

A Critique of Selected Sculptures of Some Zaria Art School Artists

Adeyemo, Peter Adewole
woleyemo@gmail.com

Date: 8-2-2017

Abstract

Critique is said to be an alteration of an archaic word that referred generally to criticism especially artistic work (Merriam-Webster Dictionary online). Thus, art criticism is usually based on the discussion or evaluation of visual arts. Hence, it has been noted that most art critics often criticize or appraise art works in the context of aesthetics or the theory of beauty. In this paper therefore, attempts are made at critiquing objectively sculptures of three selected artists in an exhibition namely: Dachin Gershon Paul, Idiong Emah Peter and Obande John Udeh. All of whom are graduates of Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A) in Sculpture, Fine Arts Department, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Key Words: Critic, critique, criticism, art criticism, exhibition.

Introduction

From a literary perspective, a critique can be used as a “noun” or as a “verb.” According to Hornby (2015), critique as a noun is a piece of written criticism of a set of ideas, a work of art, and critique as a verb is described as something to write or give your opinion of, or reaction to, a set of ideas, as a work of art. However professionally, critic is seen as the noun – person, critique as the verb – process, and criticism as the art – product. Generally, critique is said to be an oral or written discussion or evaluation strategy used to describe, analyze, and interpret works of art. To further strengthen the foregoing, Merriam-Webster Dictionary online avers that, critique itself dates to the early 18th century and originally referred to a piece of writing that criticized a literary or artistic work. Also it is corroborated that, art criticism as genre of writing, obtained its modern form in the 18th century and that, the earliest use of the term ‘art criticism’ was by the English painter and writer Jonathan Richardson the Elder, in his 1719 publication entitled *An Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism* (Venturi, 1936). In other word, it can be deduced that, it was Jonathan Richardson that coined the term *art criticism*. Hence, the words *critique*, *criticism* and even *review* are observed to overlap in meaning. More subtly, Kuspit (n.d) holds that, art criticism is often tied to theory; it is interpretive, involving the effort to understand a particular work of art from a theoretical perspective and to establish its significance in the history of art. This then can be interpreted possibly by regarding a piece of art for its beauty, order and form or even for its utilitarian qualities and the role it plays in communal and spiritual activities.

Oftentimes too, as Adeyemo and Duniya (2016) note, when one hears the words ‘art criticism,’ one may first imagine people standing in an art gallery furrowing their brows as they point out the flaws in a painting or sculpture or even drawing. Although the authors hold that, art criticism is far more than mere commenting on a work of art or pointing out errors, it is the act of analyzing and evaluating any type of art. In essence, it can be deduced from the foregoing that, art critique and or art criticism is about appraising objectively any kind of art work without prejudices. In this case, the critique and judgment will be premised on the merits and faults of the artistic work on display putting certain evaluative criteria into consideration.

It is not surprising then when Sporre in Adeyemo and Duniya (2016) assert that, criticism implies many things to many people and that, it does not necessarily mean passing or saying negative comments about a work of art. This paper stems from an exhibition which is compulsory and part of the M.F.A programme at the Zaria Art School. Also, the works are product of researches done on specific subject-matter. With this mindset, the critique thus looks at two works from each of three artists, with the view to critiquing them. The artists in this category are Dachin Gershon Paul, Idiong Emah Peter and Obande John Udeh. All of them graduates with Masters’ of Fine Arts (M.F.A) in sculpture, from the Fine Arts department, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria otherwise known as the Zaria Art School. The works to be critiqued were part of their final exhibition at the departmental gallery in October, 2015. Onoja *e tal* (2016) hold that, art exhibition is the showing of art pieces for public view, appreciation and critique. Thus, the view, appreciation and critique of such art pieces prompt this paper. The paper will therefore, proceed by “critique-cally” examining the works of the artists using formal analysis method to appraise their visual elements.

The Artists and a Critique of their works

Dachin Garshon Paul

Dachin Garshon Paul hails from Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State. He was born on 29th December, 1985 in Gombe State, Nigeria. He had both his primary and secondary education at LGEA Primary School and Government Secondary School in Pushit, Mangu LGA of Plateau State from where he proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University for his first degree between 2005 and 2010. He has about four works on the exhibition stand to his credit but two will be discussed, and his main medium of expression is charcoal. The two works are rendered in a representational manner. The first to be critiqued in this section is one the writer titles “Horse-Head” (plate I) because the title is unknown.

