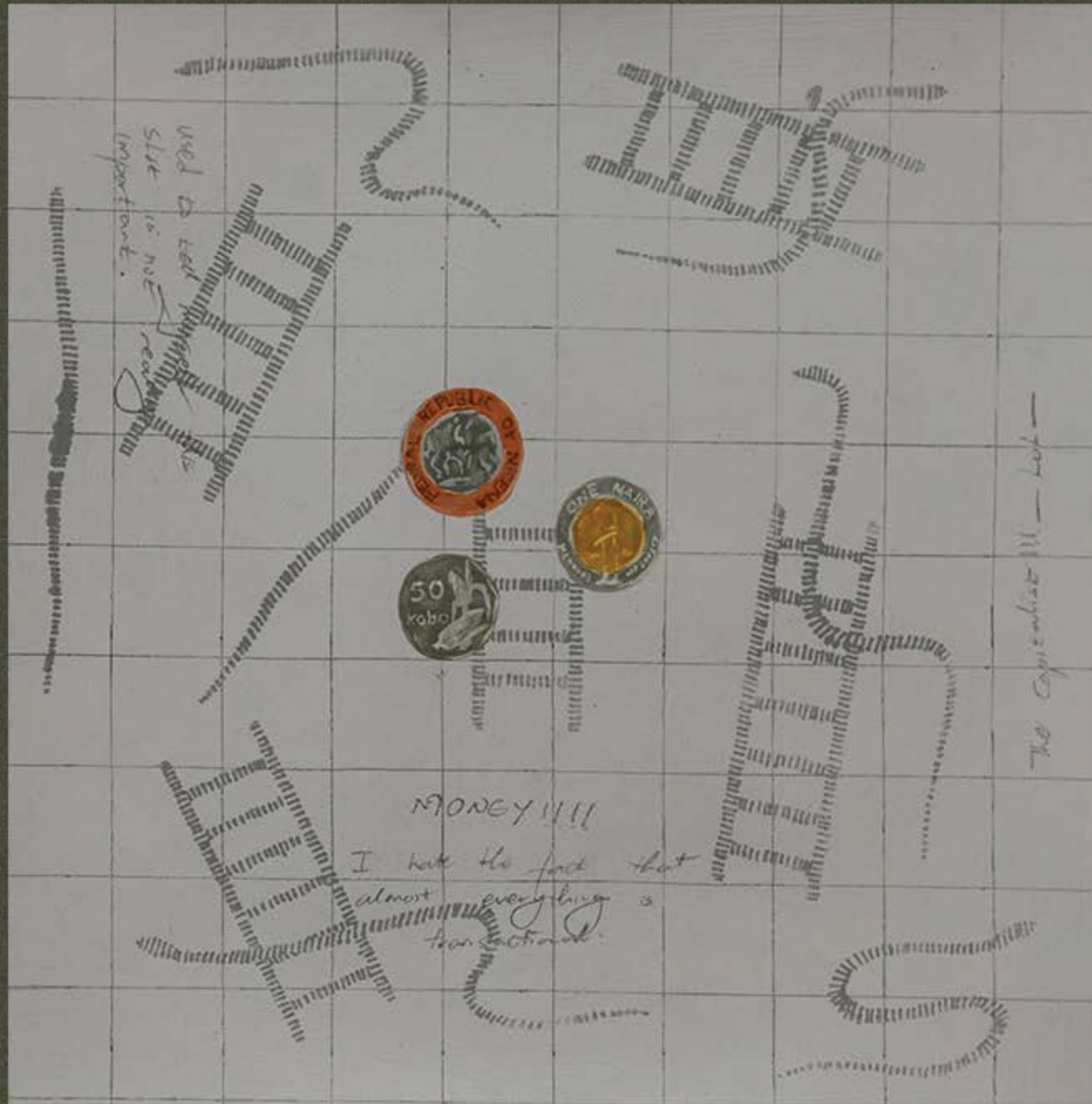


MEANT TO BE A

IT WAS

GAME



Ameh
Egwuh

LE

www.rele.co



Gallery Statement

Rele Gallery Lagos is pleased to present a solo exhibition of new work by Ameh Egwuh titled *It was meant to be a game*. On view from October 22 till November 26, 2023, the exhibition offers new experiments in painting and drawing, marking a shift from Egwuh's brightly coloured canvases while retaining a fundamental preoccupation with line and traditional mark-making.

Presenting multiple paintings on canvas and works on paper, the artist employs a mixture of lines and images drawn in graphite to create grayed-out, muted backgrounds in contrast to the painted central subjects. The works in this exhibition reference the classic 'Snakes and Ladders' games, with subjects shown against checkered landscapes in which striped images of snakes and ladders float. Much like the origin of the game — which is rooted in Indian philosophy and was initially used as a tool for teaching moral lessons to children and adults — the exhibition takes as a central subject the individual and collective choices that inform our understanding of the moral and social qualities of life.

Despite its popularity in contemporary cultures as a simplified children's game of luck and entertainment, in its original form, the 'Snakes and Ladders' game was designed to represent the concept of karma and the journey of life towards spiritual enlightenment. The ladders in the game were seen as symbols of positive virtues and good deeds, leading players closer to enlightenment. Conversely, the snakes represented vices and bad actions that could set players back on their spiritual path. Offering no personal moral judgment, Egwuh evokes a moment, interaction or state of being in examining tangible and abstract ideas that govern aspects of social engagement and an individual journey through life. An armed figure dressed similarly to law enforcement officials raises questions on the social construction and manifestation of power; an image of a baby leopard playing with a butterfly conveys the beginning stages of life; a diptych of two figures in different states of embrace insinuates the duality of the human experience, a constant, oscillatory movement between the good and bad.

In his gray backgrounds and drawings in graphite, Egwuh invites the audience to closer inspection, to meticulously tease out the nature of objects devoid of color; is the spill at the foot of the armed man a puddle of water or a pool of blood? How do these different possibilities affect our reading and understanding of the larger composition? The artist refers to every single work as a moment, conveyed by an impartial narrator. In viewing these works, we begin to play a game of sorts, imagining what ends of the morality spectrum the moments on view belong to. Or do they exist beyond the simple duality of black and white, in the more marginal, ambiguous sphere of the gray?

Ameh Egwuh

Ameh Egwuh (born 1996) is an artist whose paintings are characterized by a fascination with the line.

His lines draw inspiration from the scarification techniques of ancient Ife art — striated grooves etched onto faces — as well as Adinkra, and Nsibidi signs, which are indigenous pictograms and aphorisms. Employing these pre-colonial art traditions while referencing contemporary art history, his works invite the viewer into expansive, multi-layered worlds from the familiar to the surreal, presenting us with intimate casual scenes of play and rest as well as fantasy images of transcendence.

Exploring themes of home and familial responsibilities, solitude, identity and duality as well as death and the afterlife, Egwuh utilizes multiple modes of representation from expressionistic painting techniques to geometric patterns — drawn from textile designs from his hometown, Idoma in Benue state — in representing form and space. His eclectic visual vocabulary conveys varying textures of lives lived and spaces occupied.

Ameh Egwuh studied Fine and Applied Art at Delta State University, Abraka, Delta State. In 2019 he participated in the inaugural edition of Rele Arts Foundation's Young Contemporaries Bootcamp and was selected in 2020 as part of Rele Arts Foundation Young Contemporaries.

