

# **Crosby’s Nwantinti: Intimacy Under the Negotiation of Cultural Identities**

Jingyi Li\*

*School of Art, Southeast University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China*  
 \*Corresponding author. Email: 213180033@seu.edu.cn

**ABSTRACT**

The American modern history does great help in getting Igbo culture involved. As an Igbo descent, Njideka Akunyili Crosby explores different cultural identifications which define her both as a Nigerian and a modern artist. Her work *Nwantinti* is one of the most representative works of her efforts to negotiate the cultural terrain between her modern and native identities. This study depicts basic elements of *Nwantinti* with both the internal logic and a Lacanianism approach. It is argued that *Nwantinti* signifies a highly intensified feeling of intimacy. The collective memory that portrays her childhood plays the role of background, while spatial imagination of sociality serves the constructional one.

**Keywords:** *Intimacy, Nwantinti, Cultural identity*

**1. INTRODUCTION: THE INTIMACY  
 THEME OF CROSBY’S WORKS**

“Intimacy” is a very common scenario in Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s works when there are two figures in a domestic environment. “*Nwantinti*” depicts a scene of an intimate relationship within a couple in their bedroom [1]. The man, lying on bed and putting his head on the woman’s lap with hands holding together, gazes tenderly towards his loved one’s face. The woman, sustaining her body by her right arm and fondling the partner’s hair gently with the other, look back at him with a calm smile. Through her blurring eyes, a sense of reflection and mediation is casting all over objects in the picture. The eye-sight portrayal implies that something worrying trapped her, for a certain sense, in which the immersion in this very moment with her lover could be also noticed. Both characters are genuinely peaceful and calm, without saying anything can they communicate with each other. The bedroom that embraces them strengthen their close interior connection. This coherence between two figures, in conjunction with the external one experienced by the audiences, demonstrates that “intimacy” within a built narrative. A whole story might not be available in this piece, but one can imagine and extend the information given already by analysing related components which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.



**Figure 1** *Nwantinti*, 2012, Acrylic, charcoal, colored pencil, collage and Xerox transfers on paper, 5.57 ft. x 8 ft. Njideka Akunyili Crosby

**2. PRESENTATION OF ONESELF**

Through the open and perforated window, viewers are able to walk into their life and get a glimpse of their love. Blending into the private space, the audiences can not only be touched by their specific link but also get obsessed with the multi-layered images and patterns with great depth. Njideka Akunyili Crosby employs different languages of image making by using mixed medium like transfer, painting, collage and photography. The artist incorporates multiple pictures of Nigerian culturally and other personally significant images from her friends, family back from Nigeria and the internet as well into

one. While looking into these layers, people are in fact looking at various things simultaneously, which creates a sense of multiple levels, both visually and textually. Another famous visual artist Wangechi Mutu has the same process to create her mixed-media works [2]. This strategy helps the artist establish the identity and background story of these characters, enriching the elements of colour and patterns simultaneously while keeping the basic figurations. In addition, the fare modern apartment and the historical images collide and coalesce just like the figures who represent different backgrounds. This responds with the multifaceted identities of the artist herself—a Nigerian, who moved from her home country to the United States, as a cosmopolitan individual who has a close touch with not only African—her own cultures but also post-colonial and immigrant cultures.

Nonetheless, the figurations don't necessarily stand for the artist and her husband, Justin Crosby. Rather, they are the reflections of interior wishes, constructing by the artist: individuals who are eager to be watched equally and respectfully by the public. Jacques Lacan's "the mirror stage" points out that infants between six to eighteen months old are able to connect themselves with the image from the mirror, so as to realize that they exist in the world as a whole or as an individual [3]. Thus, their understanding of one's own independence and uniqueness within are established. In fact, this mechanism of self-determination runs through one's entire life: when we look at the mirror, what we can be certain is merely the physical existence of ourselves; however, when people want to ground their thoughts, values, and even the existence of the soul, that is to say, the spiritual existence, "the other", which is on the opposite side of "the self", replace the mirror and transform as the objection of self-projection—literature, art, ideology, even natural phenomena can be one of these objections. Therefore, the theory of the mirror stage is also applicable to the establishment and search of one's spirit and thought. For artists, "Others", as the contrast of "self", are of great importance. When they create figures and endow them with specific features, they are actually attaching ideas and wishes to the characters, exploring themselves through this process of projection. When Akunyili Crosby built the woman step by step, what she tried to do is to reflect herself on the canvas in an attempt to seek an accessible gateway to the public. When minoritarian subjects interface with various subcultural fields, the worrying actuality and sense of "urgency", just like Akunyili Crosby mentioned several times in interviews, activate their sense of self:

"It slowly became clear to me that art was where my heart was... I remember Thelma Golden being asked to give one word that summarized her curatorial practice, and she said, 'Urgency.' I feel an urgency to tell my story as a Nigerian in diaspora" [4].

