

A NEW STANCE FOR SHADOW IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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Abstract

The subject matter of art has remained constant within the range of nature and inanimate forms. Even though artist's perceptions and gestures have evolved over time, subject matter shows no propensity for change. What sets the artist of this age apart from the great masters of yester years lies in the process of making art. On this premise the authors are of the view that the artist's worth in this generation is proportionate to advancement in techniques and styles. In addition to form and content, what makes art important today is a product of technology, techniques and style. This paper therefore examines the use of shadow as both a technique and inspiration in the practice of "shadow art" and its historical perspectives across cultures.

Key Words: Shadow, Stance, Contemporary Art, Cultures

Introduction

The works of Michelangelo, Rodin, Da Vinci and the likes continue to blow the minds of their audience even till date. The attraction is usually centered on the finished works of art which are forms rendered in high proficiency. Only a few viewers bother to ponder on the artist in the process of making such art. Working in crude times where almost everything had to be done manually, the statues of David (Michelangelo), Thinker (Rodin) and Da Vinci's The Last Supper respectively provide reason to refer to these men as geniuses. Their works stand today as a yard stick for comparison with contemporary art. For this reason, if an artist in our time would have the desired attention from today's audience, the artist must do so by trying out new materials and methods or techniques of doing art since they provide the opportunity for new art. It is obvious that the subject of art has barely changed, it remains within a range of subject matter to include man, animals, vegetation, land forms and all the abstract or inanimate forms around us. Techniques have however evolved and improved to embrace technological advancements. The present technological era provides that the greatest innovations in art today may not necessarily indicate new form but the same old forms made novel and presented in a contemporary fashion. Contemporary music is accompanied by contemporary dance, aided by advanced technology and in similar manner, art and technology have been synergized to birth art that is unusual and unfamiliar; the likes of Tamara Kvesitadze's "Ali and Nino." (2007) (a composition of a male and female figure powered to mechanically fuse into themselves in the passing of time).



Figure i: "Ali and Nino" (2007), Batumi, Georgia, Courtesy: anasty44

Understanding Shadow

The new “shadow art” appears to arouse similar interest as an unfamiliar form of art with its most important ingredient being shadow. In explaining the connection between humans and their shadows, Westcott B. (2012) states that, “by the way your shadow follows you everywhere” this indicates that shadow is a constant companion that requires no invitation. The appearance of shadow is bound to time so the shadow of an object in a static position is likely to change continuously as time goes by. Though shadow constantly accompanies the subject or object, its presence is sometimes subliminal; it takes some amount of consciousness to detect its presence in such cases. Our different cultural backgrounds, knowledge, personal temperament and intuition, are likely to affect the way we perceive shadows. Sorenson (2008) is of the opinion that children believe that shadow persists in the dark and are made up of smoky substances. True to their judgment shadow is dark and without mass, it is true yet intangible and can be perceived by sight and not by touch, hence their reaction to shadow is that of fear. Their fear for the dark is not unusual because man is naturally drawn to light; light reveals things hidden in the dark. Where there is light, forms are identifiable by sight, for children it becomes particularly difficult to work their imagination in the dark to produce forms and that is why the dark produces unfriendly images in their minds.

It is amazing that though shadow is constantly with man, it may not produce a direct replica of man or the object it accompanies except if light is controlled to achieve that and this is the major foot hold of “shadow art”. It manipulates contours of images under controlled light to achieve the desired result. This may not be too easy because shadow could be distorted and easily adaptable to sudden changes in the direction or source of light. The saying goes that “one is a shadow of himself” symbolizing the superiority of the person over his shadow. “An interesting diversion in viewing one’s self is to look at one’s shadow” as opined by Westcott, (2012). This also indicates that shadow has relevance as an iconic symbol or a metaphor. Though shadows occur naturally, it remains a mystery except one takes time to understand how they are created. Shadows are born out of an interaction between light and an object (man inclusive). Like it is with colours, so it is with shadows, without light there is no shadow. Light is therefore an interesting feature in the appreciation of shadow. In explaining this process, Michell (1999) observes that, a cast shadow is one that an object throws on another surface as the former stands in the path of light. Shadow simply follows form and that is why if for any reason the form has to move, the shadow is quick to adjust in response. It really cannot exist without the form; shadow is indefinite, inconsistent and transient.