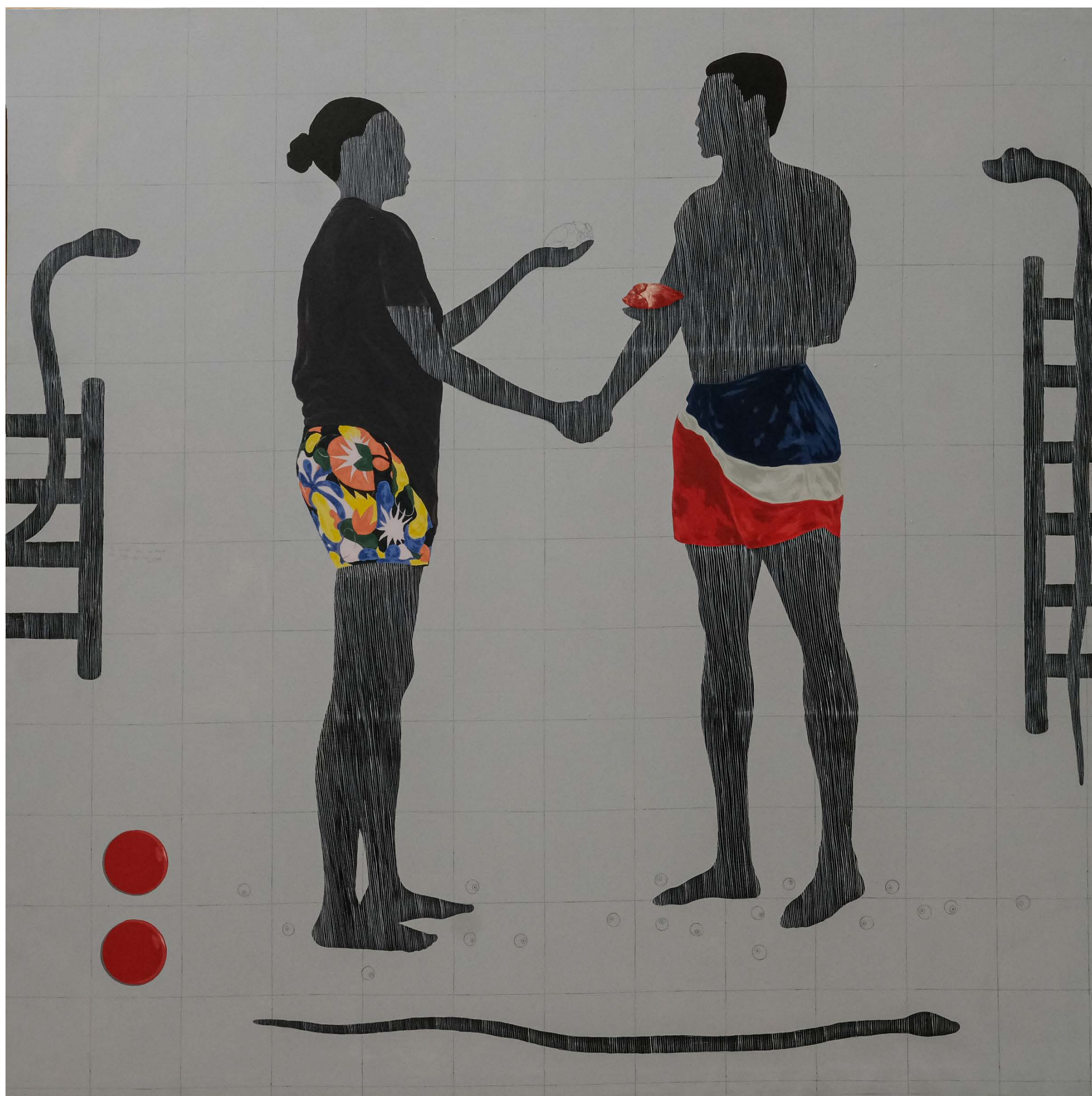
Select group exhibitions include *Being Mortal* (2023) Dom Museum Wien, Vienna Austria, *Travels with Herodotus: A Journey Through African Cultures*, (2021), Galleria Bianconi, Milan, *ItsAwRAP* (2021), Rele Gallery, Lagos, *Generation Y*, (2018), *Retro Africa*, Abuja. In 2020, Egwuh's work was shown at FNB Art Joburg and South South Veza. The first part of his debut solo show *Life After Life* opened at Rele Gallery, Los Angeles in April 2021 and the second, *Fantasies of the Other Side* opened in October 2021, Rele Gallery Lagos.

His works are included in the Jorge Perez Collection, Dom Museum Wien Collection, as well as in the Aluko & Oyebode Collection.

Egwuh lives and works in Lagos.



Baby leopard (curious cat)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Barter (a heart for a heart)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
72 x 72 Inches



Day
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



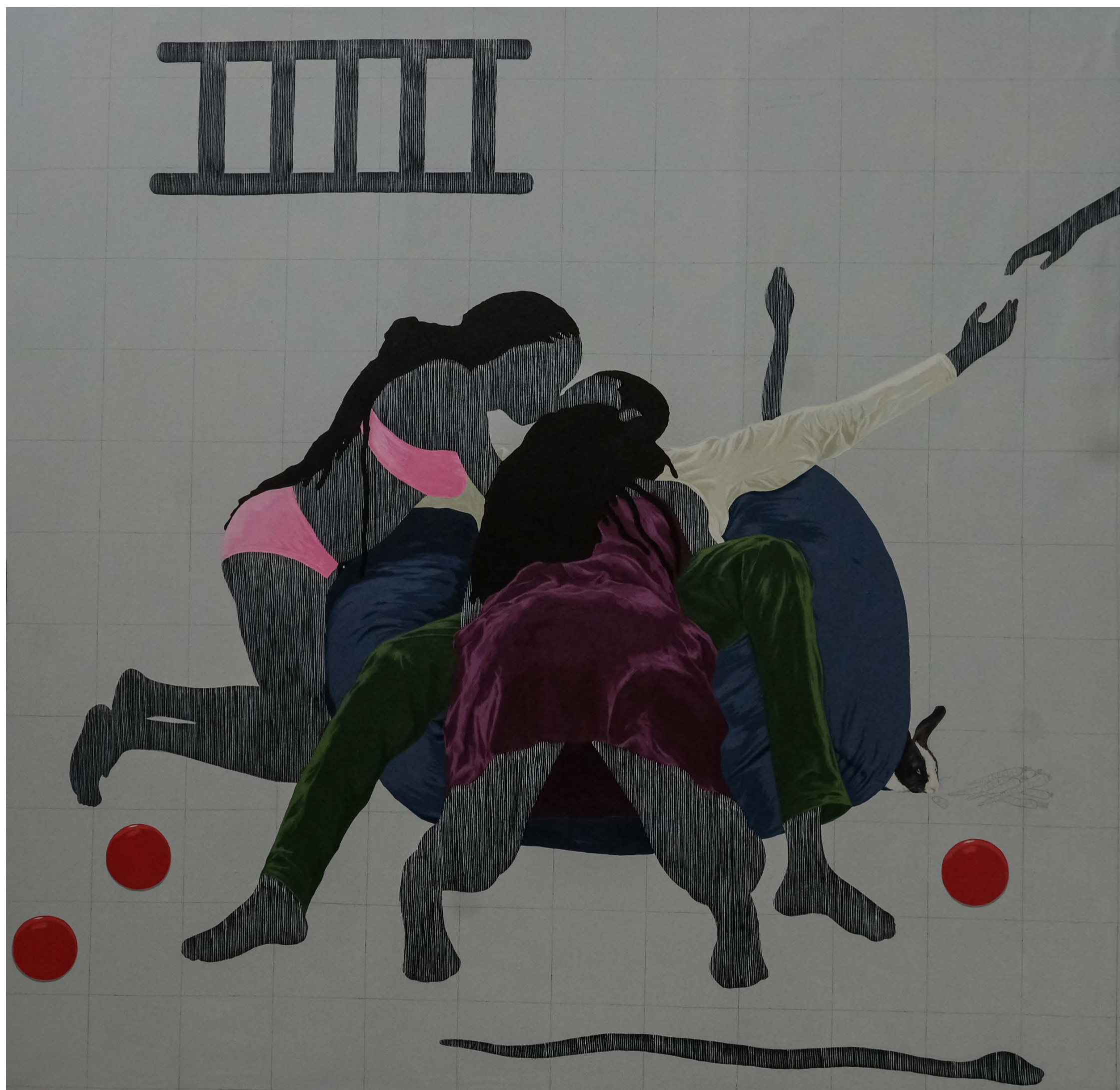
Deep Sleep (the end)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



God is the greatest!
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
72 x 72 Inches



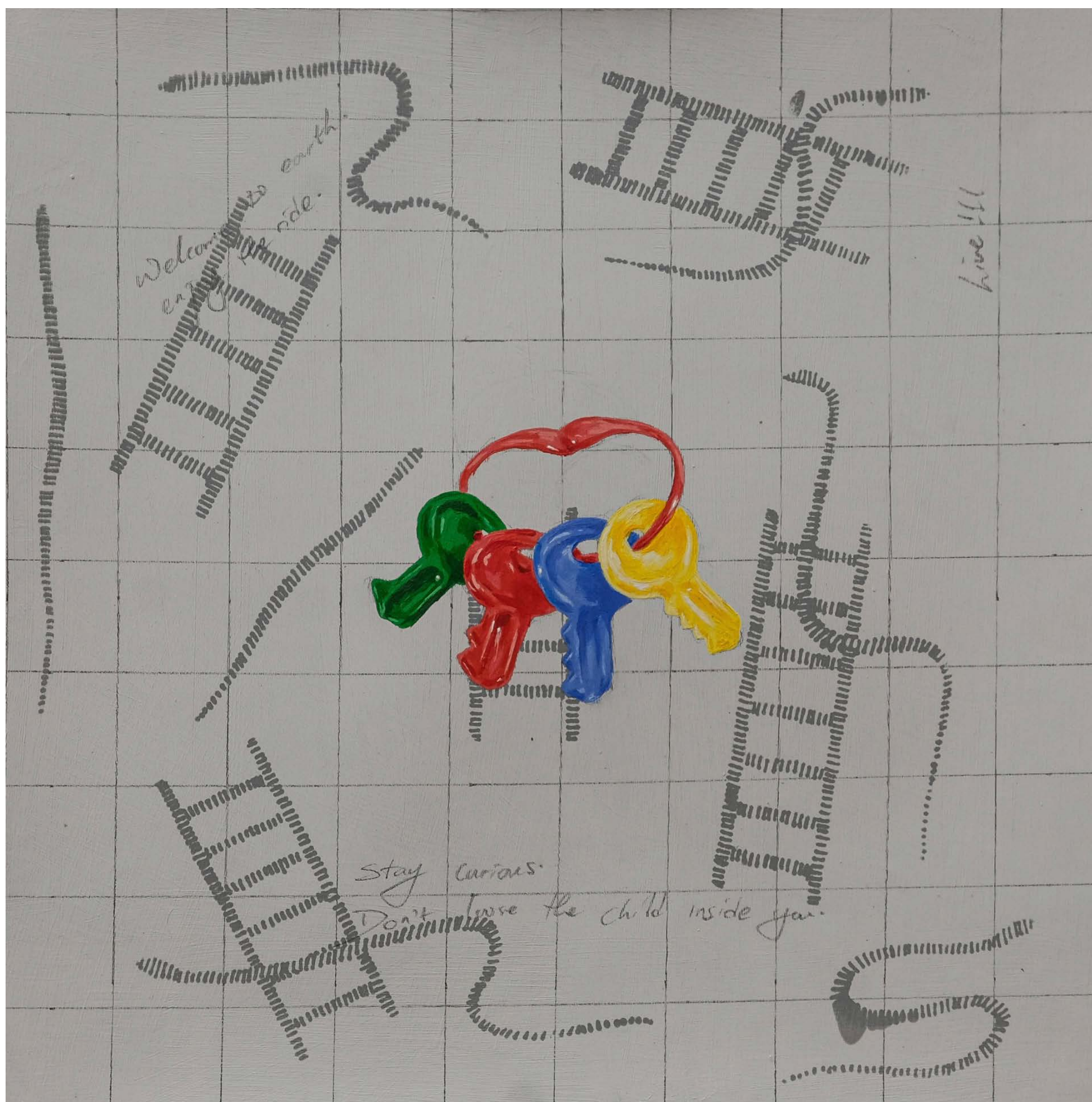
Lovers (the lift and the kiss)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Lust, Greed or Desire (I still want more)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
72 x 72 Inches



