

Current Biography®

April 2019

Njideka Akunyili Crosby

Date of birth: 1983

Occupation: Artist

Njideka Akunyili Crosby is an award-winning visual artist. Her mixed-media paintings combine paint, photography, and found materials, such as marble dust and fabric. Her work, “based on my autobiography,” she told Jean-Philippe Dédieu for the *New Yorker* (5 Nov. 2015), combines references to her Nigerian upbringing and her adulthood in the United States in intimate domestic scenes. “I feel like my journey has created a character or person who doesn’t fit in any box,” she told Dédieu. Drawn from family photographs, magazine clippings, and staged photos with her husband, sculptor Justin Crosby, Akunyili Crosby’s work often has a silk-screen effect that mimics the haze of dreams or memories. Her figurative style recalled for Dédieu a quote from the novel *Open City* (2011) by the Nigerian American author Teju Cole. “Nigeria was like that for me: mostly forgotten, except for those few things that I remembered with an outsize intensity,” Cole wrote. “These were the things that had been solidified in my mind by reiteration, that recurred in dreams and daily thoughts: certain faces, certain conversations.”

Akunyili Crosby has received a slew of awards for her work, including a MacArthur “genius” grant in 2017. Akunyili was stunned when she received the call; she had always dreamed of winning the grant in her fifties or sixties. She told Deborah Vankin for the *Los Angeles Times* (2 Nov. 2017) that she planned to spend some of her \$625,000 prize on an extended trip to Nigeria. Other accolades



Photo by Donato Sardella/Getty Images for Hammer Museum

include the Smithsonian American Art Museum's 2014 James Dicke Contemporary Artist Prize, the Studio Museum of Harlem's 2015 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize, the 2015 New Museum's Next Generation Prize, and the 2016 Prix Canson for works on paper. She also appeared on *Foreign Policy*'s 2015 Leading Global Thinkers list.

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Akunyili Crosby was born in Enugu, a former coal-mining town in Nigeria, in 1983. Her father, J. C. Akunyili, was a physician. Her mother, Dora Akunyili, began her career as a pharmacology professor. In 2001, Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo appointed her director-general of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC). At the time, Nigeria was vexed by a flood of deadly fake medicine. (Akunyili Crosby's maternal aunt, who had diabetes, was killed after receiving fake insulin.) Under Dora Akunyili's leadership, the fake drug market declined by 90 percent. She went on to become minister of information and communications. Though she died of cancer in 2014, Dora Akunyili remains a national hero.

Akunyili Crosby is the fourth of six children. Three of her siblings went on to become doctors, like their parents. As a child, Akunyili Crosby showed a natural affinity for the sciences and enjoyed poring over her father's book of diseases. After skipping a grade, she was accepted to boarding school at the prestigious Queens College in Lagos, the country's bustling capital, at the age of ten. It was a bit of culture shock for Akunyili Crosby, who was more familiar with life in grandmother's village, where she spent weekends and summers. The village was lit by kerosene lamps "so everybody goes to bed when the sun sets at seven, and there is *nothing* to do. Get up at 5:30 and sweep the floor with palm fronds," she recalled to Sophie Heawood for the *Guardian* (3 Oct. 2016). Boarding school, she said, "was my first contact with a cosmopolitan life."

EARLY ART CAREER

When Akunyili Crosby was a teenager, her mother won a US green-card lottery for the family. In 1999, at the age of sixteen, Akunyili Crosby moved to Philadelphia with her sister. The girls spent a year taking classes at a community college and studying for the SATs. In addition to her rigorous course load of science classes, Akunyili Crosby decided to take a painting class, her first, for fun. Her teacher encouraged her to pursue painting, and she did, studying both fine art and biology at Swarthmore College, outside of Philadelphia.

She graduated in 2004 and returned to Lagos, where her family was then living. She broke difficult news to her parents: she wanted to pursue art, and she was seriously dating Crosby, a white American man. "That's why I feel like my art and Justin are so linked," she told Diane Solway for *W Magazine* (15 Aug. 2017). "Because it was all or nothing. You rebel or you don't." Her mother took the news in stride, but her father took longer to come around. One of her paintings, *I Still Face You* (2015), depicts a scene based on Crosby's first meeting

with the family. In it, her father stands with his arms crossed. The tension in the room is palpable. Akunyili Crosby's trip home that year was emotionally fraught for other reasons, as well. Around Christmas, while the family was traveling to a reunion, her mother narrowly survived an assassination attempt.

GRADUATE WORK

Akunyili Crosby earned a post-baccalaureate certificate at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia in 2006. She went on to study at Yale University, where she became inspired by the paintings of legendary artist Kerry James Marshall. A 2009 portrait of a black woman particularly impressed her. "I don't think any work has had an effect on me like that," she recalled to Solway. "He was putting images in a space where you don't expect to see them. And I'm thinking, What am I looking at? It's this woman who is unapologetically black. Black, black, black. Not even a darkish brown aubergine." At Yale, Akunyili Crosby truly began to develop her artistic voice—though with little thanks to the institution itself. She graduated with an MFA in 2011 and won a coveted residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem the same year.

