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Artistic Activism in Nigeria Art: A Course, a Cause

Otu, John

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Federal College of Education, Zaria

Kaduna State, Nigeria

Phone: +2348062214089

E-mail: otwootuj@yahoo.com

Johnson, Oladesu

Department of Fine and Applied Arts

Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye

Ogun State, Nigeria

&

Sani, Bimbo Stephanie

Department of English language and literary studies

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Kaduna State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper saliently criticizes the thrust of a large number of visual arts of painting and sculpture produced in Nigeria. It is important to note that though some of the artists mentioned in this study make political cartoons that subversively quiz the nation's politicians and appointees, such artists instead attempts at pleasing their

patrons. However, the body of works produced to challenge governance that are equally bought continue to decrease. This article attempts at revealing an insensitivity relying on Chinua Achebe's assertion on art practice of various platforms that leaves man with his throes without open rebuke.

Introduction

Nigeria as a post-colony of British rule has and continues to experience a gradual rise in active participation of artistic activism. This is evident in the works of some novelists that have irked the governments of such periods. It was common place in most Africa's nation states and especially in Nigeria. Some of such examples are the works of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease*, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Wole Soyinka's *The Man Died*. These authors and their works bear testimonies of being inspired by growing leadership problems that have been turned to idioms of expression. A few of them to this end were either threatened or imprisoned despite the subversive devices employed to convey their feelings about the worsening state of the country.

Achebe (1968) asserts that "It is clear that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant... If an artist is anything he is a human being with heightened sensitivities." It is therefore possible to state unequivocally that today, many Nigerian writers and artists spend their creative energies away from the imminent concerns that continue to erode and encroach on human dignity in Nigeria.

In music, Fela Anikulapo Kuti (d. 1997) for the most part of his music career was an outspoken socio-political critic that, without restraints used the actual names of his subjects in his songs. This led to several arrests, molestation among other things as governmental reprisal attacks against the singer. In the visual arts, starting with cartooning, Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972) who published his strips in the West African Pilot newspaper owned by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1986) advocated democracy in the face of the British colonial rule as early as 1936. It is worthy to note that the cartooning platform has displayed a greater variety of anti-governmental positions than the visual arts of painting and sculpture in a period of about eighty years starting from the return of Aina Onabolu (18-19) from London and Paris where he obtained diplomas in Fine Arts by 1924. Okeke (2001: 1) explains that

...although the introduction of European art education in non-Islamic parts of the continent brought about change in the attitude of colonized to colonizer...In fact it initially paid no attention to the visual arts, being mainly concerned with fulfilling the colonial power's need for low-level manpower- for clerks, for example in the civil service. Wherever art did feature in the colonial curriculum, it

was restricted to the notion of craft. The inclusion of art in the syllabus began early when educated African's demanded it.

This is one of the much antecedence that is indicative of the primal intention of colonialism and the inclusion of the visual arts in the curriculum. The introduction of formal education clearly enlightened the citizens of the country and led to the outcries for emancipation of various forms. This is first seen in Lasekan's strips that advocated political change as others expressed this in the newspapers. It is evident from observation cartoonists have and continue to spend more of their creative energy in both the familial platform and the lampooning of government and politicians. The artistic activism that is practiced by cartoonists is more evident in the expression of their feelings about the circumstances and situations that militate against nationhood. These situations vary from political instability, corruption, ethnicity, religious violence, gender disparity among other growing injustice. It is worthy to state unequivocally here that all these issues stated above are more potent in the creative drive of cartoonist than those of painters and sculptors.

Most gallery owners would rather arm twist and woo both the artists and collectors to meet at a middle point of visually pleasing art that can be sold and resold after along or short period of time. The identity crisis that started early in Nigeria's artistic growth when expatriates were in Nigeria as art teachers still exists today. Though, the expatriates have left, yet, the philosophy of depicting traditional idioms that are African in painting and sculpture coupled with the monetary drive pervades most of the works in Nigeria.

The population for the thrust of this topic is large but five artists each on two divides have been selected. The selection has been made randomly of works that are made to please a clientele and devoid of activism with the following artists, Abiodun Olaku, Samuel Ajobiewe, Reuben Ugbine, Ebong Ekwere and Edosa Oguigo. The other five whose works are clearly laden with artistic activism are those of Dele Jegede, Wande George, Gani Odutokun, Jerry Buhari and Jelili Atiku.