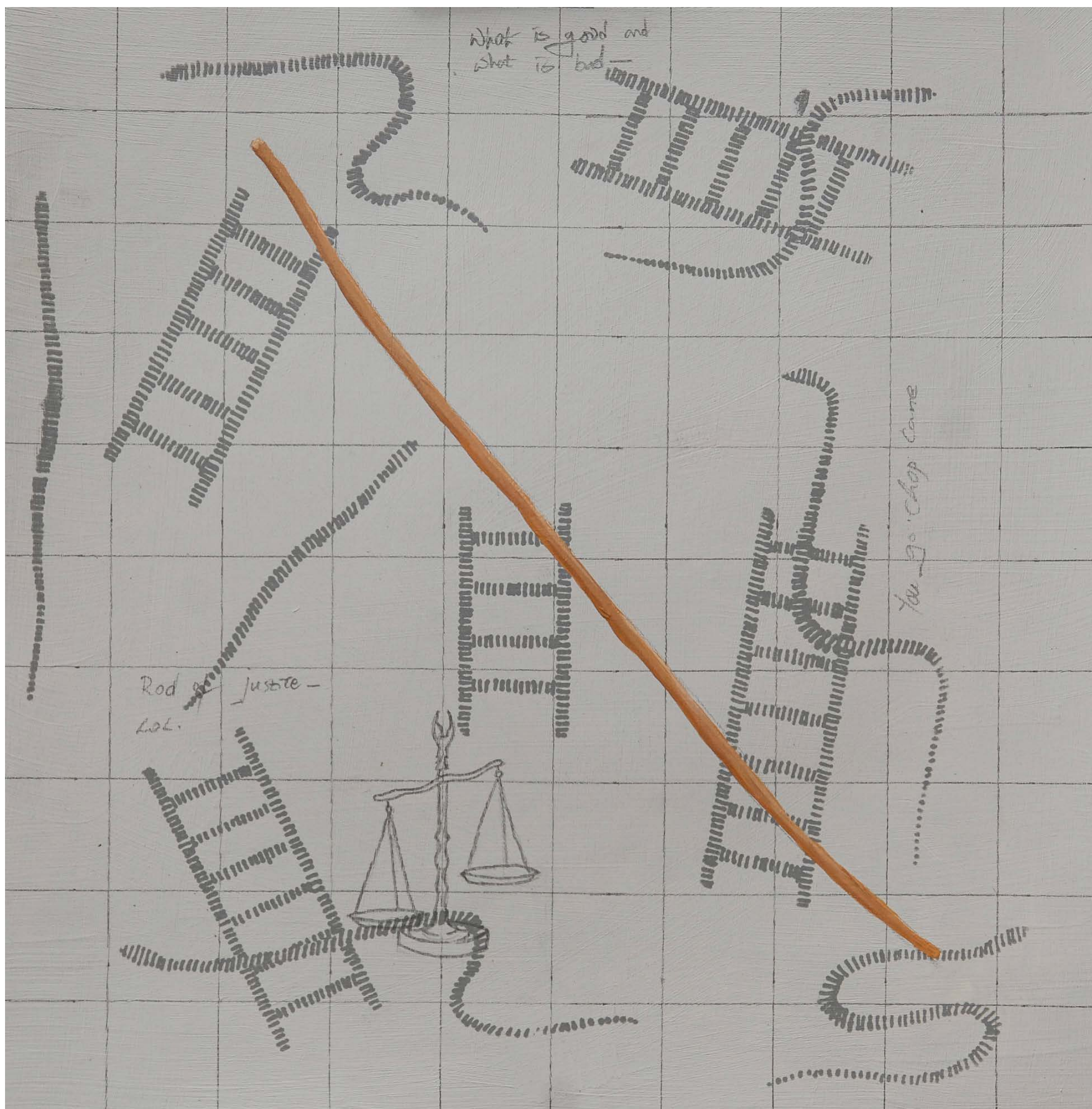
Night
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Object and Conversation I (key toy)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



Object and Conversations II (The bible)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



Object and Conversations III (Cane)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches

In Conversation with Ameh Egwuh

In this interview, adeoluwa oluwajoba engages in conversation with the artist, Ameh Egwuh. Known for his evocative and intricate works, Egwuh delves into the depths of his creative process, shedding light on the intersection of personal experiences, symbolism, and the universal themes that permeate his work. This dialogue unfolds against the backdrop of his recent residency at the R2 Space, a transformative experience facilitated by the Rele Arts Foundation in collaboration with Dulux. The culmination of this residency takes shape in a solo exhibition titled *It was meant to be a game*, which stands as a pivotal chapter within Ameh's broader body of work.

Ameh provides a captivating glimpse into the artistic philosophy that shapes his unique narratives.

a.o: As a curator, and someone who has had time to watch your artistic progress, I am curious about how you feel about this upcoming exhibition.

A.E: There are two emotions. Some days I'm chilled about it, and some days I'm anxious. I think it's because I'm working on something new, different from anything I have done –in terms of the color and in terms of the story and ideas I'm playing with. I'm experimenting with different ideas, so I'm in between two emotions. But I am also like, let's see how it goes.

a.o: The works you are presenting for this exhibition are decidedly different from your earlier work. Your previous works featured a lot of bright, colorful canvases, but this one is more muted with monochromatic backgrounds. There's also a stripping down of elements, where you can see pencil lines. Can you talk a bit about what prompted this shift and approach to your work?

A.E: I really wanted to experiment with things because I easily get bored with my own style. I wanted to explore new materials and approaches, so I tried using acrylic markers on canvas. However, the textured canvas made the color spill, so I decided to try pencils. I like exploring new materials and approaches usually based on how I am feeling at the moment. I was also inspired by an artist's work I saw while in Dubai to explore a more subtle approach to my backgrounds. I wanted to stay away from heavy colors and experiment with muted colors on my canvas.

a.o: Can you speak more about the work, especially as you are drawing a lot from the Snakes and Ladders game? Tell me a bit about this direction.

A.E: I started exploring work around the Snakes and Ladders games in 2020 or 2021. I made a painting with it around the time I was thinking about death and the afterlife. However, I wasn't satisfied with the outcome because I hadn't taken time to research properly, so I kept it on the side. When I started making work in 2022, I decided to take time to actually understand the game. I understood that it was more than just a board game because it carried the idea of duality which I found interesting. I am also quite fascinated by the idea of religion and I liked that the game originated from Hinduism in India. It had the interplay of morality, vices and virtues since it was created to teach morals. The idea of duality is something I find interesting; the interplay of light and darkness, ups and downs. It's the way I see life, an uncontrollable mix of opposing forces.

The game functions as a background for my work. It is like a safe haven, somewhere I can sit down and talk about things that I am interested in. The game allowed me to occupy a separate world while observing and commenting on things happening in the real world. So, the paintings become a way to drive conversations on the different aspects of life that I observe and experience. I believe my paintings are larger than me, so issues I can engage with transcend things I have a personal relationship with. The game afforded me freedom by serving as a backdrop against which I could examine different topics and ideas. Life itself is vast, things happening at different times elicit different reactions. I titled the exhibition 'It was meant to be a game', but it's more than just a game because there are so many things that are embedded in the body of work.

a.o: Yes, that's really interesting. Essentially, you are dialoguing with all of these different ideas of everyday life set within the context of the religious and moral aspect of the game. Apart from the focus on the Snake and Ladder game as a background for your work, what are some other things and ideas you were particularly focused on?

A.E: I explored the idea of power, its use/misuse and capitalism. Love and greed are also themes I played with, and I also wanted to express the duality of life; how life can be blissful at times, and dark and painful at others. It's about expressing my own experiences and observations of life.

a.o: You mentioned duality and the idea of opposing forces, especially in the game where there's good versus evil, right choice versus bad choice, reward versus consequences. How did you explore this specifically in creating this body of work?

A.E: In terms of morality, I have different topics on the canvas, but I'm not focused on telling the viewer what's good or bad. I'm more interested in eliciting a mental self-reflection in the viewer. Each piece is like a mirror, reflecting things we do. You actually get to have a moment with yourself.

I also play with the consciousness of good and bad times. There is a diptych in the exhibition titled Day and Night, which shows a man holding a lady while she's standing and when she's falling. The work speaks to the idea of holding on to the good times as well as the dark times. Life is an interplay of both good times and bad times and you have to experience it. You can't run away from both.

