

Intricate LIVES

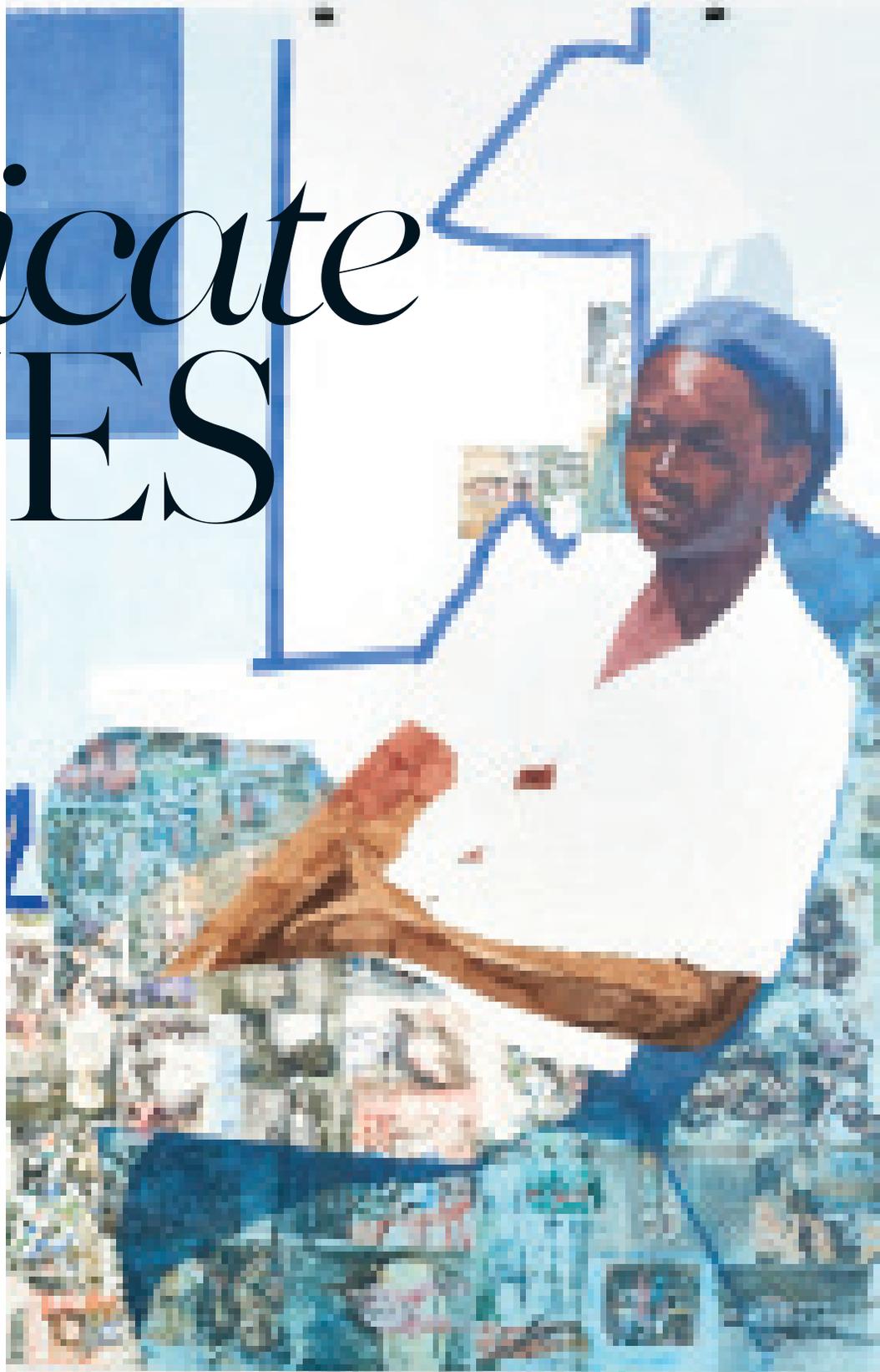
The Nigerian-born, Los Angeles-based artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby builds a wealth of domestic detail into a complex vision of a world in flux. By Tim Walker

