



UGONNA HOSTEN

*chi: Altarpieces,  
Liturgy & Devotion*

York Art Gallery  
27 Oct 2023 – 21 Apr 2024

This catalogue has been produced by Ed Cross Gallery to document  
Ugonna Hosten's exhibition *chi; Altarpieces, Liturgy & Devotion* at York Art Gallery.

# UGONNA HOSTEN

## *chi: Altarpieces, Liturgy & Devotion*

In the Artist's Words

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*Fig. 01 Fire*

Depicted are four alligator pepper pods; known in Igboland as *ósè ójí*, these pods with their warm and cleansing properties are used in sacred rituals, prayers and libations.

Within the ritual sphere, these pods act as psychic conductors, believed to possess inherent properties; conduits that enable the invocation and access to negotiation within the spirit world.

Specifically referred to here is a self-purification ritual, which requires the use of the four seed pods; the numerological significance of the pods should be noted and corresponds to the four market days of the Igbo calendar, symbolic of the deities who established the four market days.

An elemental beginning to the heroine's journey, the self-purification ritual is the first cleansing rite of many on the journey. *Fire* is a visual meditation on a purification rite and a light source to illuminate the way.

*Fig. 02 My Mother's Decree: See the tail of the kite*, is the first of two significant dreams I had at the beginning of my research into pre-colonial Igbo spiritual practices. I was brought up in a traditional Christian home where the inquiry into these spiritual practices was taboo.

The heroine is shown within a domestic space and is yet to set out on her journey. As she washes her hands in preparation for her departure, the mother figure points, and her attention is momentarily diverted.