Horse-Head



Plate I Artist: Dachin Gershon Paul, Title: Unknown, Height: 55cm, Medium: Charcoal Powder mixed with Vinyl tile adhesive, Year: 2013

The sculptural piece here shows a horse-head only, mounted on a small iron pedestal. This head depicts, virtually, all the natural traits that characterize a life horse head. The mane, behind the thick and muscled neck, is shown with coarse and bold lines, with some simple lines that portray veins on the head. The mouth is slightly opened in a manner that suggests the horse is gasping for breath, perhaps, after a race, with its nose widely opened to breath in more air, in a rapid manner.

The sculptural piece however, shows a little contrast of light and darkness to reflect the form, though it is purely rendered in a charcoal - absolutely black. The piece is well proportioned and maintains a good balance considering the size and weight of the work on the little pedestal.

Accusation

The second one is titled “*Accusation*” (plate II). The sculpture shows a man, who appears warlike and militant, on a fast-running horse, as if is in a tough war or a battle ground, chasing enemies. The rider holds firmly to the rope that he (the rider) uses to control the speed of the horse with his right hand and uses the other to stretch out, pointing to a certain direction (as if to a target). This expression really speaks its title as the rider and is rendered boldly making an accusation gesture towards an imaginary accused.



**Plate II, Artist: Dachin Gershon Paul, Title: Accusation, Height: 42cm, Medium: Charcoal
Year: 2014**

However, the technical proficiency displayed by the artist, in arranging varying sizes of charcoal pieces to execute this work, is in the opinion of this paper exceptionally splendid and highly artistic. The careful arrangement of the elements of design in the work shows the artist’s understanding of the principles of art. The artist created a rough-drapery as textural effect on the dress of the rider, which

looks like strong body-fitted bracelets and the body of the horse with an uneven arrangement of charcoal pieces, put together, using adhesives, to make up the whole work. Also, the delicate and meticulous suspension of the entire work on a broken conical pedestal gives the work a firm balance, and this unequivocally displays a perfect grip of the principle of design.

Idiong Emah Peter

The second artist is Idiong Emah Peter who comes from Ikot Ekpene Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. He was born on 6th August, 1969 at Ikot Ekpene. He attended Abiakpo Group School, Ikot Ekpene, Methodist Secondary School, Ntonpang all in Akwa Ibom State, Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos State and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State between 1976 to 1981, 1981 to 1986, 1997 to 1999 and 2011 to 2012 respectively. This critique centers also on two of his works, based on *Suya* explorations as subject matter, focusing on different types of *suya* meats. The medium of expression is mixed: a combination of steel rods, bamboo and wood.

The Struggle of Life

This piece is titled "*The Struggle of Life*." It is in a centrifugal arrangement suggesting what is known as *abodi*, among the Yoruba, *tumbi* in Hausa and *afonu* in Ibo (plate V). There are about eleven sticks of *suya* meat on a relatively flat pedestal, a reminiscence of typical *suya* stand composition, commonly found among the Hausa in the northern part of the country. More so, one could seemingly see how the artist cleverly arranges the tiny steel rods together with bamboo cut-offs to give dynamic feelings and geometric posture of true *suya* meat on sticks to the work. The creative ingenuity also, is strikingly displayed, especially in the way the artist arranges the tilted heavy load of meat at the top with the dramatic twisting and slanting of the sticks and yet a balance is sustained. The irregular and diagonal arrangement of the elements also portrays a sense of unpredictability and this appears to conform to the title of the work, as some of the rods appear to be struggling to stand straight, while others appear falling down.



**Plate III, Artist: Idiong Emah Peter, Title: The Struggle of Life, Size: 65cm x 80cm x 60cm
Medium: Bamboo, mild steel, wood, Year: 2014**

Suya I (Deception)

The piece is portrayed with variety of organic and geometric shapes and sizes to suggest assorted parts of cow/goat as *suya* meat (plate IV). These various parts of supposed meat are put on just four tiny steel rods, as sticks or skewers, firmly welded on a flat metal plate, which is then affixed on a wooden pedestal. Undoubtedly, these supposed meats that are made out of pieces of bamboo wood, on the sticks, are subtly burnt, making them appear just like real smoked or roasted *suya* meats.



**Plate IV, Artist: Idiong Emah Peter, Title: Suya I (Deception), Size: 58cm x 31cm x 23cm
Medium: Bamboo and mild steel, Year: 2014**

In addition, the textural surfaces of these pieces of meat are unevenly rough and smooth with asymmetrical sizes. The meats are vibrantly contrasted and saturated with earthly dark brown colour, and again this is typical reminiscences of genuine smoked or roasted meat of *suya*. Also, the demonstrated ingenuity on the work and the use of elements of designs reveal that the artist

understands the principle of balance. By and large, the central theme (which is *suya* explorations) of these works are, without doubt, conforms to the visual expressions of the artist, and also fits the title (deception) in that it looks like *suya* meat to the eyes but is really not.

