

Abstract

This paper documents the style, technique and contribution of Adiwu Talatu Onkala to the growth of contemporary Nigerian art. In the course of doing that, the paper looks into Talatu's personality, artistic background, motivational factors and the kind of artworks she does vis-à-vis the environmental influence on her art.

Keywords: Art, Style, Contemporary

Introduction

The emergence of contemporary Nigerian art has given artists the freedom to express themselves using different media and improvised materials of their choice. However, with the advent of contemporary art, art has moved to a higher level and this has led to the growth and development of art as a whole. Ubani (2014) states that, the pioneer artists of contemporary period, especially Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) who championed the inclusion of art in the Nigerian school curriculum in the early 1920s, Akinola Lasekan (1916 -1972) whose incisive cartoons then were used as propaganda tool for political independence, and J.D. Akeredolu (1915- 1983) who invented thorn carving in Nigeria to mention but a few, inspired the younger generation of artists to explore along the lines of general trends or international style in the art rendition.

It would interest one to note that, apart from the three pioneering male visual artists mentioned, there are also female visual artists who have individually contributed positively in the development of contemporary art in Nigeria. For instance, Clara Ugbodaga-Ngu who contributed in training a number of contemporary Nigeria artists is an illustration of such development. Afi Constance Ekong is another artist who contributed in various ways to promote art in Nigeria. According to Ubugadu (2010), Afi established a bronze gallery in 1959 which is presumed to be the first of its kind in Nigeria. In view of this, therefore, female artists also contributed greatly in inspiring this generation in art. Akande in Nor (2014) reports that, Nigerian women have played major roles in almost every facet of national development, be it in the arts and culture, politics, science and technology, just as they have ventured into areas hitherto dominated by men. According to Yohanna in Muhammad (2006), contemporary Nigeria art which appeared as a new art form at the beginning of the twentieth century A.D had to decide on the proper function of women in its own system of values and technical structure. The authors stressed further that, many women artist have therefore, made immense contributions in the development of contemporary Nigerian art, particularly in painting, sculpture, ceramics, textile, graphic, weaving to mention but a few.

Other female artists that emerged after the first pioneers are Theresa Luke-Akinwale, Collete Omagban, and Vivien Gina Ologbosere amongst others. Female artists who emerged at the same time, but did not receive formal training in visual arts include Ladi Kwali, a traditional potter who later acquired formal training in Abuja-Jos pottery center. She was honored with a Doctorate Degree in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1977. Sabina Jenti, Felicia Adepelu who was trained by her father, she creates designs with beads and she is also a sculptor, Nike Okundaye a textile designer, among other artists.

According to Muhammad (2006), the awareness created by the earlier female artists in visual arts, and also with the emergence of art schools, and workshop centers in Nigeria had groomed more women in the art scene, especially from 1970-1980. Artists who emerged in this period include Nkiru Nzegwu, Princess Elizabeth Olowu, Kaego Uche Okeke. The authors maintain that "between 1980 and 1990 another set of female artists emerge, this includes Ndidi Dike, Lara- Ige Jacks, Mairo Pate, Bridget Nwanze, a painter and art historian, Binta Sani Bala, Rose Osuji to mention but a few. Muhammad (2006) concludes that, these artists have the abilities, ideas, and had adopted different styles and techniques, which they have transferred into impressionable artworks of international standard. Okoli (2007) states that the works now produced by contemporary female artists serve the same historical and aesthetic purposes and sometimes even surpass that of their male counterparts in the documentation of socio-cultural, political, and religious development in contemporary Nigeria and

the world at large. Female artists who are practicing will continue seasoning and introducing new genres, styles and other forms of innovation to the contemporary Nigerian art scene.

The involvement of Nigerian women in the development of contemporary Nigerian visual arts is progressing and increasing every day. They are now involved actively in every aspect of visual arts using different styles, and techniques to execute their artworks. Adiwu Talatu Onkala is no exception in this regard. The main problem here is that, the writers are not aware of anybody who has ventured into this kind of style which Adiwu explored, particularly at Zaria Art School. The artist's distinctive manner of expression in painting differs quite significantly from the artworks which were previously executed. The cob-web inspired painting style is unique in Adiwu's visual expression. In view of this, this paper brings to limelight, Adiwu's artistic disposition, motivational factor, and educational upbringing. The paper also purposively selected and analyzed only five of Adiwu's canvas painting composition.