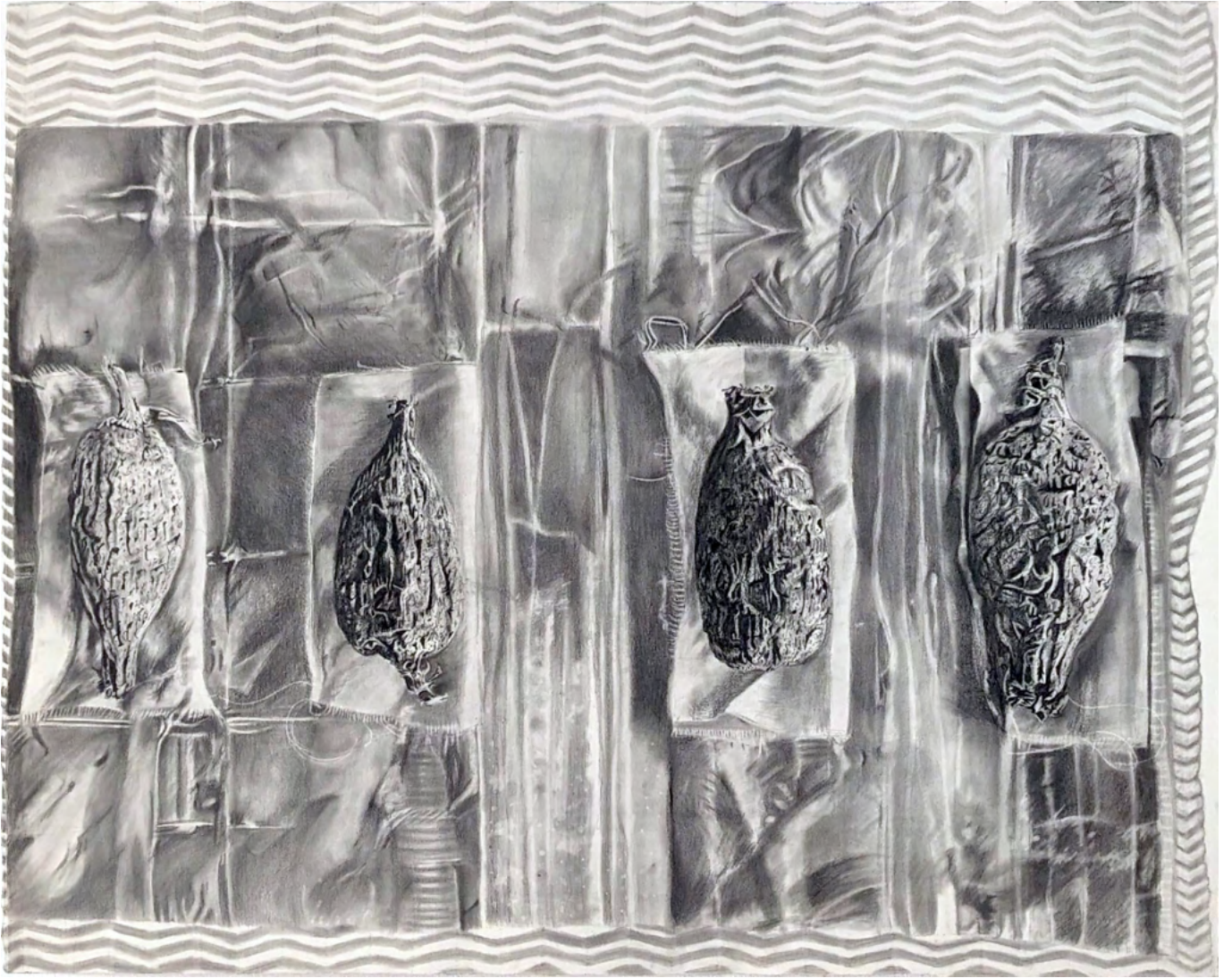


Fig.01: *Fire*, 2019



Fig.02: *My Mother's Decree: See the tail of the kite*, 2019

To the left of the image lies a mysterious territory. The dark silhouetted figure to the left is my sister who died by suicide. She is often featured in my work; in this particular drawing her presence is symbolic of an unknown territory. A beheaded horse, a symbol of strength, courage and freedom lays lifeless on the bottom left.

The title is quoted from an ancient injunction. The forked tail of the kite, a bird of prey, is used as inspiration by specialist blacksmiths to create the *Ogene*, a musical instrument often used in music and dance during rituals. It is a conical shaped twin iron bell, which is hollow and flattish in form. Within the Igbo philosophical worldview, the musical instrument is also the symbol of life; namely the dualistic nature of existence.

The dream can be read as both a warning and a decree from the archetypal mother; a call for the heroine to attune her visual faculties to spaces beyond the confines of the visible plane. For safe passage through the treacherous terrains ahead, she must come into rhythmic balance by fostering a relationship with both her conscious and unconscious aspect.

*Fig. 03 My Father's decree: The way up is the way back*

A solitary father figure from the ancestral realm sits at the table, a chair once occupied by the heroine is now vacant.

With his raised hand, the father has seemingly brought to the table some insight. The table is set but there are no visible signs of plates, it is the words of wisdom that the father has imparted that nourish and propel the heroine forward.

Armed with the boon, the heroine has a frightfully unexpected encounter in the upper realms with a snake, specifically a royal python. In the mythical realms the royal python is the child of the river goddess Idemili and is revered by the Igbos. The python's mythical lineage unites the elemental qualities of earth and water, and the serpent is symbolic of the continuous cycle of transformation.

The goat, often used in sacrificial and offertory rituals, was inserted into the dreamscape as a way to amplify the impending act of crossing a threshold. The goat stands in for the heroine and thus becomes a carrier, a symbol of an offering.

As in the previous dream, my felt experience of this dream was one of

both a warning and blessing. The archetypal father figure offers counsel to the heroine; that to ascend on her journey, she must face the energies that terrify her.

*Fig. 04* This message is heeded in *I loosened my tongue and sang our song*; the heroine is in an embrace with the snake and signals the beginning of a relationship.

*Fig. 05* *Prepare a table before me* evokes an instructive command from the gods. The heroine is urged to prepare a table, a sacred place for communion and sustenance.

She chooses to create a sacred space – an altar. This takes shape in various forms, namely as a threefold offertory module as in *First reading*, *Fig. 06* *After the matter of light*, and *Yearnings*, and in the form of a supplication, *Fig. 07* *the beginning of a prayer*, a calling forth, as in *At the dawn of each new day*, *Fig. 08* and *Prepare a table before me I & II* *Fig. 09* *Fig. 10*

In this metaphysical space, a silent language of symbolic objects present felt realities for meditation and affirm her intentions for calling on her chi.

Symbolic objects that reappear in the constellation as motifs are:

#### *Attainment*

The U-shaped sculpture with ten spheres in orbit, featured on the altar in *Yearnings*, is my symbolic expression of the number ten in the mystical Igbo numerology system. The number ten represents the spiritual modality of healing and represents a complete attunement with the mystical tide of the universe, the divine.

#### *The head*

The head symbolises an initiatory process known in alchemy as *putrefactio*. In the alchemical parable *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, a sequence of operations is performed on a King and Queen; the first step in the process is one of a beheading. In alchemical terms the head is associated with consciousness and beheading signifies separating consciousness from the body.

The process performed on the King and Queen encompasses a process of death, rebirth and transmutation which then leads to the formation of the self. The self is an archetype within that drives us towards healthy balance, greater growth and wholeness.



