



*A dance of days
where dreams are
particles in motion
messengers of yearning
faraway notes calling in
Yesterday
Today
Tomorrow*

from “*Calling*” by Ada Udechukwu



Particles In Motion

ADA UDECHUKWU



May 1 - July 25, 2021

Curated by

SMO 

CONTEMPORARY ART





Particles in Motion: the Web of Life in Ada Udechukwu's Art & Poetry

Background

The idea of this exhibition started over lunch in Lagos in 2017, when Ada Udechukwu returned to Nigeria for a brief visit. Ada and I grew up together in post-Biafra, East Central State, even though she was a few years my senior. Our conversation evolved from news of family and friends, to speaking about her art and writing, of which I am a big fan. That day we agreed we should work on an exhibition and bring her work home. The few years have seen many changes, including her moving from the East to the West Coast of the United States, and adjusting to life during the debilitating pandemic. Yet all the while, Ada continued to create visual and literary magic, connecting to the “cause of humanity”. I am delighted that finally, four years later, our dream has been realized, and I have had the privilege of curating an exceptional body of her work.

Particles in Motion is an important exhibition celebrating the home coming of an artist whose elegant, deep and layered art and poetry, culturally rooted in childhood memories of growing up in the hills of Enugu and Nsukka, have blossomed into expressions which have grown finer and richer over the years.

Nuance, Flow & Depth

When one engages with Ada Udechukwu's work, one becomes drawn into a complex world of nuance and flow. Her voids speak clearly, while the kaleidoscope of her poems, interwoven with her lyrical lines, demand us to be silent, in order to feel the soft vibration of her artistry.

Udechukwu is an artist whose pen meanders across inner and outer worlds, connecting thoughts, memories, and feelings across patterns, lines, and monochromatic spheres. The fragility of her complex web of expression, draws on decades of life experience, and quietly comes to rest in our consciousness.

Her poetry echoes the pathos of life, stretching across over half a century of poetic musing, floating in sync alongside ink drawings and watercolor paintings which were created in the last few years living in Los Angeles, where she currently has her studio.

Udechukwu's childhood memories are rooted in the ochre and red earth of the hills and plains of Eastern Nigeria. Her early writing reflects the seasons and undulating landscape of Nsukka, home of the University of Nigeria, where she

won the Prize for Best Poet in 1979-80, before graduating in 1981 with a BA in Language and Literature. Her description of the rains resurrect earthy images of tropical downpours which she describes deftly, as if from an aerial view:

*Nsukka awash
bloodlines holding earth and sky
etching beaten paths*

(from "Rains")

Since the early 1980's Udechukwu's creative voice gained momentum through her textile creations, her pen and ink drawings and water color paintings, alongside her writing. In 2005 she completed her MFA in English and Literature at Bennington College in the United States. Just two years later, Udechukwu was shortlisted for the prestigious Caine Prize for African Writing, for her short story, "Night Bus".

Her writing mirrors the ebb and flow of her forms. She draws inspiration from nature, which reflects the inner joys and turmoils of everyday living. Her words, patterns, and repetitions are rooted in an emotional landscape of tropical and temperate memories. From the dry "riding wind's breath in curls" (in Harmattan Fires) to the still flow of the ocean, we see an artist in tune with her environment, reflecting its seasonality in her writing:

*a wave has passed my shore the tide is coming in
there is a turbulence raging
the hurt is here
the pain is mine*

(from "The Tide Is")

Her words capture feelings, raw and taut on the one hand, and smooth and lucid on the other; a cycle which resonates with our inner-worlds. We recognize a familiar isolation in her poem *The Tide Is*, which is echoed in many of her drawings, such as *Solitude*, and *Silence Lingers*, in which she creates a rounded void in the center of her figures, a familiar un-touched space of private grief or pain carried deep within.

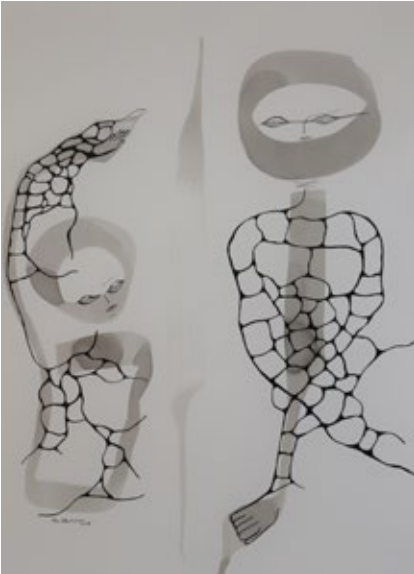
*...on my rock
i sit at the fringes*



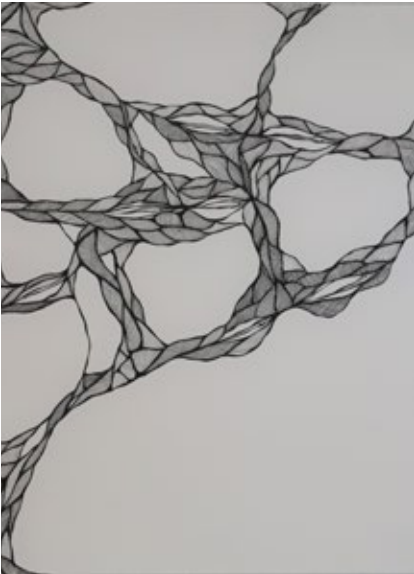
solitude, Ink on paper,
2018, 36 x 26 cm



silence lingers, Ink on paper,
2020, 43 x 35.5 cm



two of us are here, Ink on paper
2018, 41 x 31 cm



inward-outward IV, Ink on
paper, 2020, 41 x 31 cm

*watching the orchestrated medley
the cacophony of the sea*

(from "The Tide Is")

Udechukwu draws her beings out of a mesh of life experience, some rendered with dark lines like an intertwined net, while others reach out in eager anticipation of connecting with the other. In *Two of Us Are Here*, we see a smaller and a larger figure separated by a thin line, yet connected by their gaze and similar patterned interior spaces.

This otherness, which the artist experienced through growing up as a mixed race person of American and Nigerian nationality, never completely belonging or feeling accepted in either place, comes to the surface in the pregnant voids and missing links in her art. Like the floating face, squeezed unequally between two vibrant ecosystems, her small *Untitled* water color on paper work created in 2020, subtly reflects this ethnic and emotional fragmentation. She draws faces with partly open eyes, wrinkled in self-awareness, carrying a burden like two stone walls, unrelenting and stoic. These faces also mirror the artist's habit of acute observation, culminating artistically in interpreting experiences which have marinated for years in her sub-conscious mind.

Udechukwu's *Inward Outward* series, created in the midst of the corona pandemic, depict black lines rippling across sparsely populated worlds, with hatching resembling intertwined leaves, forming a complex yet loose structure of thought and feeling.

*There blows with this storm a multitude of leaves
brief flashes
that
tell
of
all
gone
by
All gone by in a whisper-wind...all gone by.*

(from "For You")

Cross-hatched patterns engulf squinting eyes which appear to see and ensure that the web holds together. Similar emotion is expressed through Udechukwu's word web:

*ice-laden limbs crash
splintering inner boundaries
in a measure of days
ice-drop rhythms against my face
fragile threads
tangled lines
unmemoried Me*

(from "Ice Storm Night")

It is this "splintering of inner boundaries" and "unmemoried fragile threads" which harmonize perfectly with *Tension*, and *Dark Washes Over*, two drawings in which the life mesh is held together by four fingered hands, joined across, within, and around darker elements. These hands stretch across, reminding one of the fundamental pull towards community despite typical covid imposed physical alienation. A community which holds together globally despite the lockdowns, when extra-ordinary human courage displayed by health care workers, buttressed by technology and social media, has created new opportunities of remaining connected.

*Love lights our strides in billowing flakes
stinging swirls, heartstring pulls
lifting wind's breath in twilight*

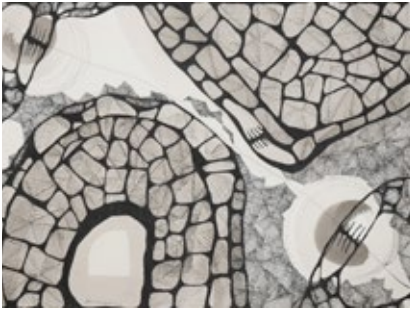
(from" Calling")

Udechukwu describes "underwater caverns" whose "breath blows calm in me" tapping into internal reservoirs of love and hope, encouraging us to collectively surmount our deepest voids. In *Here Somewhere*, Udechukwu's soothing greens and blues are a strong counter-point to her monochromatic works. She creates color hues, almost like mist covering delicately drawn pen and ink details, making the viewer step closer to appreciate the dexterity of her subtle, veiled message.

Udechukwu's artistic home coming, seventeen years after her last exhibition held in Lagos in 2004, is a celebration of color, line, poetry, connecting "inward



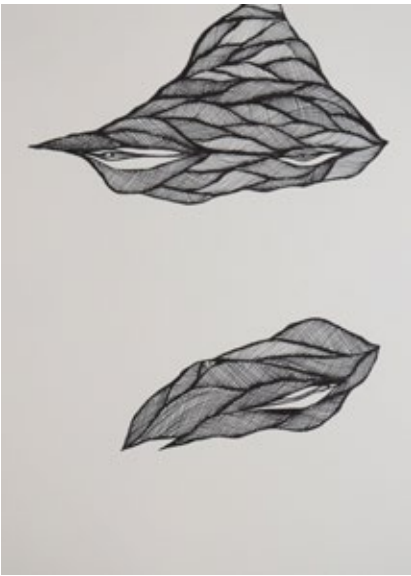
Dark Washes Over, Ink on paper, 2018, 36 x 26 cm



Tension, Ink on paper, 2018, 26 x 36 cm



Here, Somewhere, Watercolour on paper, 2020, 36 x 26 cm



Inward-Outward III, Ink on paper, 2020, 26 x 18 cm

outward" worlds with so much elegance and grace. Each drawing and poem make us appreciate the symmetry, symbolism and equilibrium her art inspires. Her rounded forms and patterns, create emotional connections in which we gently embrace the physical, emotional, and spiritual arrivals and departures of this thing called life:

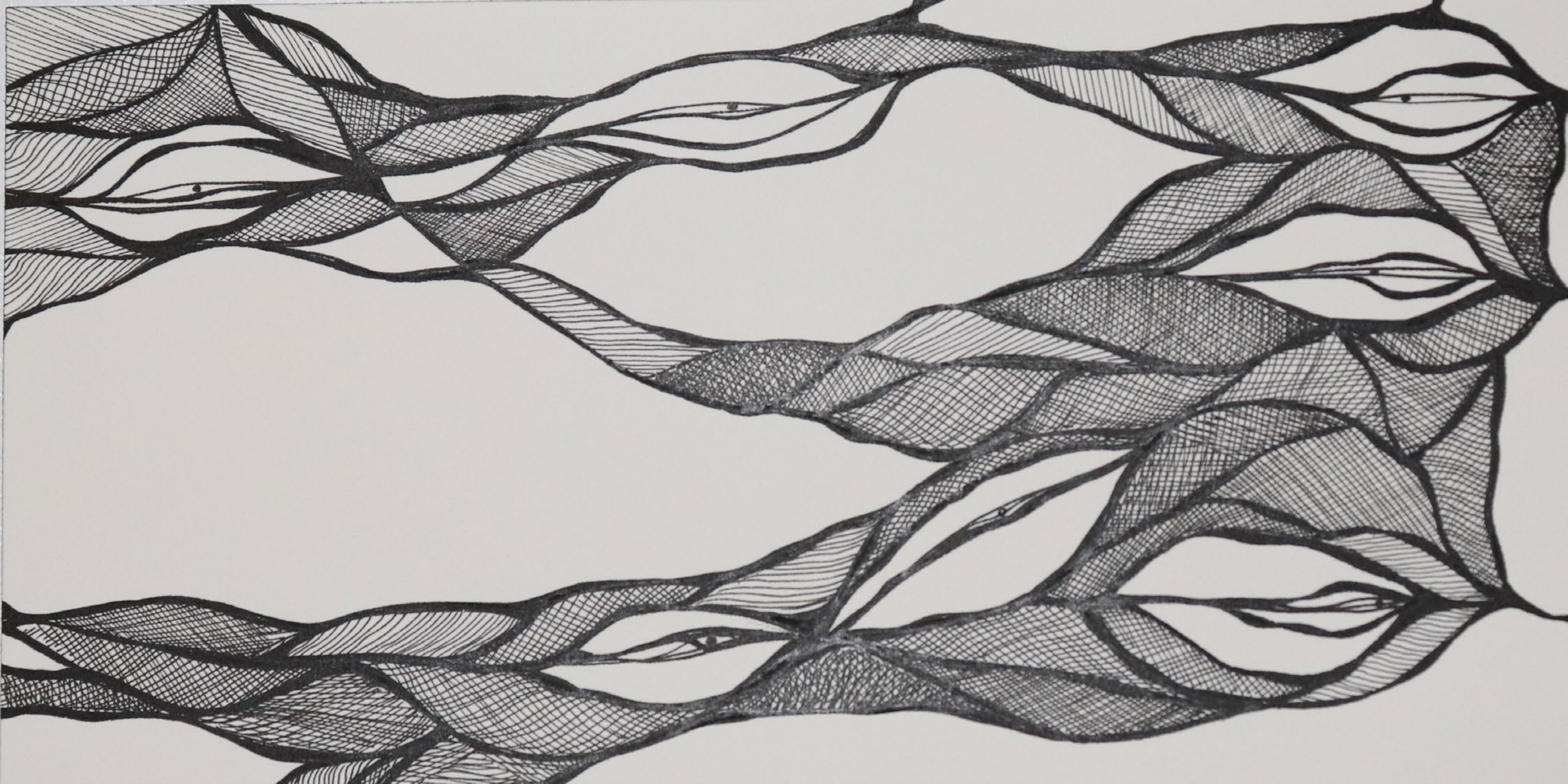
*Here,
In smoldering dry-leaf whispers
I am drawn down corridors in which Time hastens the finality of arrival, lingers among journeys,
embraces the solitude of departure And
I stand sentry at the border.*

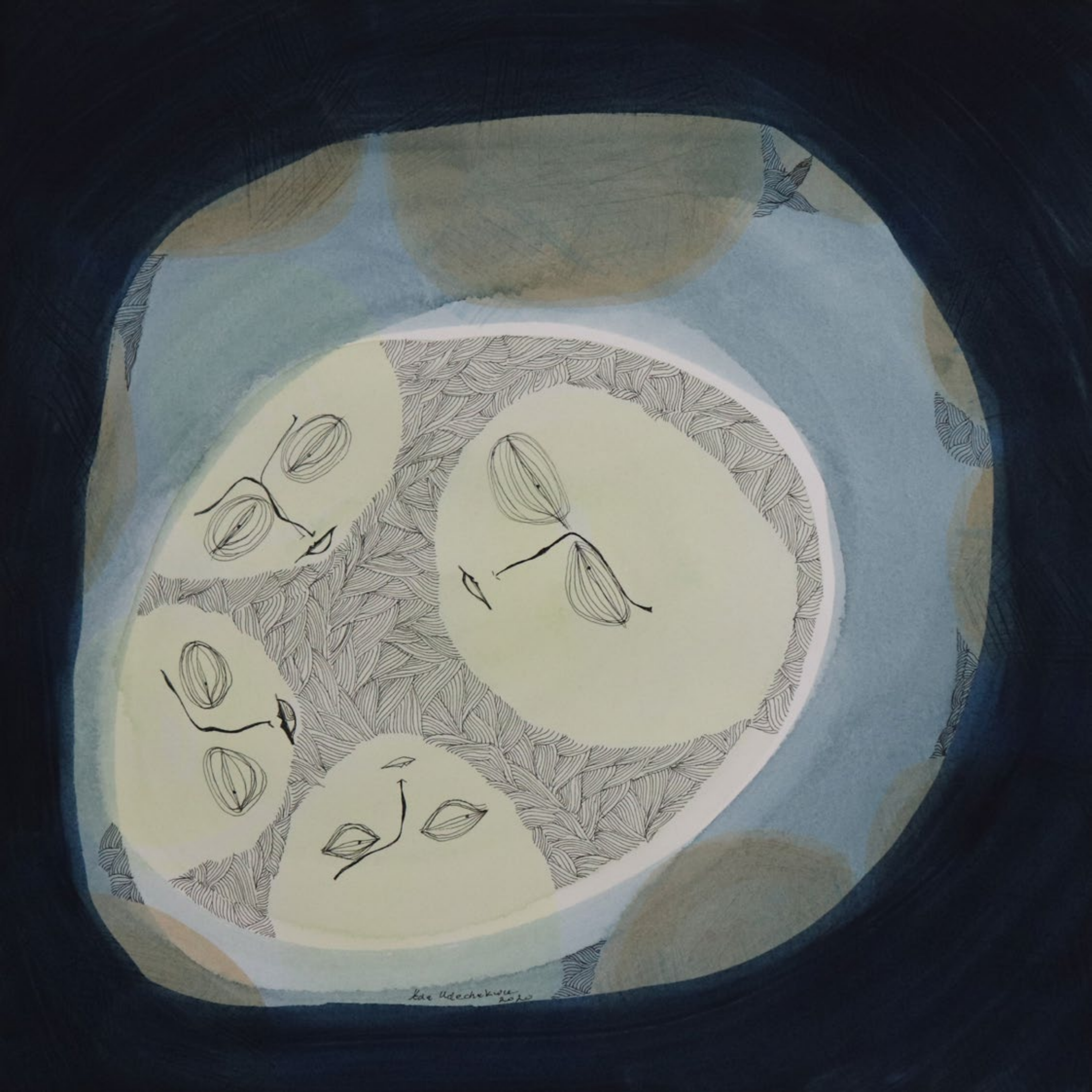
(from "Harmattan Fires")

I hope you take enough time to wander quietly through Udechukwu's *Particles of Motion*, enjoying her serene narratives. We have waited too long to welcome her back to her native land, and she has not disappointed. She has shown us that her artistry has matured over the years and has crystalized into a complex, elegant, and rhythmic synergy.