Photographs by Peter Ash Lee

if Njideka Akunyili Crosby had never painted herself, someone else would have to do it. Striking and soulful, the Nigerian-born artist has a ready smile, a fearless gaze and a discreet but distinct scar on her brow, acquired when she was seven, sleepwalking into a door. At 5ft 10in she's built for couture, but today she's wearing her "studio uniform": paint-spattered black jogging bottoms paired with the top half of her varsity athletics tracksuit from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

The studio in question is concealed behind the papered windows of a blank shop front, opposite a U-Haul depot on a nondescript stretch of Atlantic Boulevard in east Los Angeles. It's here that Crosby is putting the finishing touches to the fourth of 10 paintings for her first solo show at London's prestigious Victoria Miro gallery.

As I arrive, she's busy mixing a deep blue and politely requests a brief interview postponement: "I set myself a goal to finish this part now – and if I don't, it's just going to bother me for the rest of the day." The piece is headed to London via Art Basel, and it's due to be dispatched to Switzerland by the end of the week. "I have about two weeks' work to do in three days!" >



"I didn't go into this to be rich or famous. I thought I'd end up as a professor and maybe a few people might see my work." Njideka Akunyili Crosby in her studio in Los Angeles. Hair and make-up: Tamah Krinsky. Sitings editor: Ye Young Kim



NJIDEKA WEARS TROUSER SUIT AND BLOUSE, DRES VAN NOTEN, NECKLACE: CARA CROMINGER, EARRINGS AND SHOES: HER OWN

The London show will be the latest in a series of triumphs for a young painter widely considered to be one of the most compelling emergent voices in art today. At 33, Crosby currently has works hanging at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia and the Whitney in New York. Her paintings are part of the permanent collections of several other world-class museums, including the Tate.

Last year she signed with Victoria Miro, put on a two-part solo exhibition at the Hammer Museum and the Art & Practice Gallery in Los Angeles and won the \$50,000 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, awarded by the Studio Museum in Harlem. She was even named one of *Foreign Policy* magazine's "Leading 100 Global Thinkers of 2015".

With the morning's tasks completed, Crosby sits cross-legged on the studio floor, eating lunch shipped across town from Gjusta, a hipster eatery in Venice Beach. All the attention has left her giddy but grounded. "It's exciting, but it does make me nervous. Is it too much, too soon? Is it sustainable? I always have to resist the pressure to pump out work that I'm not super-excited by, just because people are interested in it."

The new painting is a close relation of her 2015 mixed-media work *Before Now After (Mama, Mummy and Mamma)*, which the Whitney reproduced on a billboard. That piece contained a portrait of Crosby's sister, Chidiogo, alongside framed photographs of her grandmother and her mother, Dora Akunyili, who died in 2014 of a rare form of cancer.

Crosby has spent half her life in America, and her work evokes the dislocating experience of the African diaspora, caught between the twin worlds of west Africa and the West. Harking back to the domestic portraiture of the Old Masters, the compositions feature her family and friends, her white American husband or herself, in rooms that are sometimes explicitly Nigerian or American, but are just as often what she describes as "hybrid, in-between spaces".

Her visual signature is to layer the paintings with acetone transfer prints of Nigerian pop-cultural imagery, culled from the internet or Lagos society magazines. Certain images recur: fashion shoots from Nigerian labels such as Jewel by Lisa and Maki Oh, or a shot of musician 2face Idibia perching on the bonnet of a yellow sports car in a red velvet suit. "He's mining the tropes of American hip-hop," she explains. "Nigerian celebrities try to imitate American celebrities, but mimicry is never an exact replica – and that's where hybridity comes about."

Crosby moved to Los Angeles from New York in 2014 to join her husband, Justin

Crosby, a fellow artist who came here to complete his studies at the California Institute of the Arts. The couple share their studio with one of Justin's former classmates and rent an apartment 20 minutes' drive away in trendy Highland Park.

