



ABRAHAM COLE

IJINLE ARA
THE DEPTH OF SELF

18 MARCH - 1 APRIL 2025

Abraham Cole



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CONTENTS

LADUN OGIDAN IN CONVERSATION WITH ABRAHAM COLE	6
CATALOGUE	13
ABOUT ABRAHAM BABAJIDE COLE	24
ABOUT OMENKA GALLERY	26

LADUN OGIDAN IN CONVERSATION WITH ABRAHAM COLE

"Ijinle Ara" translates to "The Depth of Self." Can you elaborate on why this particular Yoruba concept resonated with you for this series and how it informs your artistic process?

I have always been drawn to the idea that who we are extends beyond what we can see. In Yoruba philosophy, the self (*ara*) is not just a body—it is memory, spirit, and essence, intertwined with forces both known and unknown. This series emerged from my own questioning: *Who am I beyond the names, places, and labels that define me? What remains when everything else is stripped away?*

In my process, I approach the canvas as a mirror, not just reflecting but unravelling. The figures in *Ijinle Ara* exist in an ambiguous space, emerging and dissolving at once, mirroring how

we wrestle with our own self-perception. Sometimes, I work instinctively, letting the charcoal smudge and shift like fleeting thoughts; other times, I am deliberate, carving out form with ink, as if anchoring something before it disappears. That push and pull is at the heart of this work.

Your work often explores the interplay between the physical and metaphysical. How do you visually represent this intangible aspect of selfhood in your charcoal and ink drawings?

The metaphysical is always present, even in the ordinary—it lingers in silence, in memory, in the spaces between words. I try to capture that liminality through contrast: shadows that suggest presence, faces that seem half-formed, lines that blur rather than

define, with the consciousness of what I see of me that no one else can see.

Charcoal, with its ability to be both deeply present and easily erased, mirrors the impermanence of self—the way we shift, adapt, and sometimes disappear into new roles or expectations. Ink, on the other hand, stains with finality, leaving behind an imprint. These materials help me explore that tension between being seen and being felt, between what is tangible and what exists just beyond reach.

Masks are a recurring motif in this series. What do they symbolise for you in the context of identity, and how do they relate to the "shifting masks of time, place, and experience" you mention in your exhibition statement?

I think we all wear masks, whether we acknowledge them or not. Some we put on intentionally to protect ourselves, some subconsciously; examples are when projecting our story or self on social media or when we physically meet new people; others are placed upon us by history, culture, or expectation. For me, masks symbolise survival,



Untitled Me II
2023
Charcoal and ink on paper
83 x 60cm

transformation, and sometimes even concealment—not in a deceptive way, but as a necessary adaptation.

As someone who has moved between cultures and spaces, I have felt the weight of shifting identities—the need to present one version of myself in one place and another elsewhere. In *Ijinle Ara*, the masks are not just coverings; they are reflections of

the selves we construct. They ask the question: Which of these is real? *Are we ever just one thing?*

You've mentioned exploring the "silent conversations we have with ourselves." Can you describe how this internal dialogue manifests in your work and what you hope viewers might take away from it?

There is a moment of pause I often return to in my process—when a piece is nearly finished, and I step back, not just to assess but to listen. There is always something unsaid in the work, a quiet tension, an unfinished sentence. That silence is important because it mirrors the way we engage with ourselves internally.

In my drawings, I try to create that same quiet space for the viewer—to stand before a piece and feel something stir, something wordless but familiar. Maybe it's recognition, maybe discomfort. But my hope is that, for a moment, they turn inward, confronting their own silent questions.

Your artistic journey has taken you from Nigeria to the UK. How has this experience of migration



Inward Outward
2024
Charcoal and ink on paper
83 x 60cm

and cultural exchange shaped your understanding of identity and belonging, and how is this reflected in your art?

Migration is not just a physical movement; it is a continuous negotiation of self. It forces you to ask, *what do I carry forward? What do I leave behind?* And sometimes, *what part of me no longer fits anywhere?*

This experience has shaped the

way I think about identity—not as a fixed thing but as something in flux, constantly being rewritten by time, memory, and place. That sense of displacement, of being caught between worlds, often finds its way into my work. My figures are rarely grounded; they exist in undefined spaces, reflecting that in-between state of belonging and longing, of holding on and letting go.

You've worked with various mediums throughout your career. What draws you to charcoal and ink for this particular series, and how do these materials contribute to the overall mood and themes of the exhibition?