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago
Curator
Founder & Artistic Director, SMO Contemporary Art

Lagos, April 2021





Ada Udechukwu (b. 1960) is an artist and writer. She holds a BA in English and Literature from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and an MFA in Creative Writing and Literature from Bennington College, Bennington Vermont.

She has had several exhibitions of her drawings, paintings and textiles. Her solo exhibitions are: Hand Drawn and Painted Fabrics, Nsukka, Nigeria (1990) and InMidmomenT: lines. spaces. boundaries., Canton, New York (2000). A selection of her joint and group exhibitions include: An exhibition of Marada Design: Featuring Mary Ezewuzie and Ada Udechukwu, Nsukka, Nigeria (1984); Fabric Dimensions: The Art of Ada Udechukwu and Elizabeth Ohene, Enugu, Nigeria (1990); Uli: Different Hands, Different Times, Nsukka, Nigeria (1992); Celebrating Africa [with Olujimi Gureje and Achmet Dizi], Lagos, Nigeria (1993); The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, Washington, D.C. (1997-98); and Lyrical Lines: The Works of Obiora Udechukwu and Ada Udechukwu, Greensboro, North Carolina (2003). Her work is in private collections in Europe, Nigeria and the United States and in the collection of the Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey.

She has published a book of poems, Woman, Me (Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1993) and Herero (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 1996). Her short stories have appeared in The Atlantic Monthly, Callaloo and PMS: Poem Memoir Story. In 2007, her story "Night Bus" was shortlisted for The Caine Prize for African Writing. She lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

A single line...a loaded brush drawn across paper...ink spreading on wet surface. This initial instinctive spontaneous gesture on blank surface evolves into meditative practice as a drawing or painting progresses. And the original propulsive image of an experience—a person seen, an encounter with a stranger, or perhaps someone I know, or my witness to the social and political landscape that surrounds me—is transformed as I find the *story* it holds.

Honoring that narrative is crucial, and finding the language to do so, central to my practice as a writer and artist. An important influence on my aesthetic is the traditional Igbo art of *uli* with its emphasis on brevity of statement, linearity, abstraction, and balancing of positive and negative space in composition.

In my work space is a presence: whether it is the white of paper or subtle patterning of background areas. And in the interaction of image and space on paper, emotion is central to my examination of memory. It shapes our relationships with ourselves and others, and its contours hold what we will and will not carry.

Ada Udechukwu

In Midmomen T

fall songlines begin
unfolding, refolding...in
leaf-lines and midribs
Autumn, 1999

winds speak in silence
filtering dust-held patterns
inwoven gold-thread
Harmattan, 1967

Nsukka awash
bloodlines holding earth and sky
etching beaten paths
Rains, 1997

Ada Udechukwu



on the way down, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 41 cm

Harmattan Fires

In this season
Serenity takes me
Towards dreams that travel as raging
flames,
Riding wind's breath in curls,
Heralds of a great silence
In
Which
Only
I
Escape among the ashes.

Here,
In smoldering dry-leaf whispers
I am drawn down corridors in which
Time hastens the finality of arrival,
lingers among journeys,
embraces the solitude of departure
And
I stand sentry at the border.

Ada Udechukwu



when memory betrays, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 26 cm

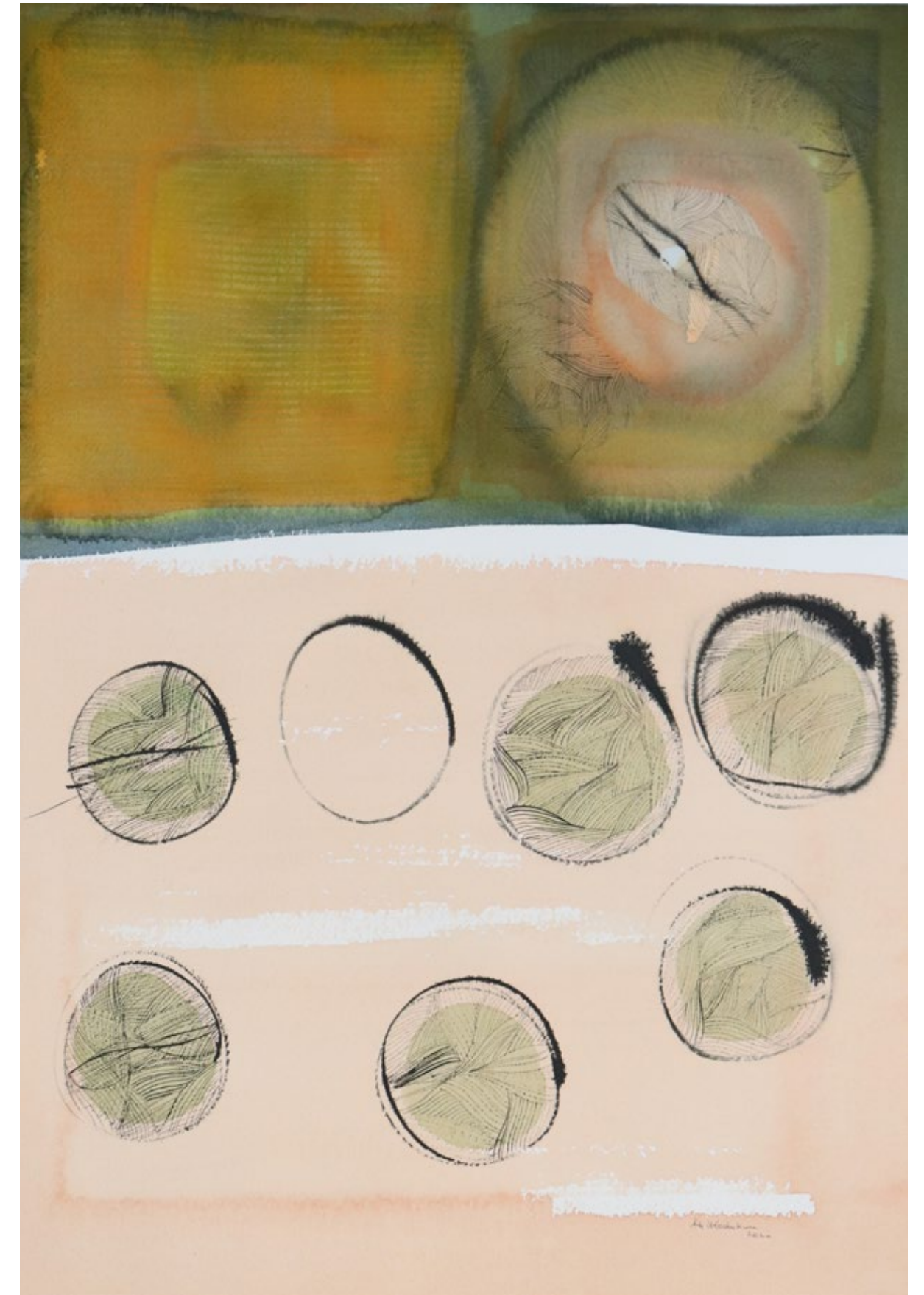
The Tide Is

a wave has passed my shore
the tide is coming in
there is a turbulence raging
the hurt is here
the pain is mine

on my rock
i sit at the fringes
watching the orchestrated medley
the cacophony of the sea

far, far away
the clarion call of the waves
and a chord strikes a response

Ada Udechukwu



one of us got away, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 51 x 36 cm



portals, Watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 36 cm



return is not possible, Ink, pencil and watercolour on paper, 2020, 51 x 36 cm



untitled, Ink on paper, 2020, 19 x 28 cm



totem, Ink on paper, 2018, 31 x 16.5 cm



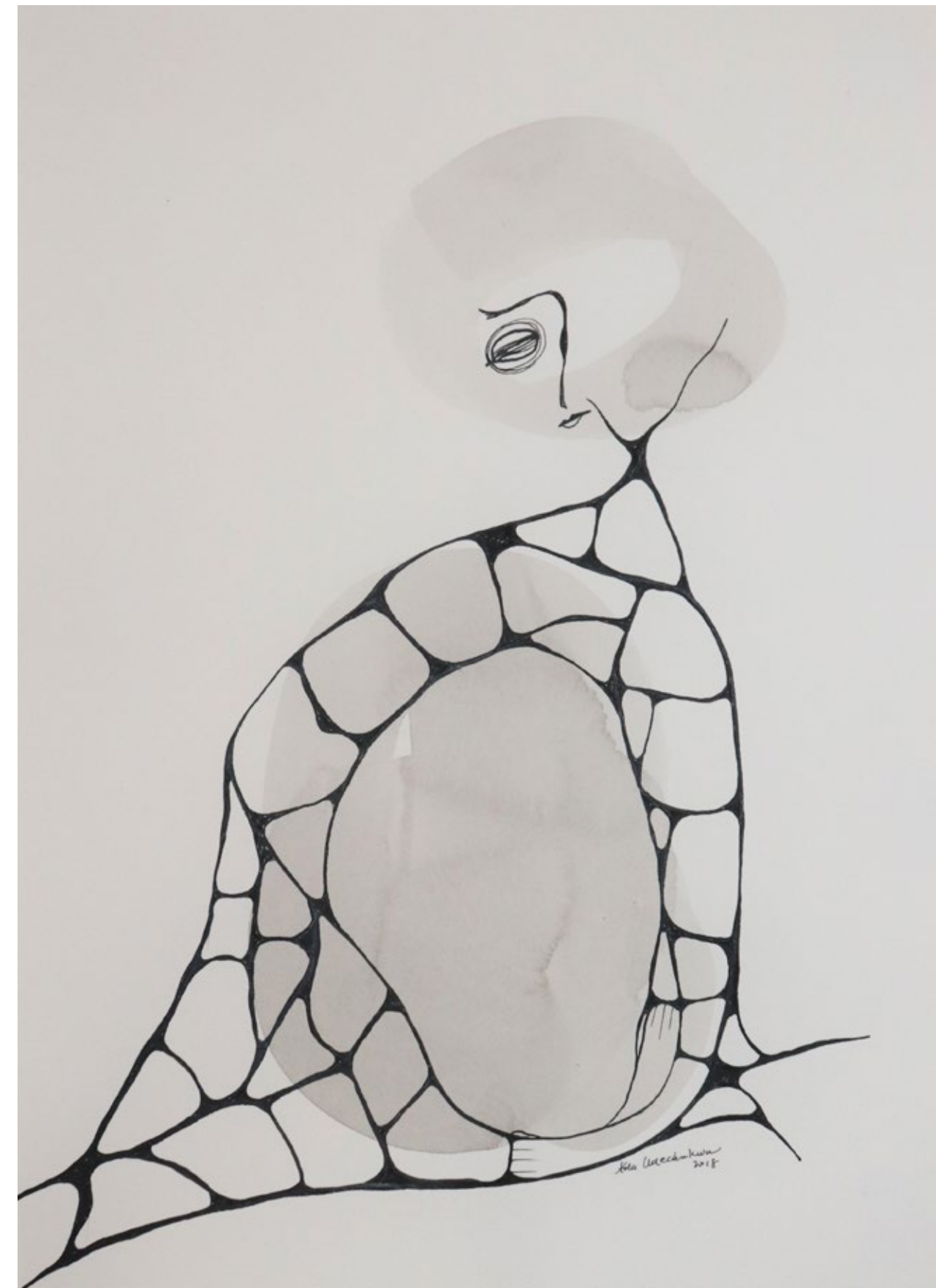
in flight, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 23 cm



untitled, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 23 cm



how fragile this containment, Ink on paper, 2018, 31.5 x 23 cm



solitude, Ink on paper, 2018, 36 x 26 cm

A Crossing

Be drawn
within these depths
and find me
an image that speaks of you
that tells
that holds in whispers
secrets of the bridge between us
as I stand on this bank
in a quietude that I rage against
with still waters lapping, lapping
and my load laid down.

Ada Udechukwu



untitled, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 41 x 31 cm

Distance

Step back beyond the shadows

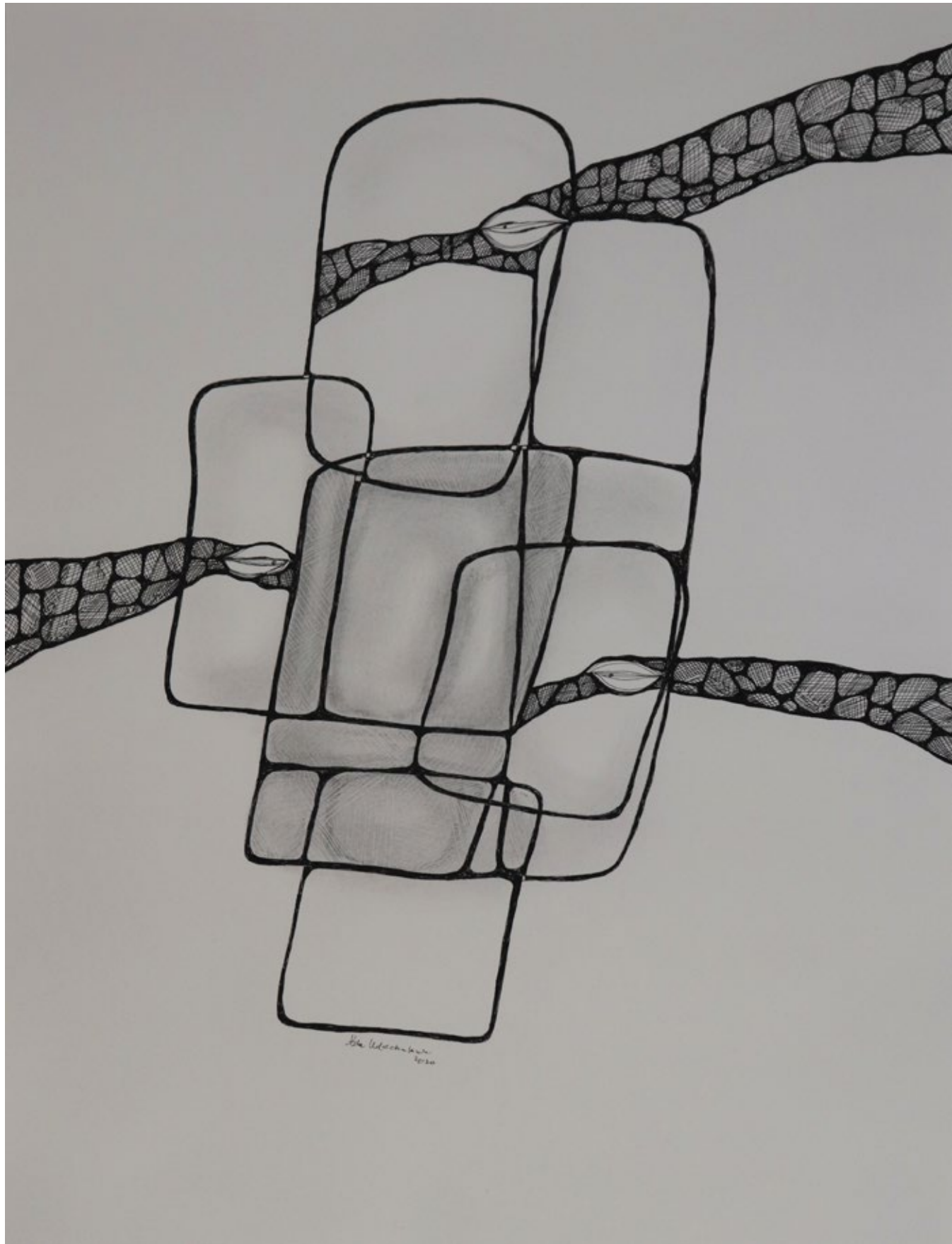
Join me
in days filled with echoes of what was once,
and is now not.