Fig.03: *My Father's decree: The way up is the way back*, 2019



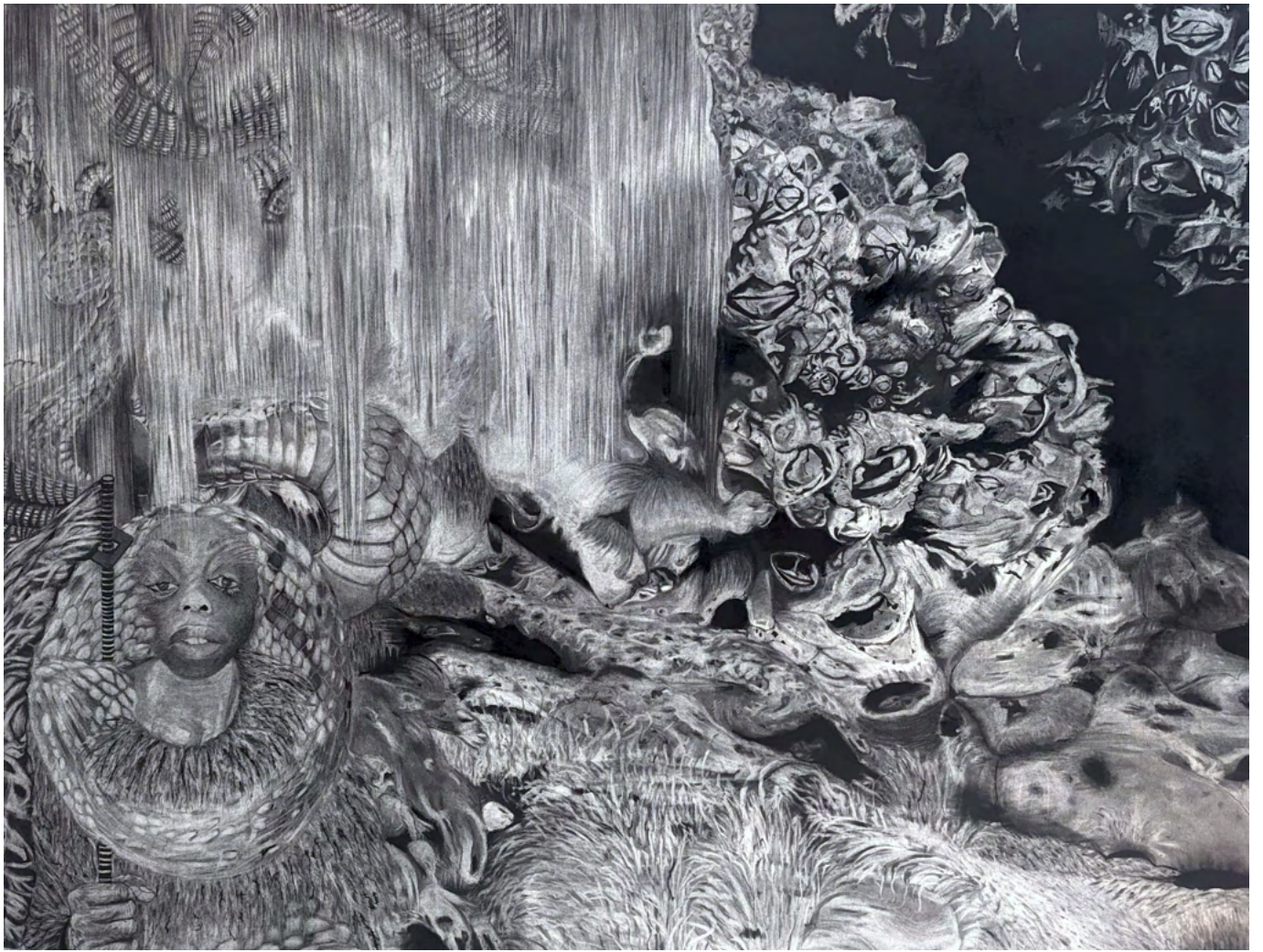


Fig.04: *I loosened my tongue and sang our song*, 2019

By presenting the head on the altar, the heroine makes a declaration of readiness; to begin the initiatory process of separating the animating conscious principle.

*The stone; a unification of body and spirit – the self*

The elongated stone with a translucent, water-like form protruding out of it symbolises the union of matter and spirit – the self.

United are two contrasting elemental forms: stone and its density with the fluidity of water. The self is a part of our psyche which encompasses both our conscious and unconscious and the goal of the process of inner alchemy is to bring both aspects into an optimal relationship with each other.

The ultimate goal of the heroine on her voyage is to meet and establish a relationship with her chi, in the hope that her chi provides divine guidance in achieving this integrated wholeness.

*Cowrie shells*

For me, the cowrie shell is a two-fold symbol that conveys the notion of currency both in the spiritual and physical realm.

A legal tender in Igboland during the late part of the 19th- and early part of the 20th- century, cowrie shells are used in divination rituals performed by an afa priest (oracle); to gain insight into the thought of the gods. During a divination ritual the unique formation in which the shells fall denotes a specific answer from the gods.

Inhabitants of the sea, cowrie shells symbolise the dark, unknowable depths and act as psychic conductors in seeking wisdom in those depths.

The presence of the cowrie shell on the altar, expresses the heroine's desire to commune and conveys the specific mode in which she wants to establish a connection as a way to honour sacred traditions.

*Prepare a table before me I* is a recitation for protection.

