

## **KEN OKOLI'S ABSRACTED LANDSCAPE SCULPTURES: THE ZARIA INFLUENCE**

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### **Abstract**

In art history scholarship the study of landscape has always been focused on the representation of beautiful sceneries in painting. Most of the attempt to represent landscape in relief sculpture has also been centered on the representation of human figures, animal forms, and generally on decorative patterns which form the background of such relief sculptures. In recognition of this paradigm, Ken Okoli has created some relief landscape sculptures inspired by the Zaria environ, especially the vernacular Hausa architecture and the baobab trees. This paper looks at the multifarious manifestation of landscape art and reviews its evolution in relief sculpture. The paper eventually discusses the educational background of Ken Okoli, analyzes some of his relief landscape sculptures and concludes by making some recommendations.

### **Introduction**

Landscape can be defined as the visible features of an area of land or the genre of painting that depicts such an area of land. Landscape, include the physical elements of landforms such as mountains, hills, water bodies such as river, lakes, pond and the sea, living elements of land cover as well as indigenous vegetation, human elements including different forms of land use, buildings and structures, and transitory elements such as lighting and weather conditions. These combine both their physical origins and the cultural overlay of human presence. Landscape could further be considered under the following categories: landscape art, cultural landscape, landscape ecology, landscape planning, landscape design and so many others. A general definition of landscape will be seen as “the activity that modifies the visible features of an area of land”. (Wikipedia, 2015). According to the comprehensive definitions of landscape here explored, the aspect that informs this presentation is landscape as art expression.

Artists over the centuries have suggested different types of landscapes in visual art expressions in varied media which includes graphics, paintings and sculptures. But, what is different is the approach to its presentation especially as it relates to relief sculpture. Most landscapes in the history of relief landscape sculpture are represented as motifs or patterns that serve as adornment or barely as a background to the relief sculpture. This assertion is concurred by Okoli (2007), that “whenever landscape compositions are mentioned in visual art, what come to every mind is usually landscape in painting. However, this is because landscapes in the history of art as always appear to be a painter’s domain”. Okoli asks, “Does this mean that landscapes have not been depicted in sculpture through history? An attempt will be made to answer this question as the discussion progresses in this presentation.

Relief sculpture in plastic art according to visual art encyclopedia (2015) “refers to any work which projects from but which belongs to wall or other types of background surface”. Thus, a relief, like a painting is dependent on a background surface and its composition must be extended in a plane in order to be visible. Relief sculptures may be abstracted in style as well as representational or figurative. Abstracted reliefs, both geometrical and curvilinear, have been found in several cultures, including those of Ancient Greece, the Celts, Mexico, the Vikings, and Islam. “Representational and figurative relief sculpture is strongly associated with Greeks, the Romans, Romanesque and Gothic architecture, and European sculpture from the Renaissance onward”.

### **An overview of Relief sculpture**

Landscape in relief according to Kleiner (2009) “appeared during the old Kingdom in Egypt depicting scenes of war, siege and social activities of the monarchs against the backdrop of simplified landscapes”. Rogers in Okoli (2007) also notes that the Assyrians artists achieved illustrative relief sculptures which represent incidences and topographies, which figures were set against a detailed landscape. These representations of landscapes lack geographical reality. After a good attempt at depicting landscape, the Lycians in Asia Minor also explored a well understanding of the art of stone carving and were also able to depict landscape in the tombs of their nobles in relief sculpture.

A general observation is that Classical and Roman relief sculptures depict mostly humans without capturing any activities on the background. However, examples of these sculptures abound, one of the oldest known relief sculptures that depicts a woman holding a bison horn is found in Laussel, France, Ca.25, 000-20,000BCE. Also, in Le Tuc D’audoubert, Paleolithic sculptor sometimes created reliefs by building up forms out of clay rather than by cutting into stone blocks or stone walls in the Apollo II cave in a profile. However, this works measuring about two feet which is the largest among the Paleolithic sculptures. (Kleiner, 2009)

*Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and three daughters* from Amarna, Egypt, 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Ca 1353-1335 BCE, which is a Limestone relief sculpture. In this sunken relief; the Amarna sculptor created an intimate look at the royal family in a domestic setting Akhenaton, Nefertiti, and three of their daughters bask in the life-giving rays of Aton, the sun disk. The mood is informal. Akhenaton lifts one of his daughters in order to kiss her. Another daughter sits on Nerfititi’s lap and gestures towards her father, while the younger daughter reach out to touch a pendant on her mother’s crown. Another work is titled, *Athena battling Alkyoneos*, from the Alter of Zeus, Pergamon, Turkey, Ca 175 BCE, Pergamon, a marble sculpture. The Pergamon alter has an expressive power unparalleled in earlier Greek art. The work depicts violent movement, swirling

draperies, and vivid images of suffering scene, the marble are five panels that are vertically placed side by side. In Rome, Christian theme started to dominates the relief and sculpture in the round. Bishops were known to commission varied projects. Hildesheim doors with relief panels commissioned by Bishop Bernward for Saint Michael's Hildesheim, Germany, 1015, bronze. This relief sculpture tells the story of origin of sin and the ultimate redemption (Kleiner, 2009).

Kleiner further states that the Romantic spirit also initiated the incorporation of both Neoclassical and Romantic elements. For example, the colossal sculptural group titled *Departure of the volunteers of 1792* also *La Marseillaise*, which is a limestone relief sculpture created by Francois Rude (1784-1855).

Okoli (2007), reports that the Bini of south-southern Nigeria also attempted the rendition of landscape in their court art. They appear to have produced the most outstanding sculpture of landscape in pre-colonial Africa, these sculptures are dominated by human activities like The Roman and Greek relief sculptures. Some of the reliefs are also dominated by the activities of royal in the society. Fagg and Plass (1973), also is in accord to the submission of Okoli, observe that the Bini created some relief sculpture which captured varied motifs and leaves at the background. For example, in the shield shaped plaque, the artist captures a central figure which is the *Oba* and two chiefs, one on the left and the other on the right. The plaque is surrounded with motifs, leaves, snakes, interwoven line, circle and linear vertical lines.

### **Ken Okoli the Artist**

Kenneth Okey Okoli popularly known as Kenkoli was born in Kano on March 30, 1964 of Awka parent. He studied Fine Arts in Federal Collage of Education, Pankshin obtaining National Certificate of Education (NCE) in Fine Arts in 1988. He later went to study Fine Arts in the prestigious Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria for his Bachelor of Arts, Fine Arts, and Master of Arts, (M.F.A) Sculpture in 1998 and went ahead to further his education in Art History with a PhD in 2007 in the same institution. He teaches sculpture in the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and has exhibited widely and participated in several workshops, conferences, and have been awarded many sculpture commissions nationally.

### **Analysis of Some Selected Relief Sculptures of Ken Okoli**



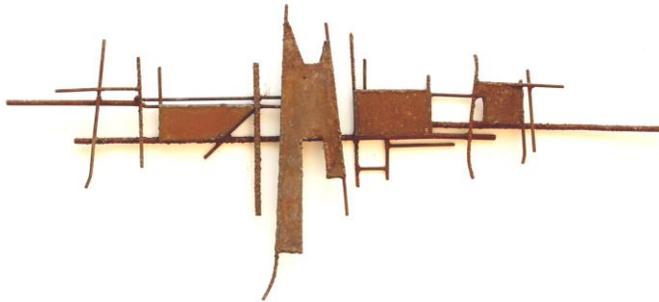
Ken Okoli, *Korfa 2050*, Mild steel, 112x45cm, 2011

This relief metal sculpture titled *Korfa 2020* gives the artist's impression of how the entrance of Zaria city gate will look like in year 2020. A futuristic expression of *Kofar*, with a

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simplified linear composition of the Zaria landscape. One observes the use of quarter rods, 10mm and 12mm steel rods juxtaposed within a horizontal plane against positive and negative spaces using sheet metal to represent the houses. Okoli creates an excellent dynamic use of lines to achieve energetic movements of spatial manipulation of lines, while the building at the centre of the composition shows the main entrance gate to the city called *Korfa* in Hausa. The City gate is known to have some other gates; but the one that interests the artist is the main entrance gate called *korfa Doka*. One will observe in the composition that the artist has been able to show his ability to use the principles and elements of art adequately by the organization and arrangement of design elements in the composition. The negative and positive spaces working in line with the vertical and horizontal linear lines, the simplicity of the houses in flat plates and the framed or boxed sheet metal all add to the success of the composition.

