

# 28 Greats

*A Celebration of African-American Art and Artists*



Njideka Akunyili Crosby. Photo: Mel Melcon, *L.A. Times*.

**Njideka Akunyili Crosby** (b. 1983) is an acclaimed contemporary artist whose large-scale figurative paintings address the global and cultural intersections between individuals. Born in a coal mining region of Nigeria, she came to the United States in 1999, settling in Philadelphia with her mother.

After graduating from Swarthmore, where she met her future husband Justin Crosby, she received her MFA from Yale University. Justin appears in many of her paintings, their relationship symbolically representing the merging of cultures. In *Wedding Portrait* (2012, top right), she presents a pivotal moment in a Nigerian wedding when the kneeling bride gives palm wine to her chosen groom; this is the moment the couple are considered married. As a later companion piece of sorts, she painted *Ike Ya* (2016, center right), where their positions are reversed in an intimate moment of tenderness. In all her work Crosby employs the patterns and styles of Nigeria, such as the portrait dresses worn for weddings, funerals, and other important family and public events. Western influence and iconography also permeates her work, reflecting and referencing Nigeria's long history of colonization under Britain. Collage is an important part of her artistic practice, as transfer-printed advertisements and photographs form patterns across the surfaces of walls, furniture, clothing, and skin, implying how these cultural elements become part of our definition of self. Crosby has noted that Nigerian viewers, familiar with the individuals in those print sources, will undoubtedly interpret her work differently, and will see certain in-jokes or commentaries. For instance, the title of her painting *Nwantinti* (2012, below) refers to a 1976 recording by Nigerian singer Nelly Uchendu on the subject of finding true love. There are other more visual aspects, however, that speak across cultures.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby has exhibited widely, with solo exhibitions in Venice (Galleria Victoria Miro), London (National Portrait Gallery), Baltimore (BMA), and Fort Worth (Modern Art Museum). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Tate Modern, and numerous other arts institutions have added her work to their collections.



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Nwantinti*, 2012. Acrylic, charcoal, colored pencil, collage, and Xerox transfers on paper. 5.57 x 8 ft.

In 2015 she was awarded a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as well as its Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize. The Smithsonian awarded her both a James Dicke Contemporary Artist Prize (2014, Smithsonian American Art Museum) and an African Art Award (2019, National Museum of African Art). Moreover, she received the famed MacArthur Foundation grant in 2017. Her most recently exhibited series, *The Beautiful Ones*, features images of children in her inimitable style (bottom right).



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Wedding Portrait*, 2012. Acrylic, pastel, colored pencil, marble dust, Xerox transfers and fabric on paper. 63 x 54 inches.



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Ike Ya*, 2016. Acrylic, transfers, colored pencil, and charcoal on paper. 7 x 7.66 feet.



Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *The Beautiful Ones No. 1c*, 2014. Acrylic, pastel, colored pencils, and Xerox transfers on paper, 60 x 42 inches.