The works aren't supposed to project a particular ideology because I don't know it all. I am still very young and constantly open to suggestions. I question these things because I'm also confused, so in putting this out, I hope we can have collective conversations and actually grow from them.

a.o: Your work has always incorporated symbols and metaphors in crafting the larger narratives you explore. With the body of work, apart from the more obvious one which is the snake and the ladder, there are also all of these inanimate objects and animals that come together to form your compositions. Could you speak to some of these elements in your work?

A.E: Now, for this body of work, most of the elements are drawn with pencil on the canvas. I wanted to create images that aren't immediately visible until the viewer gets closer. That's why they're drawn and not painted. You might see a particular scene and not understand what is going on there until you get closer. The drawn elements are also symbolic, they mean certain things within the contexts in which they are. For instance, in the diptych I spoke about earlier, I depicted a chicken sitting on one canvas and with its head cut off on the other. The blood from the headless chicken is drawn with a pencil as well as the text that says 'blood'. The piece with the policeman that has 'Power' written across his chest also shows a blood stain on the ground drawn with a pencil. All of these things are metaphoric. The smaller pieces I created feature just objects which have different connotations. I also incorporated the use of written words in the paintings to give clues and additional context for the compositions. I like playing with these elements because the main image doesn't always convey the entire story I have in mind.

a.o: speaking of all these objects, there's one that is repeated. The red circle

AE: On that, the work will be titled in numbers and the red circular elements symbolizes a person on the canvas. So if you see three people on the canvas, you have three of those circles. You know when you play the snake and ladder game, everyone has a round tile that charts their movement across the board. So, in the paintings, the tile represents the event of the individual lives. Every single work on the canvas is a moment. The circle then symbolizes the time on the canvas for the different characters..

a.o: You also incorporate a lot of animals, and I imagine they all mean different things. I also think that in your earlier work, there was a lot of fascination with animals. What's the fascination with these different animals?

AE: That's quite straight forward. I think there's a connection between us and animals and there's also this belief that we originated from apes. So most times, instead of just adding more figures, I decide to let animals act in those roles. Some of those animals are also symbolic. There's a painting with a baby leopard in it and with that, I wanted to convey a feeling of infancy and the first day of birth. I wanted something that symbolizes our first moments on earth and this idea of trying to experience the world. The idea of child-like curiosity. That's why you see the red tile is in the starting box, symbolizing your first day on earth.

So when I can't use human beings to express a particular thing I just use an animal to represent that idea. Some animals are symbolic, with a religious undertone like the dove, while some are metaphoric, standing in as characters in the work.

AO: There's something you mentioned that I don't think I noticed when looking at your work. You mentioned that with the baby leopard piece, the red tile is placed at the starting box which symbolizes the beginning of life. Are the positioning of the tiles deliberate in all the different boxes you put them in? Does this play a role in reading the entire work?

AE: It is not sequential but I tend to look at the figures on the canvas and imagine the age they might be in. It's more of asking, at what age will I have this conversation? At what age will I be having conversations on sex, greed, power or love? A lot of the figures and moments in the paintings are fictional, but I try to figure out what stage of life the different characters are in and try to correspond it with their position on the game.

AO: To reference something you said earlier, you mentioned that you recently noticed that there is a preoccupation with religion in your work. Do you think that that's from a personal experience with religion or you're just interested in religion as an institution?

AE: I'll say it's from a personal experience with religion because I like questioning things. My girlfriend and I — she's more religious than I am — always have these arguments because it's quite difficult to apply logic to religion and I like trying to apply logic to everything. Apart from it being personal, there is also a curiosity I have to religion. I like the excitement that comes with the unknown. Aside from the struggle with logic and belief, I think that most of the stories are quite interesting and it does make sense when it's explained. This is why I am drawn to religious symbolism. I want to know what's actually going on in the spiritual world. And religion gives you that pathway to walk into that space.

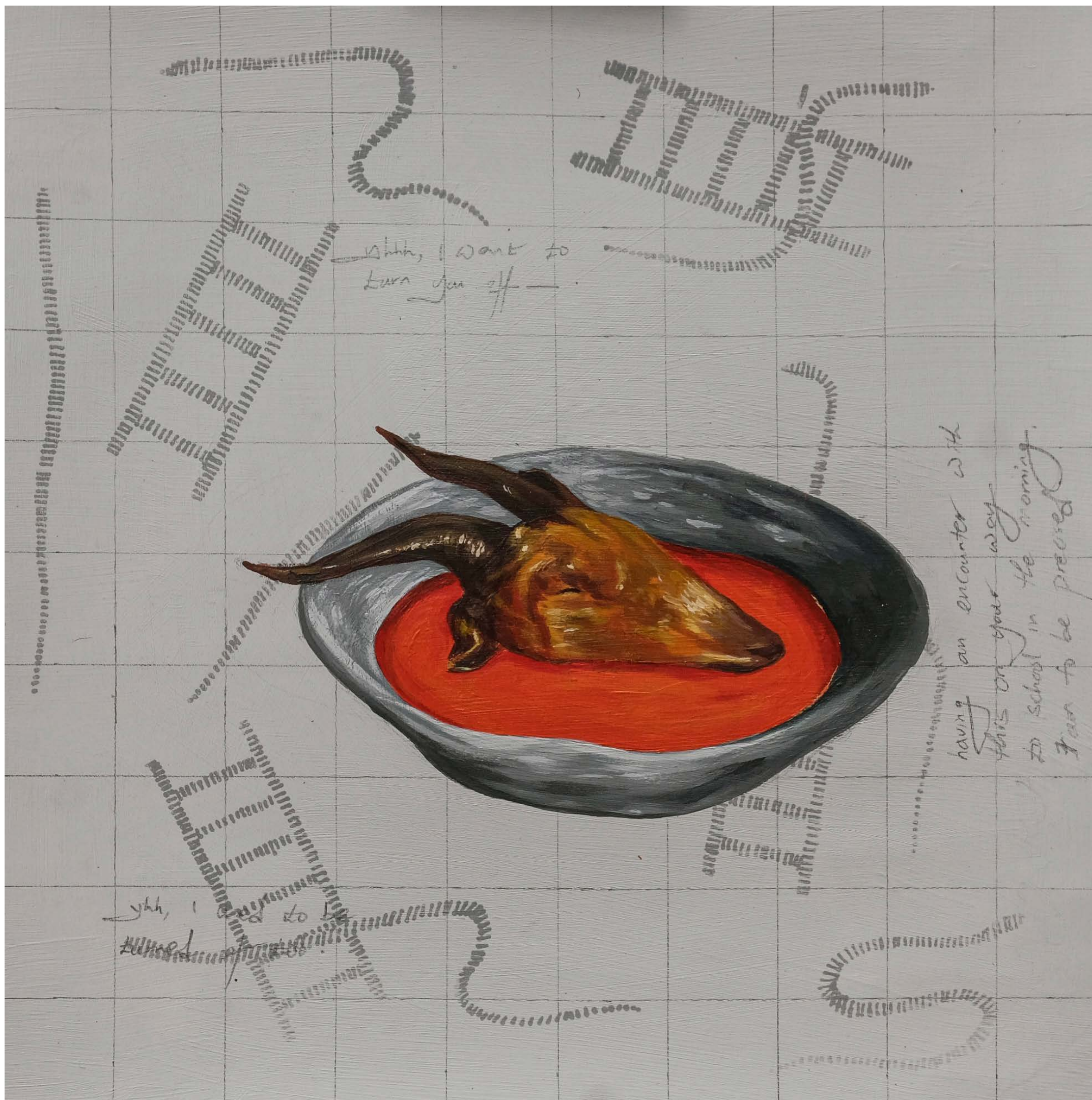
AO: You spoke a bit earlier about when the reception you envision from the audience, particularly the feelings you want to evoke. You mentioned creating a space where the viewer is left to come to their own conclusion. What kind of experience would you say you are trying to create with this exhibition?

AE: Like I said before, I want a moment of reflection. I want the viewer to feel self aware because that is what I experience when I interact with the work. I have had moments when I am at home, listening or watching something and I just remember

