

Nigeria's new

THE visual frame is more SOHO

memorable, than even the now familiar mode of spelling his name, his signature, all in the lower keys – dele jegede, the artist, cartoonist and scholar, was in his first visit to Lagos from the United States in seven years.

An enthusiastic, even if sparse presence in 'the circuits' during the weeks of the visit, the bushy hair and sweeping beard now speckled with white grays could be picked easily either in the bookshop, leafing through recent local publications or in scores of art galleries dotting the landscape of Lagos island, mulling over works by some upcoming and promising artist who some seven years back might have been a mere junior high pupil.

What jegede sees is a bubbly scene filled with activity and business. It is even to the credit of the scene that a few galleries opened but shortly closed down, giving place to galleries with more enduring vision, combining artistic with business vision.

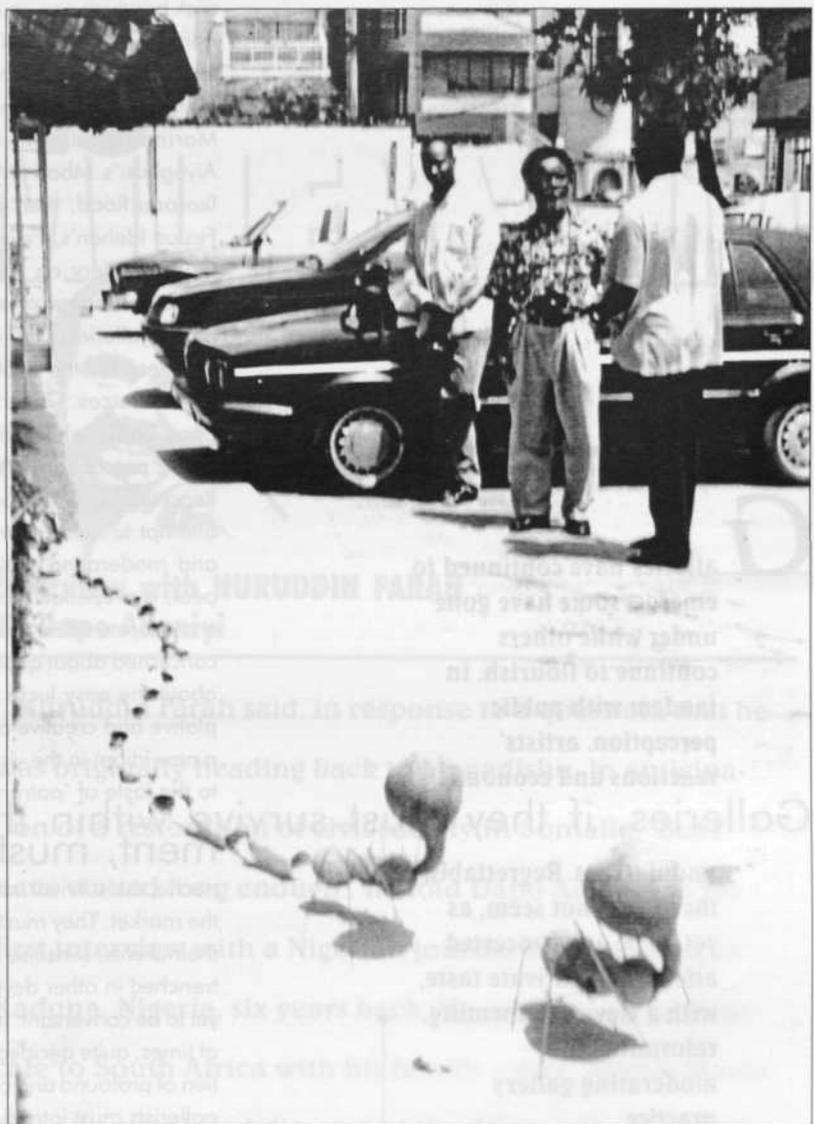
He could not catch up with all the often simultaneous exhibitions and art shows but regrets however that the system has not evolved a process for selection and possibly elimination, where, he says, artists and their works could face critical evaluation, and collectors also find good guidance.

