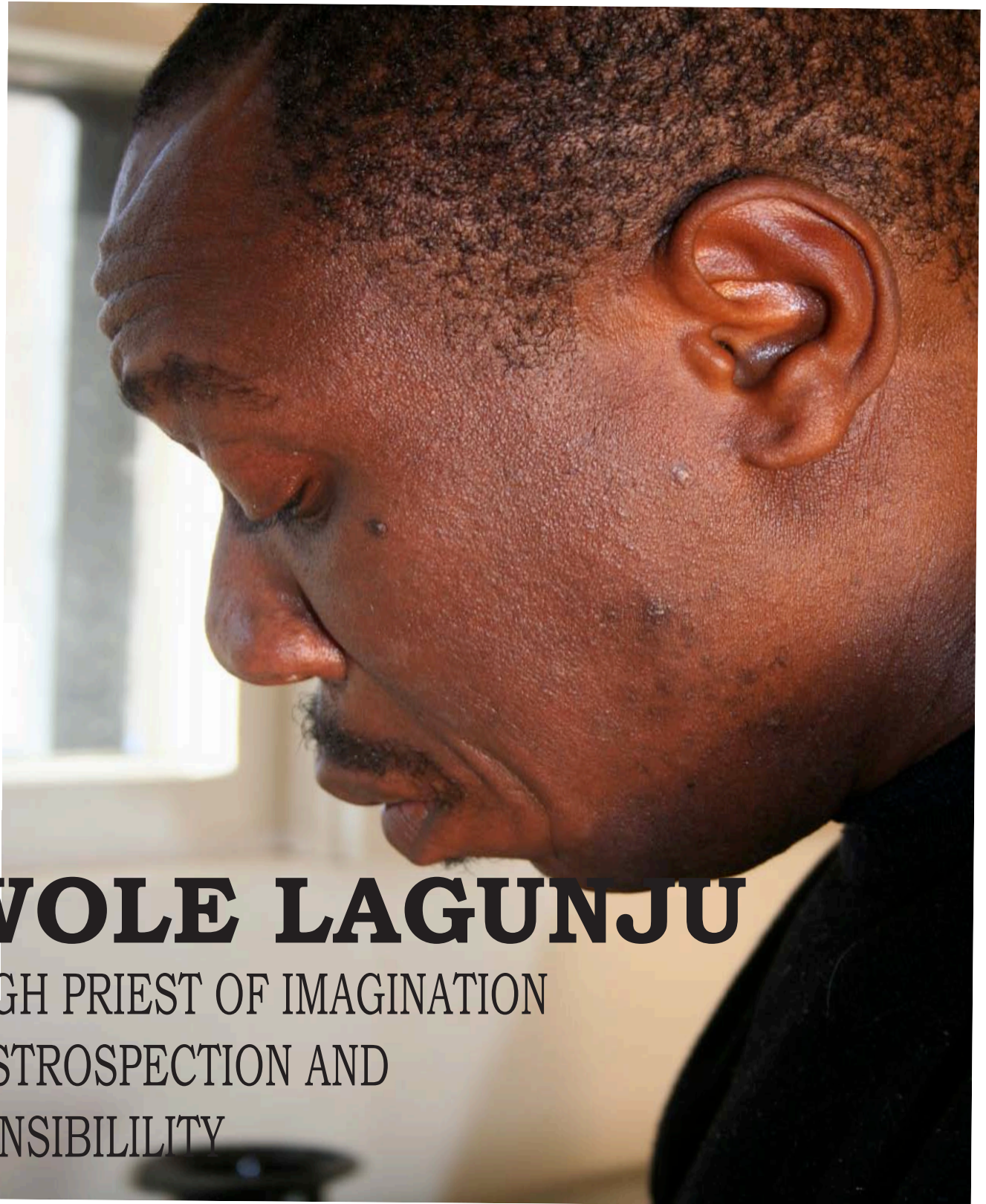


Biodun Jeyifo



WOLE LAGUNJU

HIGH PRIEST OF IMAGINATION
INSTROSPECTION AND
SENSIBILILITY



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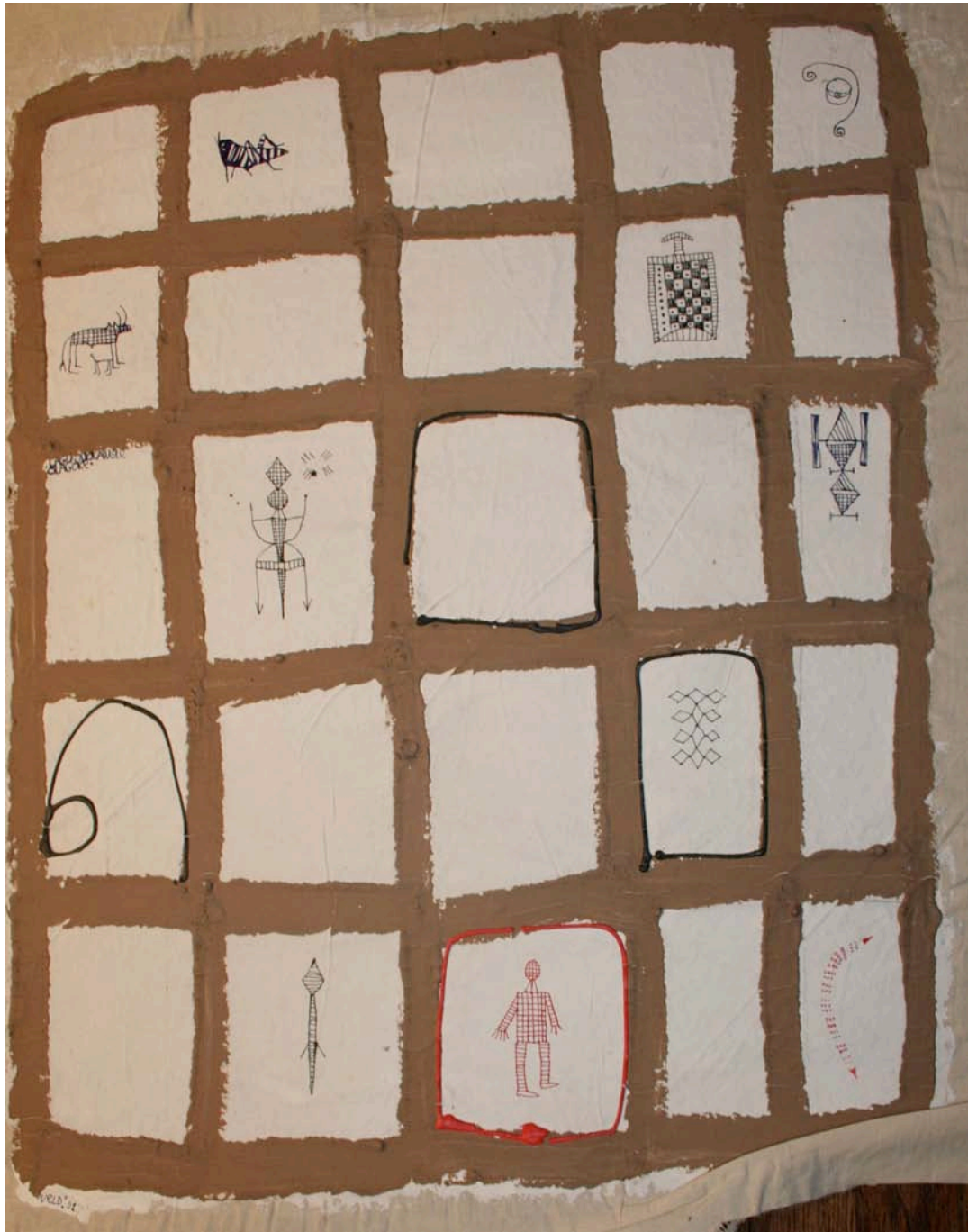
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The pieces in this catalogue are titled *Untitled*. One of my favourite works in Wole Lagunju's oeuvre is an untitled piece of pen and ink drawing which comprises 176 individual rectangular drawings all contained within a larger, single frame to produce an extraordinarily variegated yet unified whole.



I was so taken by the power of this piece that, absolutely without a thought- or so I thought at first – a title for the piece immediately suggested itself to me – *Infinite Excursus*.



The range of figures in the 176 small units in this piece is truly remarkable, spanning human, animal and vegetal; the figurative and the non-figurative; the esoteric, sacred knowledge and that of pragmatic, utilitarian activities.