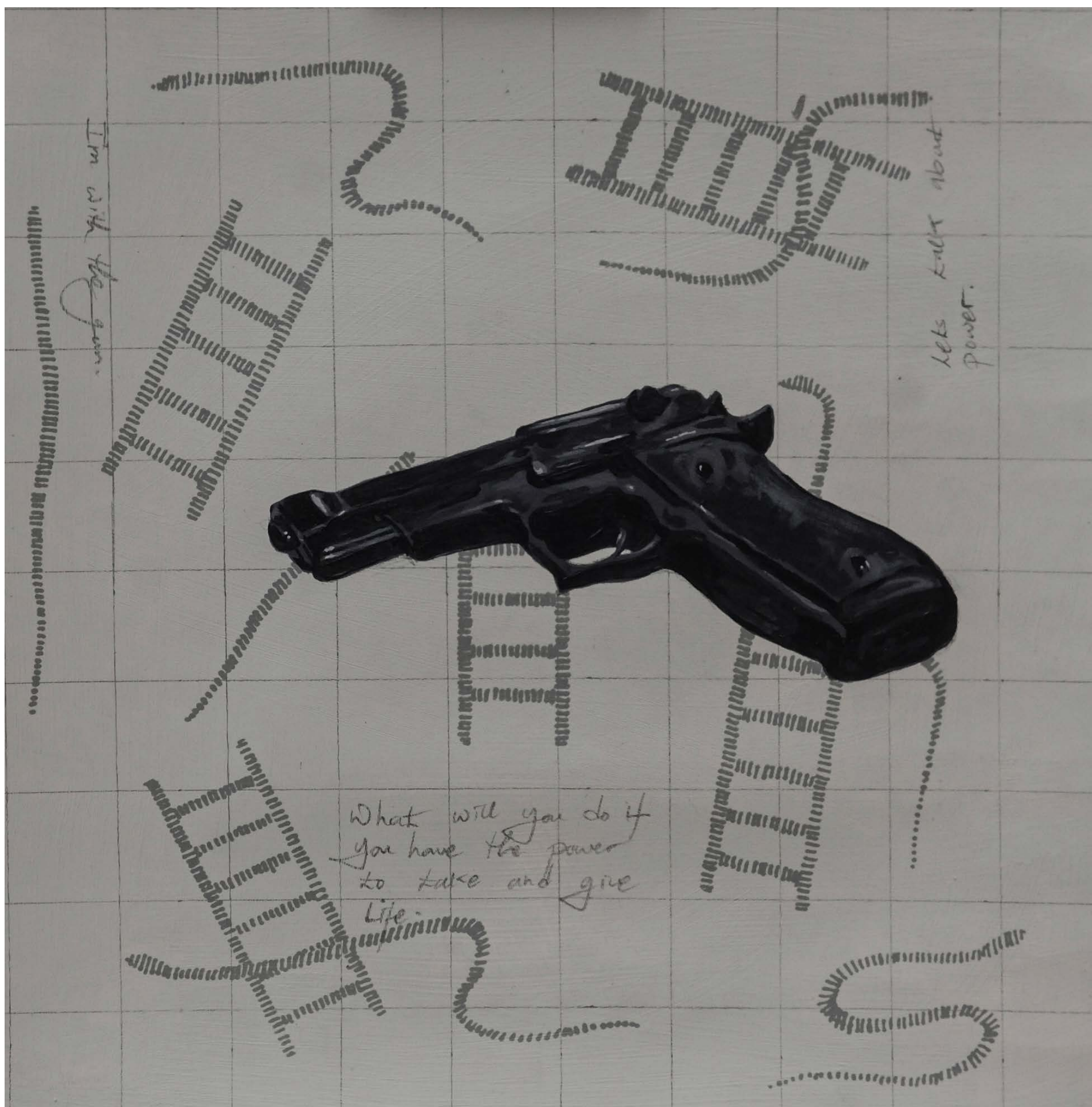
something from one of the works. I want it to mean different things to anybody that walks into the exhibition. For instance the work that has the word 'Power' written across the policeman's chest; at first you might think of police brutality, but it goes beyond that. It's more about the concept of power, 'the man with the gun'. It makes you remember that everyone has that power to take life and make or break another person. I want people to be able to engage with themselves from viewing the exhibition.

ao: Thank you very much.

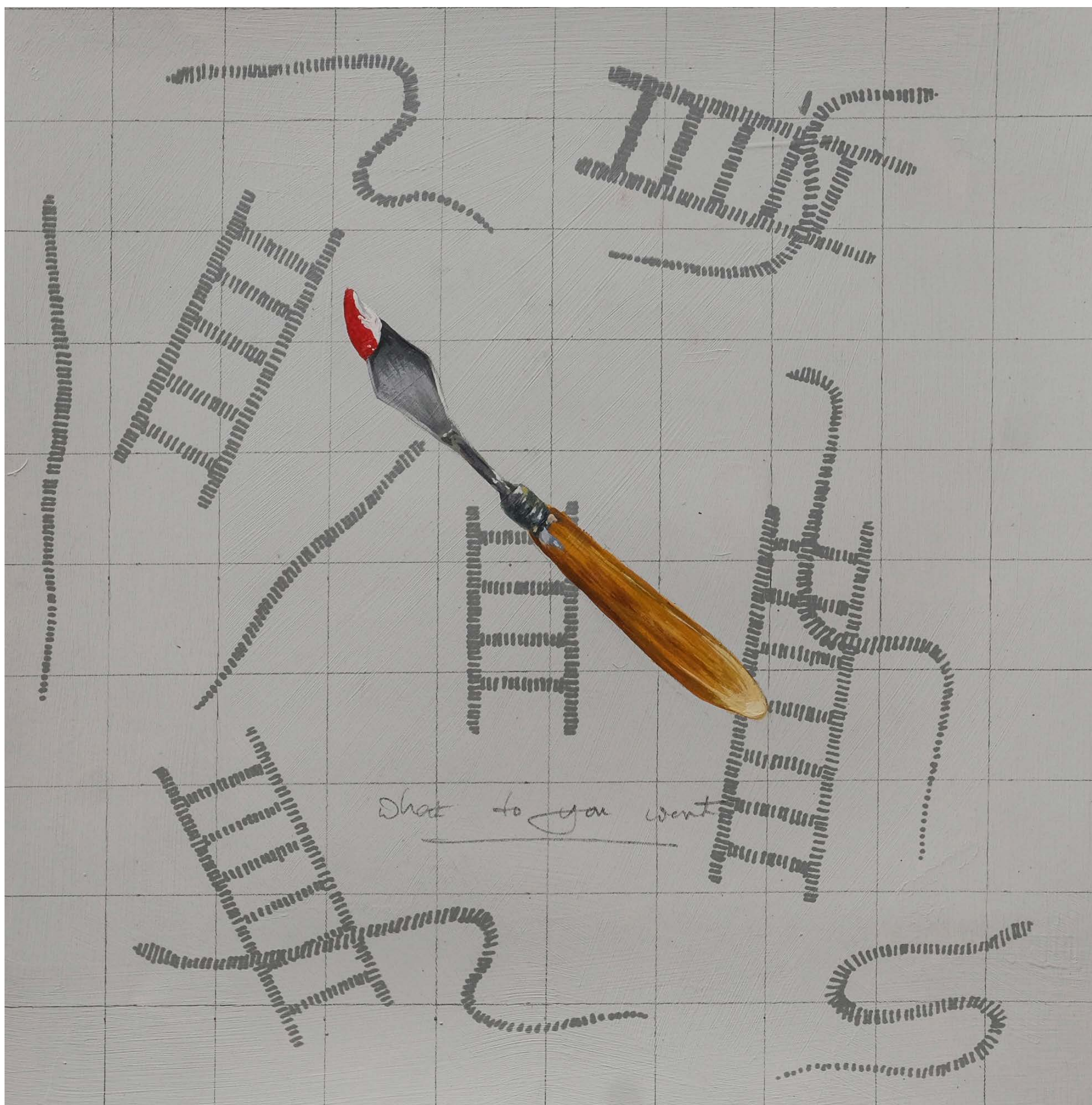
adeoluwa oluwajoba is the Curator at Rele Gallery



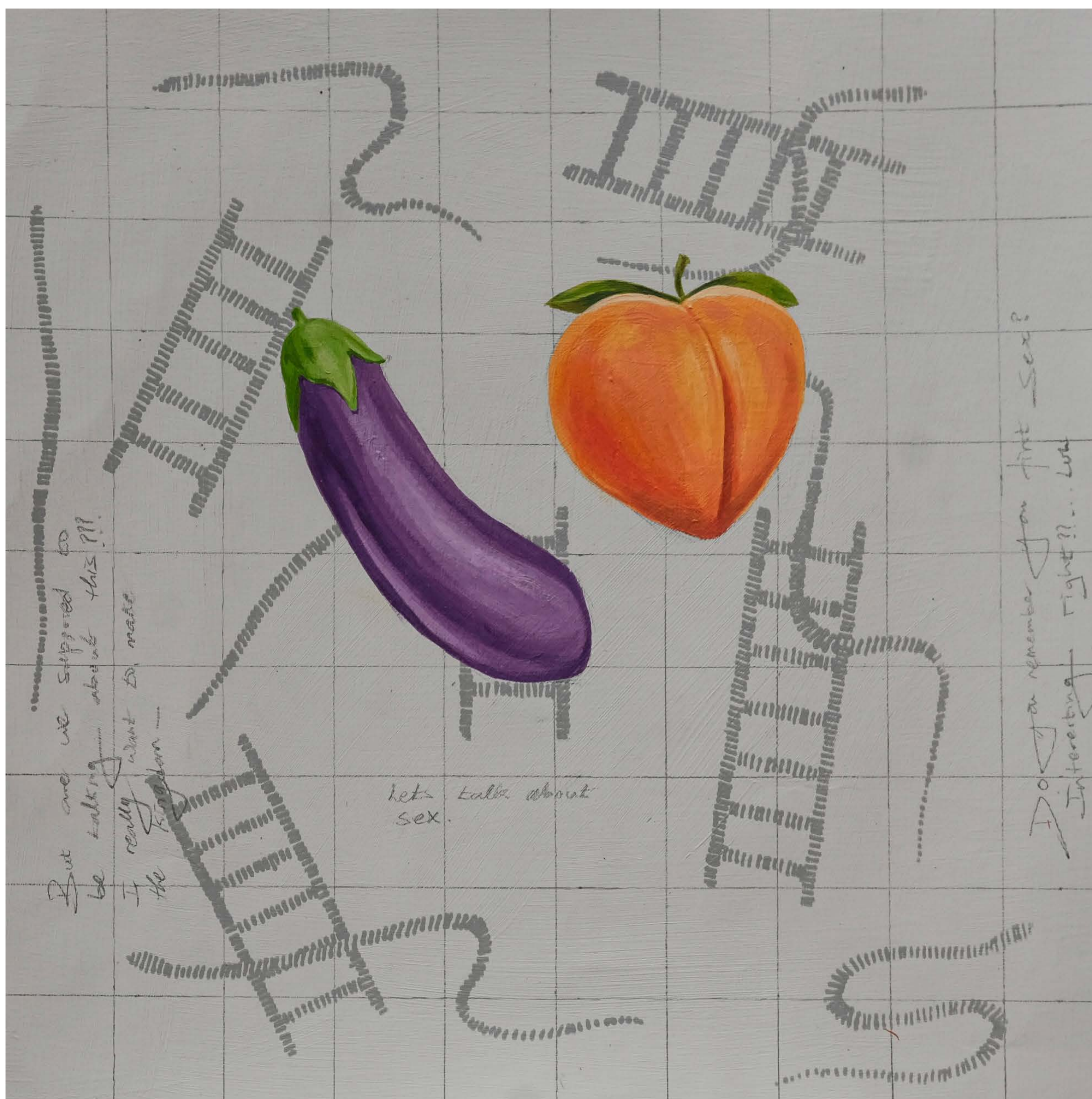
Object and Conversations IV (Ebo)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