The statement below and that of Achebe above are used to set the tone of the overall discussion. This is with the aim of engendering a paradigm shift from the current trend of visual similarity in the themes of most paintings and sculpture to one that will bring relevance to the art painting and sculpture. This will also necessitate socio-political change when all quarters of creativity rise to clamour for a change in mindset that makes life and living enviable in Nigeria. Jegede (1996) avers that

For the visual artist, mastery of techniques and materials cannot, and should not, be a substitute for message and thrust, otherwise he is a rambler who refuses, to advice a thought through his art, or shudders from passing comments or aims at no substantial specifics but revel

in slavish celebration of mere technical proficiency. The artist who is a product of his time cannot afford to ramble or remain neutral.

When art was practiced in the traditional African societies; thought they were not primarily viewed as art, the works were reversed and referred to at both times of pain and joy. The images were passed through the hand of the priest who then evoked upon it the spirit that made it potent. At this, the owner takes it home to serve the purpose for which it was made. Today, Christianity, Islam and formal education have- enlightened most of Nigeria peoples into perceiving art as evidences of man's creative ability. Moreover, formal education has pushed the boundaries into using art as a tool for self-expression, possibilities of making a profession out of it and teaching learners how to appreciate the visual arts. Having stated the obvious antecedence above, the article begins to outline the first five works that display a mastery of technique and materials.

Abiodun Olaku has spent more than the last ten years depicting dusk and dawn scenery of houses built on the riverine areas of Lagos. This is devoid of the splendor typical of the busy city centre of Marina and Victoria Island. Perhaps, he attempts at revealing the neglected side of Lagos with the aim of drawing government attention to improve on the living conditions in the areas depicted. However, the rendition betrays the squalor typical of Olaku's subject.



Figure 1: Abiodun Olaku, Grey Tunes, Oil on Canvas, 95 x 110cm 2005

Source: Modern Nigerian Art, Artexpo exhibition catalogue

This painting like many others he has made seldom allows the viewer to see the dilapidated nature of the houses depicted. Instead, his approach to the subject venerates the scenery as places worth living in, drawing all sundry to the visual appeal presented in the painting. Samuel Ajobiewe depicts a point of a market where rams are sold. He celebrates a seemingly enterprising opportunity that exists as though it is not seasonal.

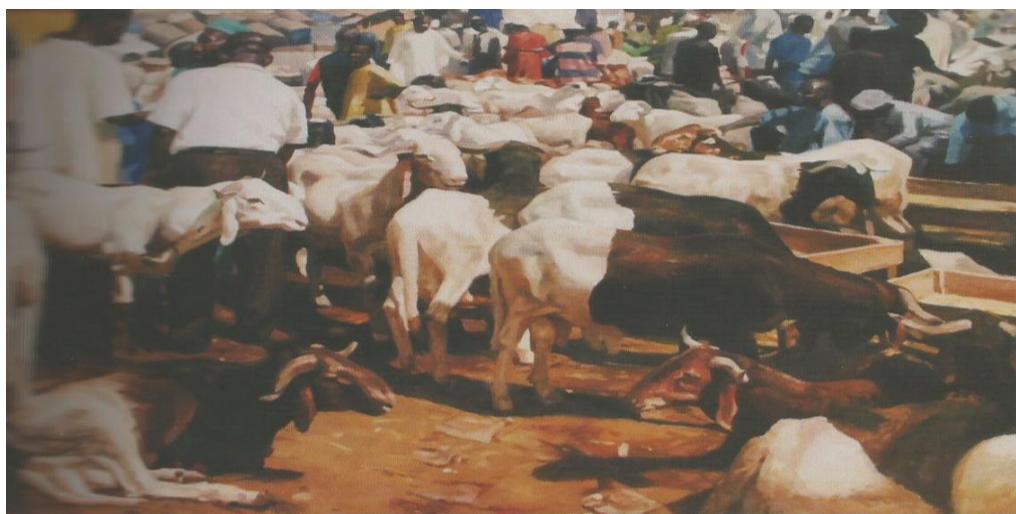


Figure 2: Samuel Ajobiewe, Enterprise in Rams oil on canvas, 2012 107 x 143cm

Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue

The most of the canvas is dominated by the depiction of rams from the top middle of the canvas and spread to both the bottom right and left of the work space. The human activity participating in the buying and selling is restricted to the top, about a third of the upper part of the canvas. Filani (2012:7) posits that

... the levels and choices in art appreciation differ from person to person. Since art itself is becoming more difficult to define, boxing it into traditional departments without contextualizing its trajectory might make us atavistic. However, for discerning connoisseurs, the key words to artistic creativity remain skill and good taste.

