‘Recent Works’ mirrors Oguibe’s prodigious ability to cross artistic media and geopolitical space. This collection boldly traverses the boundaries between painting, sculpture and writing, as well as combines a variety of art traditions including early 20th century European photography, the military flags of the Fante of Ghana, the murals of West African and Ndebele women, as well as Arabic illumination and literature.

Such plurality is the hallmark of the contemporary artist trying to reflect either the malaise of an increasingly fragmented reality, or the hyper-market variety of cultural artefacts available in the (post)modern world. It is also symptomatic of a more deep-rooted phenomenon in contemporary African and non-occidental cultures, one that not only speaks of diversity within the framework of current humanistic discourse, but also re-evokes the interchange of influences and ever-changing configurations, movements of populations, and free trade of art objects and styles prior to Empire and colonialism. Such a combination of elements one finds in the work of South African painter Gavin Jantjes, the painter and printmaker Uzo Egonu, and Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui, among many others whose works are beginning to take centre stage in contemporary cultural discourse. In the case of an artist like Oguibe, however, this variegation and its potential for multiple meaning could lead to reductive interpretations by a metropolitan cultural élite intent on reading signs allegorically. The inclination here is always to seek, in the works of these artists, references to problems of nationhood, corrupt dictatorships, neo-colonialism, underdevelopment and so on; a narrative of crises. But such readings are divisive in that they serve to pigeon-hole as much non-occidental art as possible under the heading ‘post-colonial’ for the sake of keeping it outside and beneath the authorised canons of modern art. In ‘Recent Works’ Oguibe takes brave new steps to subvert such etiquettes of interpretation.

In the past Oguibe could be accused of hitting people over the head with his messages. He rose to fame by exhibiting his works on the streets of Nigeria before showing in galleries in the late 1980s. Those early works were done mainly on baskets and mats with the avowal that those who worship oil on canvas and ornate frames can ‘walk straight to hell’. Even his 1991 ‘Works and Words’ exhibition at the Bhowngree Gallery in London sparked off a row when it was censored by the Commonwealth Institute. Writing in Art Monthly, Peter Townsend compared the incident to the censorship in 1957 of John Osborne’s play, The Entertainer. Oguibe’s predilection for daring and controversy has also been mirrored in other areas of his life.

Born in 1964, Oguibe began to paint and sculpt at a very young age, training as an apprentice to his father, himself a sculptor and graphic artist. His prodigious talents were combined with political activism at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, which led to his suspension and eventual expulsion from the University. In spite of this he obtained a magna cum laude degree in Fine Arts and a host of awards and honours before fleeing under political pressure to Britain. He has since gained a PhD in Art History from the University of London and won the Christopher Okigbo Prize for Literature for his 1992 collection of poems and drawings, ‘A Gathering of Fear’.

Despite his more radical concerns, Oguibe has always maintained his preoccupation with the quest for what he describes as ‘ultimate artistic eloquence’. Thus, the plurality of messages in ‘Recent Works’ is tempered by a pervasive lyricism that is a natural progression from his earlier exhibits. In many of the works in this exhibition he uses the basic format of the flags of the Fante, a West African fishing community, to which he has referred in some of his earlier work. This format, with its large chequered squares and decorative patterns around the edges, defines two of the most striking canvases in ‘Recent Works’: Draughts and
Fish. Here, the border patterns enclose a singular, motival arrangement in the centre of the painting, while in the top corner, where the Fante would locate the British flag, the artist introduces a variety of references to other cultures and artistic traditions. The imperial flag is effectively dislodged and replaced.

In *Fish*, a rectangular man angles in a small pond. A valid interpretation here would be the old maxim, "give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach him how to fish..." But the message is not merely one of charity versus rehabilitation because it is just possible that there is no grave message in the work. As in another work in the exhibition, *Pompadour*, the rest of the canvas is ablaze with a brilliant orange. This intensity of colour, like the bright yellow of *Draughts*, gives a song-like ebullience and even joy to the work.