There's something intimate about charcoal. It's raw, unfiltered—it stains your fingers, it lingers. It allows me to push and pull between form and formlessness, much like how selfhood feels—sometimes sharp and defined, other times elusive. There is something beautiful about the marks and stains it leaves on the drawing surface. The fact that the impression fades out after your first impression is magical, reminding me that as humans we

are not permanent; as humans we fade, but our fading gives birth to something beautiful we have no idea will come to existence. That mystery of beauty is endless for me.

Ink, on the other hand, is more assertive. Once it's on paper, it stays. It speaks to permanence, to the parts of us that remain unchanged despite transformation. The balance between the two materials feels like a conversation between presence and absence, between knowing and questioning. That dialogue is at the core of *Ijinle Ara*.

Your previous exhibition, *Deep Introspection*, and your public art installation celebrating Yoruba heritage both explored themes of identity. How does *Ijinle Ara* build upon these previous projects, and what new perspectives does it offer?

Deep Introspection was very personal—a look inward, almost like an artist's journal made public. That's why I decided to experiment with an unconventional execution, adopting the use of



The King's Head
2024
Charcoal and ink on paper
73 x 140cm

photo manipulation and digital illustration using Photoshop as an influence in my practice as a communication designer in my earlier career as an artist. My public installation in Peckham was the opposite—outward-facing, engaging with history and community, and engaging in dialogue that reinforces the Yoruba migrant's living the consciousness of their original culture as a community in the heart of London—Peckham. *Ijinle Ara* feels like a bridge between the two.

This series isn't just about identity; it's about what lies beneath it. It's about the unseen, the spiritual,

the echoes of ancestry that shape us even when we don't realise it. It asks not just who we are but what remains of us beyond the shifting labels of time and place.

You've been involved in community-based projects like the Mayor of London's Untold Stories Project and the *Suns of Egypt* exhibition in Athens. How do these experiences shape your vision for future explorations of selfhood?

These projects reminded me of the universality of searching for self—how migration, memory, and spirituality are themes that resonate across cultures. They have made me more conscious of the responsibility that comes with storytelling, especially when working within histories that are layered and complex.

Moving forward, I want to explore selfhood not just as an individual experience but as a collective one—how our identities intersect, how our pasts inform our futures, how cultural memory shapes personal narratives, and sometimes connecting the viewer's mind to how we can help

the future be a better ecosystem learning from history, as I have a personal belief there is no future without the past and the present.

What are your hopes for this exhibition at Omenka Gallery, and what conversations do you hope to spark with viewers?

I hope that *Ijinle Ara* creates a space for quiet reflection. In a world that often prioritises surface identity—names, backgrounds, affiliations, and nowadays social media status—I want to invite people to look deeper, beyond the immediate.

I want them to ask themselves, *who am I beneath everything I've been told I am? What part of me has always been there, unchanged by time or place?*

If even one viewer walks away feeling like they've encountered something beyond an image—something personal, something lingering—then this exhibition has fulfilled its purpose.

Your work often incorporates fragmented forms. What does this fragmentation signify about

the nature of selfhood, and how does it relate to the idea of a "sum of all we carry"?

We are never just one thing. We are made of memories, of places we've left behind, of people who have shaped us. Sometimes, those pieces feel disconnected—scattered. But even in fragmentation, there is wholeness.