Stay with me Love
as I walk this road again
counting the emptiness between us
those milestone weights, chains that weigh
in a search for familiars
among silence-tone footprints
caught in a wind that blows betrayal into fragments
and a song in the shards left behind.

Ada Udechukwu



refraction in this pool, Ink, pencil and watercolour on paper, 2020, 41 x 31 cm



untitled, Ink and pencil on paper, 2020, 41 x 31 cm

Ada Udechukwu

And The Elegant, Diagnostic Line

I am increasingly challenged by the potential of extending the borders of experience in my art by combining these two tributaries in ways which would enrich the exploration of emotional experience that is central to my creative involvement.¹

Ada Udechukwu, 1997

Prelude

I do not remember now if my first encounter with Ada Udechukwu's work was through her drawing or her poetry. I suppose that the passage of time, and the aftermath of the traumatic and unforgettable dark days of the mid-1990s Nsukka, have compromised my memories of those years and details of my inaugural introduction to Ada's work as an artist and writer. While I am concerned presently with her newest drawings, made mostly in the last three years, it is impossible to fully appreciate the scope and depth of her artistic accomplishment without keeping her poetry in critical proximity. There are at least two compelling reasons for this. First, she has always reminded us of the synergetic relationship between the two forms and the simultaneity of their role in the making and sustenance of her creative imagination. Second, as I intend to argue shortly, despite that her drawing and poetry do not depend on each other to reach their full artistic potential and thus exist as autonomous visual and literary forms, the very formal qualities that define her aesthetic are manifest in equal measure in drawing and poetry. Therefore, if I can no longer figure out which of her two expressive forms I first came upon, it says less—I think—about my mnemonic capacities and more about the futility of segregating them as if one could ever come close to the full essence and scope of one without engaging with the other. This has been the underlying condition of Ada's work, and the latest drawings reaffirm it with compelling conviction. They make clear that she has reached her mature artistic phase in which drawn lines become, with alluring power, analogical marks of poetic lyricism and indexes of emotional states. The expressive clarity and consistency of this body of work suggests that she has arrived at the place, after decades of search, where she seems at ease asserting an authoritative, confident artistic voice, even as she continues to probe with deeper resolve themes of love, emotional and existential fragility, and unstable identities, that have pervaded much of her oeuvre.

Nsukka

Ada Udechukwu has been associated with the Nsukka School, the epochal artistic efflorescence that emerged at the University of Nigeria during the late twentieth century. This is not the place to give a comprehensive account of the work of Nsukka artists. However, I want to note some core aspects of what one might call the Nsukka School aesthetic as it helps us make sense of Ada's stylistic trajectory and the broader historical contexts of her work.

The arrival of Uche Okeke (1933-2016) at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka art department in 1971 soon after the end of the Biafran War (1967-1970), spurred a dramatic transformation of the art and research with which the program would be known for decades. A decade earlier, he was among the leading new voices on the Nigerian art scene calling for new art and literature informed by a new appreciation and investigation of indigenous African artistic and literary forms. At Nsukka, he spearheaded research into Igbo Uli mural painting and body drawing, supported by two generations of artists and scholars, some of whom would be included—along with Ada—among the artists presented at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art by Simon Ottenberg in 1997 as members of the “Nsukka Group.”¹ Despite the marked or subtle differences in the work of these artists, they all invariably adopted the fundamental elements of Uli: the sinuous, lyrical line, a corpus of abstract and simplified representations, and dynamic balancing of negative and positive space. While most trained as painters, some of their best works were in ink and wash, which was reminiscent of the liquid pigment with which Igbo women rendered the body drawing. Moreover, ink and wash made possible, perhaps more than any other common artistic medium, that very quality we have come to associate with the Nsukka artists’ work: the elegant combination of the masterfully rendered graceful line and airy composition of stylized form and space—in short, pictorial poetry.

Strong as the connection between the Nsukka art aesthetic and poetry as a literary form, it bears noting that most the group's leading artists are published poets. A few have won national and international poetry prizes. The origins of this phenomenon of poet-artists can be traced on the one hand to Okeke who was already publishing poetry while in art school, and, on the other, to the 1960s and early 1970s Nsukka humanities community that Isidore Okpewho once described as “perhaps the highest concentration of stellar scholars and artists to converge on any Nigerian campus.”² Besides Christopher Okigbo who had tremendous influence on Eastern Nigerian poetry at mid-century, there were other accomplished poets, including Okogbule Nwonodi, Akomaye Oko,

1 See Ada Obi Udechukwu, “Poetry and Art of the Nsukka School: A Panel Discussion”, in Simon Ottenberg, ed., *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 154

2 Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997). The exhibition, *The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, Nigeria*, that accompanied this publication held at the National Museum of African Art, Washington, DC, Oct. 22, 1997—April 26, 1998. The book and exhibition feature the work of Uche Okeke, Chike Aniakor (b. 1939), Obiora Udechukwu (b. 1946), El Anatsui (b. 1944), Tayo Adenaike (b. 1954), Ada Udechukwu (b. 1960) and Olu Oguibe (b. 1964).

3 Isidore Okpewho, “Preface,” in Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria*, xi.

Dubem Okafor; poet-artists such as Kevin Echeruo, Bons Nwabiani and Obiora Udechukwu; novelists, dramatists and literary critics such as Chinua Achebe, Michael Echeruo, Emmanuel Obiechina, and Donatus Nwoga. Thus, in the post-war period, Okeke's strive to reanimate the Nsukka art program, accompanied by his investment in poetry and folklore, found a receptive ground in “the veritable symposium”³ of Nsukka-based writers, poets, dramatics, musicologists, critics, and the art department's students and faculty.

Still, the fascinating and peculiar humanistic world of Nsukka at mid-century and the influence of Uche Okeke do not quite explain the specific marriage of drawing and poetry in the work of the group of artists associated with that university. Why drawing and poetry? We might come closer to an answer, perhaps, by returning to the character and formal conditions of Igbo *uli* and its relationship with the lyrical arts of song and dance. I am thinking here of Uche Okeke’s account of a performance by the *ljele* mask from Enugu Ukwu, in today’s Anambra State, in 1972, particularly the song by the mother-of-the-masquerade, ljele Nwume, a woman of great honour who led the mask’s musical ensemble. According to Okeke, she narrated how, following an unsuccessful career as trader, she turned to *uli* drawing and painting, and that it was only then that “the gift of songs” came to her.⁴ More than providing us a small detail about what must have been ljele Nwume's fascinating life story, this account does something more; it speaks broadly to the mobility of artistic talent and common origins of the expressive arts, which are believed to be under the guardianship of Agwu, the unpredictable deity of creativity, divination and healing, and more specifically to the idea that *uli* and singing share similar aesthetic and technical sensibilities. This latter point is critical, for it explains why an exercise in *uli*—which harnesses the individual's lyrical imagination or sensibilities and the bodily techniques necessary to express it—can logically serve as training for the art of song, dance, and poetry. Once gifted with lyricism in one art, the individual subject is only a short step away from other lyrical arts of image, sound, performance and text. Reflecting on ljele Nwume's art two decades later, Uche Okeke noted that:

She is a musician, a very good singer, a very powerful singer, a folk singer, at the same time she is a very important *uli* artist. I think that this relationship, this lyrical form of *uli* also induces some musical feeling in one, the fact of drawing and writing in lines.⁵

Thus, for Ada Udechukwu, whichever art that manifested first, the other was only a latent force to be turned on under the right conditions, such as the intense artistic and literary scene in Nsukka at the beginning of her career as an artist-poet.⁶

4 Okpewho, “Preface,” x.

4 Uche Okeke, “Igbo Drawing and Painting: Two little-known art forms,” *Ufahamu* 6:2 (1976), 106-115. I have used *uli* and Uli throughout the text to refer respectively to the traditional Igbo art form and the modern style developed at Nsukka.

5 See Ottenberg, *Nsukka Artists*, 148.

6 Most of the artists of the Nsukka School trained as visual artists but took up poetry in the process; a few, like Ada Udechukwu and Greg Odo, studied literature before turning to drawing.

This transferability of artistic talent across visual and literary genres, specifically across drawing and poetry, connected as it is to both the intellectual culture of Nsukka and to Igbo philosophy and aesthetic, constitutes the inalienable basis and principle of her art, and she has emphasized this point herself:

As a writer and as a visual artist, my poetry, drawing, and painting support and complement each other. I think of my art as providing varied creative journeys within the flow of its tributaries.⁷

Distances

One of Udechukwu's important early drawings, *Self-Portrait* (1991; **fig 1**), is indicative of the extent to which her work was originally tied to the Uli aesthetic of the Nsukka artists and, more specifically, to that of her husband who, as noted earlier, was a leading figure of the school. This ink-wash drawing is composed of three dominant lines; two of these—the feathery broken arc outlining a segment of the figure's head, and the soft undulating, slightly horizontal swoosh of the upper lip that ends to the right in a needle-sharp point—seem to lie below a third darker line moving horizontally to the right before rising vertically, and fattened, to suggest the nasal ridge. The artist has taken substantial liberties in this composition, interested not so much in a naturalistic rendering of her facial features as in creating an anatomical poetics of a subject immersed, perhaps trapped, in an existential pool, her eyes, the soul's window, barely held above the aqueous plane. The formal protocols of this drawing, consistent as it might be with Nsukka School's fondness for the elegant, lyrical line and composition, allow Udechukwu to engage in what she would call the “visual interpretation of an emotional state of the mind.”⁸

Years before Udechukwu made the 1991 *Self-portrait*, in which she demonstrates her confident draughtsmanship and facility with ink-brushwork, she took to fashion design—after her earliest tentative *uli*-influenced pen-and-ink, during the early 1980s—to better understand and familiarize herself with *uli* techniques and aesthetic. Whereas traditional Igbo *uli* was made on walls and the human skin, and whereas paper was the standard support for Nsukka School drawing, Udechukwu turned to making simple clothes on which she drew with fabric inks abstract designs based on prominent *uli* motifs. By seeking to the deliver, with ink-loaded brushes, the bold gestural brush strokes defining the design motifs on the ample compositional space offered by the cloths, she learned the bodily comportment and coordination similar to those generations of *uli* artists used especially to decorate walls. Moreover, by repeatedly rendering her cloth designs based on motifs from documented *uli* lexicon, she did not so much seek to memorize their specific shapes as internalise the formal sensibilities, that is the lyricality of linear elements and spatial arrangements. Once she completed these lessons, and moved from cloth to paper, her drawing, exemplified by the 1991 *Self-portrait*, henceforth, relied on and expressed *uli* lyrical sensuality (See also, “*In the Temple of My Familiar*,” 1990; *Companions*, 1994).

⁷ See Ada Obi Udechukwu, “Poetry and Art of the Nsukka School: A Panel Discussion”, in Simon Ottenberg, ed., *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), 154.

⁸ Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria*, 210.



Self Portrait, 1991,
ink on paper, 15 x 20in



In the Temple of My Familiar,
1990, ink on paper, 16 x 12in



Companions, 1994,
ink on paper, 28 x 15in

In fact, more than any other artist associated with Nsukka in its heyday, Udechukwu deployed the very elements that guaranteed the association of modern Uli drawing with what I have called aesth-ethics⁹ or socio-political commentary, to explore emotions and the psycho-geography of the self. Where other artists used their drawing as commentary and critique of Nigerian postcolonial condition, Udechukwu is more introspective, frequently questioning her relationships with her internal and external worlds. In her hands, thus, art (and poetry) are readily available and effective tools of self-analysis and enunciation:

For the greater part of my life I have struggled against internal and external boundaries, journeying in search of a space that continually eluded me. A space where I might be free of the often confusing and contradictory signals that a biracial person faces. It took me time to realize that the place I was looking for lies within...¹⁰

The artist has occasionally noted the impact of the Biafran War on her understanding of her place in the world. Evacuated with her family to the United States at the onset of the war, that experience unmoored her from the experiential and social certainties of her Eastern Nigerian childhood. Even more, the reverse dislocation caused by her return to Nigeria after the war's end deepened a feeling of cultural rootlessness and subsequent struggle to anchor herself to shifting, precarious grounds and boundaries of her intersectional identity. This biographical detail is crucial to understanding how art and poetry became for her laboratories of self-inquiry and why moments of existential turbulence serve as catalysts for what she has called “monologue by inner self, an inner self that needs to be listened to.”¹¹

The Biafran war, and the centrality of Igbo cultural identity in the making of the Nsukka school might explain, I suggest, the distance between Udechukwu's introspective drawings and the more socially engaged, genre and folkloric themes that dominated the school's work. For whereas direct experience of the war shaped and sharpened the socio-political consciousness of many Igbo, including several of the artists associated with the Nsukka school, Udechukwu's absence from Biafra during the crucial war years, pushed to the fore her own personal relationship not with an imagined community (Biafra, Nigeria, USA, Igboland) but with people whose lives have touched hers. Being away from the scene of the war's violence and deprivations, and the unfamiliarity of the post-war Eastern Nigeria to which she returned as a child, imposed a trauma, at once deep and personal, a psychological distancing from the very horrific experiences out of which the affective solidarities associated with being Igbo, Biafran. Thus, while she was drawn to the artistic and literary world of Nsukka that began with her training in the English Department where she published her first poems and drawings (as the art editor of *The Muse*, the student journal), she also set out on a journey of self-rediscovery, of prying open the soul's interiorities, as a countermeasure to the powerful forces arrayed against the individual subject

⁹ I discussed the concept of “mma” which encapsulates idea of the beautiful as a condition of the good in Obiora Udechukwu: *Line, Image, Text* (Milan: Skira, 2017), 19-20.

¹⁰ Ada Obi Udechukwu, *Nsukka Artists*, 161.

¹¹ See, Ada Obi Udechukwu, “Essence / distills / and the dawn of the moment is here,” in *Woman Me* (Bayreuth: Boomerang Press, 1993), n.p.

existing outside normative boundaries of race, nation and ethnos. In Igbo *uli* and the modern explorations of its aesthetic at Nsukka she found a visual language that reinforced her poetic sensibilities yet connected to an old artistic tradition that depends on the diversity and distinctiveness of individual expression.

If the experience of wartime dislocation shaped Udechukwu's self-identity, and her relationship with her intersecting worlds as a biracial woman, mother, wife, writer and artist, the second forced departure from Nigeria in 1997 amplified her inwardly-turned gaze, and invariably inaugurated the full emergence of her artistic selfhood. At the height of the military dictatorship of General Sani Abacha in the mid-1990s, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka went through what I had earlier referred to as its dark days. The appointment by the regime of a Sole Administrator to run the affairs of the university, and national strikes by the academic staff union, resulted in the unlawful 1997 arrest, detention and prosecution of several Nsukka professors, including the artist's husband Obiora Udechukwu. Consequently, the family fled Nigeria in the summer of that year and has lived in the United States since.