Shadow and light are two opposites which occur concurrently therefore, it literarily connotes the opposites of life and death or good and bad. While light exposes, shadow which is dark conceals and creates mystery. Different people have diverse interpretation to the subject of shadow. According to Morris (2013) the early Egyptians believed in nine parts of the one soul with “khaibut” as the shadow of a body. The Roman word for shadow was umbra, also meaning ‘the shade’ or the ghost of an individual who went to a place called the land of shades (Ancient lore concerning shadow people, 2009). In Hausa language the word equivalent for shadow “inuwa” also means shade. All these cultural interpretations indicate the relevance of shadow in understanding the human being and how it functions, but the darkness attached to it has only helped in strengthening mysticism.

The use of Shadow in art has been in existence long before now only to be reawakened with new savoury visual idiom in this age. The categorization of “shadow art” can be ascribed to Dethal (2017) who documented a group of shadow artworks as “shadow art”. His document included a list of artists to include Kumi Yamashita, Tim Noble and Sue Webster in addition to other notable shadow artists. The earliest relevance of shadow in art is its relevance in the production of silhouetted images. Muney (2014) enthuse that, such images are two dimensional and represented in one solid tone. Dethal (2017) states that “According to an ancient Roman author, Pliny the Elder, the very art of painting originates from trailing the edge of shadow, as a maid of Corinth traced her lover’s shadow on a wall” that art refers to silhouette. Furthermore, Muney (2014) is of the opinion that silhouettes emerged before the conventional style of painting where varying colour hues were applied. Silhouette (profile) portraiture was a popular way of recreating an image of oneself or loved even before the invention and common use of

photography in the mid 1800's. However, the first thorough analysis of shadows had to wait until 1490 when Leonardo Da Vinci described how artists could use light and shade to evince perceptions of three-dimensional relief in paintings. (Mamassian, Knill and Kersten, 1998)

Shadow is dark and is not necessarily a form, its therefore significance has been misconstrued in several cultures. It is associated with evil and other mystic practices. The modern artist has provided a positive look at shadow which is a build up from the early days of shadowgraphy. Shadowgraphy as practiced beyond the shores of Africa, is a synchronized and coherent art of storytelling; being a performative art supported with visuals created with the hands against a background on which the image is cast. The art of Shadowgraphy or ombromanie can also be called "cinema in silhouette". Its Performers are called shadowgraphist or shadowgraphy", it is similar to puppetry.



Figure ii: An illustration of images formed in shadowgraphy

Debating Shadow against form

It is evident that the use of shadow in art has resulted in appreciable artworks that cause one to ponder on the role of shadow as either a means to an end or an end itself or whether in art parlance it is acceptable to refer to shadow as form. Rather than use shadow to produce art, what has been obtainable over the years was to feature shadows within a picture frame to form part of a composition. Form as we know it is mostly associated with animate objects while shape is ascribed to inanimate object. However, the shadow of a human form is hard to describe. Shadow is by nature flexible, inconsistent and ever-changing. Its presence in a given piece of art provides concrete definition to the entire setting in a picture frame; the objects around, the dimensions of the surrounding, what doors or windows let light in. In addition, shadow defines contours, negative and positive spaces etcetera. In many cases where the subject of interest is not the shadow, artists unconsciously depict it last in their drawings; this act does well to highlight the supremacy of the form over its shadow.

The concentration on subject matter causes us to see very little about shadow. We fail to see that shadow can stand alone in expressing complete sense as a primary object or a motif in art; it bears a defined shape bordered by lines yet one could walk through it or step on it. It has tones of colours ranging from the darkest to the lightest since it could be manipulated to bear colour consequent on the presence of light. All these attributes to mention a few make it a subject of interest for the artist. It is obvious that shadow cannot occupy space since it has no mass yet its presence is indispensable hence it has the capacity to impose some sense of curiosity on the artist. Out of a position of such inquisitiveness the contemporary artists may choose to study shadow over its form.