In the above statement, he bestrides the threshold of pleasing collectors and the display of great handling of medium. Moreover, it remains important to punctuate a body of work with a wall for reasoning that will in the long run arouse the conscience of viewers to work against an existing dogma that pretends things are well. This is a state in which the visually pleasing work serves as opium to soothe the heart and soul.

Reuben Ugbine's swimmers attempts at depicting swimmers in a cylindrical piece to achieve distance as expressed on two dimensional surface; hereby rendered on a three dimensional surface.



Figure 3: Reuben Ugbine, Swimmers, Wood, 240cm, 2008

Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue

It might be inferred that it saliently depicts the political struggle that is evident in Nigeria's type of politics today or any form of tussle for a top seat. Moreover, the work is open to more interpretations that might be subtle and pleasant to various perceptions. Edosa Oguigo's painting of two men on horseback motivates the need to cohabit.



Figure 4: Edosa Oguigo, Friends, Oil on Canvas, 81 x 119cm, 2011

Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue

Both riders look more like identical twins, though the horse to the right of the painting has a white mark running down the front of the head. The overall depiction in relation of the title that calls for friendship has not shown any reason why both men will not easily be friend each other. Perhaps, he presents the two men from a position of avoiding any thought of envy of each other in a world where it is common place to fight for supremacy over possessions.

Ebong Ekwere presents a ballet dancer in one of the characteristics poses typical with the dance.



Figure 5: Ebong Ekwere, Dance, Fibre glass H:115cm, 2011

Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue

The work elicits from the viewer to imagine any type of classical music being played to make the dancer strike the pose. On the contrary, classical music and the dance still enjoys very low patronage perhaps due to the wide cultural difference and the increasing gap that exists between Nigeria and the west due to the insurgency in the country. Falola (2011:24) explains that

... dele Jegede turns provocative, aggressively challenging us not to rethink Nigeria, but to confront its mess. It is bold in its imagination, conception, execution, as he brings along history of chaos and corruption to trigger a narrative of penetrating intelligence,... the Nigerian state is clearly disorganized and despotic, and its “infrastructural” outreach promotes decadence rather than progress.

If most artists in Nigeria decide to respond to the trend of dilapidating polity in the country, it will arouse attention to the importance of art a broadly to the demand for

change than a mere want it. Falola's description of Jegede's work is replete with an active protest for change, ironically mentioning actual challenges without employing subversion.



Figure 6: Dele Jegede, Abuja: Things Fall Apart, 32" x 28" latex on canvas, 2009

Source: Peregrination exhibition catalogue

The painting above describes the state of the seat of government against the backdrop of the growing activities of insurgency in the north of Nigeria, general nature of injustice and political anomalies. The painting should have brought the wrath of the Goodluck Jonathan government on the artist if they care at all about an art work having any potency to cause any harm on the stability of governance. Instead of a threat or arrest to express disgust as such a tone of expression, a blind and dead ear is turned and the impurity continues. When Idris Abdulkareem released his song titled ‘‘Nigeria Jaga-jaga’’ during the Olusegun Obasanjo’s tenure as president; (1999 to 2007, he was touched, and replied that it is the artist that is “Jaga-Jaga”. This type of response in the first instance perhaps shows how attentive the government was, but instead defended itself over the various issues raised by artist in the song. Some of such problems included sporadic shootings borne out of kidnaps, robberies caused by inept governance at the time.

Gani Odutokun (d. 1995) has both covertly and overtly shown through his art how badly government performs.



Figure 7: Gani Odutokun, Police Brutality, Poster colour 72x55cm, 1994

The three colours of red, black and white are metaphors of the increasing destructive activity of the nation's police force. The background depicts bloodshed typical of the inept attempts the police have shown in protecting life especially. Two female figures are depicted in both hands of the beastly depicted police officer with a chevron on the short sleeve shirt showing the rank of a sergeant. This suggests the rank of which police officers get to and revel in cold blooded murder popularly called 'accidental discharge'; when they cover up for shooting their victims.