Silences

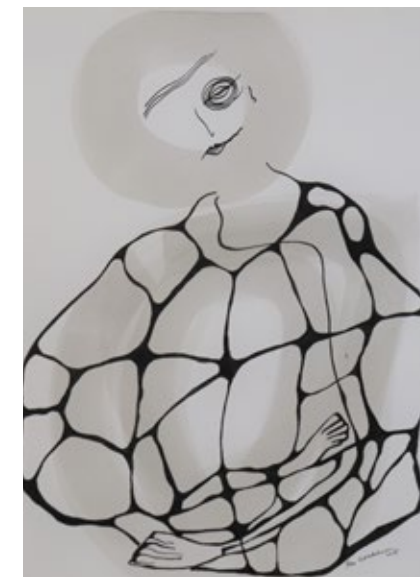
Just as *Self-portrait* (1991) shows Udechukwu at the point in her career, twenty years ago, when she attained full confidence in her mastery of the Uli aesthetic in its classic phase—that period when the virtuosic line dominated the compositional space—*solitude* (2018; **fig 2**) is indicative of where she is today with her line, and what work line does presently in her drawing. By using different types of line to depict the figure's puffy, shut eye and mouth, and folded limbs, Udechukwu achieves a powerful figuration of solitude. She is indisposed to engaging the world through her senses of vision or power of speech, or physical interaction with others. Other drawings, such as *silence lingers* (2020), *what is borne within* (2020), and *what is carried* (2018) convey an embodied state of solitude, and existential isolation. The subject here seems to turn to the soul's quiet interior for psychic auto-regeneration, in response to unrelenting threats from the experiential world.

In *solitude*, as in other recent work, the yesteryear bold, decisive yet elegant line arcing or coursing across open space has been replaced by two kinds of lines. One is the spectral wash, rendered with large brushes to suggest heads, torsos, and bodies. This is a holdover from her previous drawing. The other, web-like, is linked in such a manner as to define closed spaces that could alternatively read as rounded masonry forms fused by black mortars. At the top as well as at the lower left and right these black lines unravel, ending in two-pronged dainty spikes. The top spikes impale the figure's one-eyed head, while its delicately drawn, crossed legs—or, is it hands?—are nearly hidden among the web of form-spaces.

Though it might not be readily apparent, what I have just described as linear web-like netting or mortared-masonry design is in fact constituted from one of the most recognizable motifs in the Igbo *uli* lexicon: *isi-nwoji*, the schematic rendering of the three- or four-lobed kolanut's dorsal view. What had previously featured in the work of Nsukka School artists and Igbo women muralists such as



solitude, Ink on paper, 2018, 36 x 26 cm



how fragile this containment, Ink on paper, 2018, 31.5 x 23 cm



what is carried, Ink on paper, 2018, 41 x 31 cm



inward-outward I, Ink on paper, 2020, 26 x 18 cm

Okanumee Mgbadunwa of Nnobi, as a mark of virtuoso draughtsmanship and lyrical elegance, has now been transformed into a decorative structure through an iterative process of patient and deliberate mark making. However, this formal decorativeness is only half of the picture; this system of drawing figures, consisting of soft washes that serve as figural armature, and the black, *isi-nwaoji* structure that gives perceptual volume to and partially delineate the figure, characterizes Udechukwu's recent work (*how fragile this containment*, 2018; *what is borne within*, 2018; *silence lingers*, 2020). But, what is the significance of this new mode of figural representation?

Udechukwu has finally devised a formal language that conveys, with convincing efficacy, her longstanding meditation on the human condition, specifically subjects trapped or lost in the crossroads of life. The two elements with which she constructs her figures, the soft umber washes and the rigid *isi-nwaoji* structure, dramatize a tension between the weak integrative forces of the former, and the strong dispersive character of the latter. Where the washes suggest the figure as a solid, whole unit, the web structure seem like a failing carapace, a cracked pot. On their own, or combined, these two elements convey an image of a subject riven by the antagonistic interaction of its own constitutive aspects. The washes are not strong enough to fully define the subject; the linear structures are too skeletal to give it a bodied presence. This is a figure in crisis, or rather a figuration of existential crisis. In this series of drawings, the fusion of image and idea, form, and concept, the literal and the poetic, is nearly complete, and this is what makes Udechukwu's new work, her most successful yet.

A second system of drawing Udechukwu developed in the past year is indicative of a new track she has opened as she continues to move farther away from the classic Nsukka School aesthetic, to consolidate her long journey to imaginative solitude. For the first time since the early 1990s when her personal style fully emerged, she has devised a mode that does not rely on the ink or watercolour washes as major compositional elements. Gone too, for the most part, is the ethereal, sweeping, gestural line and, quite crucially, the human figure or face as compositional anchors. Given how intensely Udechukwu has focused her attention to the individual as the locus of subjectivity, which in turn recommended the attention to faces, portraits and bodies, throughout her career, the abandonment of the figure in this series is at once jarring and thrilling. But, what to make of this radical turn? This unmistakeable and hard turn to abstraction and shift away from the anthropomorphic?

Titled *inward-outward* (2020; **fig. 3**), this series of pen and ink drawings are enigmatic in that they suggest states of structural fragmentation or processes of organismic mitosis. The basic elements are leaf-shaped motifs, shaded with delicate parallel or hatched lines, placed side-by-side, bordered by thick lines, proliferating and linked in such a way that they form thick or thin bodies closing off or delimiting compositional negative spaces. However, embedded randomly within these massed elements are other unshaded elements that might suggest floral or even labial structures. These, in fact, are disembodied, partially closed, heavy-lidded human eyes. Though not arranged in a manner that suggest individual subjects, their placement in each composition appear to signify a

multiplicity of isolated, or rather fragmentary and independent eyes. And, if the eye, as it must be here, serves as a synecdoche for bodies, what we have then are people perhaps constituents of imagined communities separated, hedged into their bounded spaces, isolated by abstract, unrecognizable, unforgiving forces. Moreover, the heavy lids, narrow slits and tiny, almost invisible pupils, further suggest individuals in sad, soporific states, which points invariably to the subject of these drawings.

In the summer of 2020, midway into the rampage of the COVID-19, and as authorities in California, where Udechukwu lives, imposed strict shutdowns and city streets emptied out, the dramatic and terrifying impact of these measures on the social life of individuals, families, and communities became a key part of the pandemic experience. Mandated closures of public arenas and banning of public events and rituals of social, communal, and civic life exacerbated physical and psychological isolation of the citizenry. The prevalence of facemasks, the simple yet powerful tool in the pandemic epidemiologist's toolbox, became the most visible mark of the disease's virulence. Precisely because—in covering the mouth and nose—it focuses attention to the wearer's eyes, the soul's proverbial window, the facemask reduces the individual's subjectivity to her eyes, accentuating their synecdochic function. In fact, it is the uncomfortable awareness of the enhanced presence and significance of masked faces, and the ubiquitous eyes and anxious gazes of frightened and isolated folks during the ongoing pandemic, that compelled the making of the equally unnerving *inward-outward* series.

Udechukwu's previous work hardly featured multiple figures or crowds, focused as it had been on the individual subject and her social and psychic worlds. However, as she developed what I had earlier described as figuration of existential crises sometime around 2018, with the combination of soft washes and hard, dispersive *isi-nwaoji* structures, she increasingly relied on fragmentary body parts to convey human presences. Whereas the digitated forms sometimes showed what might simultaneously be hands *and* feet (*solitude; tension*), in *dark washes over* (2018; **fig. 4**), one of the most enigmatic drawings in the collection, the multiple pairs of feet are unmistakable. Here, one is reminded of *ukwu-na-ije* figures of the Igbo—puzzling wood sculptures emphasizing the feet and which served as altars for rituals associated with successful travel. In this drawing though, the arrangement of the feet into tight blocks seem to invoke recursive and fateful journeys into and out of darkening realms. The lesson here is that just as Udechukwu deployed fragmentary hands/feet in these 2018 drawings to signify multiple figures in fields of abstract forms, eyes have similar synecdochic value in the 2020 *inward-outward* series.

Clearly then, the ongoing focus on the symbolic power of disembodied feet/hands and eyes is indicative of an important turn in Udechukwu's stylistic orientation and in her thematic concerns. Years of deploying the elegant, ascetic, and lyrical Uli line, and of meditation on and exploration of the soul's inner recesses has lately given way—though not completely—to probing the inside-out worlds of individual and collective selves. Her deliberate and methodical line, and her broken abstract forms, signify, as she noted recently, stories of diverse



dark washes over, Ink on paper,
2018, 36 x 26 cm



inward-outward II, Ink on paper,
2020, 18 x 26 cm

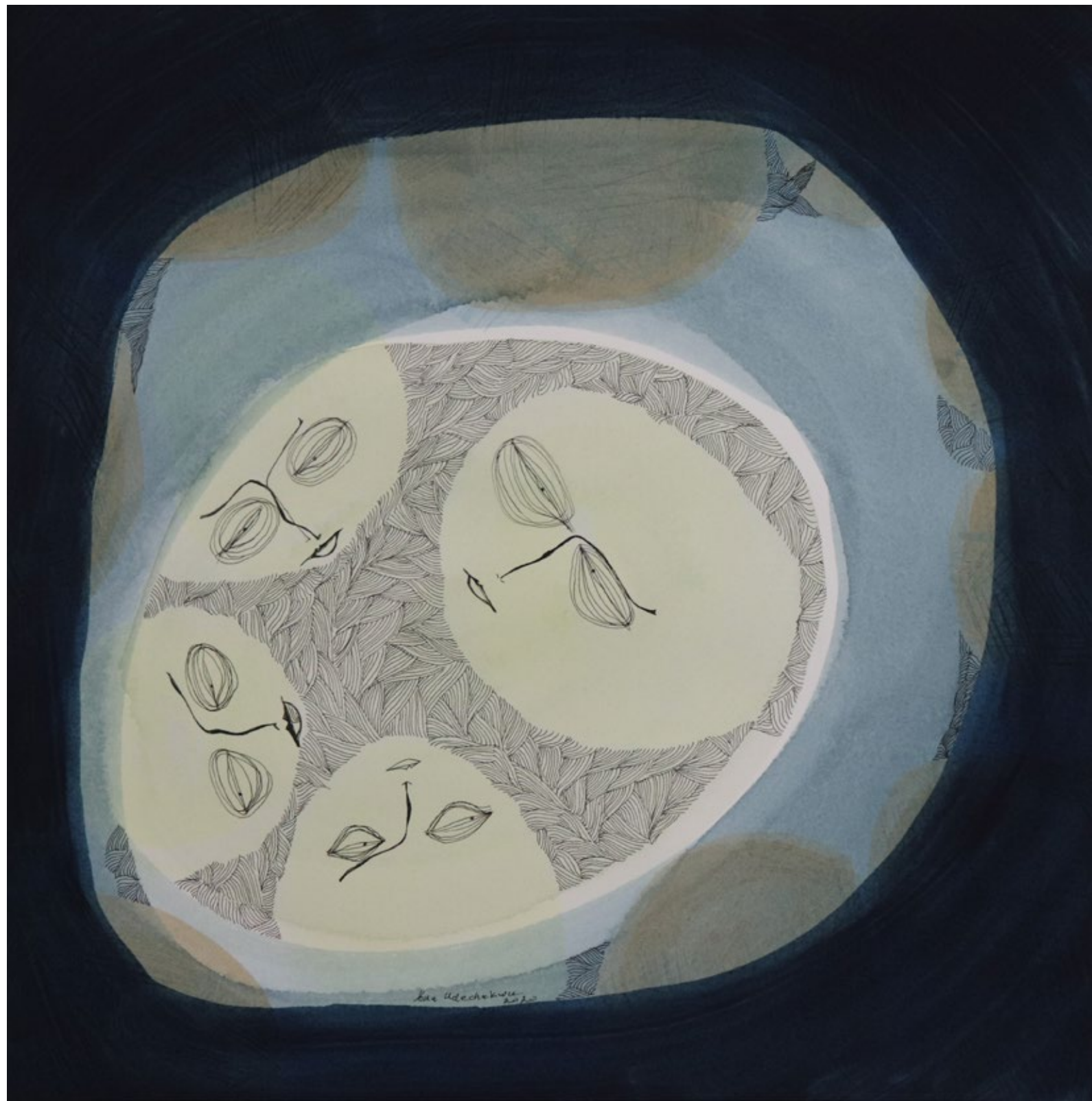
experiences—"a person seen, an encounter with a stranger, or perhaps someone I know, or my witness to the social and political landscape that surrounds me."¹² The attitude of her line has no doubt shifted, ever so subtly, from expressing lyrical dynamism to insinuating containment and fragmentation. Moreover, the relationship of negative and positive space has become complicated, askew. Even so, the poetry of line's interaction with form, space in these drawings is as fascinating as ever.

Chika Okeke-Agulu, MFA, PhD

Professor of African and African Diaspora Art

Princeton University

¹² Ada Udechukwu, "Artist's Statement," 2021.



contours of containment, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 31 x 21 cm

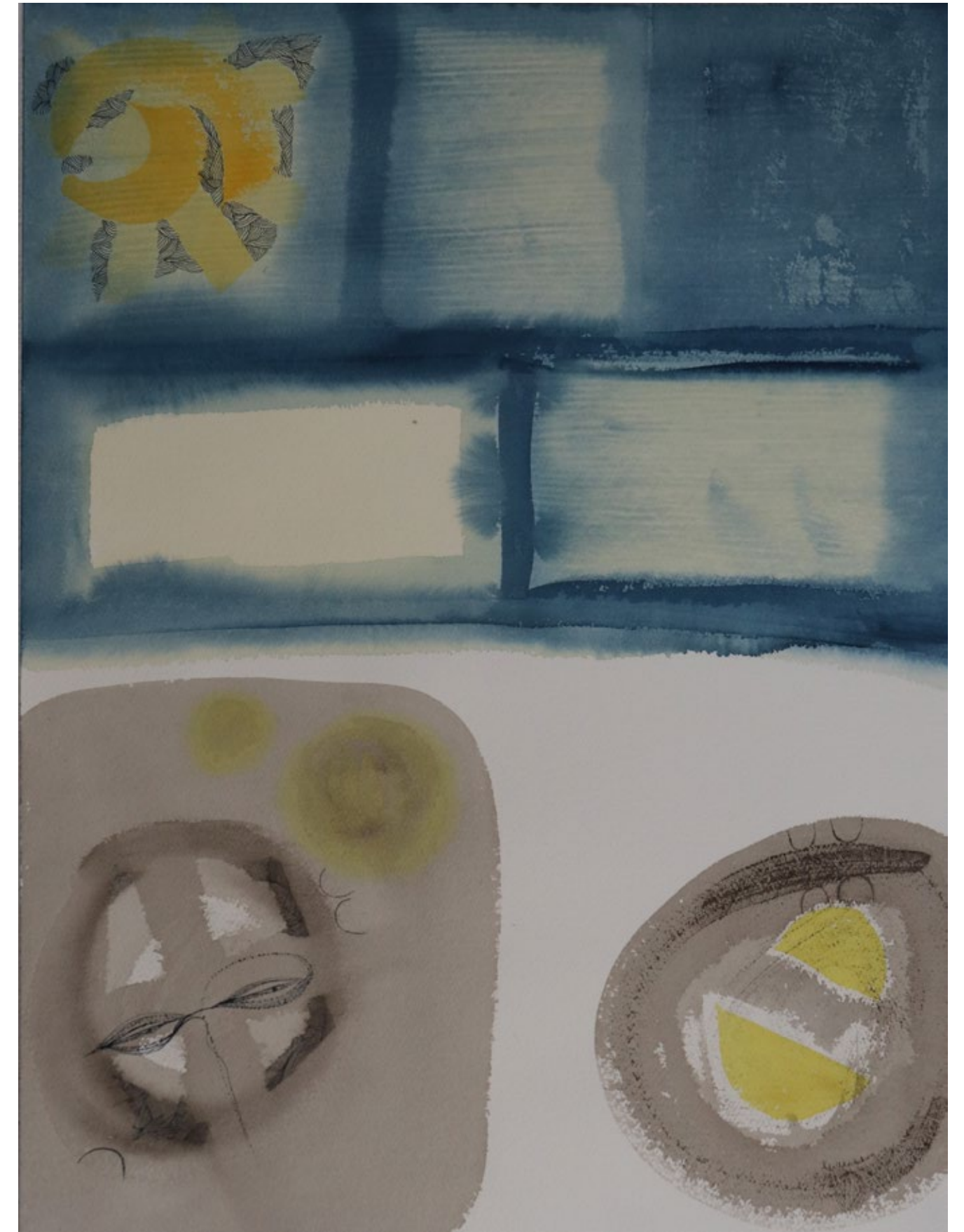


unscheduled departure, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 51 x 36 cm

