, 2022
Pallet wood, acrylic paint
113 x 31 x 5 cm





Fig.14: *Pa Jay*, 2023
Pallet wood
85 x 37 x 4 cm



Fig.15: *Mama Special*, 2023
Pallet wood
71.5 x 65.5 x 5 cm

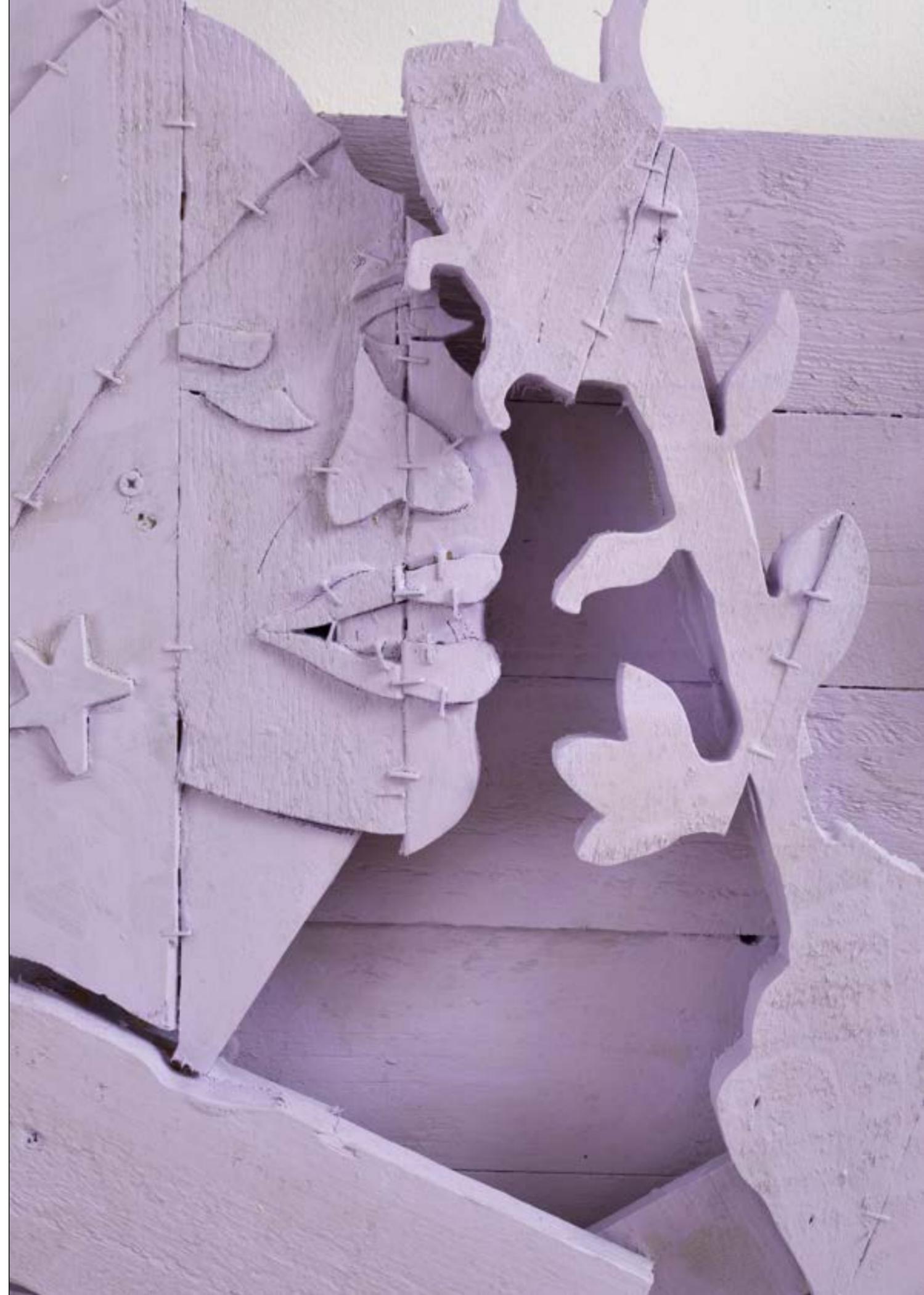


Fig.16: *Fly boy*, 2023
Pallet wood
78 x 62 x 5 cm

Abdulrazaq Awofeso (b. 1978, Lagos, Nigeria) is a sculptor and installation artist. He lives and works between Birmingham, UK, and Lagos, Nigeria. Recent exhibitions include Dakar Biennale (2016), STEVENSON, Cape Town (2016), Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (2017–18), MAXXI, the National Museum of 21st Century Arts Rome (2018), Museum Arnhem (2020) and Ikon Gallery (2022). Forthcoming exhibitions include Museum Arnhem and South London Gallery (both 2023). Awofeso's work features in prestigious private and institutional collections including Benetton Imago Mundi, Laurent Perrier, Deborah Goldman and Yemi Odusanya.

Athi Mongezeleli Joja is a South African art critic and PhD Presidential fellow in Art History at the University of Pennsylvania. Joja has contributed art criticism and scholarly writing to various publications such as Mail & Guardian, Artthrob, Artforum, ASAP/Journal, Theoria and so much more. In 2020, the UK based art magazine Apollo selected Joja as part of Africa's 40 UNDER 40 influential young art thinkers.

Ed Cross works with emerging and established artists across and beyond the African diaspora. The gallery seeks to stage conversations – between practitioners, international audiences and as guided by its artists – to amplify voices historically silenced, and to create space for their independent development. Since launching in 2009, Ed Cross has held exhibitions across the world: from New York to Paris, and London to Lagos, the gallery continues to build on its values of cooperation and curiosity in its new permanent space at 19 Garrett Street, London.



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