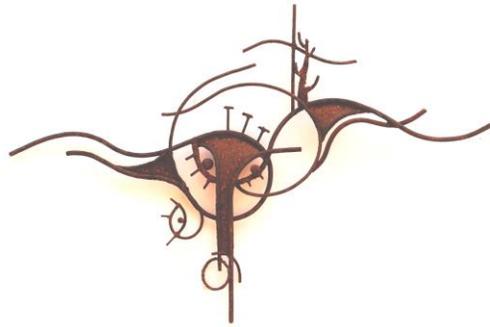
The power and prowess of a technical artist can be felt in the finishing of the work, starting from the straight line that appeared to be straight and the curved line that comes out curved without any undulating lines. The geometric correctness is excellent, which gives visual quality and strength to the work, of course is there is no doubt that the work is carefully crafted by an experienced hand. The discussion will not be complete without mentioning the interaction that exists between the background which penetrates the work, so that viewers can enjoy the feeling of the colour of the wall in which the work is mounted against the rusted nature of the mild steel.



Ken Okoli, Korfa 2020, Mild steel, 112x45cm, 2011

In this composition that is reminiscent of a similar work titled *Korfa 2020*. This is another futuristic projection of the artist, in which the artist clairvoyantly shows that by the year 2050 will exist as *Korfa* presently would have been transformed into a mega city. The sculptor considers the possibility of a modern city that will be transformed from the traditional Zaria city Vernacular architecture to a modern city.

In the transformation process, the artist has dexterously created a contemporary city by juxtaposing vertical and horizontal linear lines which are systematically placed by the use of positive and negative spaces. The strength of the landscape sculpture lies on the simplicity, yet it shows strong linear and spatial use of space to create a composition that considers the creative use of both the principles and elements of design. Another successful attribute of the work is the use of mild steel rods to create drawing in space.



Ken Okoli, *We are Still Watching*, Mild steel, 112x45cm, 2012

*We are still watching* is a relief metal sculpture. The title of this work suggests to the writer a protest of the artist against human activities that are endangering the natural vegetation of the environment. *We are still watching* is an attempt to cry out loud about how humans have destroyed the beautiful green vegetation that used to occupied most of our vast land. Man has

become the environment's greatest enemy, yet at a larger extent man must survive and his survival is based on an intervention which some may describe as 'environmental destruction.' The struggling man that hews wood to make fire does not see anything wrong in harvesting from the environment yet Environmental activists would resist such actions. What we have therefore is a contentious existence between state policies to safeguard the environment and a desperate quest by humans to survive. This discussion may not dwell more on these huge discourses.

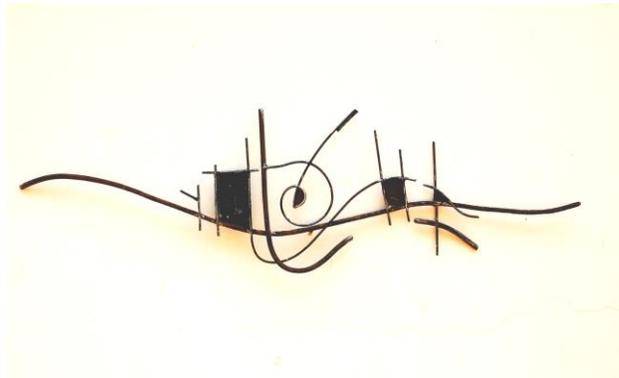
The first attraction to the work is the face of a woman situated at the centre of the composition, and another smaller one by the side. The larger face perhaps could be said to symbolize the landscape crying over the negative activities of humans that have led to the destruction of the ecosystem. The human face is a face of pain, agony, a cry for help and a cry for reforestation. The small baobab tree on top of the face stands lonely; it also demands for company of other trees. It is not surprising that a work like this could motivate a lot of philosophical debate. The composition is yet another simplified relief sculpture with some interwoven gestural linear line that are rhythmically arranged in overlapping pattern. This composition unlike the other two captured human figures in stylized manner, curiously showed recent manifestation in Okoli's current works. This method of representing humans in his sculpture could not be observed in his earlier works especially before 1998 when he did his postgraduate studies. "We are still watching" what the Government will do to this issue of deforestation.