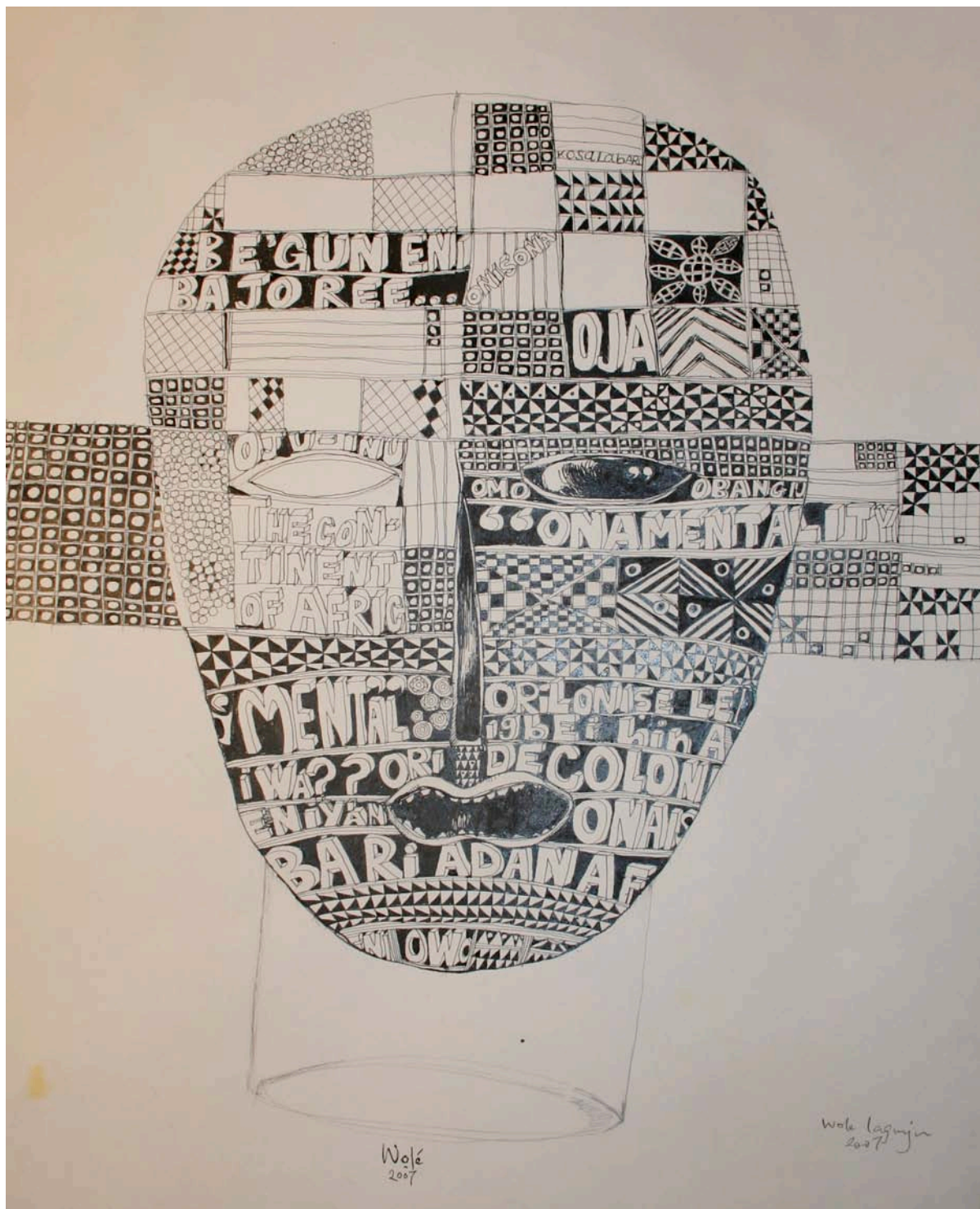
Moreover, after the first few attempts to identify all the idioms of representation and figuration which supplied the motifs for the 176 small units, I gave up the attempt when I realized just how extensive and capacious these sources were.



And it was this very act that brought the realization to me that my title for this untitled piece had not come to me without any thought, that indeed upon my very first encounter with the piece, its eloquence and power had immediately set me thinking subconsciously.



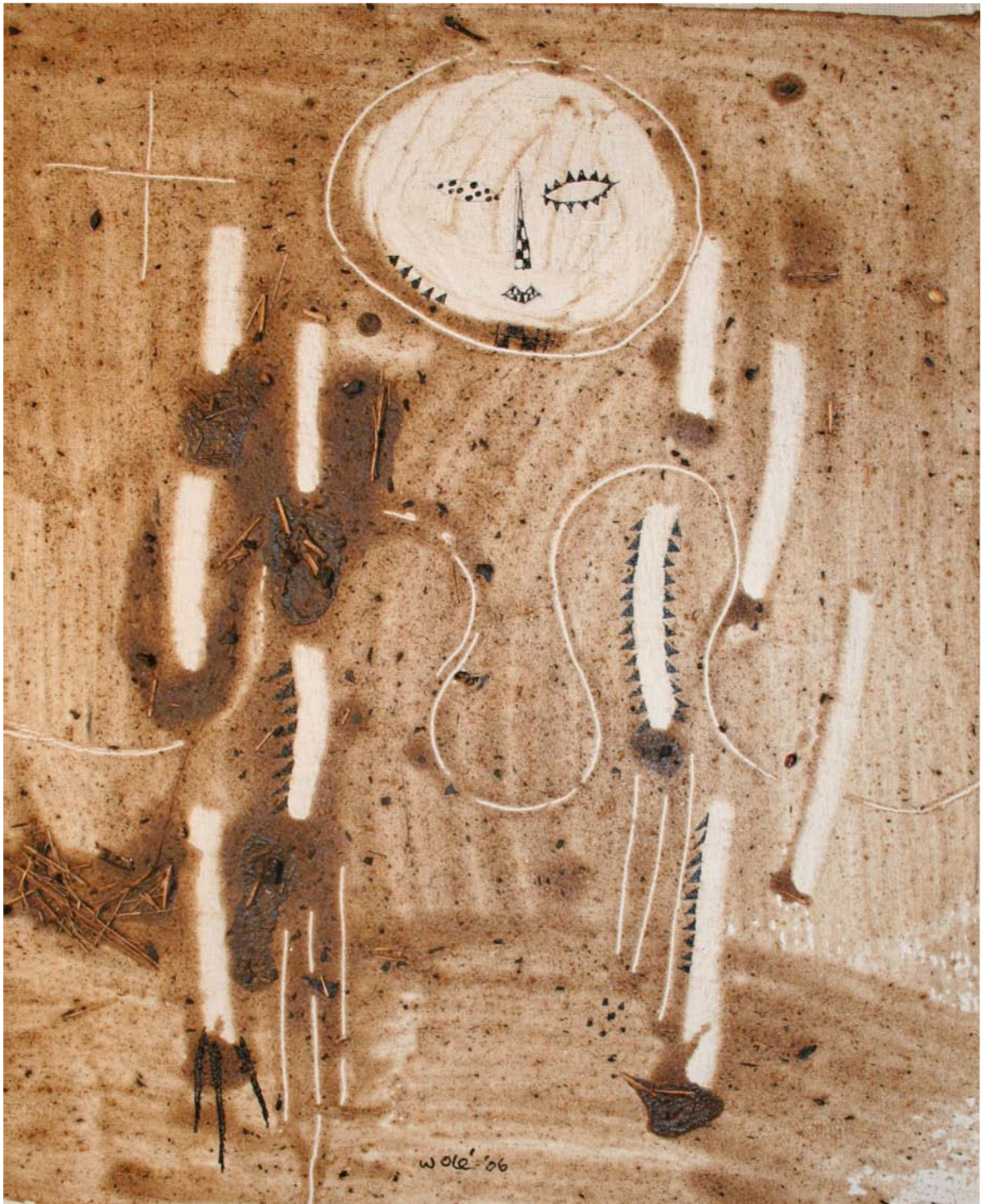
Thus, my title for the piece, *Infinite Excursus*, is a testimony to the range, diversity and open-endedness of the work.