Painting, as a medium of performance and display, is a strategy for them to clarify the particularity of each individual and fight back against stereotypes held by the mainstream. For Akunyili Crosby, she combines photographs, space and images to indicate her personal state of being and position in the society [5]. Only through these can the characters be truly complete. For the woman, as for the artist, surrounded by such cultural hostility is more familiar and mentally comfortable to her as well, especially the root where she comes from. In the embrace of her family, cultures and her lover, all the other symbolic cultural derivations seem to float away and she can finally enjoy this very moment of peace. Thus, all in all, another dimension of "intimacy"—culture identification is illustrated. Literature, music, movies and etc.—the integrated method to manage images is the way for Akunyili Crosby to establish her authentic appearance of a cosmopolitan citizen who processes the union of several different languages via the power of narrative and cultural symbols.

Though the space happens in a private room, the open window and lattice screen indicate the possible invaders from the external space of the room and work itself. The element of visible and transitive passageway for the other can be often seen in Akunyili Crosby's creations. Portals, windows and open cabinets are key elements to understand the "exposure". Relatively speaking, the dark-red wall with circular holes on the right side of this work is actually a rare element in Njideka Akunyili Crosby's paintings. But she created "Facets: Screen Wall" in 2016, which is a detailed version of the same wall, a meditation on the mutable and open boundary between the private and the public [6]. The painting depicts an interior decorative breezeway with a concrete lattice screen, an architectural motif and material common in many homes in warm climates. The viewers can only take a glance at the family portrait behind the screen, as the complete version is not available visually. It is extraordinarily decorative from its appearance, yet it still makes itself accessible for spectators to regard. These "loopholes" make the figures aware of the possibility and danger of being peeped at, being gazed on, creating a tense atmosphere. The "privacy" is exposed to the public in an open sphere. What should not be neglect is that the gate is also a window for the characters to show their multiple features, an exit for an artist to interact and negotiate with the majoritarian public sphere. Via the ambiguous glance through this lattice screen, one may not able to see the whole view of the others, where people would be easily led to misunderstandings. As what has just been mentioned, painting is the tool for the artist to communicate with the audiences and construct her identification. We are permitted to gaze at a more complete vision of the life of the woman and man. Although in "Nwantinti", communication seems to be restrained between the lovers, the gaps that break the

space are essential to comprehend the look from both inside and outside.



**Figure 2** Facets: Screen Wall, 2016

The peculiar existence of an open closet is a noticeable component of transparent separations. Clothing is the most intimate and personal belonging in one's home, which is more often put or hidden in wardrobes. Yet what seems to be done on purpose is that it is now widely shared with the spectators outside the painting. The colours depict these garments are relatively bleak, and the broad, blurry brushstrokes are really unusual, compared to the strict and clear lines that delineate other objects. This "blurry" feature coordinate with the "privacy"— what has been generously shared still held back some part of the characters. Meanwhile, just like the shared-experience feature of this work, the clothes are also used to decorate oneself and demonstrate the ideal identity to others, bringing about what we want to imply who we are.

### 3. INTENSITY WITHIN

The intensity is not only available because of the possible gaze from external space and internal urgency to present and express. As a matter of fact, the interaction between these two characters is more complicated than what it looks like.

The elements of structure, the light and the shadow, and colors that form these two characters are in line with the objects surrounding them. In some way, the figures are like the guides in the space, where they function in different dimensions. Foremost, the striped trousers that the man is wearing resemble with the bed sheet underneath him. Together with the images printed on him, both his clothing and his body, these factors indicate

that in contrast with the woman, he becomes part of the surrounding and is much closer with the space. The stripes, pictures with historical and personal implications seem to destruct and reconstruct his image in the way of textualizing. Like tattoos on one's body, these images endow the figure with new stories and identity, which is in fact given by the female partner. The artist regards him as something she could rely on, equally as her cultures back in Nigeria. There are also photographs of her and her husband on the background. Thus, not only can we judge the real body as "body", but also the whole background and objects around are the "body" of language and texts, especially when we take the similar procedure of transferring, painting and collage.

Now looking back to the female. There are no transferred photos on her, and the orange dressing she wears is decorated with an ornamental design of blue flowers. The technique used to present her is originated from the tradition of European painting as some scholars find in her other paintings [7]. Akunyili Crosby's personal tableaus are firmly rooted in the classical academic Western painting of her rigorous art school training, while there is still her own innovative spin on tradition visible in the painting. The woman is of higher saturation and more realistically figurative style than the rest of the collage. Through the couple's position and the way they interact, it is pretty clear that SHE is the dominant figure of this painting, the architect of the thoughts and mind. To summarize, this whole scene can be viewed as a picture from the female's perspective, which in fact is, the way that she sees throughout the world and herself define the consequence of final appearance. Even the intimate relationship between them is a creation from the artist according to her daily life and, of course, imagination.