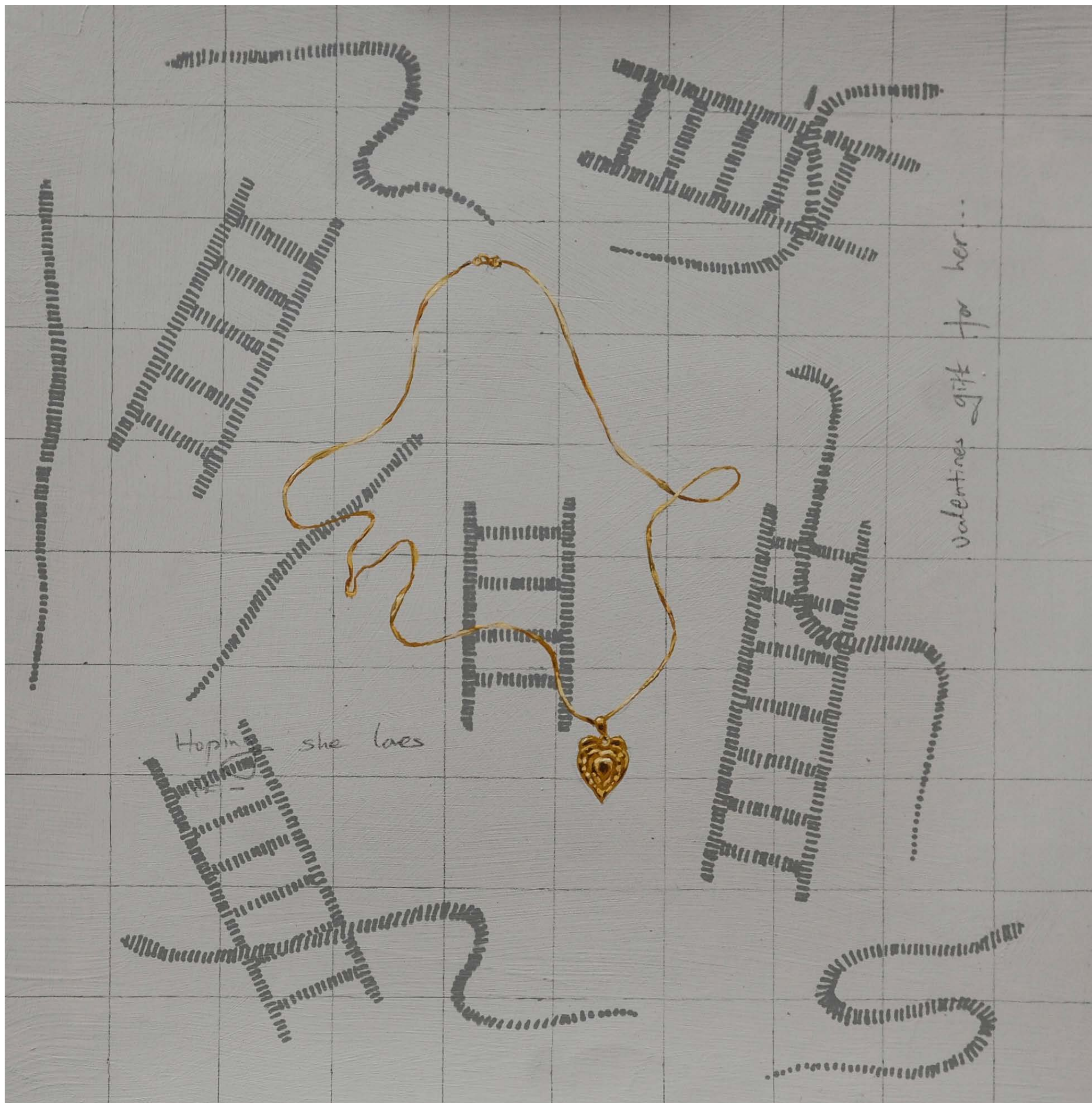
Object and Conversations IX (Black Pistle)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



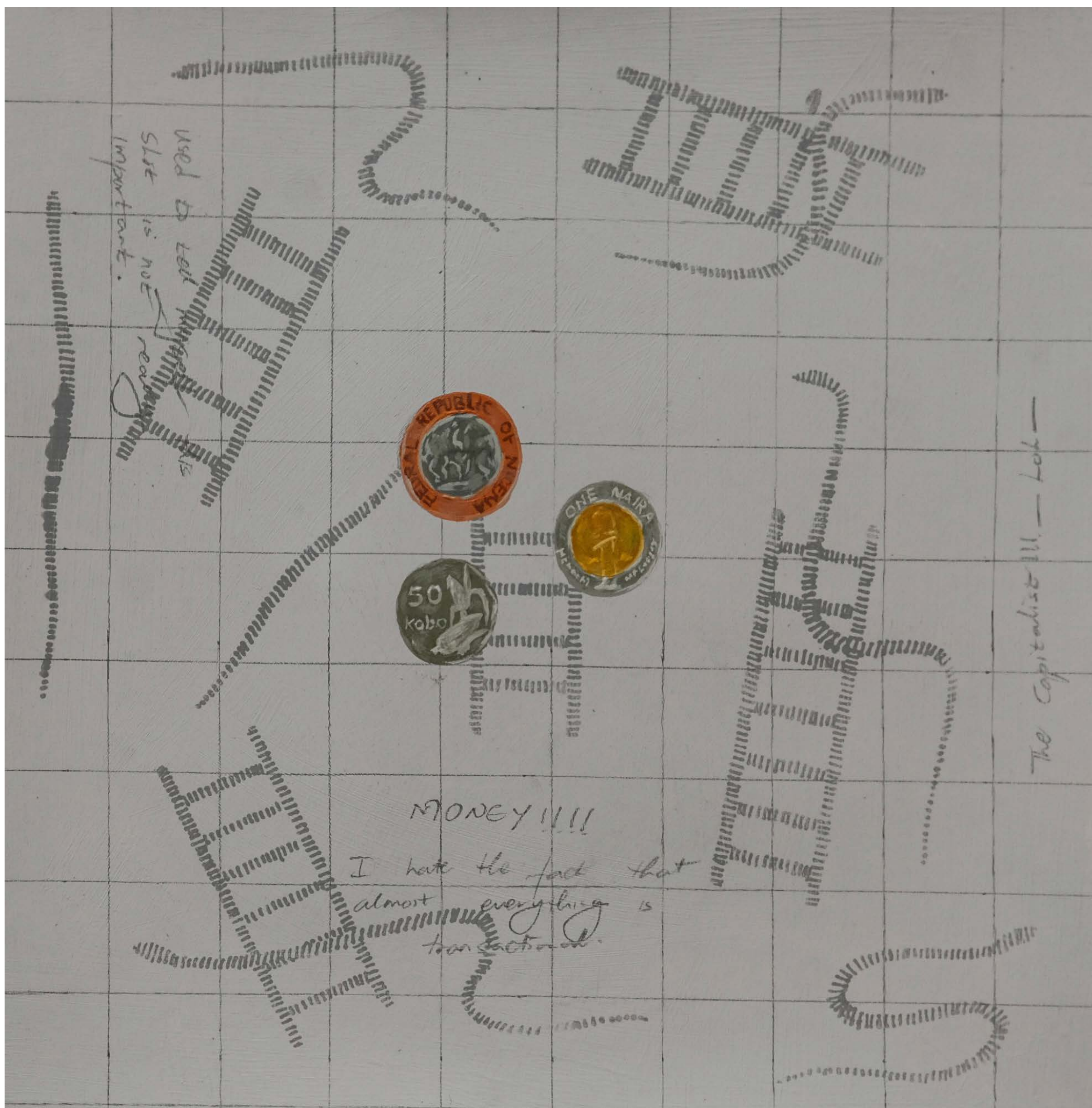
Object and Conversations IX (Black Pistle)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