Since “*Infinite Excursus*” was not the first work of Wole Lagunju that I saw and either instantly liked or gradually and imperceptibly came to appreciate, I would not like to give the impression that this piece is the key, the ur-text, of the entire corpus of Lagunju’s works.



Nonetheless, the work does show some basic, recurrent qualities of Lagunju's artistic sensibility. Indeed, one of these very qualities is expressed in this word, "sensibility".



For if it might seem superfluous to say that an artist, any artist, is a person of sensibility – isn't that the very definition of the artistic temper?



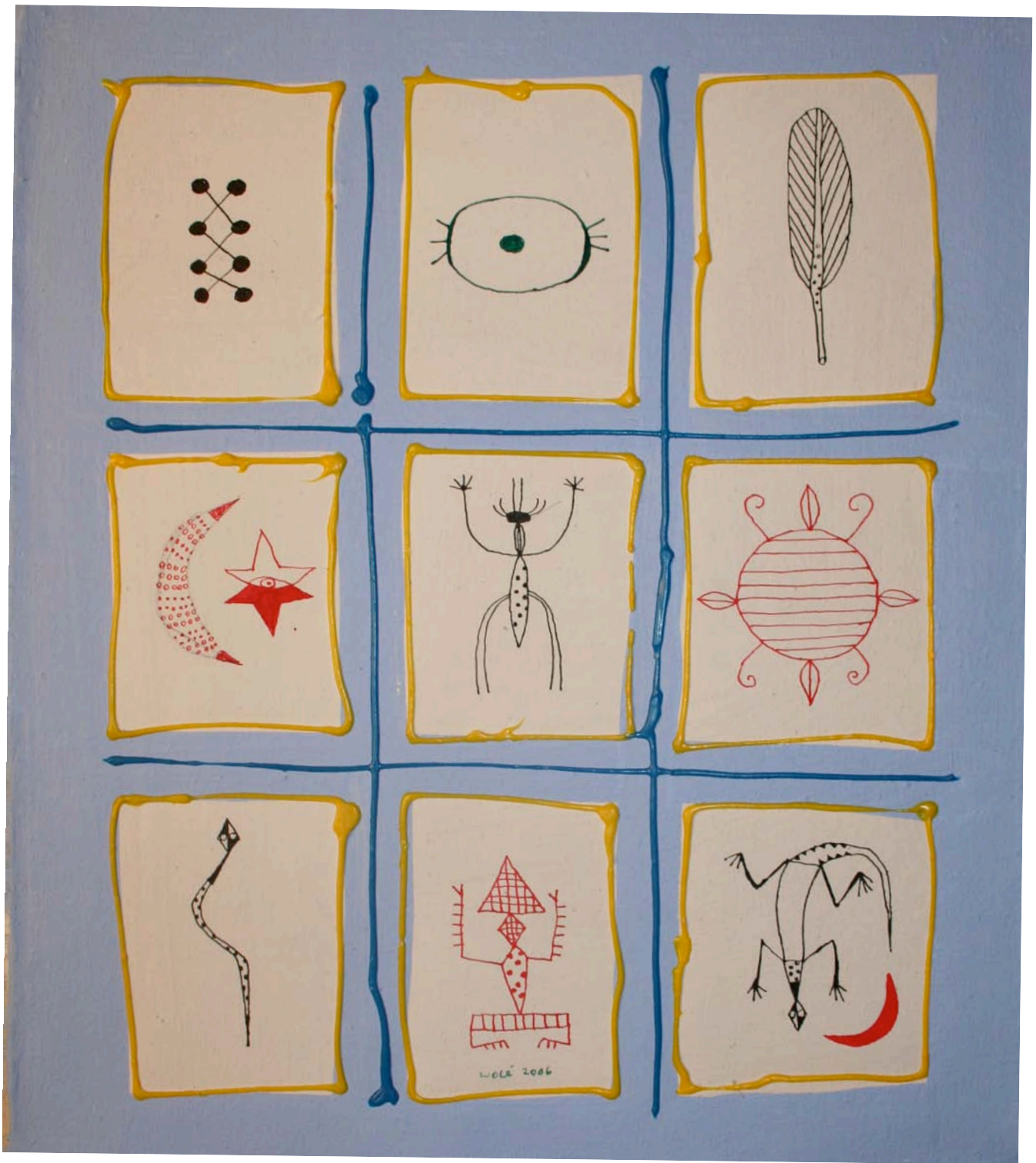
It is all the same true that only very mature, very self-assured and ultimately very sensitive artists achieve that distinctiveness of emotional, spiritual and ethical sympathies that goes by the name of “sensibility.”