Creativity stands out as an important tool in the new approach to shadow art. Where creativity is involved it becomes cumbersome to adhere to the principles of a particular practice. Divergent thinking gives us the power to exercise some leverage. Creativity which is either divergent or convergent takes a lead role in artistic enquiry, but in creating shadow art the divergent approach happens to be manifest because it is an experimental process. Kneller (1971) in Beckley (2016) states that, "divergent thinking generally resists the accepted ways of doing things and so seeks alternative". It is the duty of the artist to look at shadow in an entirely

different way. Again Goodman (2014) in reference to divergent thinking says “some people call this “thinking outside the box” making reference to the box as rules.

Art as a field of study is built on the understanding of basic principle such as balance, Harmony, Perspective, Dominance and so on. The mastery of these principles is what makes an artist great. About shadow, these principles do not have a bearing in creating the shadow but perhaps in the final image. The ability to create shadow by manipulating and controlling light is very important. In respect to shadow, when an artist shifts focus from the object and concentrates on its shadow it is thinking “outside the box”, equal to divergent thinking which does not make their art of less importance but of more value as a renewed subject matter.

By reason of intuition the artist can claim freedom to do as he or she pleases; esteem the shadow over the subject. There are great masters of art whose works attest to the fact that it is possible to make a masterpiece by simply ignoring the rules, the likes of Picasso, going contrary to the rules of proportion. (This is not to say that Art is a loose end). A second look at realism resulted in abstraction and gave birth to the cubist movement which holds that the artist should disregard proportion, but if proportion is important, why did Picasso’s works fetch him so much recognition? This is just to exemplify what thinking outside the box could result to. The contemporary age is one that welcomes changes. The divergent approach in contemporary art practice has helped in blurring the dividing line between two and three dimensional art. We would agree that shadows are two- dimensional and are evidence of the tactile nature of three-dimensionality, However, there is nothing solid about them, they simply “... define solid objects by giving them volume and weight, and create relationships between objects” (McGinnis, 2007).

Shadow in art evolved along the lines from silhouette to photography and today shadow art which is a more advanced invention benefiting from the science of lighting and the artistic skill of form rendition. An artist going into this area should be knowledgeable in light source and its wave lengths. Da Vinci as a fore runner in the shadow study stated that the artist “...when representing objects above the eye and on one side--if you wish them to look detached from the wall--show, between the shadow on the object and the shadow it casts, a middle light, so that the body will appear to stand away from the wall” (Da Vinci, 1970) But with today’s shadow art this may seem irrelevant. Shadow art has evolved to give new perspectives in art practice; its possibilities are endless only a few are enumerated as follows.

Rather than use shadow to produce art, what was obtainable over the years was to feature shadows within a picture frame as a part of a composition. In drawing a relationship between shadow and three-dimensionality the artists would rather refer to the underlying consequences of shadow. The assumed presence of a human figure is expressed in the work titled “the invisible king”. Where the subject of interest is not the image represented but the one talked about as suggested in its title.



Figure ii: The Invisible King, Medium: Fibre glass, Location: Sculpture Garden, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

The king’s attendant walks behind the king, fanning him with a hand fan but as viewers we never behold the king. The empty space before the attendant is quickly occupied in the viewer’s mind with a shadow-like image of what the king should be. Here the uncertainties of shadow

come to bear; different viewers would have diverse imaginations of what the king looks like. It is overtly easier to understand shadow in two dimensions, not three. For the sculptor shadow is not a "form" so it is also with the painter so it creates a difficult situation for the artist. Where the artist decides to study the shadow rather than its form it indicates some philosophical perspectives to the subject portrayed in the art piece and that is one way to look at shadow essence.

In an orientation lecture for 100 level students at the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 2004, Dr M.A. Jaji described three dimensional arts (sculpture) as the only branch of visual art that produced objects that could cast shadow and this was the easiest way of differentiating sculpture from painting. But that was just to introduce the students to three dimensional arts. Today three dimensional arts can be expressed in so many different forms which would still necessitate the use of the same basic elements; form, lines, shape, and texture, colour and so on. The understanding of form however, is a distinguishing factor between both and forms a good basis for the kind of comparison the authors hope to achieve. However, for shadow it is of less importance. This is so because; shadow is more or less an illusionary substance and can be used in creating illusionary situations too.