Educational upbringing of Adiwu Talatu Onkala

Adiwu Talatu Onkala was born on the 7th December, 1982 in Kwajjaffa, Borno State, Nigeria. She is an indigene of Plateau State, Local Government Area of Bassa. She attended Girls High School, Gindiri, in Plateau state from 1994 to 2001. She then proceeded to Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria to study Fine Arts, where she specialized in Painting and graduated with a B.A (Hons) in 2006. She enrolled for her Masters in Fine Arts (MFA) in 2008/2009 and concluded in 2011 with a Masters of Fine Arts (M.F.A) in Painting. Adiwu has also obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in Education, Kaduna in 2012. She taught visual arts at Zaria Academy, Shika a private boarding school. The artist also earned a Doctoral degree (PhD) in Painting from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 2016.

She has participated in several exhibitions and workshops organized by students and staff at the department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. She is also participated in African Regional Summit and Exhibition on Visual Arts (ARESUA 2009). "Shades of Unity: Women make it Happen", An Exhibition of Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FAAN), Abuja Nigeria, 2014. Scapes and Forms workshop Zaria, "Nigeria/Roots Contemporary Artists from Nigeria" Imago Mundi Luciano Benetton collection Workshop and Exhibition, Lagos Nigeria (IMAGOMUNDI 2014). She believes in the simplicity of form in relation to space using the illusionistic continuity of line to reduce any form to its barest minimum. She also strongly believes that colours are not everything as one can express self in black and white. Adiwu (2014) states that, drawing conveys my emotions, thought and feelings better; because there is a kind of direct contact between (me) and the surface. Thus communication is direct and more effective.

Motivational Factor

Adiwu's interest in art began in 1998 in her JSS III, and she started to paint between her 200 and 300 levels. She acknowledges the influence of Kefas Danjuma who taught painting and drawing at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. His influence on her artistic disposition went beyond the classroom contact but filled with intense mentoring that made her to learn faster than she had thought. He encouraged her to study the technique and style of other artists around the world so as to have a better understanding of painting; which subsequently aided her own style. She was also made to draw and paint on a variety of topics in various sizes of paper and canvas using a wide variety of media like mixed media, and mural.

In doing so, subsequently, Adiwu's works are centered on abstraction of natural elements she sees in her immediate environment. She reveals what she is constantly and closely pursuing by the concepts and practices of neoplasism. She appears to be concerned with the state of the environment as evidenced by her choice of subject matter which includes eroded landscapes, spiders, trees, butterflies, old architecture and aquatic animals as well as flowers and vegetation. Adiwu favours two dimensional platforms for her, and lines in her executions which she refers to as the 'most significant tool of erudition'. This statement rings true in her works which are laden with heavy linear brush applications.

Talatu maintained abstraction as her main style of expression. She has always believed abstraction is the crux of art and that it is what separates Fine Arts and other areas of specialization, while she adopts mixed-media as her technique, which she considered her drive towards experimentation with the aim of the possibility of deriving a peculiar style of expression that can be attributed to her alone. Finally she advises upcoming artists to spend time thinking deep to give birth new ideas that will aids their artistic career.

Discussion and Analysis of Five Selected Painting Compositions



Plate I: Title: the meeting. Artist: Adiwu Talatu Onkala. Medium: Oil on canvas. Year: 2014. Size: 188.92 x 121.88cm. Source: ArtistCollection.

The painting presented in Plate I titled *The Meeting* is executed on black background where the artist painted about fourteen presumed elongated human figures in abstract form rendered with red, blue, yellow ochre, white, yellow, green, orange, grey, and purple colours. The colour application depicting the elongated figures at the lower half of the canvas appears boldly, while the figures at the top are rendered to fade into the background. The figures suggest that there is a growth process that leads to those at the top growing out of the scene for a new set of people or younger generation to take over. Similarly, the painting composition suggests a cluster of people who converged in a *tete-a-tete* as in the way and manner the politicians do during a gathering or campaign. It is important to note that her works tend to allow for a variety of interpretation that is common with abstract art in particular. It is probably the artist derived the rendition of her elongated figures from the works of renowned contemporary Nigeria sculptor, Ben Enwouwu's elongated sculptures.



Plate II: Title: spirit II. Artist: Adiwu Talatu Onkala. Medium: Acrylic and oil on Canvas. Year 2013. Size: 121.99 x 121.99cm. Source: Artist's collection

Spirit II shown in Plate II, shows abstracted figures which are suggestive of women in curvilinear postures. The artist makes use of the quality of line, shape, proportion and colour to convey a direct meaning of her personal visual thought. The canvas is covered in vertical yet irregular shapes that flow downward. Selected part of the painted canvas has coloured lines drawn on top. The lines are spindly, curvy, and wiry in nature; while in some cases the lines further accentuate the shapes. She implies that spirits are abstract beings that operate in an unfamiliar way such that ordinary man cannot deduce, let alone understand their activities. This study however, holds that the shapes look like young girls admiring their bodies as it grows biologically, they also day-dream of how they might look like when they become fully grown women.