Obande John Udeh

The third artist, Obande John Udeh came from Ado Local Government Area of Benue State. He was born on 2nd March, 1983 in Bauchi State. He attended Government College Makurdi, Special Science Senior Secondary School, Mud, Benue State Polytechnic, Ugbokolo, all in Benue State and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State between 1992 to 1995, 1995 to 1998, 1988 to 2000 and 2002 to 2005 respectively. His works focus on the exploration of play sculptures that are inspired by anthill formations with terra cotta as its medium. The artist has four works on the exhibition stand that are all bearing the organic form of an anthill. However, only two will be appraised in plates V and VI titled *Play Cave* and *Play Hut* respectively.

Play Cave

Looking at plate V critically, one could see structure that is ant-hilly in shape, but with unusual stair-cases as adjunct, by the side, leading to another slippery slope downward. Beneath and beside, to the right, are hollowed spaces, with rough textural effect. This uncommon trait of stair-case is the artist's conception, to make it look like play house. This reminds one of such structures in our kindergarten schools today, where children have their fun/play during their break-time.



**Plate V, Artist: Obande John Udeh, Title: Play Cave, Size: 35cm x 27cm x 30cm
Medium: Terra cotta, Year: 2014**



**Plate VI, Artist: Obande John Udeh, Title: Play Hut, Size: 32cm x 27cm x 32cm
Medium: Terra cotta, Year: 2014**

Play Hut

This piece is not much different from the plate V in the sense that it is also ant-hilly in form, with adjunct in curved stair cases that leads to another supposed slippery slope downward around the work. However, the form in plate VI, if critically examined, is more ant-hilly than the one in plate V, putting into consideration its cone-like top shape. The textural effect is relatively rough with seemingly bold lines, to create squarely relief-designs all over the form, which again ostensibly differentiates it from the plate VI. The wide and hollowed space beneath the work is suggestive of a primitive dwelling and the work, from its appearance, conforms to the title.

Conclusion

Criticism is all about looking at art works objectively, putting into consideration all pertinent characteristic features and evaluative criteria, in order to give correct and unbiased evaluation and judgment of any kind of art. To strengthen the foregoing, Allen (2015) avers that, we look at a work of art, examine it from a chosen perspective, and draw conclusions about the artist, his or her work, the time period it was created... The writer thus is of the opinion that, the artists seem to have purposely experimented and explored different media, styles and approaches to create unique and captivating sculptures whose central themes or subject-matters are quite research probing and

fascinating, considering the visual elements and how they are used to conform to the principles of design. Duniya (2013) posits that, artists all over the world have experimented with all kinds of materials, for their expressions. The author further notes that, the creative impulse that constantly pushes artists into exploring other means of doing art, has led them to finding new ways of even using the traditionally known art materials. And proofs of these submissions, if closely observed, are quite evident in all the exhibits.

References

- Adeyemo, P.A. and Duniya, G.G. (2016). An Analysis of Lasisi Lamidi's Metal Sculptures. In *International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature and Arts Studies*. 4(2): 1.
- Allen, D. (2015). Art Appreciation, Art Criticism, and the IB Diploma and Common Core. Retrieved on 2 February, 2017 from http://www.gallerydplus.com/?page_id=112.
- Duniya, G.G. (2013). Waste as Medium of Art Expression: A Prognosis of Lasisi Lamidi's Art. A Paper presented to the National Conference organised by the Society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A), Anambra State Chapter at the Auditorium, Nnamdi Azikwe University, Akwa.
- Hornby, A.S. (2015). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. (New 8th Ed.) New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kuspit, D.B. (n.d.). Art Criticism. Retrieved on 5 January, 2017 from <http://www.britannica.com/topic/art-criticism>
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary online. Critique. Retrieved on 5 January, 2017 from <https://www.merriam-Webster.com/dictionary/critique>
- Onoja, J.E., Adeyemo, P.A. and Lawal, L.A. (2016). Art Staff Exhibition 2016: A Review. In *International Journal of Innovative Language, Literature and Arts Studies*. 4(1): 41.
- Venturi, L. (1936). *A History of Art Criticism*. Retrieved on 2 February, 2017 from https://catalogue.pearsoned.co.uk/assets/hip/gb/hip_gb_pearsonhighered/samplechapter/0205835945.pdf