In front of a looming beaded mask, a translucent horse-like spirit is brooding protectively over a stone object.

A cowrie shell rests on a pyramid form, the combination anthropomorphises the cowrie shell and reads like a cloak or vestment of a clergyman.

In front of the cowrie shell is a dark mound, a protective charm with pins protruding from round beads in a clustered formation.

In this recitation, the heroine calls for protection three times. Firstly against unknown malignant spirits, then protection of her stone (the self) and lastly protection of the cowrie shell; the instrument and psychic conductor for her mediumship.

### *Prepare a table before me II*

Some of the motifs previously seen in *Prepare a table before me I* reappear in this altar constellation with the addition of the continuation of a recitation for protection. The hand depicted on the altar is that of Atum – a creator deity often depicted in magical texts as a powerful talisman to drive away evil spirits in Egyptian symbolism. To the right of the image is an object that I describe as similar to a celestial globe. The object, entitled *Moon and matter in orbit*, provides the audience with a macro level glimpse of the imaginative realm that I conceived. It is representative of the dwelling place of the gods and spirit entities and charts both their movements, in relation to the position of the moons (of which there are many)...a place where the offerings are received and where the rituals take place.

### *At the dawn of each new day*

Extracted from an invocation, the title *At the dawn of each new day*, in its visual composition takes the form of a supplication.

In the language of traditional invocations – the format of the beginning of a prayer – is typically a calling forth, for all of creation in its totality to gather and commune.

Gathered in front of a mirror are: myself the artist, Ebezina (a sea-like figure who is an embodiment of the heroine's chi), and a collection of symbolic objects.

The mirror personifies the unconscious and has the compelling capacity to draw the imagination into its seeming depths.

*At the dawn of each new day* conveys the sense that beyond the mirror image lies another world, thus simultaneously reflecting the known and unknown.