Such almost light-hearted use of colour brings to mind Matisse and Sean Scully, who themselves used African motifs in their work. It also introduces the ambivalent potential for comment-and-no-comment mentioned above, and strikes a happy medium in ‘Recent Works’ between the detached, minimalist portrait of a women in *Pompadour*, for instance, and the weightiness of *Painter*, a mixed media painting whose beauty is purposely drowned out by a collage of statements.

In *Painter* the theme is one of dislocation. The canvas appears to be split in two with one half painted in a dark blue, signifying Europe (the word Europe is actually written here) and the other half painted red, signifying Home. But there is also a decorative strip, derived from the Uli mural art of the artist’s Igbo people in Nigeria, which borders the red section and adds as it were an extra ‘half’.

Here, Oguibe plays into the hands of those looking for allegories because *Painter* can be read from right to left as a narrative movement from tradition to modernity. In the middle of the painting, a pair of trousers stand glued to the canvas with one foot in the red hell-fire of Home and the other in the deep blue sea of Europe, an inventive, if somewhat blatant, reference to the condition of exile. In addition, the figure of a woman in the red turns into the simulacrum of foot prints in the blue. This blue section also contains an incomplete sentence in Arabic taken from a poem by the Arab poet Mahmoud Darwish which translates as ‘he was a painter but paintings usually...’

If in the past Oguibe has been accused of hitting people over the head with his messages, then here he flattens you with a barrage of them. The main difference now, though, is that these messages are not region specific. Nor are they totally ambivalent for, whereas, say, Jeff Koons imports traditional Italian craft work, sloshes it with paint and then braces himself for the Andy Warhol comparisons, Oguibe presents us with nothing so trivial. The mixed media collage of *Painter* intellectualises tradition and contextualises it in accordance with contemporary experiences of exile, statelessness, immigration, racism, even patriotism. In Darwish’s own poem *The Painter*, the opening lines read “he was a painter/but paintings usually do not open doors”. This, of course, is the ultimate artistic message — a self-referential one, and one that is also cynical. For, the grim reality is that neither paintings nor Oguibe’s *Painter*, despite all its effects, can open any doors.

We are entitled to point out Oguibe’s reference to nation or the lack of it here, but where one meets the intellectual challenge presented by the singular installation in this exhibition, *Requiem*, all direct references to experiential loci go out the window. *Requiem* deals with a universal yet contemporary malaise: the persecution of the innocent. It consists of a framed photograph of a European child placed amid four white plastic dolls and raised on a five

*Fish* 1993, acrylic on canvas.
foot high platform. It is a memorial to a dead child. The daguerreotype texture of the sad-eyed portrait temporally evokes the early part of this century and somehow suggests a war child. The sense of loss may also refer to the countless Somalian, Sudanese or Kurdish children killed, mutilated or left starving as a result of war. Yet, though Oguibe is an African artist, what is notable is that the photograph is not one of an African or Oriental child, nor are any of the dolls black.

It is here that the idea of a plurality of messages and experiential locations most frustrate typical metropolitan readings of — and agenda for — contemporary African art. For where so often one hears of the (post)modern artist’s craving to ‘enter into the spirit of the native’ in search of the unspoilt intensity of ‘nature’s children’ — a trend started by Gauguin in Tahiti and nowadays reproduced on the pages of the Sunday Telegraph magazine — Oguibe reciprocates such liberal gestures with the same sense of freedom by using European images. The added message here must be that yes, children die in war, both in Africa and the Middle East, but these are not the only ones; the West is also killing its own children in war. The point is the barbarism of war, from which the West can claim no innocence. Bosnia springs to mind.

This may be reading too much into things because, as with Fish and Pompadour and all the other canvases in this show bar Painter, there may be no message at all. That is, no message other than the enchanting pathos of a child’s eyes. And this is the level of sophistication on which Oguibe’s ‘Recent Works’ operates: multiplying the art object’s signifying potential while purposefully retaining a formal naivety and lyricism, which in the end goes beyond mere allegory and message to uphold eloquently the principle of beauty as the artist’s ultimate goal.

‘Recent Works’ was at the Savannah Gallery, London, 22 July — 20 August, 1993.