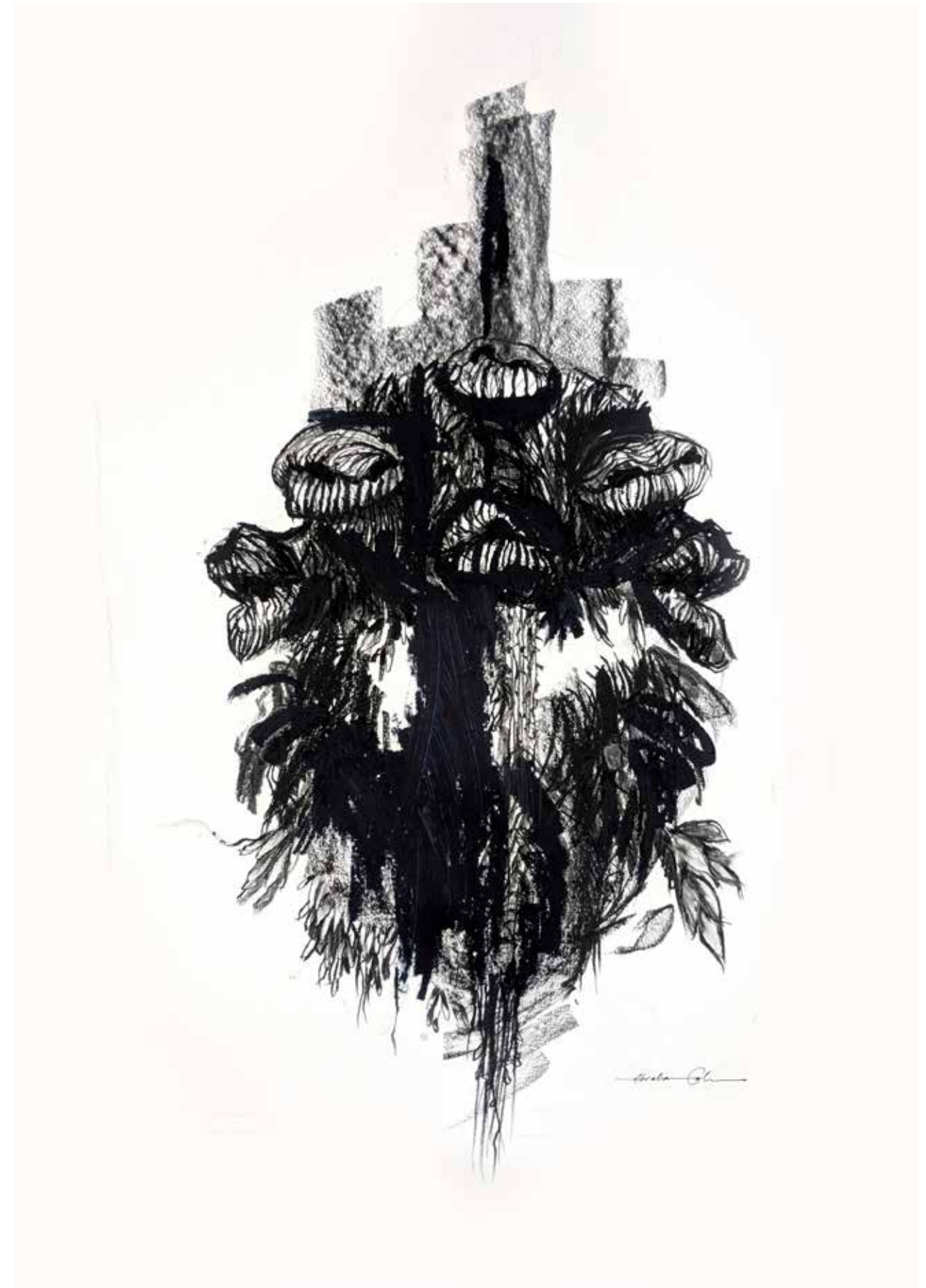
In my work, the fragmented forms are not about brokenness; they are about layering, about complexity. They reflect the way identity is built—not as a singular truth, but as a collection of everything we carry. And in that sum, we find our depth.