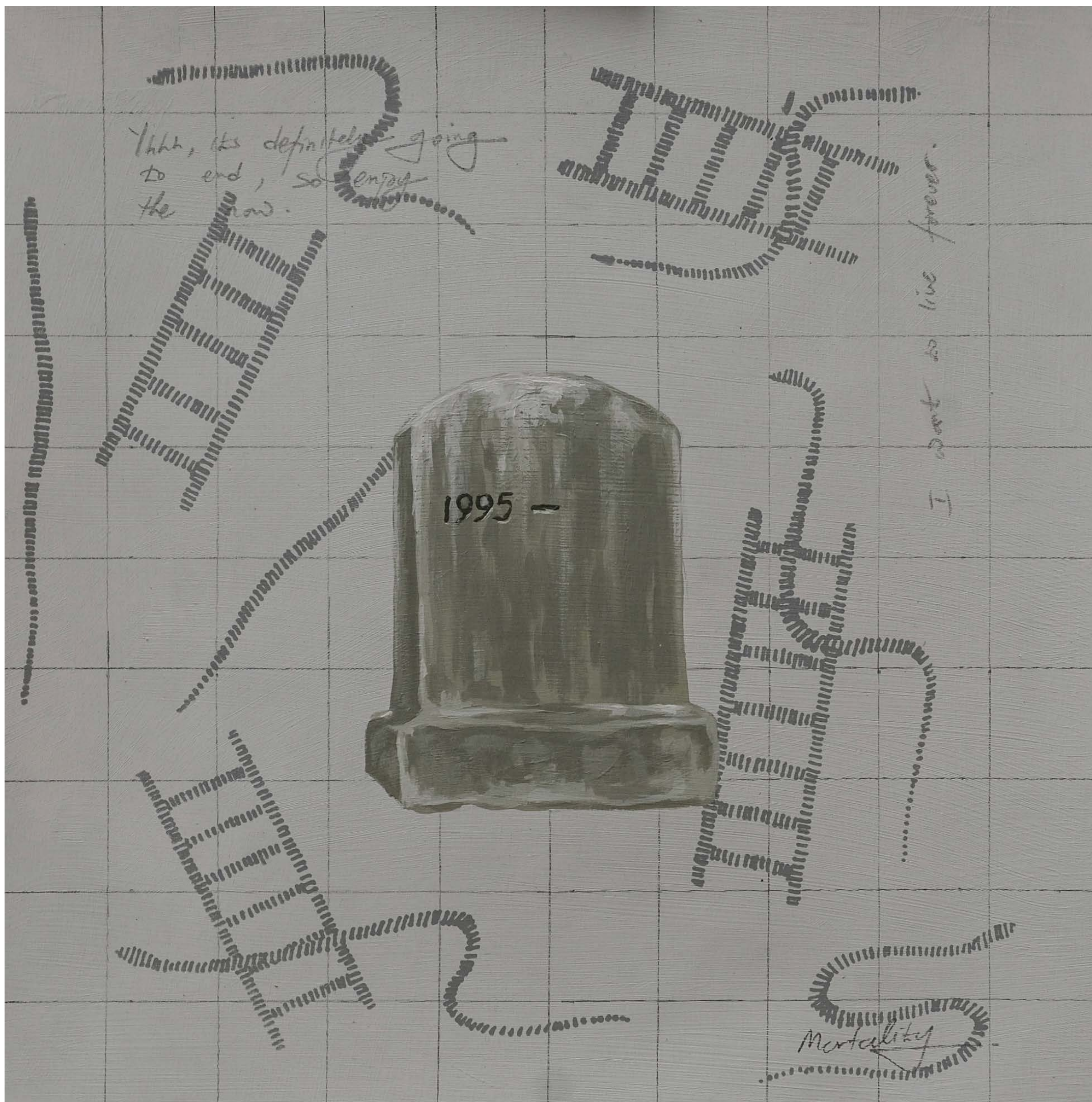
Object and Conversations VI (Eggplant and Peach emoji)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



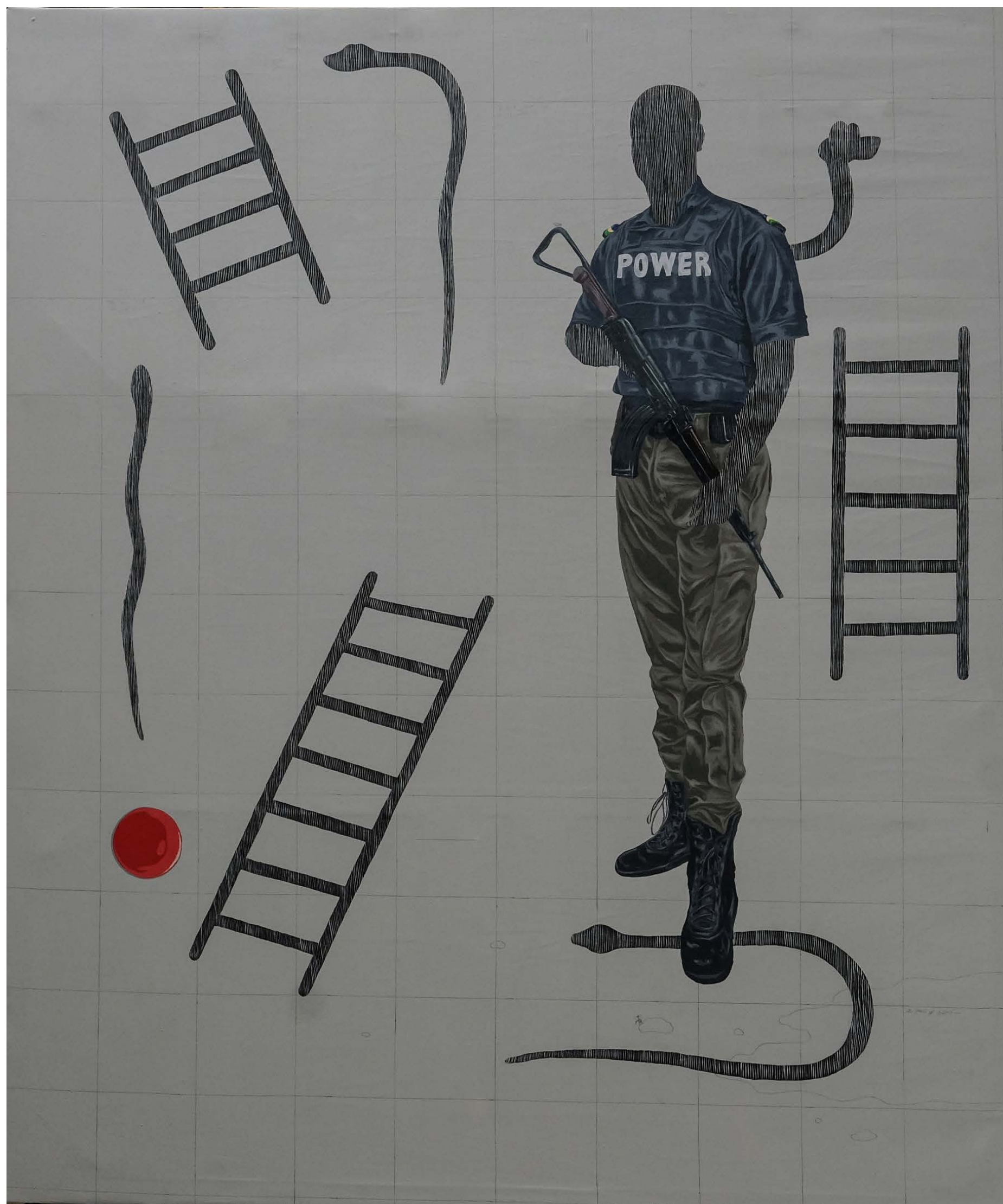
Object and Conversations VII (Gold necklace)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



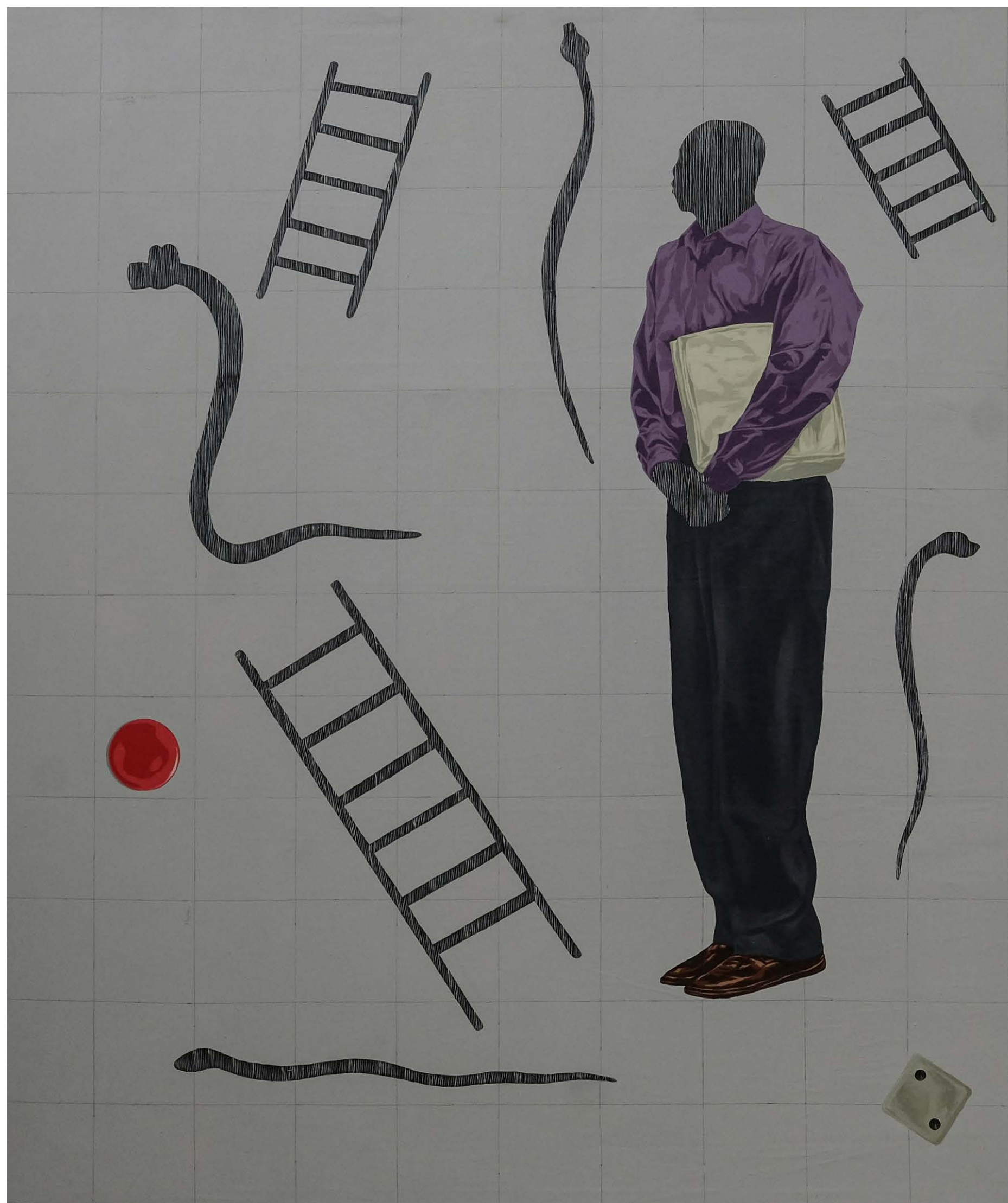
Object and Conversations VIII (Coin)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