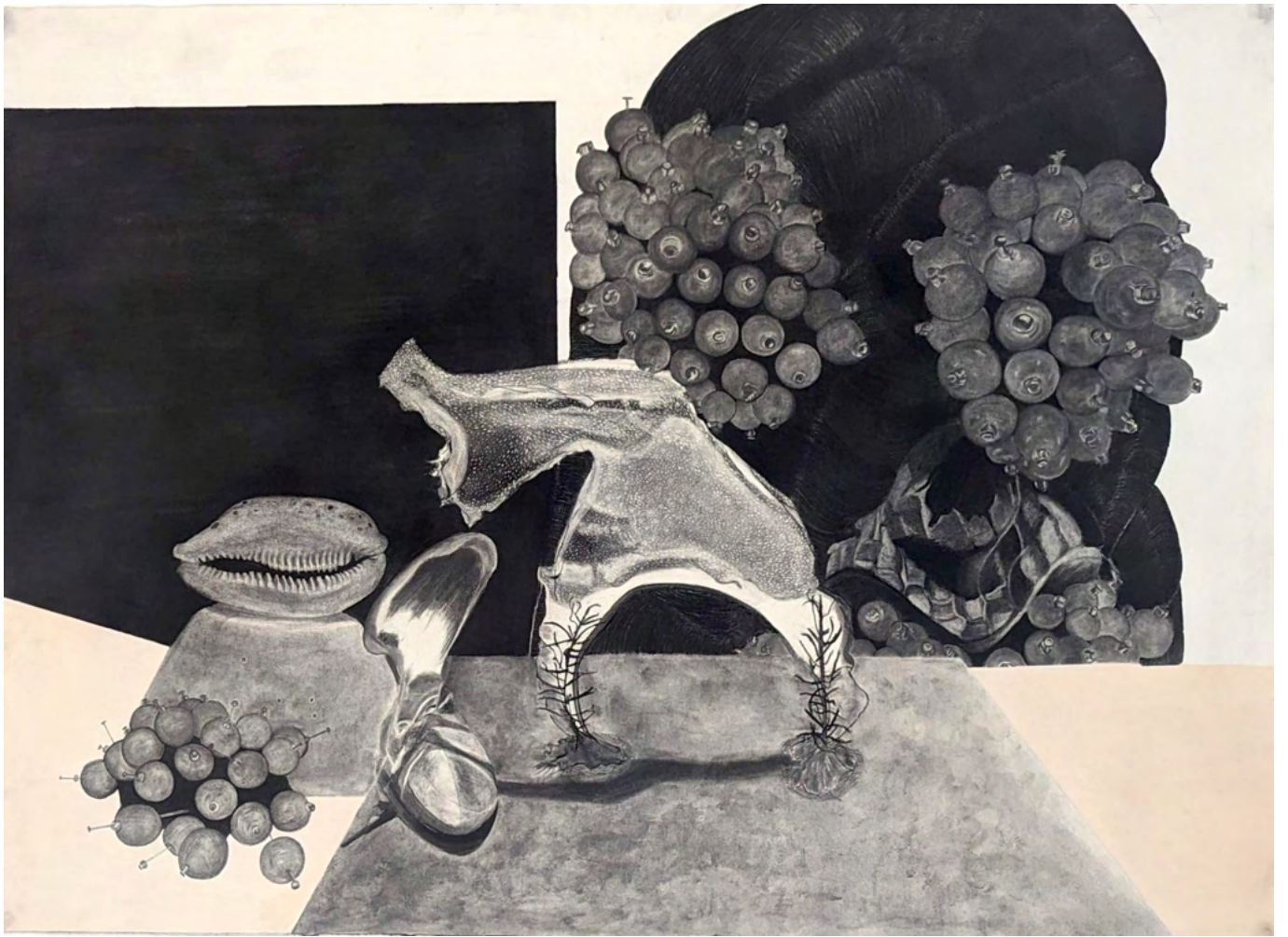


Fig.05: *Prepare a table before me I*, 2019

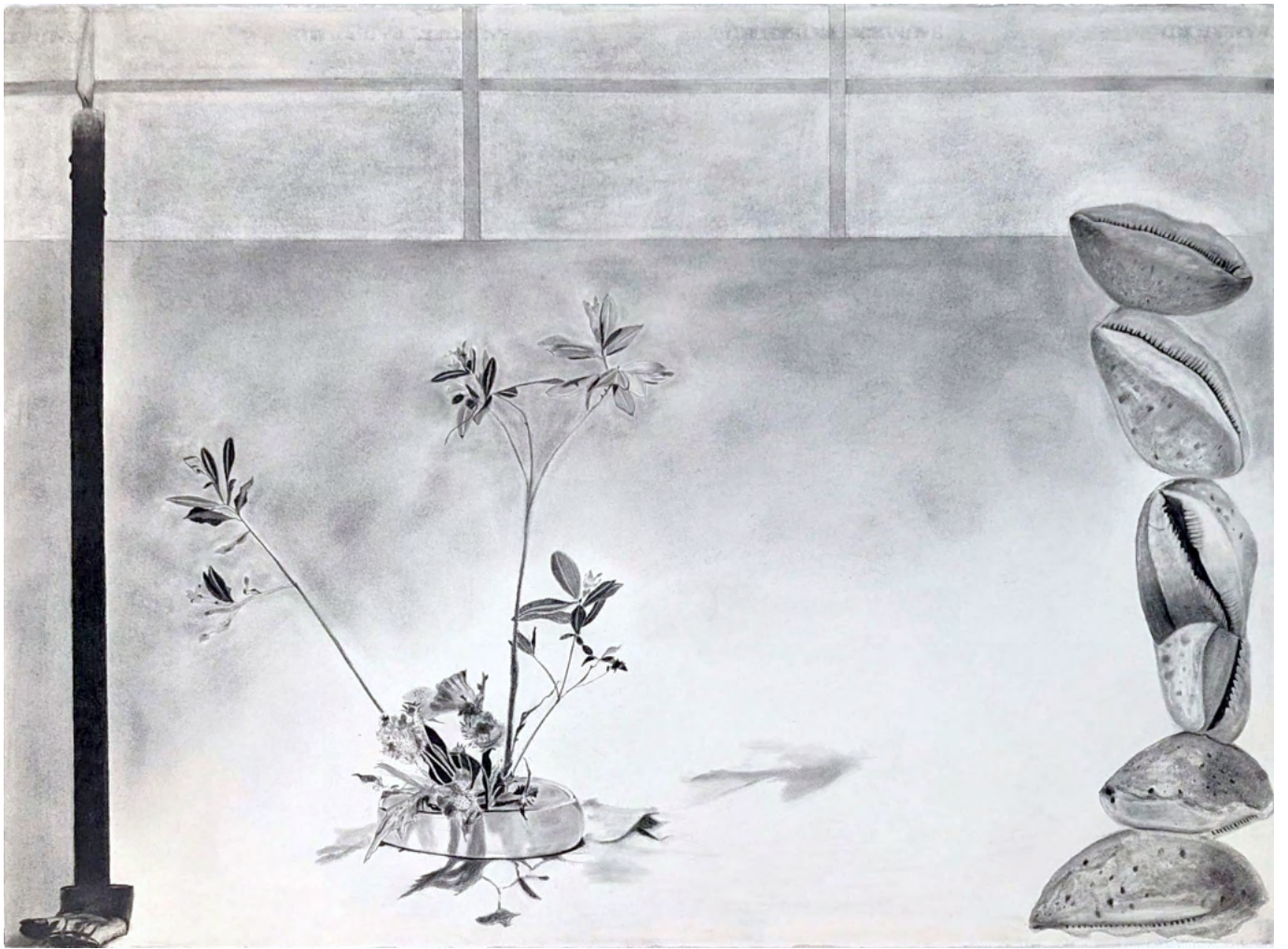


Fig.06: *First Reading, 2020*

Fig. 11 *Emissaries of the gods I & II*  
Fig. 12

Whilst the altarpieces act as visual prayers, these light bearers attest to the old age wisdom that, when the gods are called upon, other agents and intermediaries are also awakened and often eavesdrop.