The figuration of the lovers' forms a triangular structure, from the top of the woman's head to the feet of both. This stable form could be interpreted as the symbol of intimacy within. However, the feet of the female partner in stocking stagger, hanging up and down in a vacillating position, while the ones of man stand steadily on the ground without possible movement contemporarily. In this interdependent interaction, he needs her as a dependent and she relies on him to maintain the intimacy as they both require it mentally and physically. Thus, even the triangular represent the stability, there is a sense of intensity surrounded. This evidence convinced us to be suspicious of that their state of mind isn't as peaceful and relaxed as what it looks like on the surface. There is still the strength remaining and they are aware of the possible danger emerging from the inside and the outside. Their experience and feelings towards "intimacy" are not the same. The relationship of love is, from the very beginning, like a battle and negotiation between the two parts. Maybe the artist is conscious about this deep inside, in which we can explain the deep contemplation in two figures' eyes.



**Figure 3** Something Split and New, 2013

This reception may come from daily life. It is understandable that the uneasiness comes from sights from the external space. As has been discussed above, “privacy” is broken due to the presence of “gap”, which also a gate to the public. Akunyili Crosby said that she always feels an “urgency” to express herself as a Nigerian. For the white male, which represents her husband, who is often surrounded by various members of his wife’s family in other paintings, he might get anxious as well, trying to get into their culture and be a part of them. He is always the only white person in the works, which pushes him to communicate with others, whether willingly or grudgingly. This is transferred from the artist, female’s perspective. So it might not be the central idea of the work. For example, the main thought in “I Refuse to be Invisible (2010)” clearly focuses on the woman, as a protagonist looking right at us [8]. Yet, in comparison with the male’s “gaze” in traditional art paintings from feminism, could there be a female’s gaze? She is creating him in the way she understand him. In “Something Split and New (2013)”, all eyes are looking at the white male. Altogether, sights of audiences and the artist converge into this very space, where the fusion of “intimacy” and “intensity” helped us to understand about one’s cultural and psychological identification.



**Figure 4** I Refuse to be Invisible, 2010

#### **4. IMAGES FOR IDENTIFICATION**

When choosing images and pictures for a certain topical collage, artists want to deliver a surface level denotation of what is in fact going on. The reason why those photos have been chosen is that they promote a very specific narrative the artists wish to give. Who I am—well, all you need to know is in my pictures. That’s quite similar to the way how people get engaged in the social media. We are all media practitioners that are in the business of promoting their own personal stories or, mythology. Even though the image is about “me”, it doesn’t mean that “it” is precisely “me”—it has been changed and polished by myself already, generally in an unconscious way. What is essential is that it isn’t complete. No matter what medium you choose, we ought to remember that the real life is always different and far more complex than the surface. However, when being seen and delivered, the pictures of mythology you produced which is sometimes narrow and one-sided would be taken seriously by others. This is fine when it happens to an image created by the exact person that wishes to promote or change the stereotypes that the majority hold. That is what most of the artist would do when managing to set up their own identification. Yet most of the time, we tend to be misguided by the social media, simplifying others’ unique features and cultures. Due to the constant usage of dichotomy and labelling, which we regard as a better way to quickly understand one and another, a deep understanding of another identity

is merely impossible to be built. Discriminations can be easily built.

By implying layers putting together, Njideka Akunyili Crosby manages to create a sense of illusion and confusion towards the viewers—what are we actually looking at? The bed sheet, or the family photographs and historical images? What she tries to do is breaking the defined box, to question about the rough definition of a multifaceted individual—everyone is far more sophisticated than the conditions that the dominant culture generates. Especially when taking Crosby's status into consideration, the space that she presents where disparate cultures overlap establishes her understanding of a cosmopolitan person. Art is the strategy to establish one's own status in this world and the ultimate pass towards the answer of "Who am I". One's dependence on the pictures can be concluded throughout the artwork, which assists him/her in projecting the sense of self to the images. Furthermore, maybe this procedure of fighting against discrimination and realizing one's self-identification is unconscious, beneath her brain, but, as we looking through the elements and narratives, exploration of self and identification can be found throughout her painting.