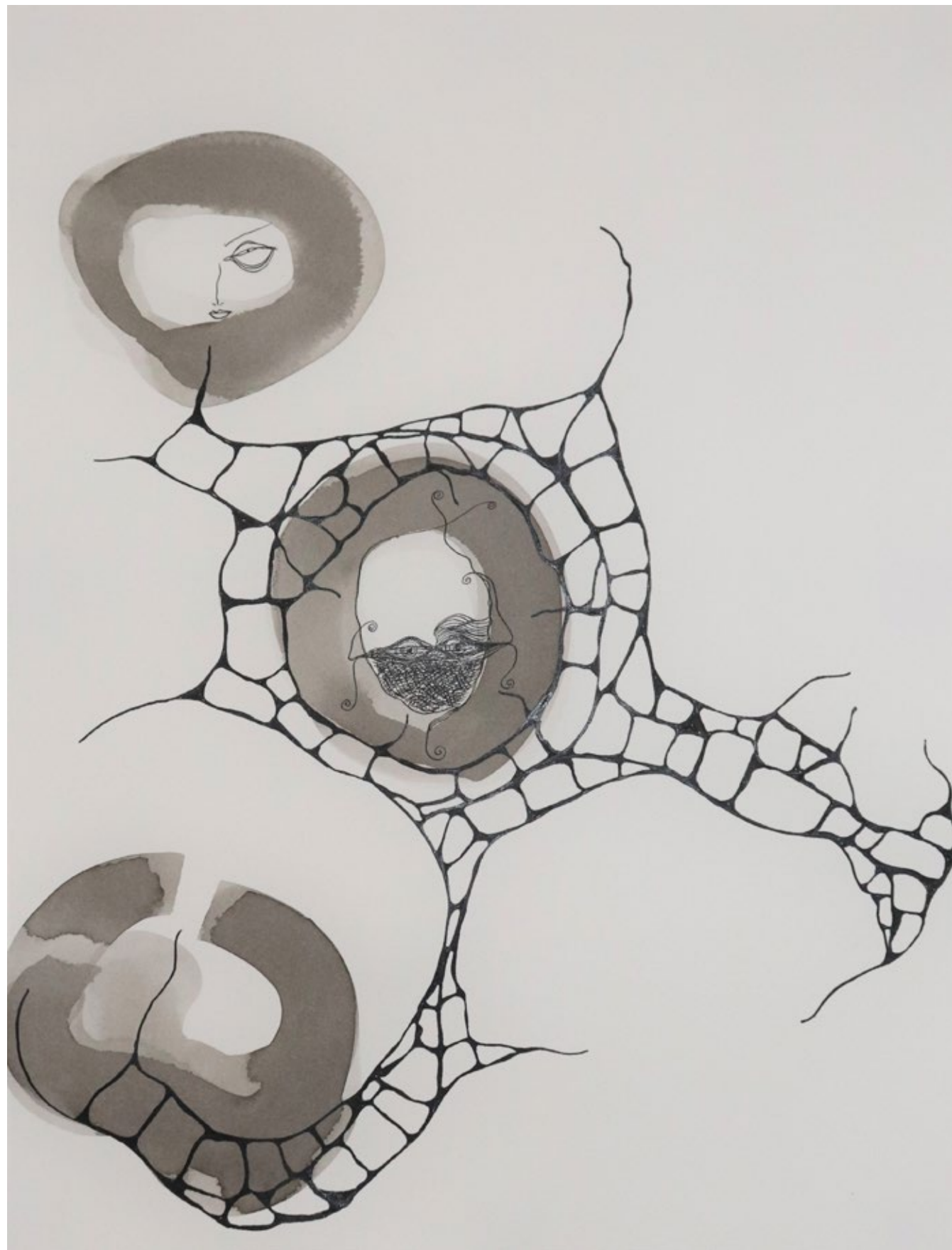
Expecting...expectation

In the stillness of the waters
the boat rocks
 and rocks
Something here that holds in a well of loneliness
Something that seeks
To be drawn
from depths dark and engulfing
a boiling deep that sucks one down
Can it be that
it is here within
and yet
without

Ada Udechukwu



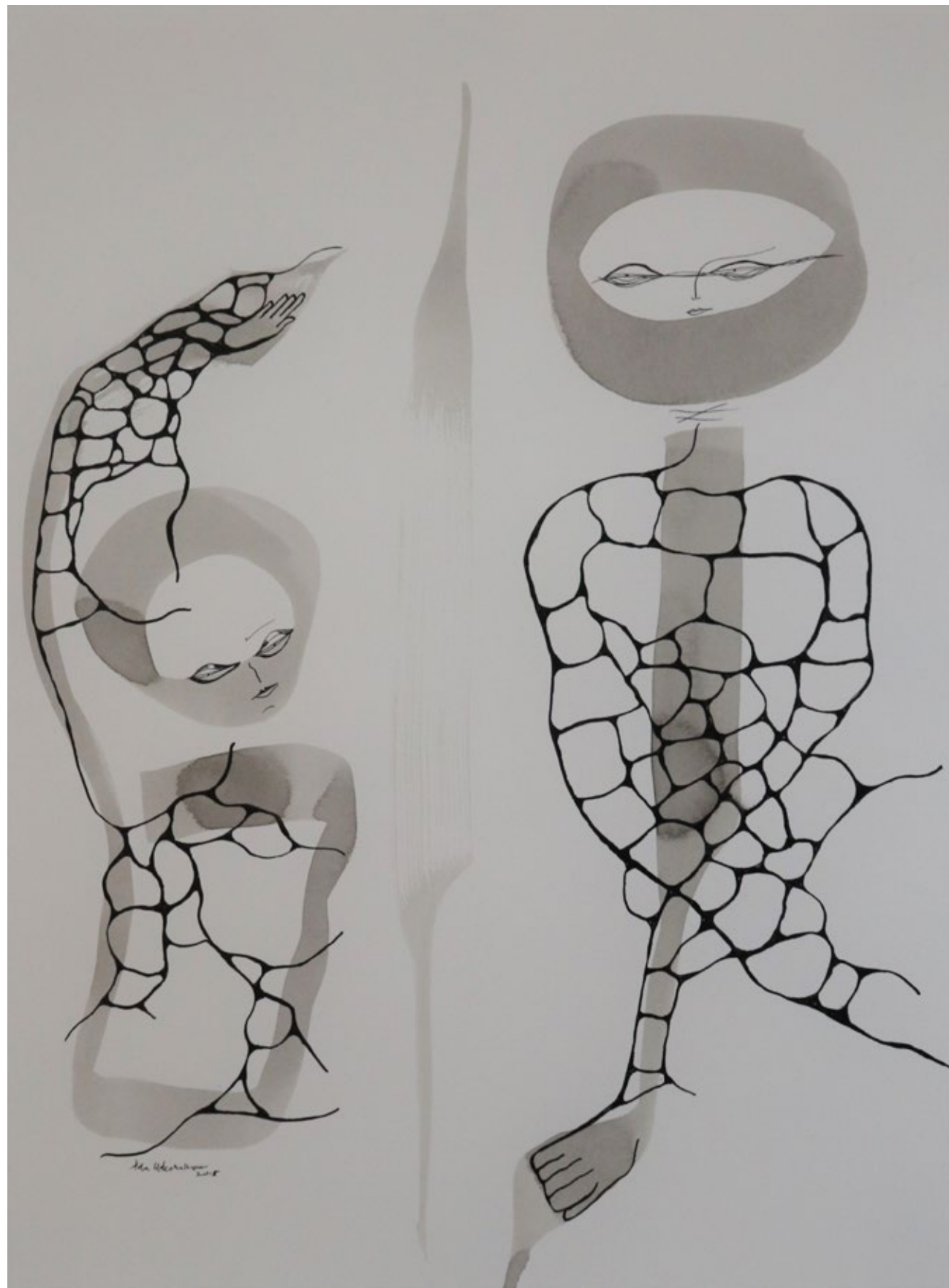
the difference between here and there, Watercolour on paper, 2020, 51 x 46 cm



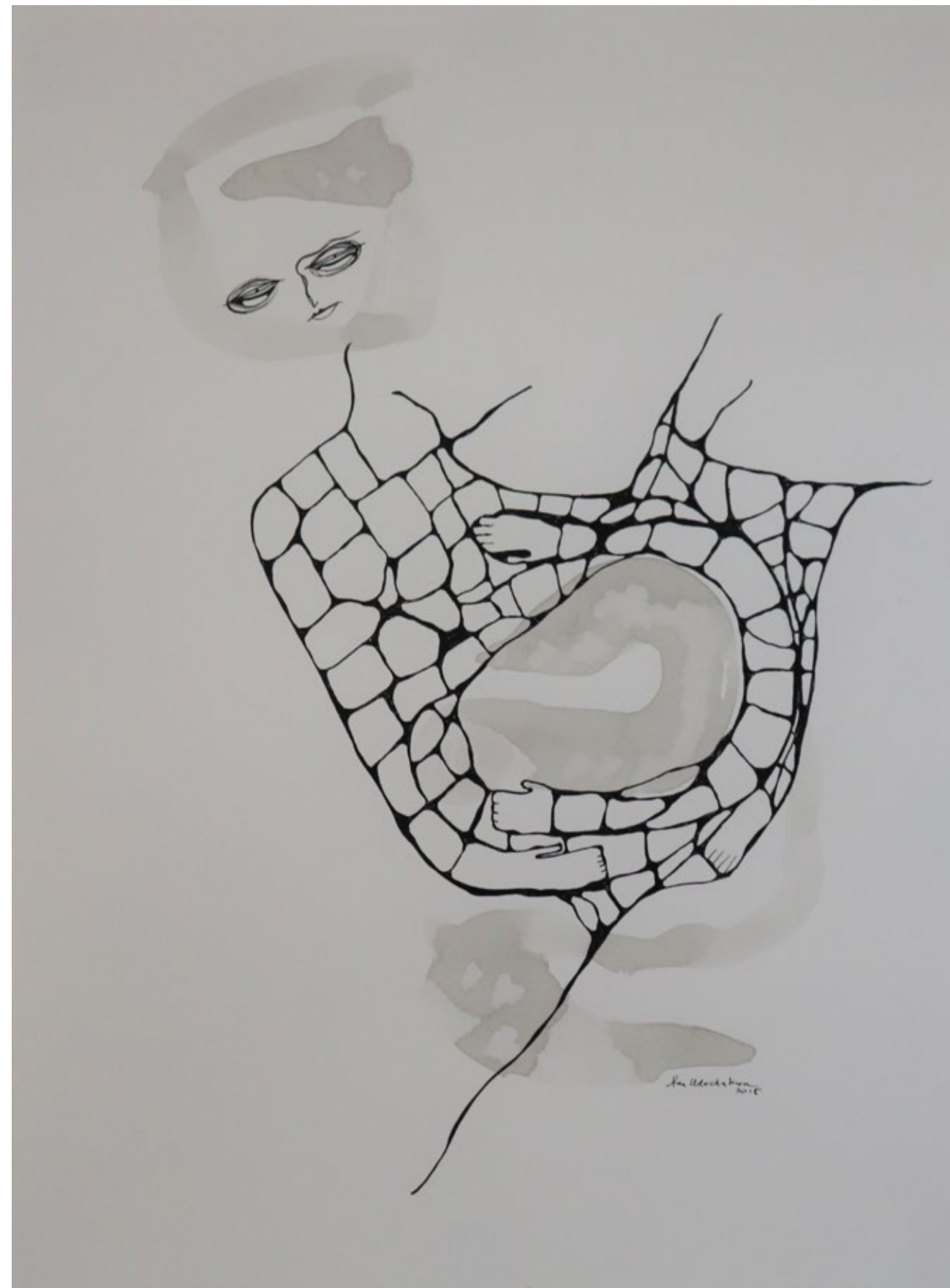
doppelganger, Ink on paper, 2018, 41 x 31 cm



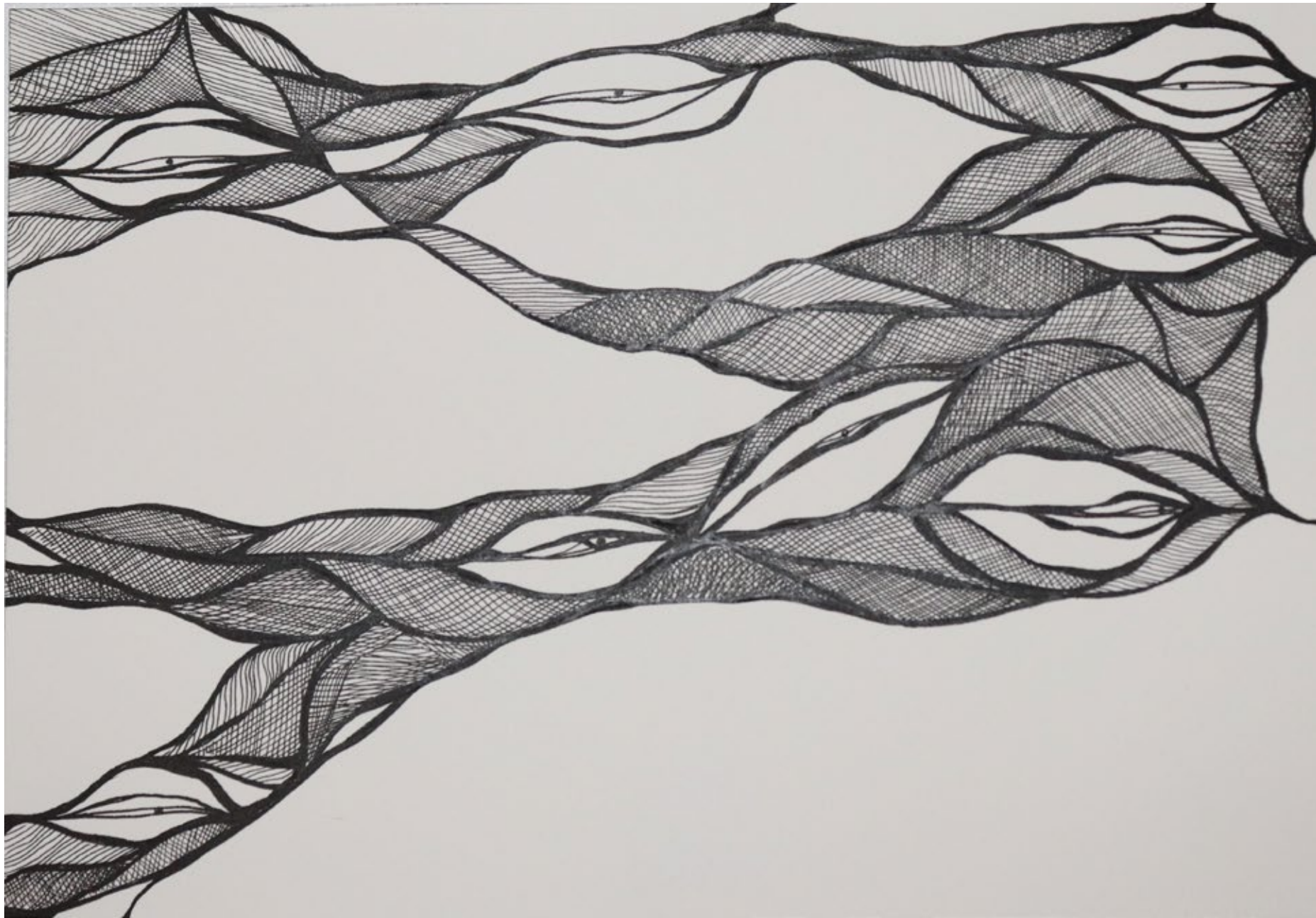
silence lingers, Ink on paper, 2020, 43 x 35.5 cm