Ladun Ogidan
Asst. Curator
Omenka Gallery

CATALOGUE



Self Praises, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 120 x 74cm



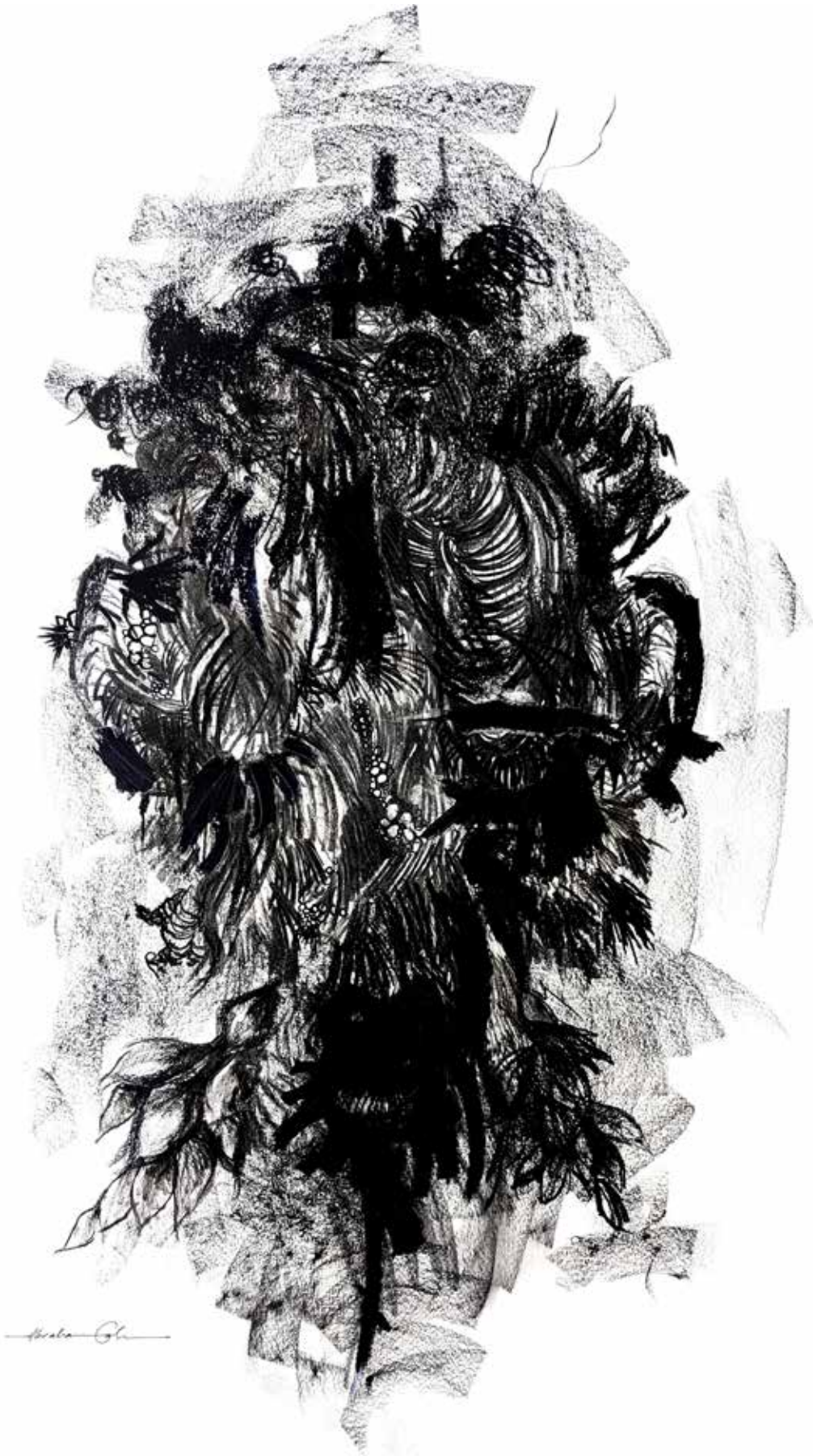
My Wealth is Not Yours, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 124 x 74cm