"Los Angeles has been so good to me: the shows at the Hammer and Art & Practice, the connections I've made," she says. "We planned to head back east once Justin was done at Cal Arts, but we love our apartment and the studio is bigger than anywhere we could get in New York. I can be more expansive. Three of my last five works are the biggest I've ever made."

The warm light and pastel palette of southern California are creeping into her compositions, too. In one of the half-finished, large-scale works hanging from industrial-strength paper clips on the studio wall, she points out the rug and the mid-century coffee table from her Highland Park living room. "You can tell

"I want my work to have a long life in the public realm, not just be in a house in the Hamptons"

which of my older works I did when I was living in my New York apartment because the furniture there was all from Ikea!"

Hammer curator Jamillah James says Crosby showed "a very fierce independence" in committing to figurative painting at a moment when it was firmly out of fashion. "To have the wherewithal to say, 'I want to assert myself and insert people that I know and love into my work,' even though it's not on-trend, is indicative of Njideka's confidence as an image-maker and as a person."

The Hammer show got an unexpected profile boost when Beyoncé turned up to see it with her erstwhile Destiny's Child bandmate Kelly Rowland. "Beyoncé is a woman of few words, but she was enthusiastic," says James, who showed the stars around. "Historically, black women have not had a place in portrait painting. Njideka's work pushes back against precedent by putting herself and people like her front and centre. It's really powerful for black people to see that, whether they were born here or on the African continent."

Crosby grew up the fourth of six siblings in Enugu, a small city in south-eastern Nigeria. Her father, Chike Akunyili, still practises medicine there. Her late mother, Dora, was a pharmacist at the same teaching

hospital, who would rise to become director general of Nigeria's food and drug administration and was eventually appointed the government's minister of information.

Enugu was "very quiet, not cosmopolitan at all," Crosby says. "It's a town where everybody knows everybody." Without satellite television during their childhood, she and her siblings found ways to entertain themselves, be it searching for fish in the stream behind a neighbour's house or performing at local street parties. "I think my upbringing nurtured my creative side," she says. "We really only had the basic necessities of life, so if you wanted something that wasn't a necessity you had to figure out how to make it for yourself. My sister always reminds me that I used to make dolls with ping-pong balls and matchboxes."

Back then, America was little more than a fantasy for Crosby, nurtured by the few television programmes that made their way to west Africa: *Beverly Hills, 90210*; *The Cosby Show*. "People in Nigeria think America is a land of no suffering. When I tell people back home that there are poor people here, they're like, 'No! You're lying!'"

Her American dream became reality after her mother won the Green Card Lottery in 1996. Dora never left Nigeria, but her six children were automatically issued green cards of their own; one by one, they moved to America to complete their education. At 16, Njideka flew to Philadelphia, where she shared an apartment with her 17-year-old sister, Somto. "We cooked for ourselves, cleaned, shopped," she says. Their parents visited once a year, "so there was nobody to take care of us but ourselves."

Today, her three older siblings are doctors; two live in Houston, one in New York. Chidiogo, her younger sister, works for the World Economic Forum in Geneva; her younger brother is bound for business school in London. They remain tight-knit despite the vast distances. As we talk, Crosby breaks off frequently to hoot with laughter at fresh messages from the family Whatsapp group.

"I use my iPhone world clock a lot," she says. "If I want to talk to my sister in Geneva, I always have to check what time it is there. Sometimes I get phone calls at four in the morning and I'm like, 'Did you forget that I live in LA now?'"

Crosby believed she would follow the rest of her family into medicine but she failed to earn a place at the celebrated Baltimore medical school Johns Hopkins. Inspired by a painting class she'd taken at Philadelphia's community college, she applied instead to >



Njideka Akunyili Crosby in front of a work in progress, to be featured in her upcoming exhibition in London





Something Split
and New (2013)

COURTESY NJIDEKA AKUNYILI CROSBY AND VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON

Swarthmore, a small liberal-arts school, where she majored in art and biology.

It was at Swarthmore that she met Justin, who is originally from Austin in Texas. “One of the first times we hung out together I had him sit for me. People always ask if he minds, and I say, ‘No, he knew what he was getting into before we even started dating!’”

