

Here's how one local immigrant is striving to keep the dialogue of immigration open

By Melanie Occhiuzzo

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Grasping for Freedom, Grasping for Hope (oil on canvas) by Raul Manzano of New York, New York. This art piece is part of the 'Strive' exhibition. (Southside Daily/courtesy of Amanda Bradley)

NORFOLK — Solomon Isekeije, head of Norfolk State University's Art Department, describes immigration as the most poignant conversation in American political and social debate today.

To showcase what it means to be an immigrant and to strive for the American dream, the d'Art Center is showcasing artwork from around the country in an exhibition titled *Strive: A National Exhibition Highlighting American Immigration and the American Dream* and Isekeije, an immigrant, is serving as juror for the exhibition.

"I'm looking for a way to make somebody pause for a minute and realize we will all need to be part of the debate," he said.

Artists across the country were invited to submit artwork they thought best described immigration and the American dream.

"The vision was to curate a national show that highlighted the topic of immigration and the pursuit of the American dream that gave both artists and immigrants a chance to exhibit the topic in an expressive way," said Amanda Bradley, d'Art Center's graphics, communications, and gallery manager. "The span of submissions of different artistic mediums and high-quality work from all over the country was stunning."

Bradley specifically chose Isekeije to be juror on the exhibition because she wanted an immigrant to choose the art from their perspective.

Isekeije came to the United States from Lagos, Nigeria 21 years ago to pursue his master's degree in art.

He said he had a viewpoint of what America was when he first arrived that evolved the longer he stayed.

"I found my family when I came here, people helped me without making it obvious."

Isekeije commented on how they saw him as having something to offer and helped him realize his dreams.

Now as someone who has lived here for over two decades, Isekeije sees this place as his home and while he's a bit further disconnected from the immigrant

status than when he first arrived, he still feels that connection to new immigrants who come here to pursue their dreams.

Part of what he was looking for within the exhibition was the ability to tell the story without being too literal about it.

“The two hundred plus pieces of artworks submitted for Strive independently and collectively engage the viewer in a dialog about immigration, through creative and effective use of media, artistic styles, and compositions,” he said.

The artworks offered new definitions on the subject of geographical and national boundaries, transcultural migration, while placing the viewer in the venerable position of immigrants who endure untold hardship, in their quest for liberty and freedom, Isekeije added.

“This country has always been a beacon of freedom, of hope, of liberty for the rest of the world,” he said. “It is the last great weapon the United States has.”

Instead of blending in with the population, Isekeije has decided to use projects like this and others within his work to keep the American dream alive for all of his students.

He said he’s often thought to himself, “Is this going to fall apart on my watch or are we going to mend it. If the United States falls, who are we?”

D’Art Center will host its opening reception for Strive in its main gallery Thursday (July 25) from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.

The call for artists for Strive reached 30 states for a total of 236 submissions, Bradley said.

The exhibition was curated by d’Art staff and juried by Isekeije.

Thirty-eight works from 36 artists representing 17 states were selected for the show, including five from Virginia.

To learn more about other exhibitions at the d’Art Center, [click here](#).