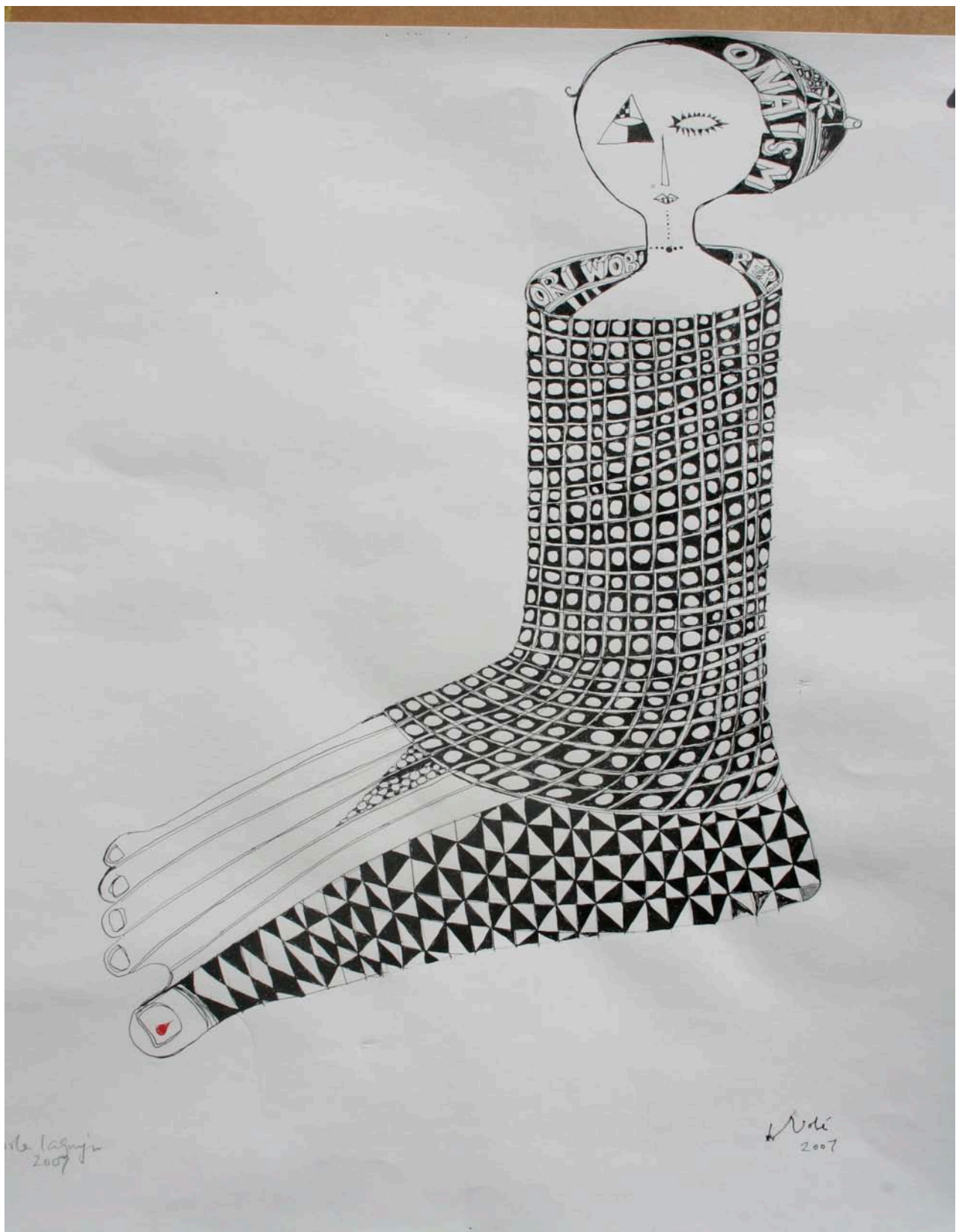
The factor of technique is very much at work in the achievement of this peculiar sensibility in Lagunju's works, even if it is not, ultimately, its source.