One might infer that the use of female figures does not necessarily imply that women are the only victims, but that of the helpless state the citizens have come to find themselves in. Jelili Atiku trained as a sculpture and has shifted into performance art with focus on human rights issues.

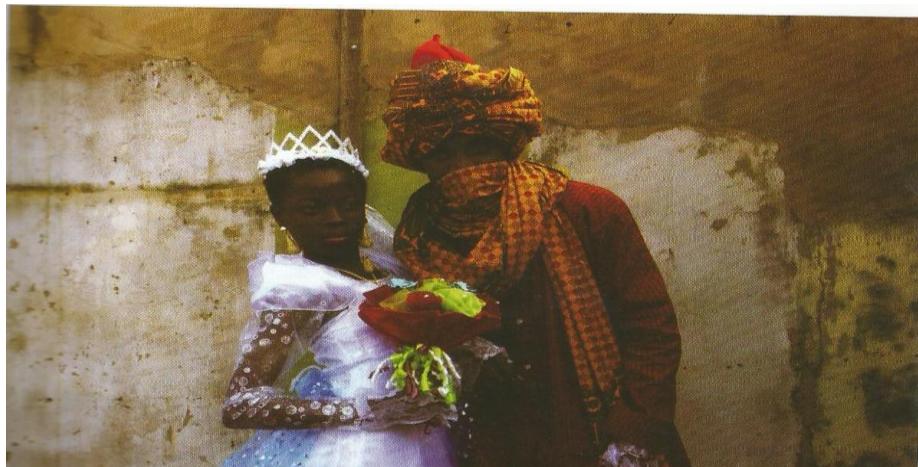


Figure 8: Jelili Atiku, Senator Yarima's Wedding, performance with Rofia Azeez, 2013

The image above is a photograph of the artist posed as ‘Senator Ahmed Yerima’ after getting married to a thirteen years old girl. The senator lawlessly chose the under aged girl as wife though in another country, bringing her back to a country that has the age of marriage as eighteen. Despite outcries for his impeachment and arrest, he continues to serve as a senator. The human rights violation and the inability for the constitution to be enforced is one of the driving forces behind Atiku’s performances. McPhilips Nwachukwu’s interview with Atiku in 2009 led the latter to reveal that

... when I was campaigning against extra-judicial killing in Nigeria and the world at large, and I stayed a performance, titled victim of Political Assassination. That show was a part of the Assembly’s events for the commemoration of human rights day for that year. In the course of the performance, the state security service officer designated to the Assembly complained that the performance be discontinued and removed from the premises. His reason for the request was that the performance was becoming an embarrassment and a wrong signal to the status of the Assembly. He found it difficult to imagine how a lifeless body, which was wrapped in Nigeria flag, could be dropped in State Assembly premises. “No, it should be removed”. The clerk of the House, whom, he took his complaint to, did not oblige and hence, the performance continued.

Despite the fact that they insisted on seeing the whole of the performance, it seems that it was entertaining, than pricking the politicians' minds to enforce the law in every ramification of life and living in Lagos State. Anogwih (2011:15) holds that

It is routine for Jelili Atiku to express his discontent with the multidimensional anomalies of our society through creative prospects or activist-art realized through performances. His understanding of the elements and symbols used in activist-based performances is deeply enhanced or charged by recurrent subject matters of inequality, economic, political and social melt downs that characterize our contemporary society.

The fear perhaps, is that these performances go beyond mere entertainment in the eyes and minds of the politicians as the poor governance continues to rise. Suffice to say, that Atiku's work protesting Senator Yerima's marriage to a thirteen years old girl has not earned him a threat, arrest or a lawsuit as both the politician and government continue in their inept path.

Wande George paints issues from various perspectives and relies on the problems around to draw inspiration from. George (2012:11) opines that "The naked truth series is about some of the "OBVIOUS TRUTHS IN OUR COMPLEX SOCIETY", the issues are so complex that they are both good, bad, sad, exciting, uplifting, frightening etc. The fact is they are obvious social/political issues that are staining us in the face but which we have done nothing about". The painting below is his attempt at stating obvious truth of the state of the nation.