Ken Okoli, No Hope for the Baobab, Mild steel, 142x55cm, 2014

Between 1980 and 1985 when one of the authors was in secondary school in Kwara State, one can still remember vividly at the end of the term when coming back to Zaria by a train. What welcomed one home to Zaria were the beautifully patterned baobab trees on the topography of the landscape. The rhythmic patterned baobab trees are now replaced with buildings. Okoli (2007), also has the same opinion that "years ago, when approaching Zaria from Kaduna you will see the baobab tree waiting like soldiers protecting the city, but they are no longer there, cut

down for firewood". What will interest one is the title of the work when viewed against the interpretation of the work. In the work, the baobab tree is positioned at the centre of the composition, which is the tallest object. While at the left side of the composition is an abstracted Hausa house constructed with 10mm steel rod framed around the mild steel sheet. The 10mm steel rod is curved into a semicircular pattern, while the other curved line goes straight forming the hand of the female figure on the right side of the composition. This feminine figure is a recent occurrence in Okoli's landscape sculptures, the introduction of human form could be seen as a philosophical concept in saying a different story away from his initial ideas of just interpreting the aesthetics of Zaria landscape. He has gone further to add more flesh to the story he is now presenting, like the need for us to look at the possibility of protecting the green areas in our society. The baobab tree is gone, but is there any hope for its coming back? This is what this work interrogates.



Ken Okoli, Nature and Music, Mild steel, 118x40cm, 2014

The first impression one gets in this landscape sculpture compared to the other sculpture in this category is that the city looks happy. The composition portrayed an atmosphere of happiness, which is brought about by the natural music of the birds and the gentle breeze that the wind echoes in the city. Music is most often associated with joy and gladness of the heart; it elevates the mind of the broken hearted. The second thought that came into the mind when one encountered the work at first glance is that the artist must be in a good mood to execute this graceful work. The composition can be said to be melodious if this term can be applied to a work of art of this nature. The focal point, which are the two basic elements at the centre of the composition: one is the circular musical note and the other is the rectangular vertical building on the left next to the musical note. The traditional building is made with sheet metal which is framed with 10mm steel rod. On the fore ground lies 12mm steel rod slightly undulation in a horizontal perspective. Meanwhile, some lines inform of 10mm steel rods are welded onto the circular abstracted musical note at the centre of the composition. In this composition, one will observe that it seems as if there are no human figures, but when you take a second look there are

many figures in the composition. Symbolically, the short vertical lines are representative of the human figures, dancing to the rhythm of the music.

The human elements are metaphorically placed in an abstracted form, so viewers wonder if truly there are human forms actually dancing to the music or not. Philosophically, it is true that artists create works and having given a title, the works now have their own life and can survive in their own interpretative world. So, the work can be interpreted as being perceived by different viewers. Some of the descriptions and analyses are on a personal metaphorical interpretation, perhaps beyond the ideal concept of the artist. In the earlier exploration of Okoli, he purposefully avoided the inclusion of human figures in his relief landscape sculptures influenced by Zaria city. He asserted that he was targeting an "Islamic tolerable sculpture" However, unconsciously in this composition he have symbolically introduced human figure in an abstracted format.

### **Conclusion**

Sculptural exploration in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has moved towards conceptual art. This form of art placed the idea as the most significant aspect of a work of art. Before now, sculptures in relief sculpture were rooted on modeling and casting, especially in bronze and other related alloys. Most of the earlier relief sculptures were in stone, wood, Plaster of Paris and bronze. With technological advancement, the introduction of oxy-acetylene and electric arc welding, sculptors now started to look at the possibilities of direct metal sculptures. The earlier pioneers of welded metal sculptors will include but not limited to the following artists, Julio Gonzalez, Pablo Picasso, David Smith, Tony Smith, Anthony Caro and Richard Serra. These artists used different methods and approaches in executing their sculptures, either through fabrication or welding with electric arc welded or oxy-acetylene welder. Okoli uses the electric arc welder, this type of welding is the most economical in this part of the world especially when compared to the oxy-acetylene and the other types of contemporary welding methods; like TIG (tungsten inert Gas) and MIG (metal inert gas). However, the works of Okoli have been able to address the issue of desertification using his relief landscape sculptures as social commentary. The greatest enemies of the environment are humans, and it will also take the same human to save it from desertification. Poverty is one key element in the deforestation in any given African society, this is so because the average individual in any traditional African society needs to survive and take care of his family as well. So, the individual needs to hew the wood for some economic values, first, he needs to provide wood for fire, shelter, and monetary purposes. It is clear in Africa today that poverty leads to desertification. This paper has established that at the beginning of Okoli's landscape relief sculpture, between 1994-1998, he was creating sculptures devoid of human figures. As time went on he started metaphorically to introduce figures into the relief landscape sculpture probably unknown to him. Finally, on his own personal convictions he consciously started to include figures into his relief sculptures, which when taken a critically look at the works they are not necessarily sculpture of landscape but relief sculptures compared to when he concentrated on the aesthetics of the landscapes with particular attention to the Hausa Vernacular architecture.

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