In another point of view, the ceremonial aspect in most ethnic groups in Nigeria and Africa at large, like festival, initiation and so on are always accompanied with dances, usually done by young girls or boys. Therefore, the painting here projects female dancers in rhythmic movement. Flowing lines on the picture frame forms the female shape and the application of variety of colours all over the picture suggest their attire. The black surface on the picture could be the mystical aspect of the dance that can only be understood by the initiator (s) of ceremony and the dance.



Plate III: Title: Tree. Artist: Adiwu Talatu Onkala Medium: Acrylic on Canvas. Year: 2014. Size: 182.88 x 121.99cm. Source: Artist collection

Plate III is titled *Tree*, the artist represents a cluster of silk that is in form of a tree. The tree is represented in a manner that suggests a dry tree, with several intertwining branches all rendered in white acrylic pigment as a border. The artist made a deliberate attempt in leaving spaces in between the dry branches filled in with amoebic-life and organic shapes in red, yellow, blue, brown and green hues.

All other areas are left blank for the black background to show through. The branches form shapes that look like birds in their shelter, the painting further reveals the relationship between the birds and the trees. Similarly, it reveals the artist's new exploration of cob-web whose idea is also gotten from the display of the peacock's colourful feather.



Plate IV: Title: Collapse, Artist: Adiwu Talatu Onkala. Medium: Oil and sooth on canvas. Year: 2012. Size: 192.88 x 121.88cm. Source: Artist collection

Collapse is the title of the painting shown in Plate IV. Here the artist portrays a cluster of vertical planes in diagonal formation. She produced this work through an observation of shapes and planes. The painting displays linear planes horizontally lying side by side, though they vary in size, but each has been painted with bright shade of oil colour. The surface of the picture plane has been segmented into unequal yet similar shapes: The colours have been duplicated while the use of line is not too pronounced.

Towards the right part of the picture frame appears a silhouette of a presumed human figure in brown colours. Just beneath it are also same forms which are indicative of human figures. It will not be out of place to state here that, the unequal horizontal shapes represents the modern day skyscrapers that abound in Nigeria, particularly in Abuja and Lagos. Having been aware of the state of economy in Nigeria, the painting reveals the state in which Nigeria is at the moment. The falling shapes suggest the low rate of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country while the black spots and lines at the lower part of the canvas represent the resultant effect of the negative situation reflecting on the people. This might also have been inspired by the increasing number of collapsed buildings in Nigeria.



Plate V: Title: sun and moon. Artist: Adiwu Talatu Onkala. Medium: Oil and acrylic on canvas. Year: 2012. Size: 121.99 x 121.99cm. Source: Artist collection.

The painting titled *Sun and Moon* in Plate V suggests two objects of interest, both of which are made to assume their individual significance. Each shape is further outlined using thick black pigment. At intervals, beginning from the top left corner of the canvas, the middle section and the lower left, there is a network of lines akin to fishing net or plaiting thread. Irradiation is from the main light source that is the yellow at the upper section of the picture frame. It reflects rays across the entire painting, illuminating the impressive and almost 'dazzling' network of black lines. There are smaller circular shapes at the top and lower part of the canvas, simultaneously painted with yellow and grey lines to suggest night and day, the positive and negative, masculinity and femininity, all which serve to suggest the relationship between man and woman.

The composition projects the relationship between humans and nature, in the sense that the bluish background represents the sky, yellow pigment at the upper left section of the canvas suggests the

sunset, the large yellow shape at the upper part of the canvas suggest the sunrise while the dazzling black lines inform of a net, and suggest human activity in a means to utilize the daylight and benefit from its advantages. The lower shape represent the sunset while the round shape painted with white suggests the moon for source of light to mankind at night.

Conclusion

In concluding this paper, it was discovered that Adiwu Talatu Onkala has been practicing art for over eighteen years now. In spite of this, Talatu's artworks have not been given adequate publicity. In fact, her works are seldom advertised in newspapers, magazines or journals. The excellence of her art works in experiments, dynamism in style and design attest to the liberty and guidance given to her while studying art. This in itself allows Talatu to comment expressively as a commentator of environmental activities in her artworks. The paper sums it up by borrowing from Egonma in Duniya (2009) who states the stylistic tendency demonstrated on an artwork is determined largely by environment in which it is created. The ideology which rules an artist, the subject matter being addressed, the media, techniques and tools of art production which depend on training, are combined mold which give character on the artwork. On the whole, it is hoped that this paper will serve as a useful guide and valuable reference material for future scholars in the study and documentation of Talatu's art works which this paper has not touched or exposed.

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