The transferred images that come up in Njideka Akunyili Crosby are mostly from herself, the family, friends and the internet. The family's most valuable possession as she claimed is a family album containing photos from her parents who got married till she moved to the United States. Thus, there are pictures of her family members and herself as a kid in "Nwantinti". When returning from home, she would bring a short list of Nigerian material and visual culture as well, photography floor patterns, her grandmother's tea table, and crochet doilies on sofas, the significance of which she was only able to see after leaving the home country. Many culturally significant photos appear in this work as well. This is the way for her to stay connected with home and deal with stress that emerged in living in another different nation and starting her career as an artist [9]. Crosby acknowledges that her position as a person who left Nigeria, helped her see aspects of popular culture that were too familiar to be invisible to Nigerians, like her, in Nigeria. The distance even helps her to ensure the relationship between herself and her homeland, letting her to comprehend the meaning and value of childhood, of family, of Nigeria. In such intimate scenes, photographs back home are the soul of her Harbor, the place where she could rest, similar to the shoulder of her beloved one. Although she is now living in a different nation, the bond of blood and homeland is more strengthened than ever. The perspective of the immigrant culture in identification is a tattoo on her body, resembling to the technique of putting meaningful images on the figures' body, that would never fade.

The artist also collects images online Nigerian material and pages, musicians and designers. The title "Nwantinti" is originated from Nelly Uchendu's popular 1976 rendition of an Igbo folk song "Nwantinti" that describes the experience of finding true love. She transferred the cover of the album into this collage so there are a lot of them visible in this work. The description of burning and integral love in this song indicts that under the peaceful atmosphere of this artwork, the characters hold on a vital, sincere love towards each other, just like the artist herself and the husband [10]:

"My baby my valentine (Uh)  
Girl na you dey make my temperature dey rise  
If you leave me, I go die (I swear o)  
You are like the oxygen I need to survive  
I'll be honest  
Your loving dey totori me  
I-I'm so obsessed  
I want to chop your nkwo bi



**Figure 5** Album cover Crosby used as a symbolic content

(Unle) Your body dey baka mi si (Unle)  
Open am make I see (Unle)  
Gimme love nwantiti  
Baby make a bad man sing oh yeah"

Nelly Uzonna Edith Uchendu (1950–2005) was a Nigerian singer, composer and actress. Revered for modernizing traditional Igbo folk music, Uchendu rose to prominence upon the release of her 1976 song "Love Nwantinti" which earned her the "Lady with the Golden

Voice" sobriquet. This symbol of Nigerian music culture helps the artist to build out her identity as well as the actual images appearing in the artwork. The music, as well as the image, tells you stories in a visualized way—the become texts, information which is understandable to spectators. People often relate the presentation of Justin Crosby, as the union of two widely different civilizations. In “Nwantinti”, photographs of them two is also present. But what should not be ignored is that just like what the family and the motherland mean to her, her husband, symbolizing as the deepest connections she got from the US, is her new home which she can count on. Their love is “like the oxygen they need to survive”. There is no denying that they connect closely with one and another, both physically and mentally. The suggestion of crazy even mad love in the lyrics seems to disagree with the quiet scene, which unravels another dimension of intensity. Thus, even if the whole scene appears to be tranquil, together with the anxiety to establish one’s identification,

## 5. CONCLUSION

Intimacy is a very common scenario in Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s works, between lovers or family members. However, in the very special work “Nwantinti”, the peaceful scene seems to differ from other paintings she created in color and dynamic. Still there is intensity underneath the picture: through the open window and the accessible portal, the characters are conscious of possible gaze from both inside and outside, which is also a gate for figures to present their personal image to the public sphere; After careful analysing essential elements within, it is distinct that this peaceful sense of beloved relationship is more complicated than what it looks at first sight. The anxiety to seek out for identification not only from inside but also from outside, together with the hope for steady and perpetual love, breaks the seeming stillness in this scenario.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *Nwantinti*, a collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2012
- [2] Elspeth Van Veeren (2019) Layered wanderings: epistemic justice through the art of Wangechi Mutu and Njideka Akunyili Crosby, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 21:3, 488-498, DOI: 10.1080/14616742.2019.1619468
- [3] Lacan, *Some reflections on the Ego*, 1953
- [4] Ando, E. and N. A. Crosby (2016). "Njideka Akunyili Crosby." *BOMB* (137): 44-54.
- [5] Simone White, *Skin, Or Surface: Njideka Akunyili Crosby*, The artist's layered, tender paintings consider the history of being seen and touched by black women, *Features*, 2018
- [6] Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s scrapbook, An exhibition review article retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/1843/2016/10/10/njideka-akunyili-crosbys-scrapbook>
- [7] Frauke V. Josenhans, *Painting with Fragments: Njideka Akunyili Crosby's "The Rest of Her Remains"*, *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, 2016, *European Art* (2016), pp. 110-113
- [8] Alicia Daniel, *Being Seen: Cultural Hybridity and Representation*, 2018
- [9] Natalie Zel, *Picturing an Impossible American: Njideka Akunyili Crosby and Photographic Transfers in Portals*, Walter de Gruyter, 2016
- [10] Nelly Uchendu (feat. Mike Obianwu), *Love Nwantinti*, 1976