Later, Akunyili Crosby expressed distaste for Yale. "Yale was not a community," she told Hewood. "But I think of the Studio Museum as a family." At the Studio Museum, Akunyili Crosby was introduced to the work of Kenyan-born artist Wangeci Mutu. She appreciated the way Mutu's work demonstrated, as Solway put it, "that an image could be composed of many others." Other influences include the nineteenth-century French painter Édouard Vuillard, contemporary American figurative artist Alex Katz, and contemporary British artist Chris Ofili.

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DROWN AND OTHER WORK

One of the first of Akunyili Crosby's works to capture dealers' attention was *I Refuse to Be Invisible* (2010), a painting that depicts Akunyili Crosby dancing with her husband. She sold three paintings to the New York gallery Fredericks & Freiser while still at Yale. (A legal dispute arose later when the gallery refused to tell her who they sold the pieces to. She bought back one of the pieces—*Nyado: The Thing around Her Neck* from 2011—for \$20,000, 150 percent more than its original price.) In 2016, Akunyili Crosby's painting *Drown* (2012), featuring a naked couple modeled after her and her husband, their bodies collaged with colonial images, sold at Sotheby's for \$1 million, far more than its \$200,000 estimate. In 2017, a portrait of her sister, similarly collaged with images of Nigerian women, called *The Beautiful Ones* (2014) and the first in the series of the same name, sold for more than \$3 million.

The art market has a dangerous tendency to kill artists' careers by driving the prices of their work too high too soon. Unsurprisingly, Akunyili Crosby characterized her breakthrough as quite stressful. "People expect me to be happy [about the money], but it put a spotlight on me in a way I don't like at all," she told Solway. "I like operating quietly, on my own, in the background." (In 2018, she appeared in a documentary about the excesses of the market and the commodification of art called *The Price of Everything*.) Akunyili Crosby has since made an effort to sell her pieces to museums. In 2018, she donated her striking pseudo landscape painting *Bush Babies* (2017) to the Studio Museum of Harlem for a benefit auction. The piece sold for \$3.4 million, a record for the artist.

Akunyili Crosby also enjoyed a solo show called "Front Room: Njideka Akunyili Crosby | Counterparts" at the Baltimore Museum of Art in 2017. The show appeared at the Modern Museum of Art in Fort Worth, Texas, in 2018. The same year, she created a mural called *Obodo (Country/City/Town/Ancestral Village)* for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Her series "The Beautiful Ones," featuring portraits of Nigerian youth, went on display at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2018.

ARTISTIC PROCESS AND STYLE

Akunyili Crosby is a painstaking artist, making only eight or nine works each year. She tacks the fruits of her meandering process—images sourced from the Internet and family photos, scraps of novels and books about postcolonial theory—on the wall of her Los Angeles studio.

Akunyili Crosby's work subtly positions commentary on racism and colonialism within intimate domestic scenes. *Ike ya* (2016), for instance, captures an intimate moment between Akunyili Crosby and her husband; in it, she sits on a living room couch, and he hugs her waist. A number of later works depict kitchens and other domestic spaces. The walls in her paintings are often covered with family photographs. "I wanted to put out pictures of these parts of Nigeria that I knew and experienced," Akunyili Crosby explained to Solway. "People forget that life exists in these places. There are serious things that are wrong in the country, but people exist and thrive. We hang out. We get married. We talk as a family. We lie in bed together. I can't make this point enough. It's hard to think people matter if you don't feel connected to them. And so it's about making that connection."

PERSONAL LIFE

Akunyili Crosby met her husband at Swarthmore. They were married—twice: once in a church and once in a Nigerian village wedding—in 2009. They have a son named Jideora and live in Los Angeles.

SUGGESTED READING

Dedieu, Jean-Philippe. “Njideka Akunyili Crosby’s Intimate Universes.” *The New Yorker*, 5 Nov. 2015, www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/njideka-akunyili-crosbys-intimate-universes. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.

Heewood, Sophie. “The Nigerian Artist Who Is Exploding the Myth of the ‘Authentic African Experience.’” *The Guardian*, 3 Oct. 2016, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/oct/03/nigerian-artist-myth-authentic-african-experience-njideka-akunyili-crosby-harlem-studio-museum. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.

Solway, Diane. “Nigerian Artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby Is Painting the Afro-politan Story in America.” *W Magazine*, 15 Aug. 2017, www.wmagazine.com/story/njideka-akunyili-crosby-artist-painter. Accessed 17 Feb. 2019.

Vankin, Deborah. “Njideka Akunyili Crosby: The Painter in Her MacArthur Moment.” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Nov. 2017, www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-njideka-akunyili-crosby-20171102-htmlstory.html. Accessed 18 Feb. 2019.

SELECTED WORKS

Drown, 2012; *The Beautiful Ones*, 2014; *Ike ya*, 2016; *Bush Babies*, 2017

—Molly Hagan