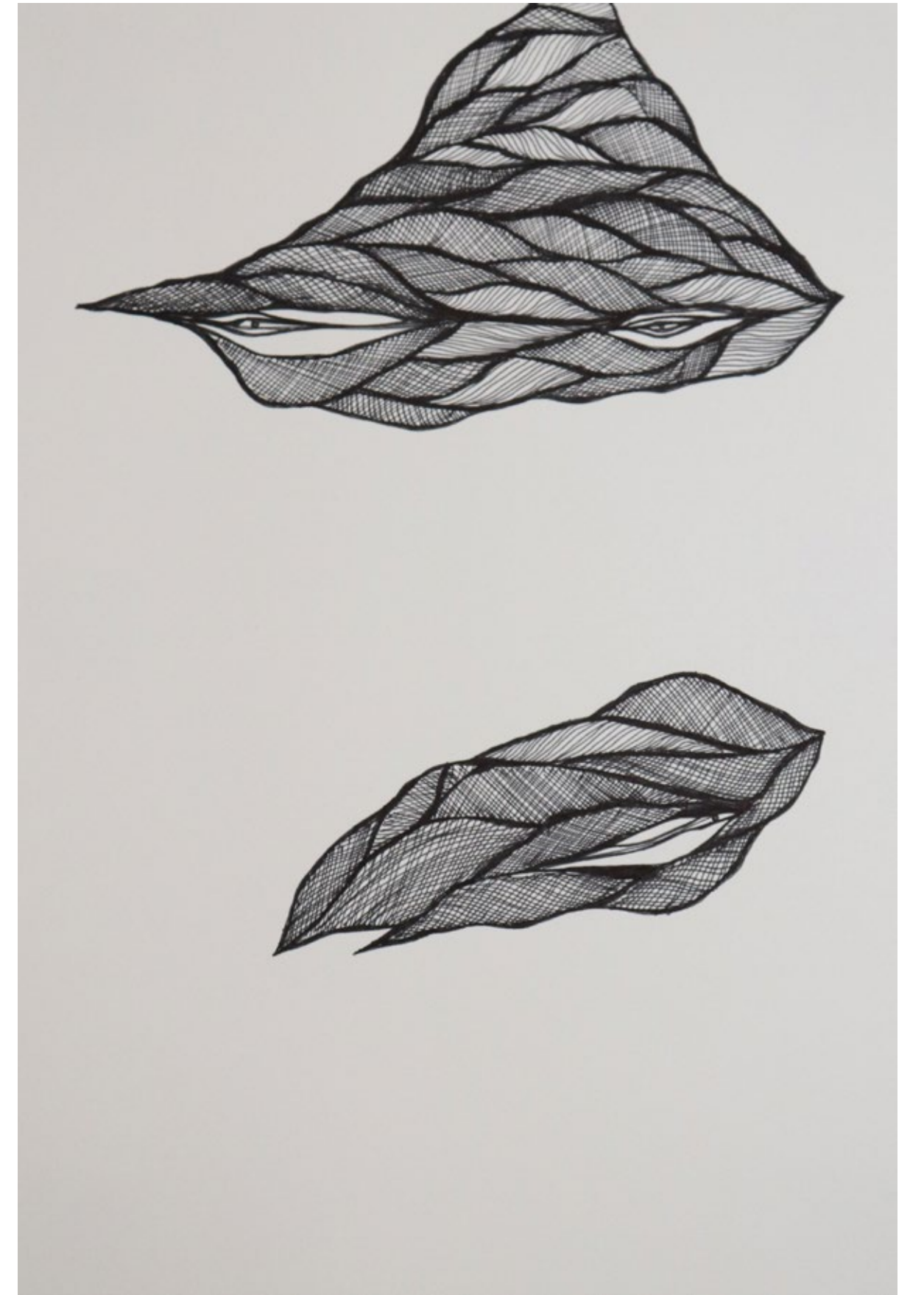
two of us are here, Ink on paper, 2018, 41 x 31 cm



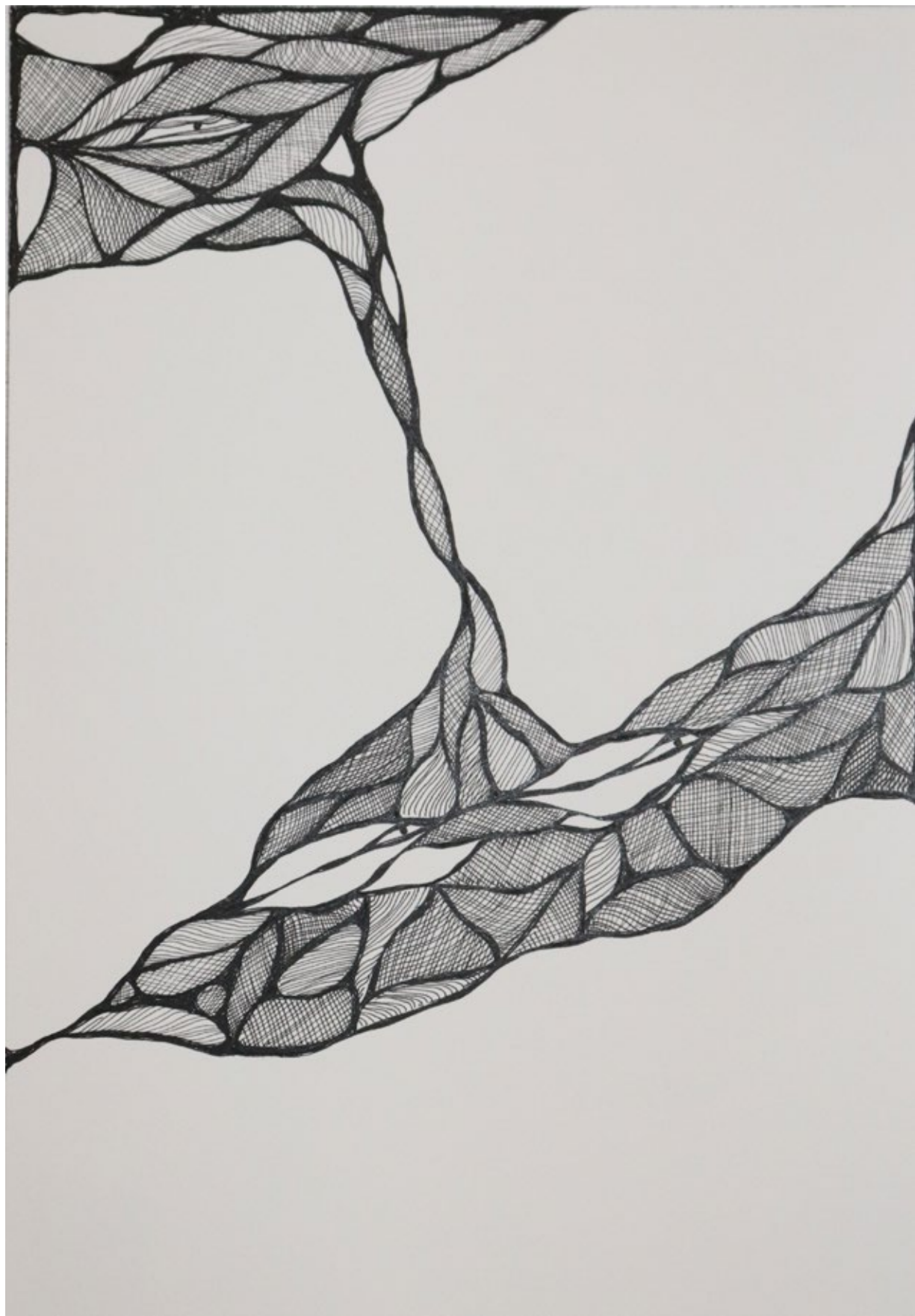
what is carried, Ink on paper, 2018, 41 x 31 cm



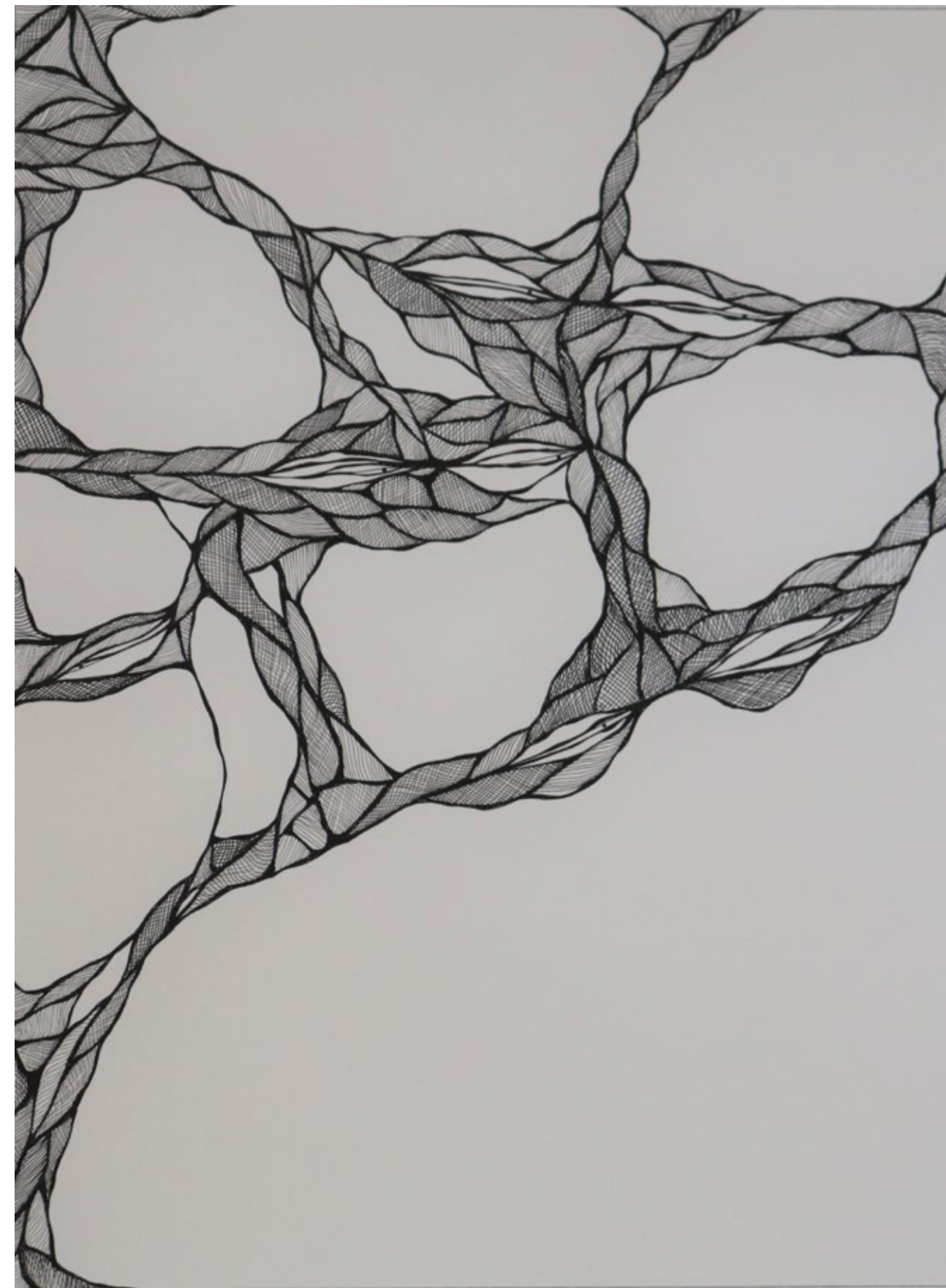
inward-outward II, Ink on paper, 2020, 18 x 26 cm



inward-outward III, Ink on paper, 2020, 26 x 18 cm



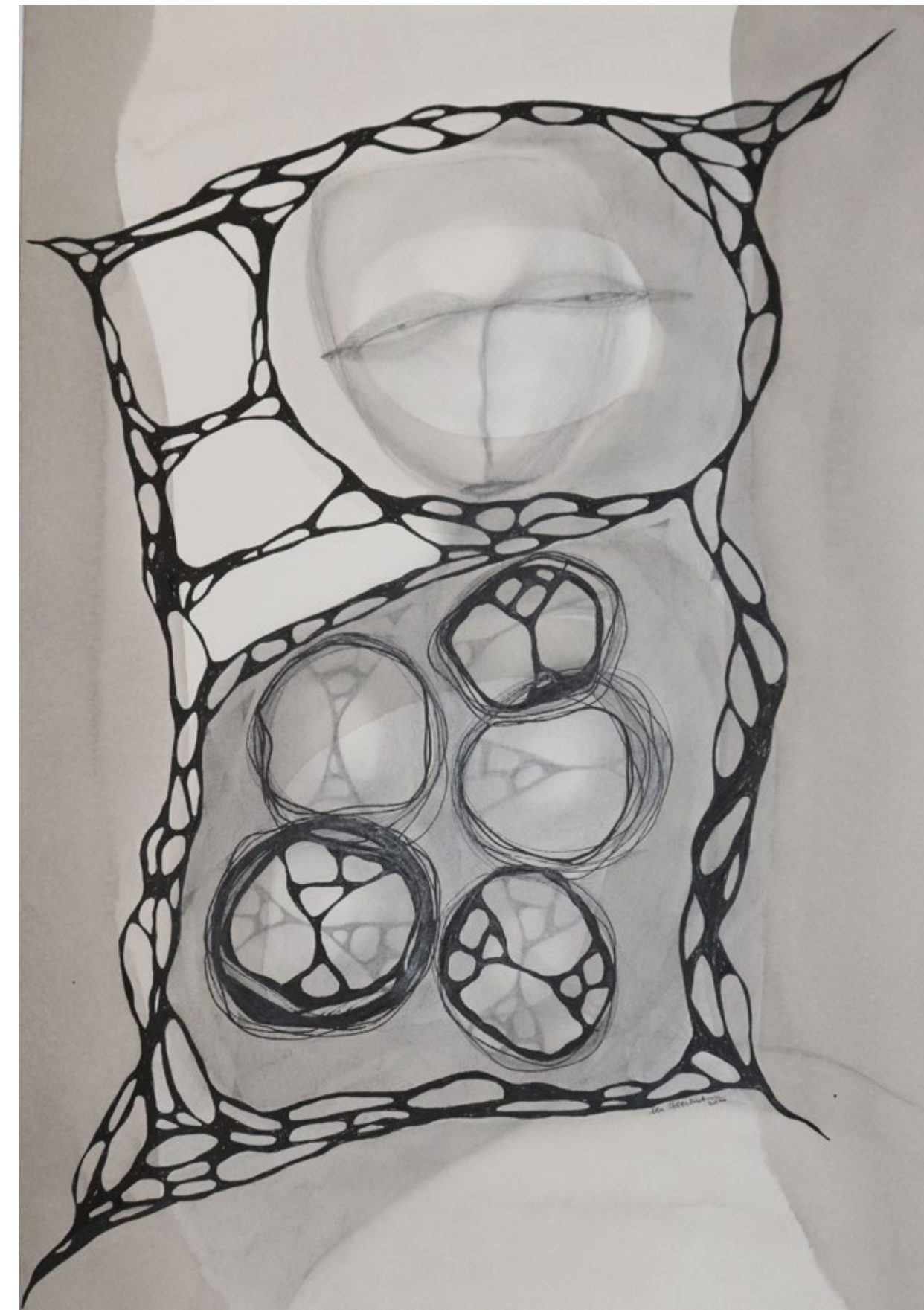
inward-outward I, Ink on paper, 2020, 26 x 18 cm