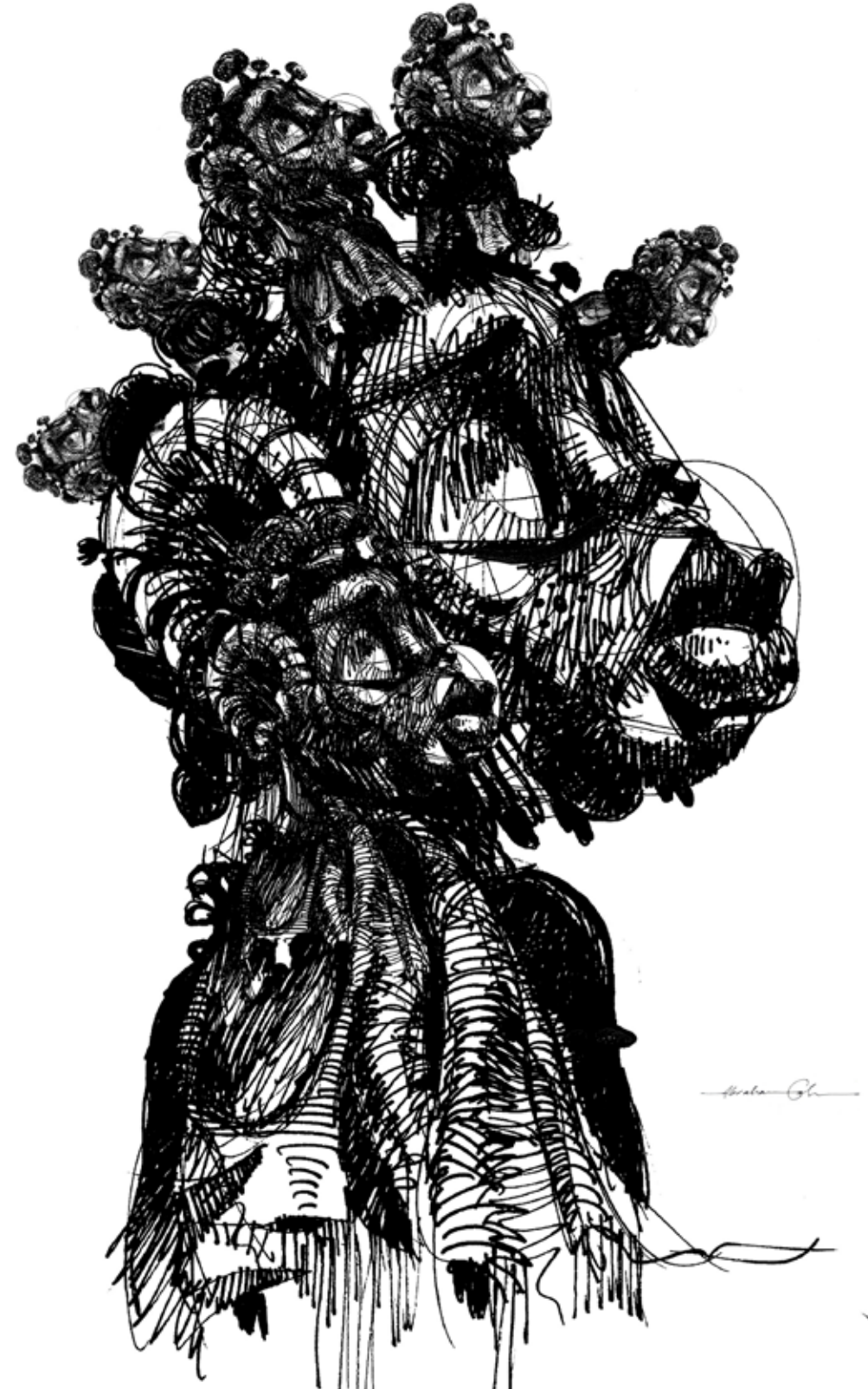
Inward Outward, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 83 x 60cm



Sacred II, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 140 x 74cm



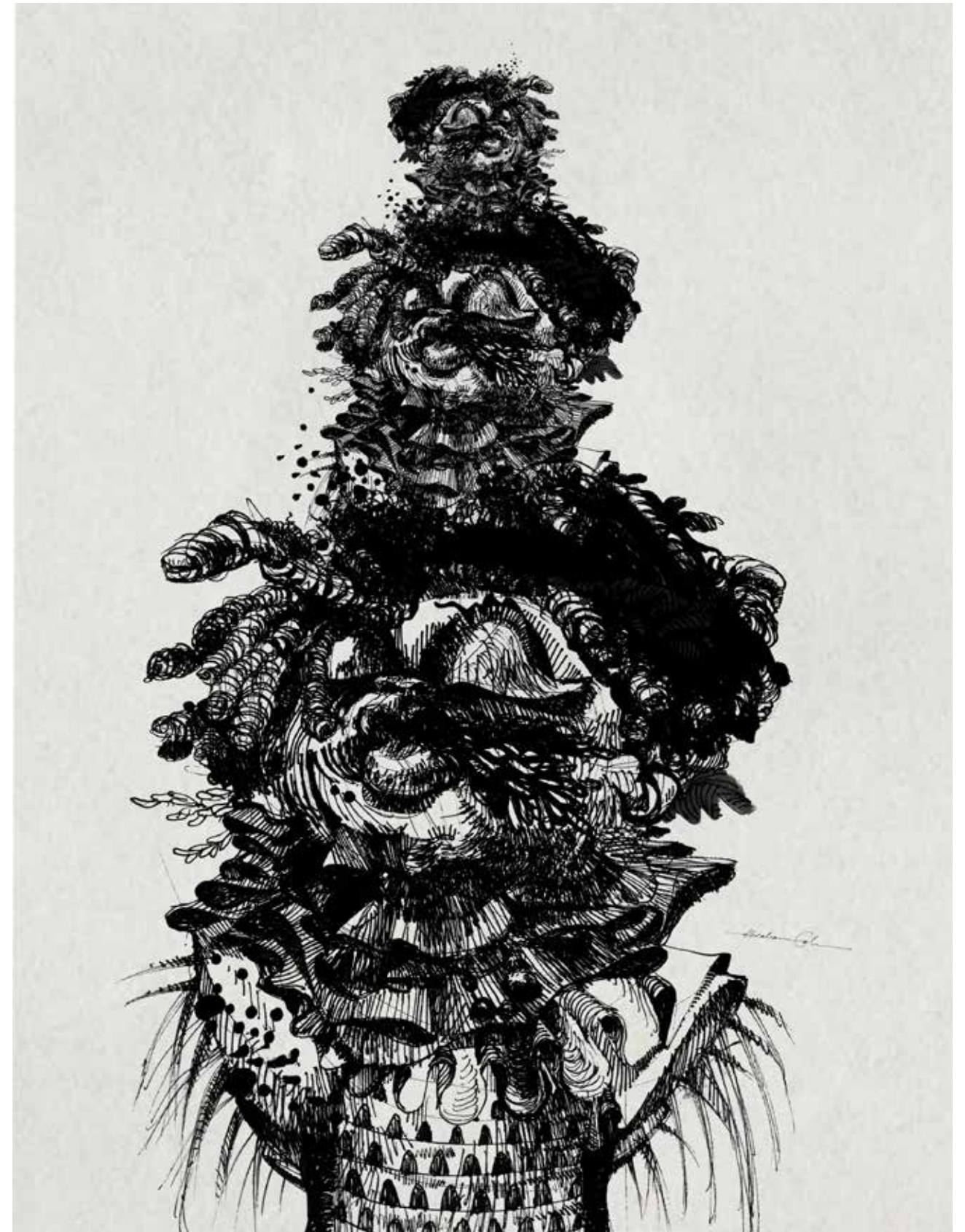
Sacred, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 120 x 74cm