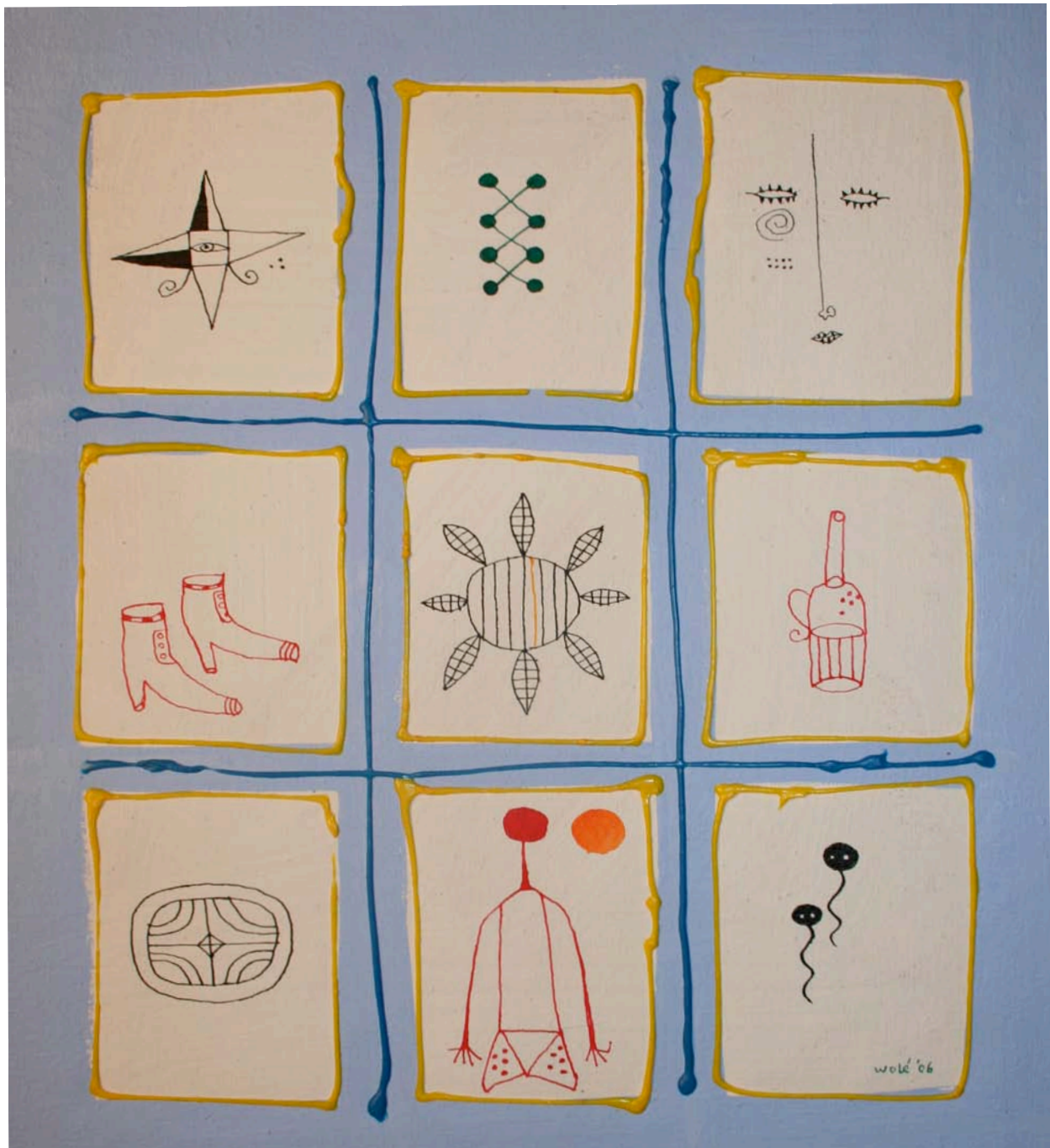
For if I have also called Lagunju a “high Priest” in the title of this appreciation, it is not with the intention to suggest that his works are suffused by “spontaneous” or “natural” expressions of a spiritual or religious worldview.