inward-outward IV, Ink on paper, 2020, 41 x 31 cm



no way out, Ink on paper, 2020, 51 x 35.5 cm



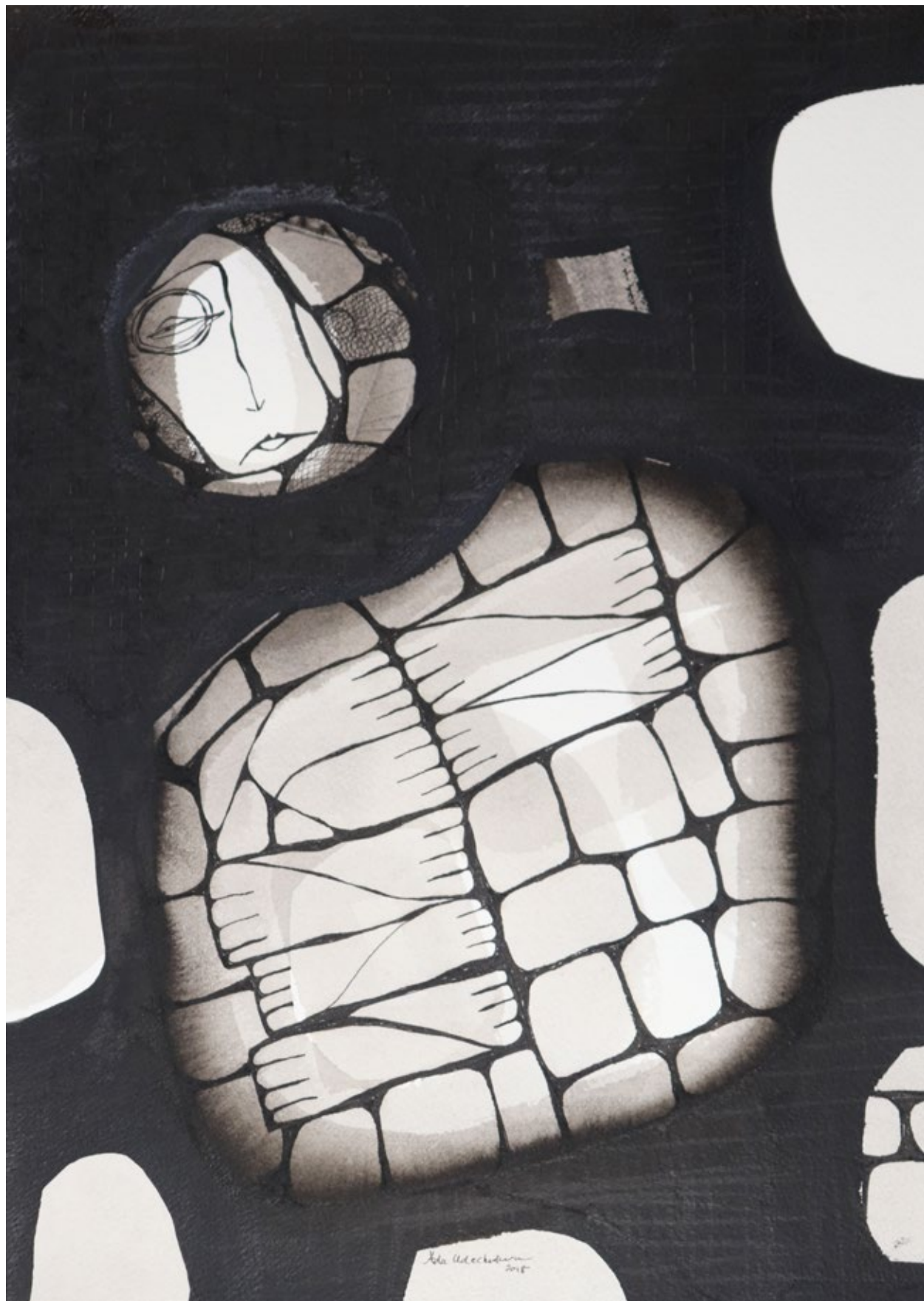
mine alone...this grief, Ink and pencil on paper, 2020, 51 x 36 cm



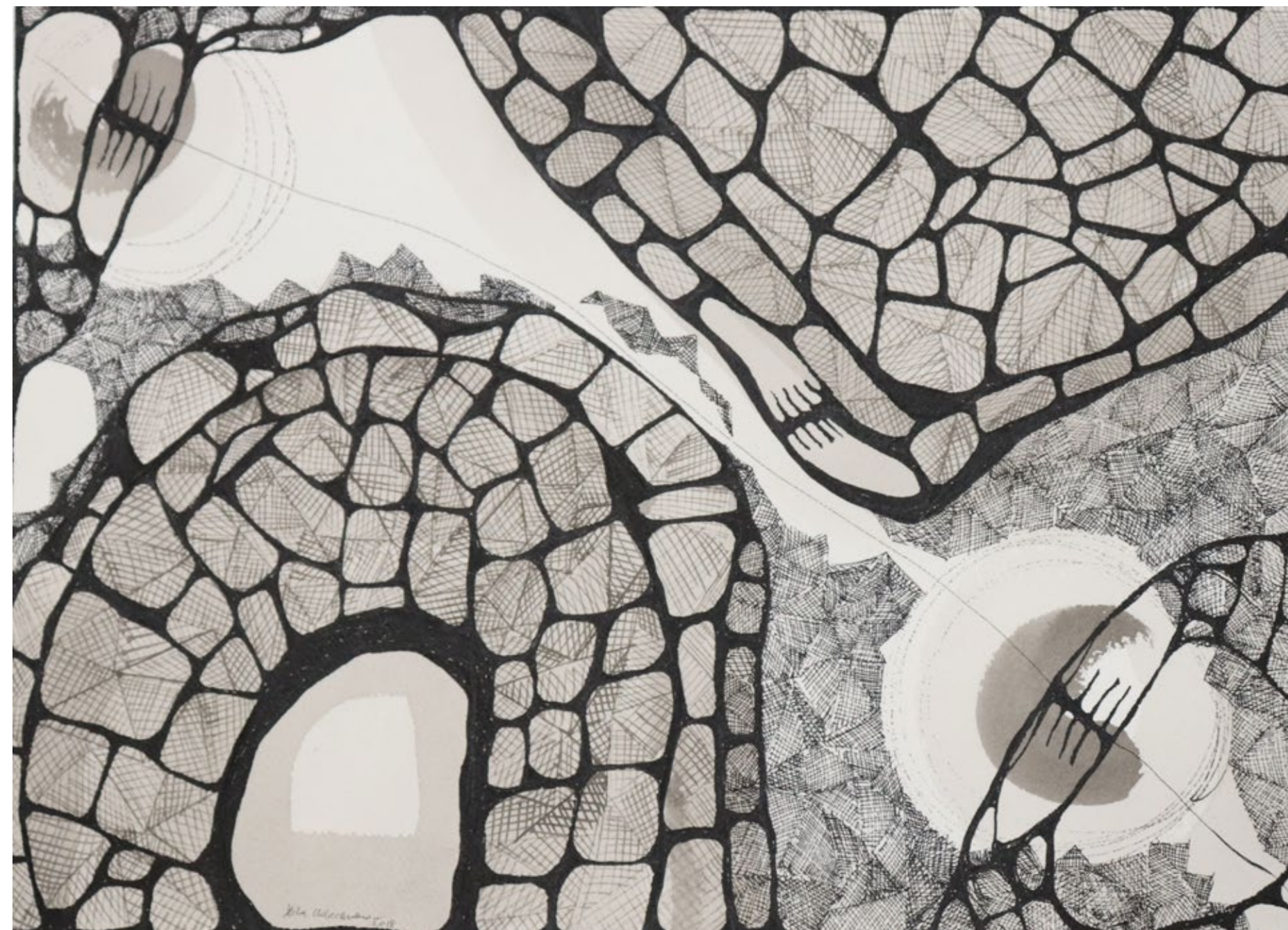
untitled, Ink on paper, 2018, 51 x 35.5 cm



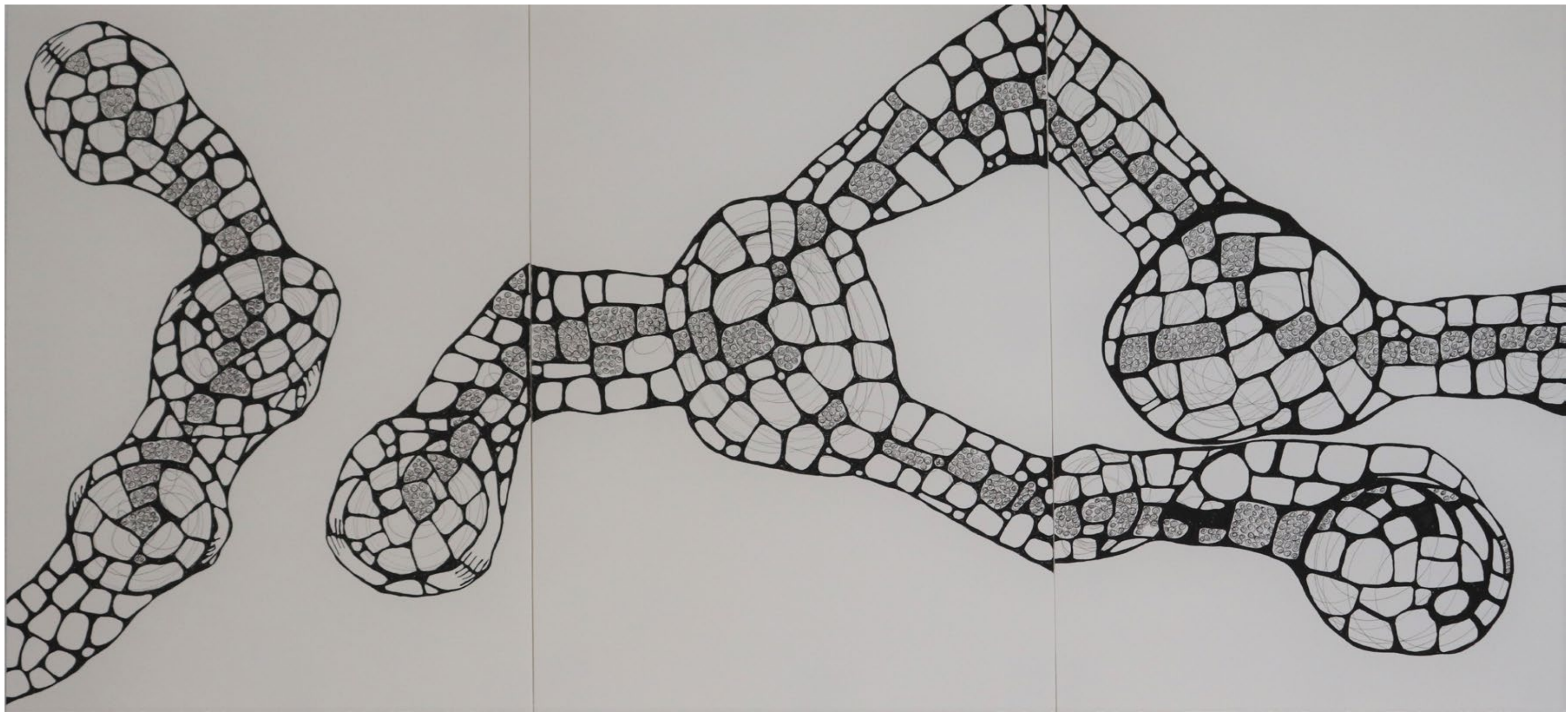
what is born within, Ink on paper, 2020, 51 x 36 cm



dark washes over, Ink on paper, 2018, 36 x 26 cm



tension, Ink on paper, 2018, 26 x 36 cm



cojoined (Triptych), Ink on paper, 2020, 36 x 72 cm

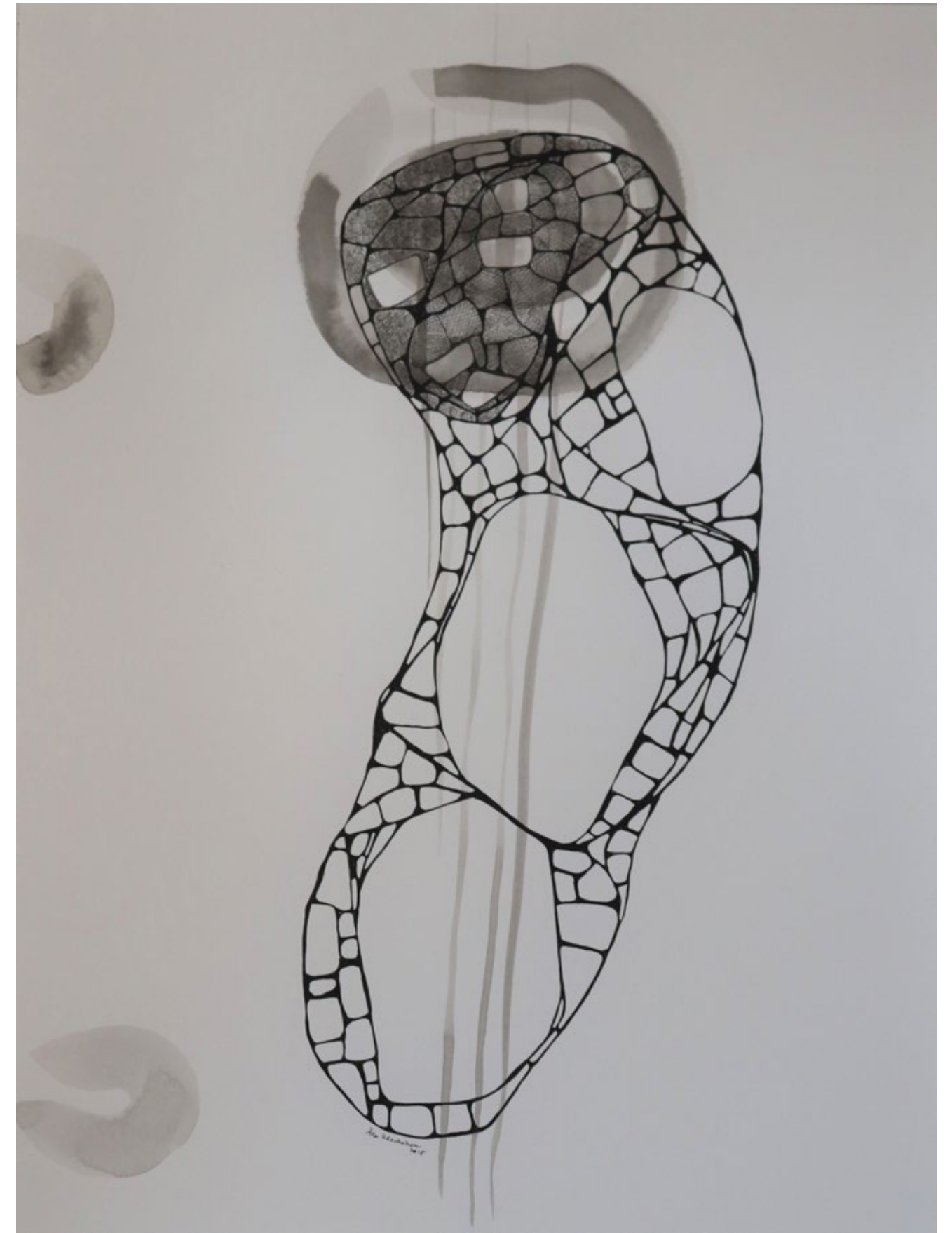
Ice Storm Night

Etched in twilight
memories surface

Tonight
winds chill
dark rolls over my moon

And ice-laden limbs crash
splintering inner boundaries
in a measure of days
ice-drop rhythms against my face
fragile threads
tangled lines
unmemored Me