By dele jegede

In the halcyon days when

Lagos was the only credible centre in Nigeria where a rarefied European breed - the cognoscenti and the literati — gathered once in an advertised while, wine in hand, to talk in muted tones, strain their necks, remove their glasses and sniff at the new art produced by the

When OUR



dele jegede (middle)
visiting the Nimbus Gallery
in Ikoyi during prepara-
tions for the Nimbus art
auction. With jegede is
Chike Nwagbogu, the
Nimbus curator (back to
camera) and the artist
Abiodun Olaku

few Nigerians who threw reason to the winds and decided to become contemporary artists in an era when every parent's wish was to produce a medical doctor, an engineer or, at worst a lawyer, the necessary structure upon which the new art was supposed to rest was virtually non-existent. Patronage was almost exclusively a non-Nigerian concern. There were, of course, some noble Nigerians who reposed confidence in the new art. But theirs was a tiny tribe. Galleries? There was none. Not in the sense that Ikoyi is now defining the concept. Please, do not let us reopen that wound, still fresh in contemporary discourse. I refer to the non-existence, or the ineffectiveness, of a critical clan: those who, by temperament, training or disposition, are well suited to moderate, energise or railroad the art scene.

Things are changing. I have seen, in the few weeks that I have spent

after an absence of nearly seven years in Lagos, that Ikoyi seems poised to re-invent itself as Nigeria's new SoHo. This development seems to signal a welcome departure from the hit-or-miss approach of the past. Compared to what obtained a few decades back, Ikoyi becomes a metaphor, a yard-



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undulations. Regrettably, there does not seem, as yet, to be any concerted attempt to cultivate taste, with a view to informing, reforming and moderating gallery practice

stick by which one could attempt a linear historicisation to development in this area. The new razzmatazz posture that Ikoyi galleries are beginning to evolve contrasts sharply with the sedate air that The Exhibition centre, that primal, precious space on the Marina, exuded in its glorious days. Galler LABAC; Tayo Aiyegbusi's Mbari Mbayo (the one that started at Jibowu on Ikorodu Road, then a single-lane, comparatively rustic road); Festus Idehen's, Felix Idubor at Kakawa; Emily Imoukhuede's Gong Gallery on Lake Street; Onobrakpeya's Ovuomaroro: these and some others are forerunners of today's plum and plush galleries. Didi Museum is in a different category. In the last decade, the evolutionary process has been tempered by market forces. Galleries have continued to emerge; some have gone under while others continue to flourish, in tandem with public perception, artists' reactions and economic undulations. Regrettably, there does not seem, as yet, to be any concerted attempt to cultivate taste, with a view to informing, reforming and moderating gallery practice. Art collection, it would appear, is propelled more by individual fads and fancies, than by a corporate effort to stimulate appreciation. Some artists seem concerned about quantitative rather than qualitative output, and about the easy lucre that inevitably contaminates the contemplative and creative air. Within this scenario, the emergence of a new idiom in the visual arts is compromised, as artists pander to the taste of 'patrons'.

demonstrate that they possess the panache, the survival instincts and an individual knack for reading the market. They must be willing to push the envelope, to goad their clients, sensitise them to trends which are already well entrenched in other developed economies, but with which we are yet to be conversant. In addition to serving, perhaps intuitively or at times, quite decidedly, as outposts for the support and promotion of profound and compelling, even if initially disturbing works, gallerists must introduce ideas that have the potentials for benefiting the market and the polity. By coming up with an art auction that allows those who may have initially missed out on acquiring significant works by historically relevant contemporary Nigerian artists, Nimbus Gallery confirms its dynamism in this evolving area. It clearly shows an understanding of the import and connectedness of aesthetic literacy to economic benefits. Although many of the artists whose works are being offered for sale are alive, it is equally important to note that there are works, many of which have not been previously exhibited, by artists who are no longer in our midst. Herein lies the significance of the toil. A Ben Enwonwu, a Rufus Ogundele, Chuka Amaefuna, an Okpu Eze or an Erabor Emokpae would, by the fact that death has for ever denied us the pleasure of seeing any new works from them, instantly increase in value. This is one of the reasons why collecting is not only a pleasurable pastime, but equally a sound investment

Chike Nwagbogu, the energised spirit behind the idea, deserves our encouragement and support. The idea is not only sustainable, it holds significant promise for influencing trends in the field.**GR**