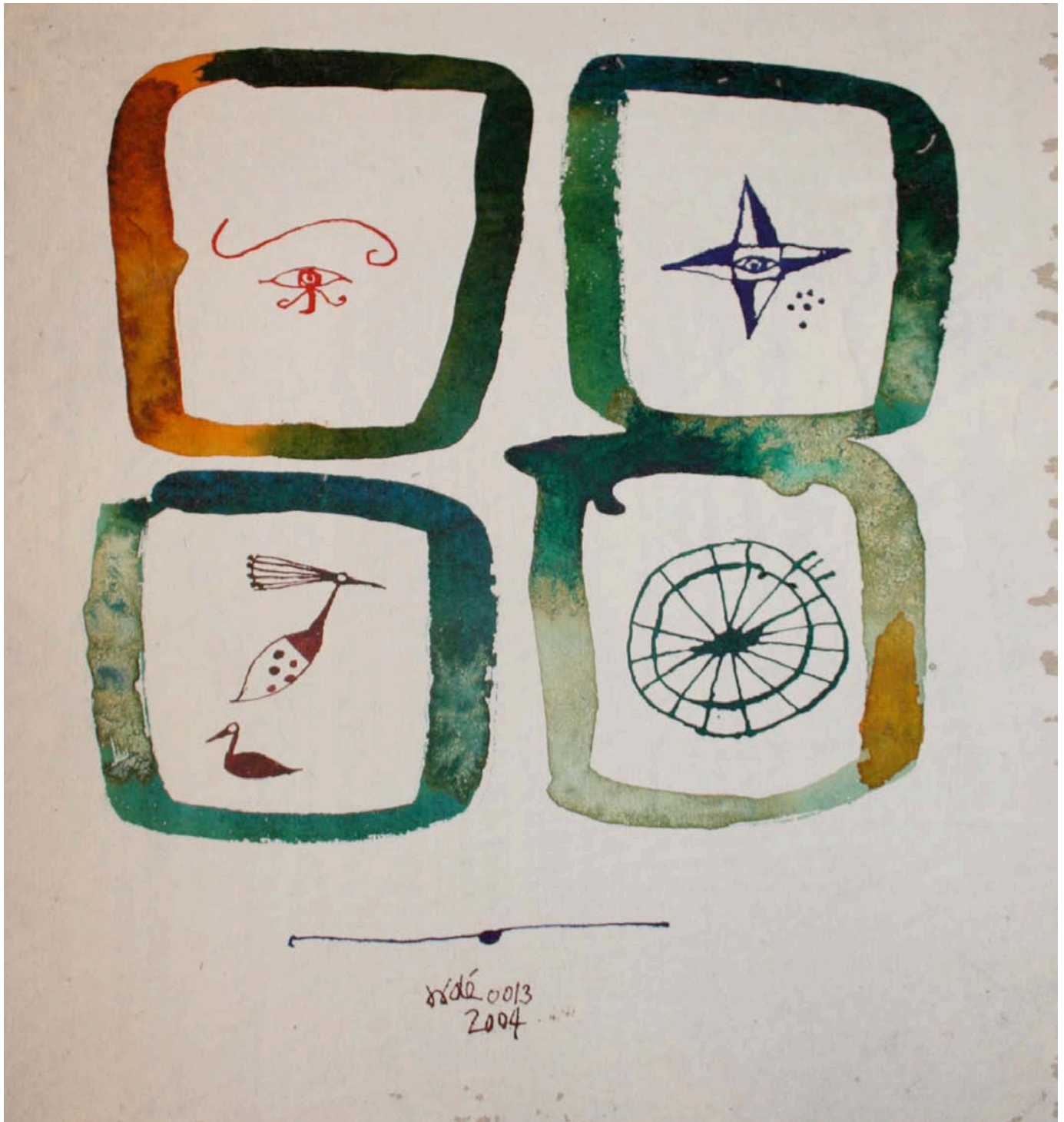
Like much of the works of the Oshogbo School to which Lagunju obviously owes some debts of influence and inspiration, many of his works are rooted in the syncretist animist spirituality of the orisa tradition and the spirit world.



Some of the titles of Lagunju's works testify to this influence: *Three Water Spirits Riding on Sea Horse*, *The Brides of Sokoti*, and *Mermaids' Muse*. In Lagunju's works, the indisputably strong and assured technique is expressed in the artist's combination of markedly subdued tones, understatement, precision and introspection in ways that one hardly ever sees them in the works of even the masters of the Oshogbo School.



All the same, technique operates in Lagunju's works as a disciplined tool, not an end in itself; it operates as a handmaiden to the realization of his own unique approach to exploring and celebrating the deities of the Yoruba pantheon and folklore.



In other words, in nearly all the named pieces in which we are evidently in the presence of the animist interfusion of subject and object, the world of nature and that of humankind, the domain of the literal and that of the noumenal, the figures representing gods, deities, spirits and avatars are, if not exactly distant and aloof, evanescently and delicately figured, they seem languidly contemplative as if burdened with an acute consciousness of the fallen, degraded state of the world.



It would of course give an altogether erroneous impression of the scope of Lagunju's works if I failed to mention the element of fantasy, of the play of imagination and humour in his artistic temper.



This is evident even in another work of a clearly metaphysical import, the work appropriately titled *Existence*. This work is arresting, powerful, enigmatic.



Against the background of what looks like a stark rendition of an *adire* motif, seven or eight figures which look like paper cutouts are foregrounded. The most dominant of these figures is a human frame, which is angular, schematic, featureless.