Ada Udechukwu



masked, Ink on paper, 2018, 61 x 40cm

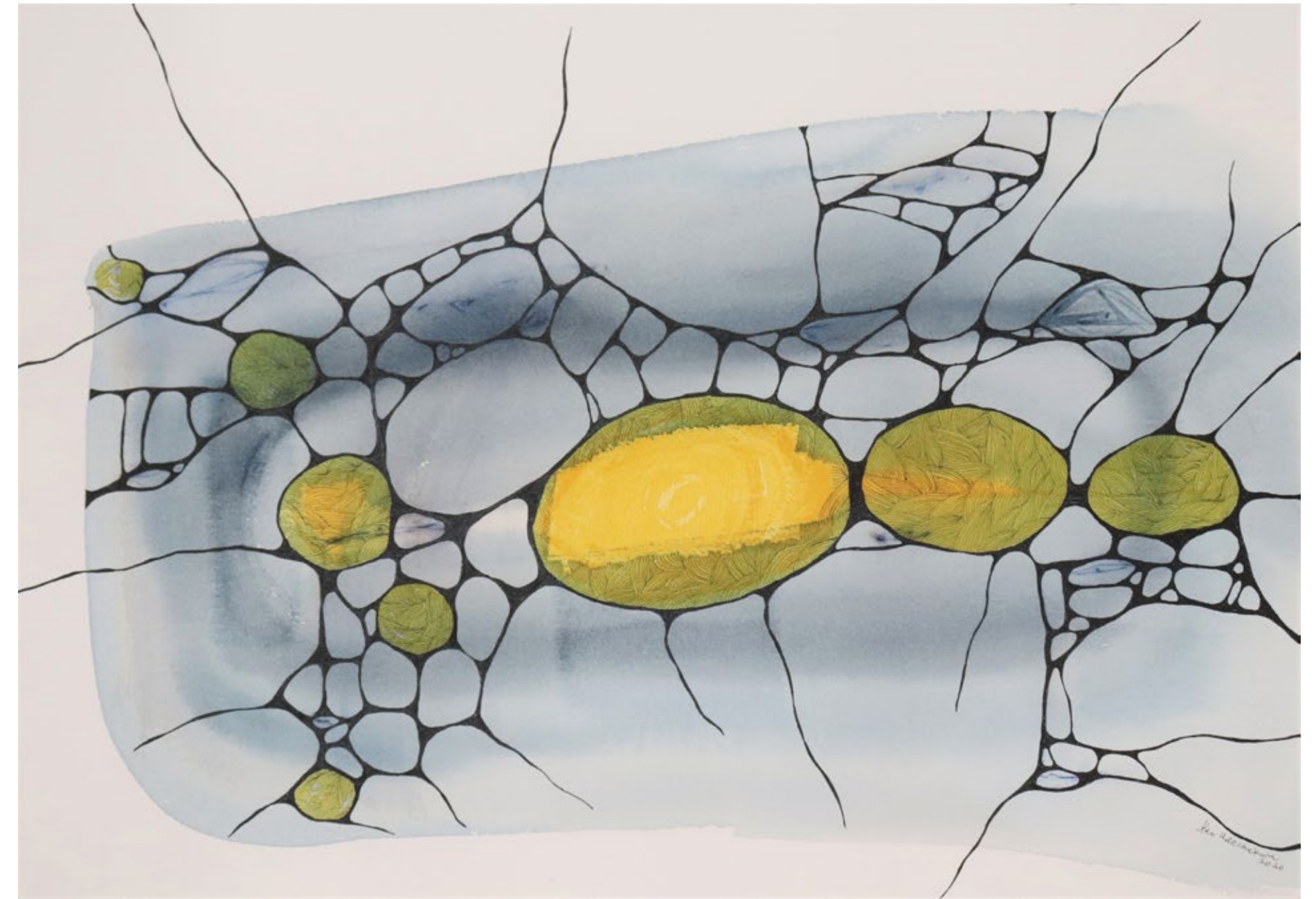
Calling

Tenderness surrounds
footprints sunk in blanketed whites
yielding softness
gentle moments

Love lights our strides in billowing flakes
stinging swirls, heartstring pulls
lifting wind's breath in twilight

Desire holds in blood
this night of our nights
A dance of days
where dreams are particles in motion
messengers of yearning
faraway notes
calling in Yesterday
Today
Tomorrow

Ada Udechukwu



a topography of desire, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 36 x 56 cm

Solitude

Time stands
still
with me

All is centered
on your fragile bloom

Then
in mystical shadows
from tangled mass
of underwater caverns
your breath blows
calm
in me

Ada Udechukwu



here, somewhere, Watercolour on paper, 2020, 36 x 26 cm



untitled, Ink and watercolour on paper, 2020, 26 x 18 cm

In Conversation With Ada Udechukwu

Sandra Mbanefo Obiago: We're delighted to be able to speak with you about your creative journey. Let's start at the very beginning; how did you discover your creative voice? What was the journey of awakening for you, in terms of broad-stroke creativity, not just art?

Ada Udechukwu: It started when I was in secondary school and my mother, who is a poet and an artist, took me to exhibitions at the British Council and her meetings with the Readers and Writers Club in Enugu.

SMO: Tell us a little bit about your writing and how you eventually merged that with fine art.

AU: It began at the University of Nigeria, where I studied English and Literature. I got involved with *The Muse*, the Department of English journal, contributing poems; and later as its Art Editor, creating original drawings for several issues. Those were my first experiments with pen and ink drawings. After I graduated, I did my Youth Corps Service, worked for a time, and then got married. I continued writing and doing my artwork, but on a small scale, in between my other roles as mother and wife. When we relocated to the United States in late 1997, my life continued in much the same way.

I exhibited my art occasionally, but my writing has always been very personal to me as a way of making sense of the world, my own feelings, and things I witness. I began writing as a poet but always wanted to explore other genres. And so I got an MFA in writing with fiction as my genre of concentration. After I graduated in 2005 I published a few short stories and continued with my art. There have been long periods of being fallow but I'm always working; a lot of it is internal. I might sit with something for a very long time, years in fact, before I am able to find a way to either write about it or make a drawing or painting.

SMO: What was it like growing up in Nigeria?

AU: I was born in Nigeria and lived there until 1967 when I left for the United States with my mother and three siblings as the Nigerian Civil War was beginning. We returned to Nigeria 1971. My formative years were spent there, and much of my early married life.

SMO: What was it like after the civil war? What were some of the memories of that period?

AU: After the war, my parents thought it best to put me into class one in secondary school, instead of primary school, so I started at Queen's School, Enugu. I had a very difficult time. The main thing I remember from that period is a kind of

drawing into myself. I became shy, very much so, and it stayed with me for a long time. I was made very aware that I was biracial. This affected me in terms of how I interacted with people. It's from here that a consciousness of being observant of others and situations in which I find myself began.

SMO: You graduated from Queen's School and you went to the University of Nigeria. What was that experience like in terms of the things which opened your mind to the creative movement going on at the time, with the likes of Prof. Uche Okeke and the pioneers who shaped new schools of thought?

AU: I had wonderful teachers: Chinua Achebe, Emmanuel Obiechina, Fr. Joseph Landy. They nurtured my love of literature; under their tutelage my critical and writing skills developed. I didn't have much connection with the art department at all really.

SMO: What was it like being taught by Chinua Achebe?

AU: It's one of my treasured experiences because we were made to speak for ourselves in class. His approach was 'How do you experience a work of literature?' as opposed to searching for the answer in critical texts.

SMO: There was a lot going on in the University at the time, there was a group of artistic intellectuals. Also you were the only female artist mentioned in Simon Ottenberg's famous book about the Nsukka artists.

AU: I often say to myself it was one of those accidental things. In terms of the preparation for that exhibition, Simon Ottenberg travelled to Nsukka to meet with and document the work of artists he was focused on and felt would be in the exhibition. But he also photographed the work of other artists in Enugu and in Nsukka. He took pictures of work that I had done and showed them (along with other photographs taken during his trip) to Sylvia Williams, the Director of the National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, at that time. She said she wanted my work in the show and that's how I got to be in it.

SMO: It's not a surprise that your work was documented because it does stand out. It's an interesting insight into the Nsukka school and how it influenced your creativity, both in writing and in art.. How did you meet your husband, Prof. Obiora Udechukwu, who was one of the leaders of the Nsukka Art Group?

AU: I met him just as I was leaving Nsukka, in 1981. We got married in 1982 and lived in Nsukka until late 1997 when we relocated to the United States with our two children.

SMO: What brought about the move?

AU: Prior to my husband being offered a position at St. Lawrence University, Canton, New York, there had been some disturbances at Nsukka. Student protests and ASUU strikes. He and nine other lecturers were detained on trumped up charges. During this period of uncertainty, the job offer came and so we took the decision to leave. It was a visiting position, and we anticipated it would be

for three years at the most, but it turned into its own story.

SMO: This was during the Pro-Democracy era, during the Abacha years when there was a crackdown on human rights, and artists and writers were being targeted? So you picked up your lives in Nigeria and moved to St. Lawrence University?

AU: We felt we had to. And with the thought it was temporary. At the end of three years my husband was asked to stay on and he took the decision to do so. Relocation was hard for all of us. It took me about ten years to come to terms with it. I liken it to a situation where intellectually you understand something but emotionally it takes a long time to catch up. You learn to create a refuge for yourself. I was there but to say I was fully present? I don't think so. Recently, in 2019, we moved to Los Angeles. And that is another dislocation.

SMO: Speak to us a little bit about the experience of being uprooted from your African home and settling in America, and if that affected your creative voice or process.

AU: It did and continues to do so. The origins are in my childhood. From having to leave during the war and come to the United States and navigate that terrain; then return to Nigeria. There's this back and forth coupled with my dual heritage. I often feel I'm travelling between two worlds, more like straddling them, not fully in one or the other. It is a recurrent thing, the interface or connection between the interior world and the exterior world.

SMO: You write poetry and fiction, and your short story was shortlisted for the Caine Prize in 2007. And you also create these amazing drawings and paintings. What does your process involve, from a practical point of view? How do you create your art?

AU: My encounters with things, situations, people. These images can stay with me for a long time. I hold onto them and the way in which they affect me, hoping for the moment to do them justice. When I first got to Los Angeles, I was struck by the amount of homeless people I saw in isolated places, sitting at bus stops, and outside their encampments along the roadside. My 'encounters' were while I was driving, or passing by them on a shared sidewalk out on a walk, or when one would come up to ask for money. And in that moment, it was, "I see myself in you." I kept asking how I could illuminate what it was I felt when I said that to myself. For me it's the humanity. A thin line separates us all from one life or the other. I've had several such encounters and one that particularly stuck with me was the sight of a small group of African-American men sitting on a bench close to a bus stop with a Caucasian woman in between them. You could tell there was a discussion going on, the woman was in some distress, one of the men had his arm around her, all of them were comforting her. It's a rough life and yet in the midst of it there is community.

SMO: Yes, in your work, there is strong inner voice; the thought process of how your characters experience the life around them and express a landscape of emotion. I feel very much that there is an inner communication. When I look

at what appears to be two eyes and a mouth in your drawing, I get a sense of an inner conversation. Speak to us about this new body of work and what some of the emotional responses were, which had you creating these beautiful drawings.

AU: As an artist and writer I'm inclined toward trusting that a reader or viewer will come to my work with their own experience, engage with the material, and let it speak to them. Personal experiences that have shaped me for many years, in particular the years 2018 to 2020 resulted in this particular body of work. It is a product of an ongoing journey of examining the interface between the internal and external life.

SMO: When we look at your work, there is such a strong linearity, there are such strong, powerful lines. Is this intuitive or do you actually sketch out your work and then build it up? How do you achieve this? Looking at your work *how fragile this containment*, does this come out of one sitting or do you do numerous sketches and finally arrive at this painting?

AU: I have never been someone that works from a sketch. For my ink and wash drawings I typically start with the wash, I lay it as I'm moved to and then start the line work. For me it's about narrative and exploration. With *inward-outward I, II, III, IV*, it was that first line and I just built on it. The use of line and space and the dialogue between positive and negative space that's inherent in the Uli aesthetic has influenced me as a visual artist. As I look at some of my recent drawings from 2020 where you see the filling of those spaces with delicate lines, I am reminded of the *akika* patterns that are used in traditional uli wall paintings as subtle background texturing. It gives voice to something there, almost intangible.

SMO: That's really profound. If you had to introduce these new works, how would you introduce them? What would you say the message you want to pass on is? What would be the general theme you'd like to express?

AU: It's hard to say because the work covers a lot of things. But like most people, especially in the early lockdown days of COVID, I experienced a period of looking inward and it amplified the interior life for me. We've moved on from those months and life is returning in a way, and we've learned to adapt to the situation. On a personal level, it made me reflect back on my life and think, "What are the things I hold dear? That are important? That are essential?". That seeking, questioning, trying to navigate, is a consistent theme. When I think of the earlier drawings, I look at it the same way: I was experiencing situations in my life and in those works articulate how I navigated that period. All art springs from the personal in one way or the other but our shared humanity binds us such that out of the personal comes the universal.

SMO: You really are a poet. I love the way you've expressed these feelings. I want to speak a little bit about the way you are planning to weave in the words. How are you going to merge the words and the visual? In your creative process, how do you see it merging? Do you separate both creative processes?

AU: When I write a poem, it's its own entity and I don't make a drawing to illustrate



*inward-outward I, Ink on paper,
2020, 26 x 18 cm*

a poem. Both forms, visual or written, rely on image. The thing is you're creating image with words in one, with line, texture, paint in the other. What unites the two in terms of the way in which I approach the creative process is how to create an image and allow it to *speak*. One of the enduring things I gained from my MFA experience was how to use image. I'm not talking about utilizing figurative language per se, but building an image that can move the narrative. In my third semester, my teacher, Alice Mattison, introduced me to the work of the poet, Jane Kenyon. Kenyon spoke often of Ezra Pound's, "[t]he natural object is always the adequate symbol". Her poetry relies on images taken from the natural world, layered spaces, and the interface of explicitly articulated statements and their implicit undertones. Reading her made me think of Uli, and its use of abstracted symbols whose associations create resonance beyond the objects themselves, like *isinwoji*, the symbol taken from the formation made by four lobes of the kola nut.

SMO: It's so profound hearing you speak about your inspiration from both African and Western artists and art forms, Your mother, who is American, is a poet. What does your dad do?

AU: My father passed away in 1996. He was an economist and administrator in the civil service.

SMO: So you got your creative vein from your mum and deep cultural influences from your Dad's Igbo roots. Have you seen that being passed on to your own kids?

AU: In various ways.

SMO: You married an artist, there are all kinds of stories about artist couples. How has it been for both of you as artists and how did you find that balance?

AU: For me it's a good partnership, like our marriage. We share a love of literature and the arts. He's a poet too. We've had three exhibitions together.

Nneoma Ilogu: I love your work. Hearing you speak about it, it's so beautiful. You are a true poet and it shows even visually. Looking at the composition of your works and even the pen stroke of your ink on these papers, it has such movement and fluidity that it's so beautiful. Particularly in the *inward-outward* series. That play on what is seen versus what is not seen. There is so much room for the viewer to, as you've said, come in and create their own narrative. It seems so spontaneous but also so well thought out and pristine. It's really beautiful. You can also see, in a lot of your works, that silent observer, which is what I would classify you, as listening to you talk about your experiences and what inspires your work. The stories are kind of there but not really there and they're taking up space but also leaving room for more. It's really poetic. I'm glad I got to sit in on this interview and listen. I still see some traces of the Uli and Nsukka experience even in your color palette in some of your works. This is really good stuff, I'm excited.

AU: Thank you Nneoma. Your response is exactly what I hope for when I'm

creating art.

SMO: This has been such a special interview. I just want to thank you for being so transparent, thoughtful, caring and inspiring. What is your prayer for this exhibition?

AU: That it would touch those who see the work, the way in which Nneoma has been touched by it.

SMO: It definitely will. Thank you.



SMO Contemporary Art (SMO) is an international art platform, showcasing a unique portfolio of modern and contemporary art from Africa and the Diaspora to a global audience. Based in Lagos, Nigeria, SMO curates exhibitions, as well as public and private art events of leading and emerging talents for a diverse audience. SMO is dedicated to artists of all generations who have been instrumental in shaping West Africa's contemporary art canon and who became crucial in establishing a unique narrative of the continent. The SMO program sheds light on forgotten talents who have paved the way for new identities in contemporary art while encouraging a vibrant and continuous discourse around their oeuvres. Regular exhibitions at diverse and unconventional gallery spaces, often affiliated to ecosystems of design, fashion and hospitality, underpin SMO's vision to engage with large and heterogenous audiences. The platform curates private and public creative events at international venues, and showcases a dynamic portfolio of contemporary art at local and international fairs. Specialized in art advisory services SMO Contemporary curates and manages important private and corporate art collections with a great commitment to documentation, preservation and communication.

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The Wheatbaker has keenly supported Nigerian arts and culture since opening its doors in 2011. The hotel's commitment to celebrating the best of Nigerian creativity saw it dedicate its walls to showcasing exceptional traditional, modern and contemporary art. The Wheatbaker has hosted world class art exhibitions including the *Collectors' Series* (2011), *Making History* (2012), *Recent sculptures* (2012), *the WW Independence Series* (2012-13), *Flow, Here & There* (2013), photography by Lakin Ogunbanwo, *Duality, Unfurling*, (2014), *Eko Moves* (2014), *AKALAKA, The Contemporaries, Save Our Art! Save our Heritage!*, (2015-2016), *Equal Rights, Evolving Currents, Mental Space, Freedom* (2016), *Permutations, Standing Out II, Wanderlust* (2017), *The Wheatbaker Permanent Collection* (2017-18), *GBAM!, The Contemporaries II* (2018), *Recent Works, Eni! You Can Always Tell Where The Elephant Has Passed By, If Walls Could Speak and Convergence* (2019), *Dis Lagos Life* (2020), *Towards The Light* (2020)



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