She proceeded next to Yale, honing her technique in the nation’s top postgraduate painting programme. The Ivy League college also introduced Crosby to critical theory, and the shelves in her studio are loaded with titles from the post-colonial canon: Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri.

Among them are several books by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian novelist to whom Crosby is often compared. Adichie’s semi-autobiographical 2013 bestseller *Americanah* is the story of a young Nigerian woman who emigrates to America and suffers the same culture shocks. At the mention of her name, Crosby’s eyes widen. “Our lives are so similar,” she says. “I feel like she’s my spirit best friend!”

In fact, the two have met, albeit briefly, when Adichie visited the Akunyili home in Lagos to meet Dora, who was considered a role model for Nigerian women. Adichie, in turn, became a role model to Dora’s daughter. “I read her book of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, when I was struggling in my first year at Yale,” Crosby recalls.

“I knew what I wanted to say with my work but I couldn’t really articulate it, and I didn’t know whether it was valid to make work about it. But Chimamanda was someone exploring the same space in another medium, and it was freaking amazing! It convinced me, I can do this!”

Crosby emerged from Yale in 2010 with the artistic voice her admirers would recognise today, but it’s the year she then spent as an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum that she credits with launching her career. From her first day in Harlem, it was clear she was “an incredibly hard worker”, says Thelma Golden, the museum’s director. “The artists’ studios are right above my office, so I’m highly conscious of art being made over my head, based on the bumps of activity. Njideka engaged enthusiastically in the daily life of the museum, spending time in the gallery, meeting all the other artists and staff. She’s voracious in the way she looks at the world, and you can see that in her work. Even as a very young artist, she was aware of who she is and what she wants to say.”

The museum’s mission is to support artists of African descent, and the residency provided Crosby with studio space, a stipend and the opportunity to exhibit her work. “It was the best thing that could have > 316

happened,” she says. “I have friends from grad school who are incredible artists but their careers are not where mine is – not because I’m better, but because people haven’t seen their work yet. The Studio Museum let people see my work.”

Her paintings have been bought by the billionaire Greek shipping magnate George Economou and by Craig Robins, the Miami property developer who revived the city’s design district. But it’s another prospective collector who has her really excited: CNN anchor Anderson Cooper. “Anderson saw my work on Instagram and he emailed me,” she says. “When we finally got satellite TV in Nigeria, CNN was one of the channels. I’ve been watching him ever since.”

Grinning, she shows me a picture on her phone of herself with Cooper, whose mother is the artist and socialite Gloria Vanderbilt. A well-known collector, he once spent \$1.4 million on a Jeff Koons – and he appears to be interested in owning a Crosby. “He flew to LA to visit my show,” she says. “He’s been incredible. I have a fan who I’m a fan of! I’d love him to own my work.”

By this time, we’re sitting in the shady asphalt yard at the back of the studio, accompanied by the playground sounds of a nearby primary school coming out of class for the day. Most evenings, Crosby works at the studio until 10pm. Sometimes she’ll go out to an art opening, but more often she prefers to stay in and watch a television show. “My family in Nigeria think I’m some sort of star,” she says, “but our lives are very normal. Our apartment is 600sq ft – my brother and sister in Texas live in mansions!”

When she joined Victoria Miro, it was decided to keep her prices reasonable in the medium term, to ensure her work remained affordable to public institutions. “I want my work to have a long life in the public realm, so it’s important to me that people have access to it. I don’t want it just in a house in the Hamptons where no one can see it.”

Diligent and driven, Crosby is keen to get back to her piece as her deadline nears. For this artist it’s the work that’s important, not the prices, the prizes or the magazine spreads: the work, always the work. “I live a simple life,” she says. “I don’t need a lot of money to survive. That’s something I made peace with when I decided to do art instead of medicine. I didn’t go into this to be rich or famous. I thought I’d end up as a professor and maybe a few people might see my work. Everything else is a bonus.” ■

“Njideka Akunyili Crosby: Portals” is at Victoria Miro, N1, from October 4 to November 5. Crosby will be in conversation with Zoe Whitley in the Starr Cinema, Tate Modern, SE1, on September 29 at 7pm