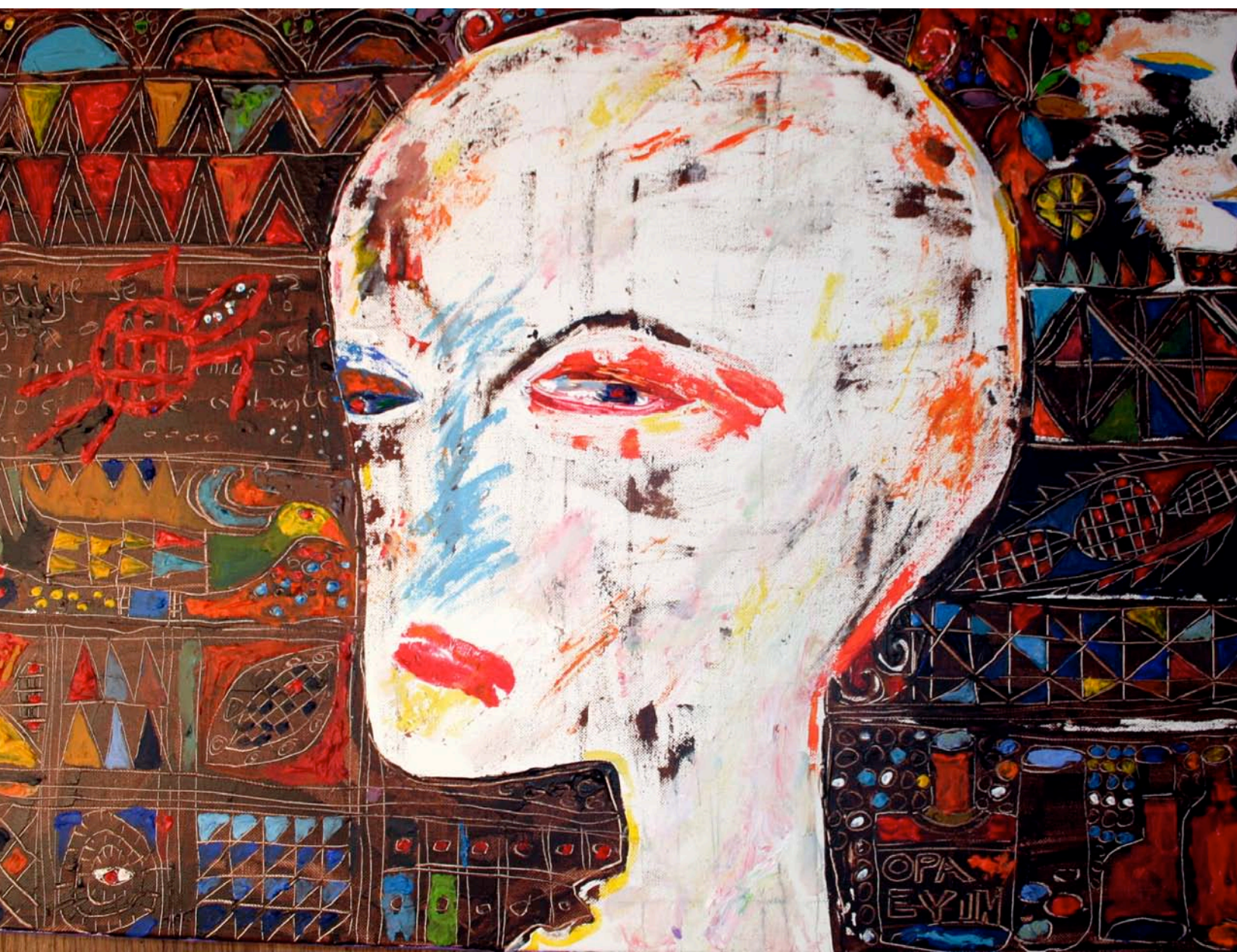
Others are the outline of a tortoise, of a rising ascendant sun, of two human eyeballs inlaid in varying geometric frames, of a couple of white dots or blotches transfixed or suspended in space and time, and of two calligraphic ciphers.



From the artist's title for this piece, we can surmise that this is a composite representation of "existence" stripped of all excrescences of vain delusionary human avowals and disavowals, whether these be innocent , youthful and untested idealism or cynical self-serving disillusionment; but it is an "existence" that, though full of enigma, it is not unknowable or unintelligible.



The two panels collectively titled *At the Edge of Thought* also partake of this mobilization of imagination and fantasy to confront deep matters of acts of knowing, sensing and deciphering both phenomenal experiences and epiphenomenal idealities.



The compositional originality here is simply breath-taking, even in its simplicity and precision. In this piece, torn, charred strips of jute bag – a “found object” – are intricately juxtaposed with small rectangular charms or fetishes – objects we cannot remotely call “found” – to bring forth a configuration of color, line and texture of stunning bricolage.



The peculiar form of contemplativeness that we see in the piece assumes expressions of discreet humour and playfully erotic undertones in pieces like *Women Are Looking For Lovers*, *Women Are Beautiful at Night*, and *The Brides of Sokoti*.



In these pieces, what could easily have become an unmanageable clash of idioms and themes is deftly reconfigured as borrowings from expressive matrices which come laden with explicit and implicit narratives and tropes – folktales, the art of sign writers and “naïve” artists, motifs from textbook illustrators, and iconographic vignettes of sculptural masks in their representation of feminine beauty.



With superb control and understated irony, these are all re-combined in a scrupulous invitation to the viewer to tease out her or his own particular take on each and everyone of these pieces.



This last point is as good as any on which to conclude this appreciation of the art of uniqueness of technique and vision that is inimitably his own. But at the same time, his is also a decentred, eclectic, open – ended and viewer-friendly art in the best senses of these attributes of both popular and high art in our post-modern moment.



Let us therefore celebrate the arrival of a potentially very seminal presence on the contemporary Nigerian and African art scene.