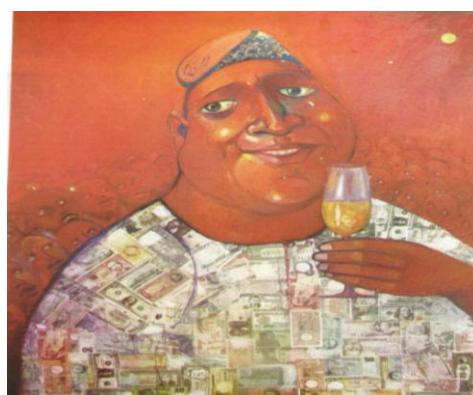


Figure 9: Wande George, the Ruling Class; Oil on Canvas, 48 X 58ms, 2010

Source: Nothing but the truth exhibition catalogue

The painting depicts a fat man rendered in the caricature manner typical of cartoonists; borne out of the fact that he is a cartoonist. Behind the main subject holding a drinking glass is a large crowd of people shrouded in the red that suggests the pain they are surrounded by. George employed the use of replica of the country's currency notes to depict the dress the subject is wearing. This suggests the height of the corruption that has engulfed the country as a whole. Despite this, no arrests have been reported over this depiction that puts government in obvious light of what characterizes governance in Nigeria.

In explaining his works in a 1996 exhibition titled THE WASTED Buhari (1995:8) states that

...I have tried to capture as sincerely as possible, my experience as a Nigerian citizen. The first category constitute works essentially done in acrylic that mourn the chaos, pain and lawlessness brought about by our leadership... The third category are miniature water colours, drawings, pastels that represent my withdrawal from the political betrayal the country suffered from the bungling of the 1993 extravagant political transition programme by the very architects who designed and executed it. If there is any message I have tried to convey in this work, it is that man in his quest for the meaning of life has travailed through many wilderness of violence, pride, greed, destruction, selfishness and adventurism".

As an exhibiting artist, he remains undeterred by the attempts made by gallery owners to sway artists like him to depict works that may be described as mass taste.



Figure 10: Jerry Buhari, Freedom from Force, Acrylic, 84 x 100cm, 1995

Source: The Wasted, an exhibition catalogue of paintings

The work depicts a state of great excitement as a result of liberation from confinement and suppressive restriction by an uncontrollable force or person(s). Painting was made during the military regime of Gen. Sani Abacha (d. 1998) which was characterized by economic hardship and assassinations of especially those that were highly placed in the society that openly wrote and spoke publicly to confront his government. Scholl (2011: 149) opines that “Activist art often focuses on what on what the situationists have dubbed the “creation of a situation”, which exceeds the normal flow of everyday life. Interventions of this kind are aimed at a temporary rupture”. Generally, activist art clearly directs attention at aiding the politician to have a rethink on its decision that continues to leave a yawning gap between the citizens and their aspirations. This is the course chosen intermittently by a number of artists for the purpose of lending a voice in the face of ever growing pains of social decadence that make many victims of the situation they find themselves and the wrong decisions they make.

Nwagbara (2008: 226) avers that “Nigeria is still tottering on the precipice. To say that Nigeria is a nation in dire straits is no news; it is a veritable fact. Researchers have said that the constitutive ethos of Nigeria was predicated upon endemics, imperial violence against constituting nationalities...which is still groping in the dark with the bangs and pangs of slavery and colonialism- and recently neocolonialism”. This implies the present situation where the political class through corrupt practices that makes it impossible and difficult for resources to be available, and where available it is too expensive for the poor person to afford. The cause of artistic activism and the existence of activist art is not a new place in the society.

Conclusion

The act of protesting against constituted authority for high-handedness is not new but is an increasing way of life in countries where the enforcement of law and order is meant for the reward of a few and the abuse of many; this among others account for the neocolonialism of sorts. Michelis (2013: 68) “...art becomes a form of knowledge-a cognitive experience- a discovery of the world made of wonders and surprise of body and sensation.” These sensations are two-pronged as presented in the two different ways as stated above. However, if an art form is going to make a desired impact, it should become sensitive to the needs and aspiration of mankind raising pertinent issues that will improve on human wellbeing. The other art forms such as music, literature, cartooning among others have and continue to be used to express two different feelings of either the familial or the activist position. Perhaps, the resultant reaction of the person or persons lampooned satirically or openly that has the power to shut the artist up has made many to continue to ply safe under the familial plat form that lacks potency. This on the long run makes such societies’ tyrants continue their evil in the face of decreasing opposition.

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