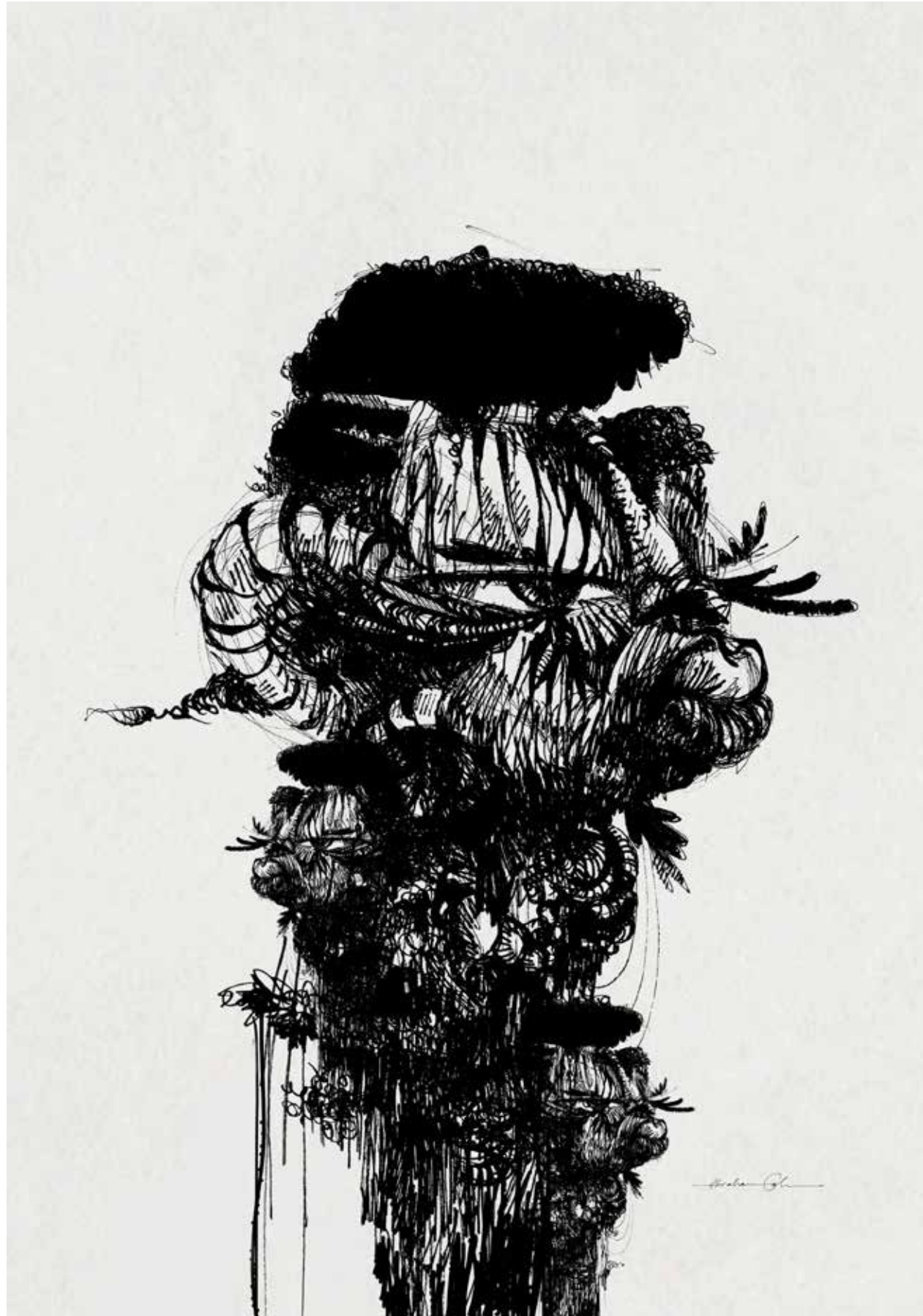
Untitled Me II, 2023, charcoal and ink on paper, 83 x 60cm



