

Opinion **Life & Arts**

A season to retreat — and reflect

Autumn is a reminder of the world's rhythms of birth, death, regeneration and renewal

ENUMA OKORO



Central panel of Andrea Kantowitz's 'Granatum Scissa' (2017) © Kenise Barnes Fine Art

Enuma Okoro SEPTEMBER 18 2021

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A few nights ago I slept with the air-conditioning off, and the windows open. There was a slight breeze in the air, and every now and then I could hear the leaves brushing against each other, fitful on their branches. The heat of our New York City summer is still loitering stubbornly, bargaining for more time before passing the baton to autumn. But on certain evenings, and in the slight cool of the mornings, I can feel it happening, the cyclical ushering in of a new season.

As much as I complain about extreme temperatures in summer and winter, I love living in a part of the world that experiences seasonal shifts in weather. Every three to four months the world around me slowly begins to refashion itself into something completely new: new colours, new climate, new produce, new hours of daylight and darkness. A world ripening again for novel discoveries and opportunities.

Autumn has always been my favourite season. The beauty of the changing leaves make little pockets of the world feel enchanted, and the crispness of the air is fresh and inviting like a blank page, a chance to start something new. But autumn especially feels like a season for recalibrating because schools start again, and people's schedules and routines change. There's slow migration back inside our homes and the onset of a leisurely layering of clothes — and even protective body fat. We're on the brink of a season of shifting rhythms and, because of the current state of the world, it's a season in which we'll have to figure out a balance between celebrating our agency and our acknowledging our lack of control in what might be to come.

The charcoal and graphite drawing “A New World 2020”, by the 21-year-old Nigerian artist Emma Odumade, feels pertinent and arresting for these burgeoning days of a new season. As students of all ages return to school in the midst of the Delta variant, parents might have mixed feelings, wanting their children to get back to classrooms and a routine, while also being concerned about adequate precautions and safety measures. No protocol can be completely foolproof.



Emma Odumade's 'A New World 2020' © African Artists' Foundation

In this hyperrealist drawing, the Lagos-based artist places a primary school-aged boy sitting on a stool in the middle of the frame. He's wearing his school uniform, and a notebook lies open on his lap, a few words scribbled on the first lines. Behind him is a wallpapered background of news clippings about a host of different dangers out in the world: threats against black lives, coronavirus reports, headlines about George Floyd. There are also one or two photographs of iconic black people who've had publicly successful lives, such as Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan.

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There's an expression on the boy's face that looks like he's trying to analyse his own current circumstances. He gazes up watchfully. Maybe he's staring at his teacher, maybe at another student, or maybe he's wondering about the uncertainty of his future. A mask that should be covering his mouth and nose hangs on his chin, and his

foot on the right side of the frame looks like it's wrapped in a cast. Both those elements of the image represent to me the inescapable vulnerability of childhood. It reminds me that, even at a time when we are trying to do whatever is within our power to physically protect our children, no child, no person, can escape the various ways life can injure us.

Thankfully, though, life can also bless us beyond what we might expect or even deserve. In some ways, every new season of our lives is like the blank pages of the notebook the child holds wide open, offering us an opportunity to try to write the narratives we want to live, for ourselves and our loved ones.

A new season is a natural marker between what was and what is coming. The trees will soon begin to shed their leaves, a process required for the tree's ultimate survival. It's a reminder that life has natural rhythms of death, gestation, birth, regeneration and renewal.

I love the quiet, enclosed feel of the 1917 painting "Portrait of a Woman", by the British artist and writer Nina Hamnett, an avant-garde creative known for her portraiture and still lifes. Hamnett lived and worked primarily between Paris and the UK in the early 20th century. In the painting, a woman sits reticent and reflective at a desk in what could be a study. A row of books is behind her on a shelf. Her attention is on a book she holds open with one hand, while the other hand cradles the side of her face. There are other books stacked on the table alongside a wine bottle and a glass. It all gives the sense of a stretch of settled reading time.



Nina Hamnett's 'Portrait of a Woman' (1917) © Bridgeman Images

I am drawn to this work because of the subdued sense of retreat and intimacy conveyed by the sitter's posture, surrounded by books, symbolic of continued attention to growth, learning, reflection and curiosity, and by the colour palette of soft earth tones dappled with occasional pastels.

In the past couple of weeks I have found myself preparing for autumn by stacking my own books to read as the days get shorter and cooler. I am pulling together a small library of narratives that all speak in some way to living an examined life, from [Hisham Matar's *A Month in Siena*](#) to a translation of "The Sayings of the Desert Fathers".

There is a natural desire to retreat, reclaiming space and time, that creeps up at this time of year. I think like animals who are starting to store up for a season of burrowing away, we too are geared towards seasons of hibernation. If we attune ourselves to these natural rhythms, I imagine they can open up more space and opportunity for the necessary reflecting, reassessing and refocusing that new seasons invite us into.

As we enter the harvest season, I've been struck by the work of American artist, educator and researcher Andrea Kantrowitz. One aspect of her work is a series of paintings of torn fruit that gorgeously illuminate the beauty and the complex patterns hidden in the flesh of natural life. Her renditions of oranges, pomelos and kiwano melons are both sensuous and sensual, infusing the painted fruit with a throbbing sense of life usually reserved for depictions of the human body.



Andrea Kantrowitz's '613' (2007) © Kenise Barnes Fine Art

Kantrowitz's work reminds me that non-human and non-animal lifeforms are thriving in their own natural and beautiful seasons of growth, ripening, maturation, death and regeneration. The painting titled "613" is a provocative still life of a pomegranate torn roughly apart, its cornucopia of vibrant red seeds lavishly displayed falling out of their sheath-thin encasements, like hard little translucent jewels. The title of the painting references the 613th commandment, that all Jews, at some time in their lives, should take part in writing out the Torah, the five books of Moses that teach the Jewish people how God desires them to live.

The painting is a seductive and mouth-watering image of a lifeform ripened and in season, burst open and spilling out its seed. To me, that feels symbolic of the richness and fruitful abundance that can grow from a well-considered life that remembers that life is a gift, life is sacred, life's seasons have purpose, and our social contracts with all living forms and with the earth matter. But the lushness and fruitful extravagance of the painting also makes me consider this as a moment to take stock of the ripeness of the fruit you've been cultivating in the past season, then break it open and offer its nourishment generously to the world.

[Enuma Okoro](#) is a New York-based columnist for FT Life & Arts

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