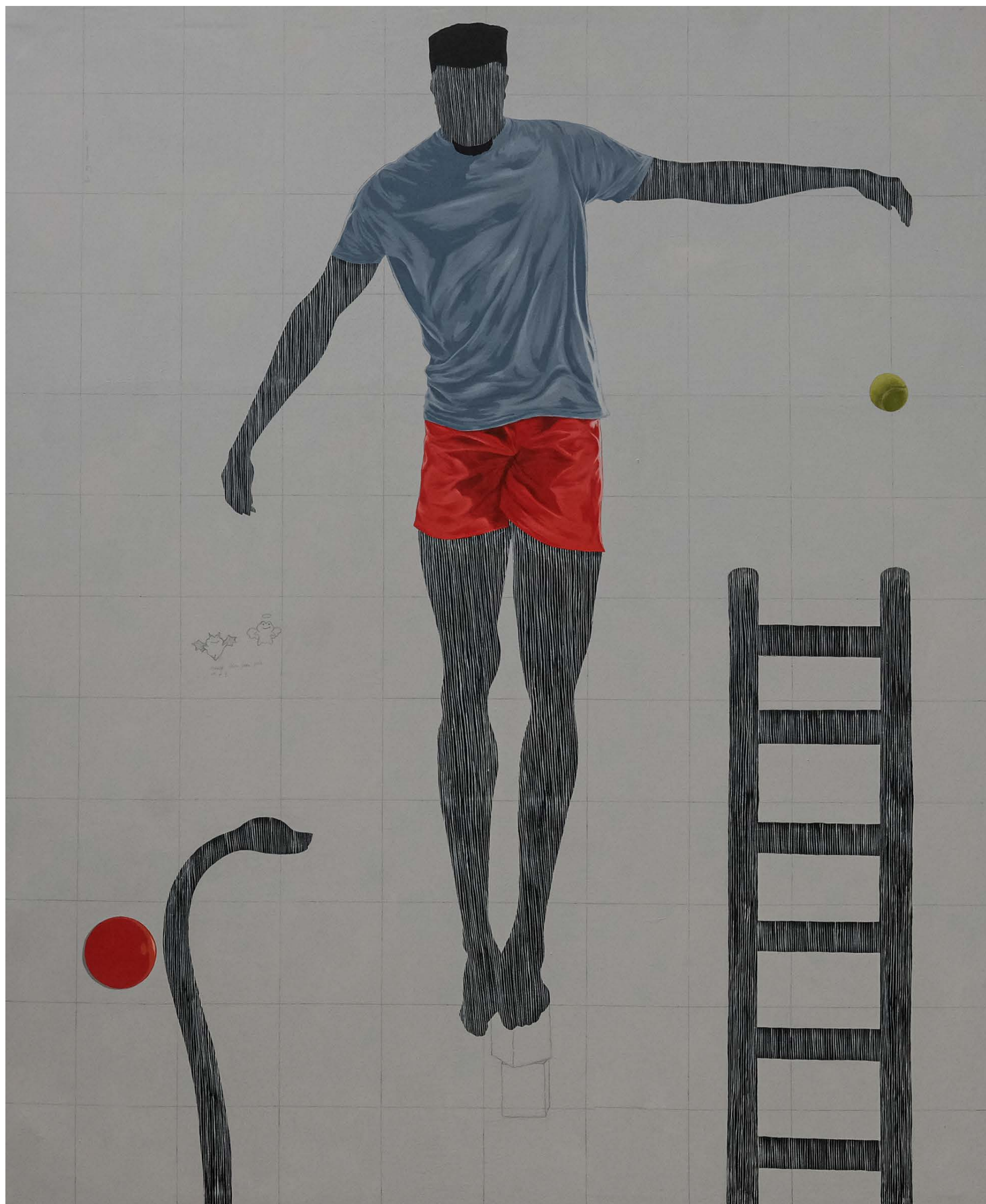
Object and conversations X (Tombstone)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on paper
12 x 12 Inches



The man with the gun
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Tomorrow and Hope (4pm on a Monday)
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Trying
2023
Acrylic and graphite on canvas
60 x 72 Inches



Under my feet (Portrait of the oppressed and the oppressor)

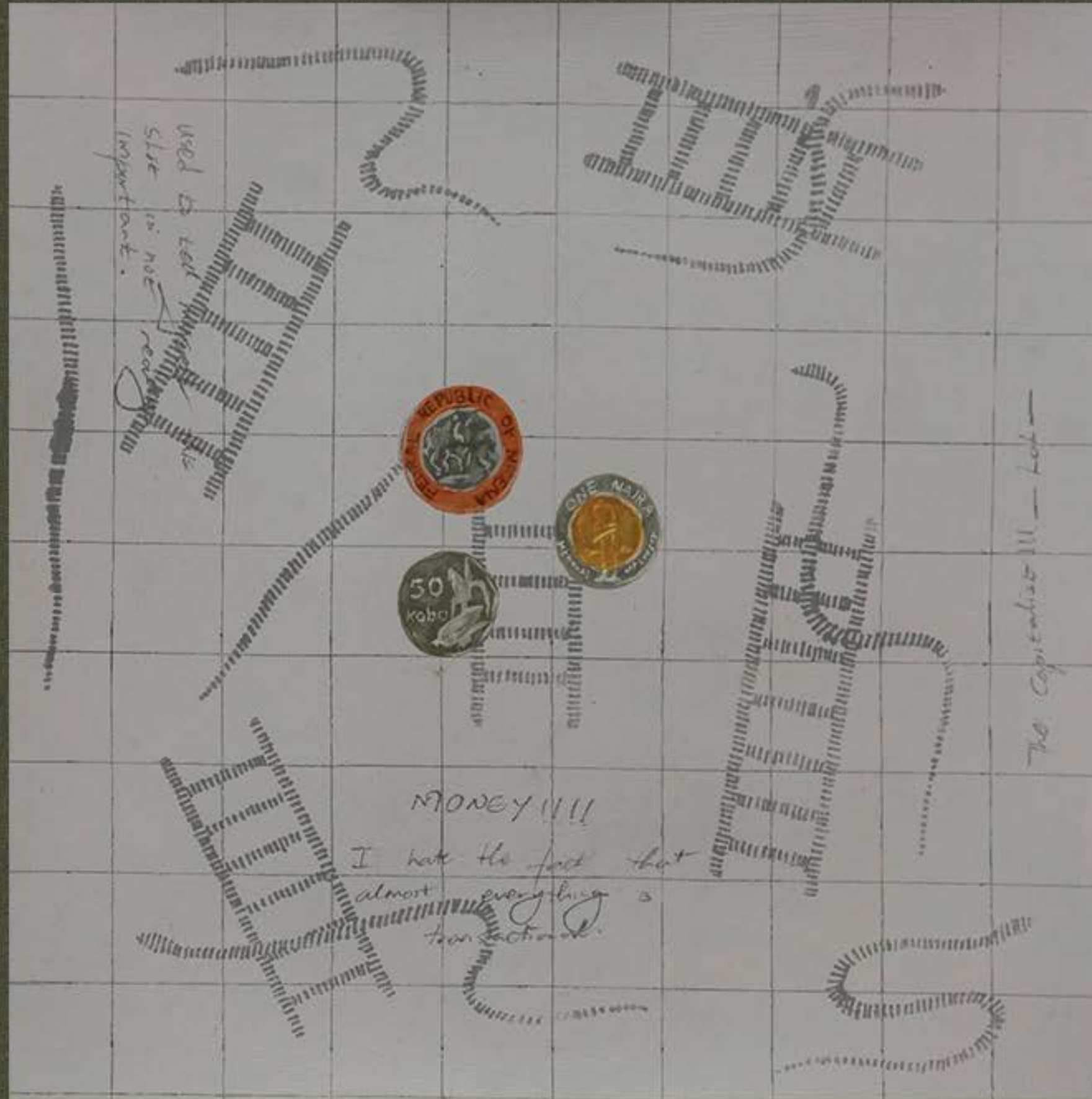
2023

Acrylic and graphite on canvas

72 x 72 Inches

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