Fig. 13 *In the wake of our daughter's becoming*

In a dark, barnacle-encrusted cave blossoming with lush vegetation, an intimate initiation ritual takes place in the presence of various spirit entities.

The title suggests a wake keeping is in progress, it is reminiscent of a shamanic pattern of an initiation of descent, death, and rebirth.

The heroine is in a secret subterranean realm and her whole body is offered in its entirety as a vessel laid down whilst the fresh tide floods the cave floor.

The body of the initiate is united with the elemental properties of the earth and water, signalling that a transformation has taken place.

In this initiation the spirit of the heroine has been released and purified in the water. As the head of the heroine levitates and hovers above the threshing waters, the transformed spirit has joined with the purified body and created a union of body and spirit.

The heroine's body is no longer corporeal and has attained a new level of being, we the viewer are witnesses to a symbolic death (ego death) and a rebirth.

Fig. 14 *Ask the morning light to adjourn her ascent for a little while longer*

The heroine is in an act of a cleansing ritual which brings together the elements of water and fire, this invokes the presence of the heroine's guardian spirit, Ebezina.

The title is evocative of a rapturous encounter with a beloved, or long-lost friends engrossed in the midst of a midnight conversation not wanting the ecstatic experience to come to an end.





Fig.07: *After the matter of light*, 2019





Fig.08: Yearnings, 2020

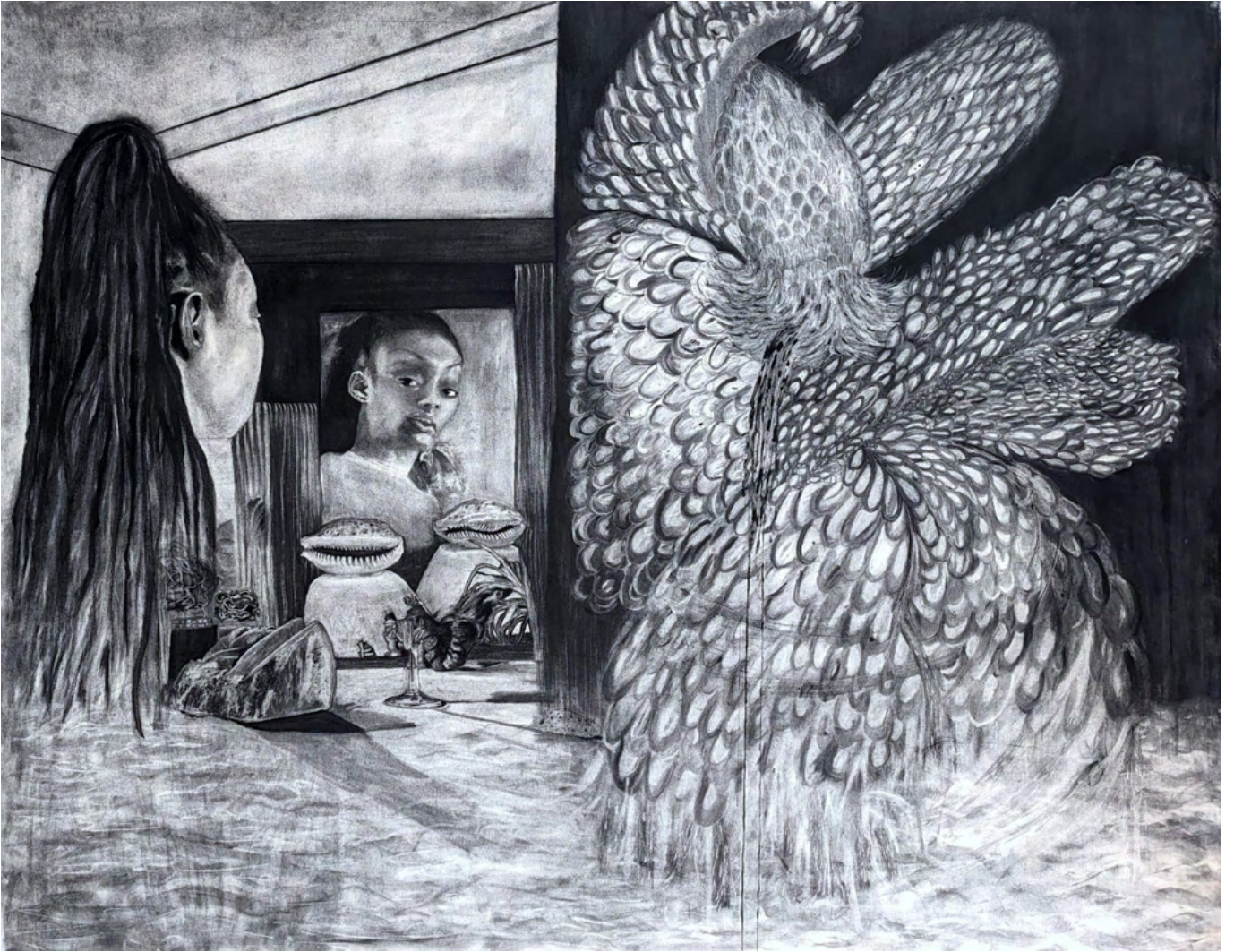


Fig.09: *At the dawn of each new day*, 2019



Fig.10: *Prepare a table before me II*, 2020



Fig.11: *Emissaries of the gods I*, 2019

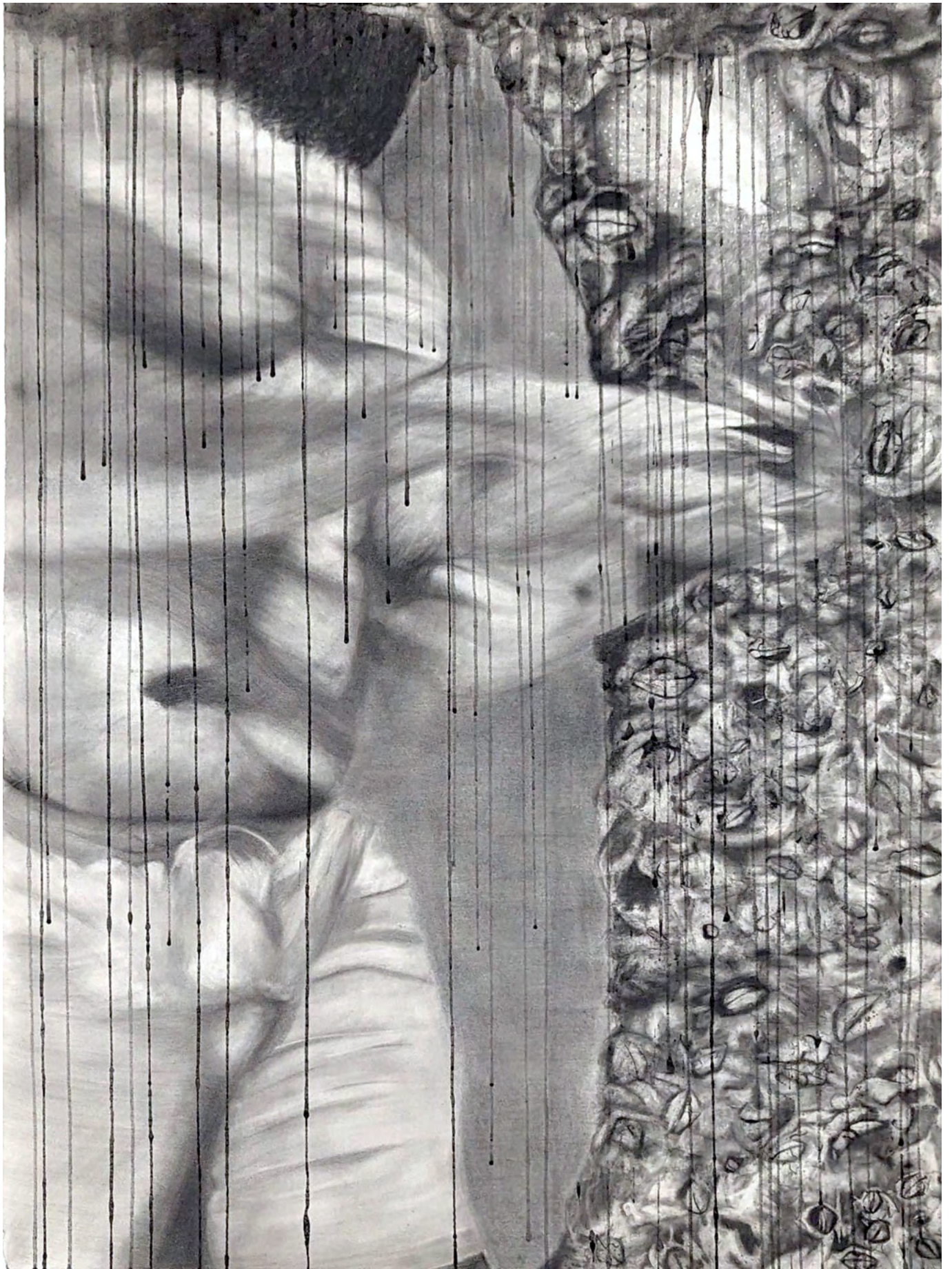


Fig.12: *Emissaries of the gods II*, 2020