Untitled Me, 2023, charcoal and ink on paper, 83 x 60cm



Then We're Untitled II, 2023, charcoal and ink on paper, 83 x 60cm



First We're Untitled, 2023, charcoal and ink on paper, 83 x 60cm



The King's Head, 2024, charcoal and ink on paper, 73 x 140cm



ABOUT ABRAHAM BABAJIDE COLE

Abraham Babajide Cole is a UK-based Nigerian artist whose practice spans painting, drawing, illustration, and digital design. His work is deeply rooted in themes of migration, identity, and spirituality, drawing inspiration from nature, antiques, and the interplay of multiple visual forms to engage with the complexities of selfhood and human experience.

In October 2022, he staged his debut solo exhibition, *Deep Introspection*, at ArtRooms Gallery, Birmingham, UK. In 2024, he contributed to the Mayor of London's Untold Stories Project, collaborating with The Culture Tree and Southwark City Council to create a monumental public art installation in Peckham, celebrating Yoruba heritage and identity.

His work has also been showcased internationally, including his participation in the *Suns of Egypt* exhibition in Athens, Greece, in April 2024, where he presented a series of 12 drawings inspired by biblical and Quranic narratives, expanding his ongoing exploration of migration and portraiture.

A graduate of Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, Nigeria, Abraham Cole has worked as an art director across communication agencies and cultural spaces in Nigeria. His current body of work, 'Ijinle Ara' (The Depth of Self), continues his interrogation of identity and spiritual introspection, using charcoal and ink to explore the ways in which we perceive ourselves beyond the physical—through mirrors, memory, and the unseen forces that shape our existence.



ABOUT OMENKA GALLERY

Omenka Gallery is a leading art gallery in Nigeria and Africa, representing a fine selection of established and emerging contemporary Nigerian and international artists working in diverse media.

With a particular focus on ensuring sustainable presence for Nigerian and African art within a larger global context, Omenka participates regularly in major international art events like; Art Dubai, UAE; the Joburg Art Fair; Cape Town Art Fair; Cologne Paper Art; LOOP, Barcelona; the London Art Fair and 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, London.

Omenka also offers to its esteemed clients a range of advisory services including appraisals, collections management, training and professional development, art finance, as well as industry reports and due diligence. Our in-depth knowledge is drawn from our diverse backgrounds built over 20 years, running and managing one of the leading galleries on the continent, consulting for other important galleries, auction houses and museums, and participating in prestigious events all over the world.

In association with Revido, Omenka has an active publications programme and produces exquisite catalogues with informed, scholarly texts to accompany its schedule of solo, group and large themed exhibitions, through which it stimulates critical thought and discourse centered on contemporary art development in Nigeria, as well as Africa and its diaspora.

Through its well-tailored content, Omenka aims to position Africa as the hub of an increasingly globalised world by stimulating interest in art from the continent as an asset class, while cultivating taste and defining emerging trends in contemporary visual culture.

www.omenka.gallery