Fig.13: *In the wake of our daughter's becoming*, 2019

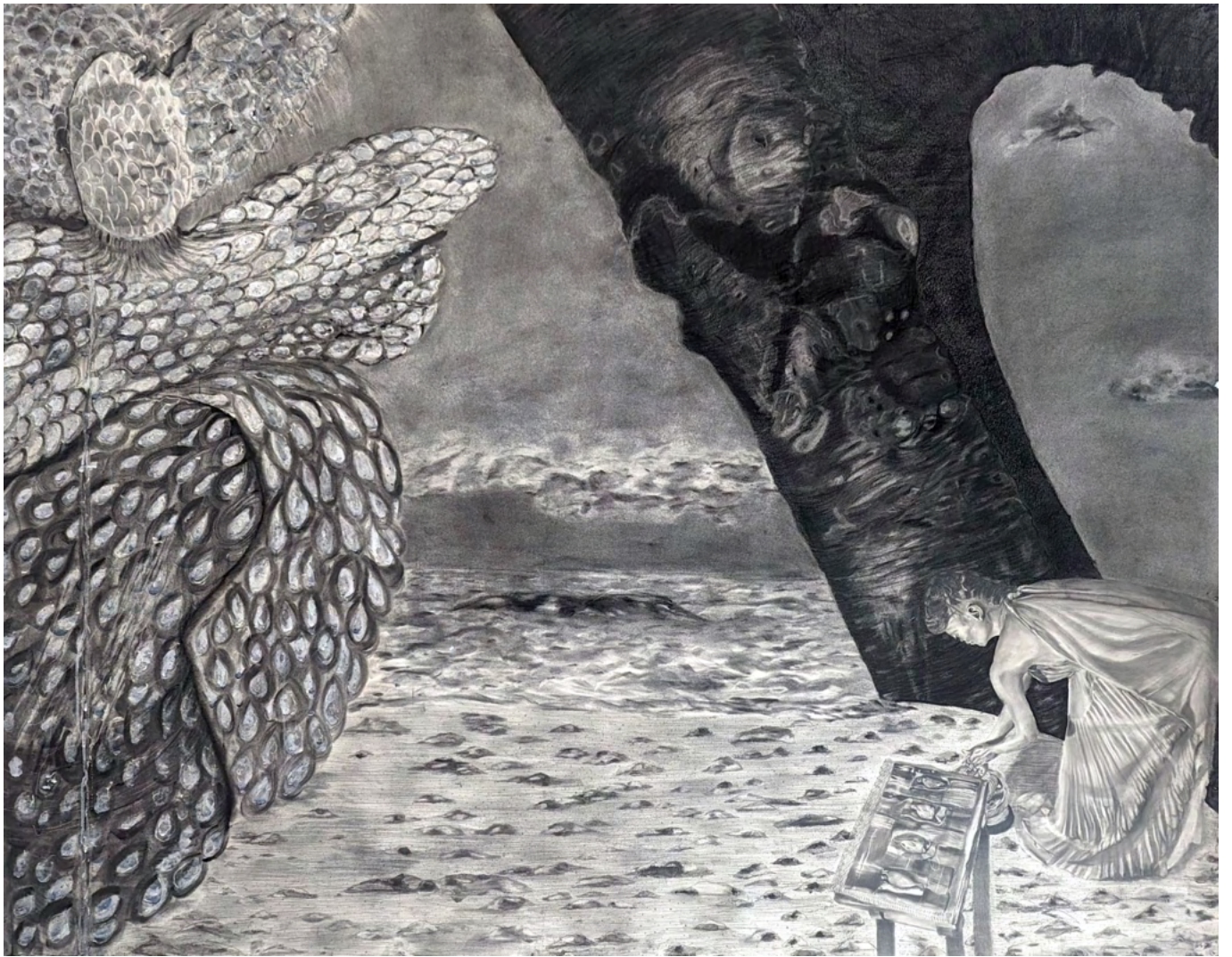


Fig.14: *Ask the morning light to adjourn her ascent for a little while longer*, 2020



Ugonna Hasten (born 1982)  
*Ebezina*, 2023  
Ceramic  
Courtesy of Ugonna Hasten



Ugonna Hosten's exhibition highlights include *1-54 New York*, 2024;  
*chi; Altarpieces, Liturgy & Devotion*, York Art Gallery, York, 2023;  
*Instinctive Travels & The Paths of Rhythm*, One Paved Court, London, 2022;  
Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, London, 2021; Ty Pawb Print International,  
Wales, 2021; Woolwich Contemporary Print Fair, London, 2021, and  
*Humanalia(n)*, One Paved Court, London, 2020.

Hosten is represented by Ed Cross gallery, London.







E D C R O S S

Ed Cross Fine Art Ltd  
19 Garrett Street

London EC1Y 0TY  
United Kingdom

info@edcrossfineart.com  
+44(0)7507067567

edcrossfineart.com  
@edcrossfineart