O'Toole (1994) holds that "It is difficult to describe in words the meaning of forms because it is precisely this emotion which is conveyed by sculpture alone." "Form" is what distinguishes two-dimensionality from three. The general or lay definition of forms refers to "objects having three-dimensions. Like shapes they have both length and width but forms also have depth". The idea of form is expressed differently in Media (Television) where it is perceived as the highest level of T.V reality. It is what is referred to as Stereoscopy which is defined as any technique that creates the illusion of depth of three-dimensionality in an image (Minoli, 2000). It attempts to make us feel the forms as if the action was right in front of us. It is merely an illusion because it happens through the screen. Three-dimensionality in TV is merely an illusion but perhaps it has got the essence of three-dimensionality. Though a striking difference may be hard to suggest, both two and three dimensional works of art are likely to project the essence of shadow in two dissimilar ways.

When ideas are perceived as illusionary there is inference on the essence of the object represented. Perhaps there is a different definition to the word form; form is responsible for the creation of shadow. Air cannot cast shadow because it is formless. The painter is able to represent smoke, water, air in his artwork but not so the sculptor. Form for the two-dimensional artist is what he/she creates. It is an illusion therefore it is an essence. Since it is unthinkable for the sculptor to represent water and smoke in three dimensions then these too exist in their essences to the sculptor. What land artists like Jean and Paul do is simply to recreate these elements in their places of existence (still bringing to fore the essence of water, sand, rocks etcetera).

Also in a subtle manner, Sculptors have made allusion to shadow in their works as expressed in fig (ii) "The invisible king". The image tries to draw our attention to the importance of shadow as a spirit, ghost or an essence in this work titled "The Invisible king".

Two things are significant about this perspective; one is two-dimensionality and the other, which is its interpretation in an African context. When ideas are perceived as illusionary there is inference on the essence of the object represented.



**Figure IV: Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, (2010), Title: Exodus,
Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 120x120cm, (Source: Artist's collection)**

A doctoral thesis on shadows in Painting by Irokanulo (2014) is an example of such artistic exploration with philosophical backing. For him the shadows exist without the form though we have earlier pointed out that the shadow follows us everywhere we go. This work in figure: iv, titled 'Exodus' is created with frantic, thick and wide brushstrokes in a manner that belays the characteristics usually seen in a crowd of figures. But the artist presents a vivid message clearly indicated in shadows which have the ability to imitate life situations and are symbolic in telling the stories of our existence. The work shows a deliberate effort to put the extended figures outside the picture frame to serve as a connection between the individuals and where they stand outside the frame and their shadows which are cast onto the surface of the canvas assumed to be lying flat on the ground. We could assume that the figures were standing outside the picture frame, somewhere by the bottom right side. To convince his viewer of the exodus move, the migrants and their loaded heads have been included in the picture frame.

This artist has further strengthened the essentiality of shadow in telling the exodus story by symbolically placing them as central characters. Each character represents a member of the family on transit; the group consists of six figures either of different ages or showing differences in the distance they must have covered. There is also an indication of highlight to the shadows giving rise to further allusions of a key character among the exodus group. In place of dark images of shadows Irokanulo presents shadows out of a rich palette of a variety of hues and tones. This effort succeeded in drawing the attention of his viewer to a positive perception of the element of shadow, making them amiable against the existing negative perception held on shadow as a bearer of evil.

Shadow and Perspective



Figure v: "Shadow" Rook Floro (2011), Medium: black glue and wires

These alterations occur in the form of elongation or compression. Shadow manifests in dark tones. It is possible to manipulate shadow and achieve the right perspective. Shadows are as real as any other physical form, although they behave like ghosts. They are ephemeral; changing before our eyes should they then be subjected to the principles of art? Principles exist as constants, not so shadows. While considering the principle of perspective, it states that, objects closer to us appear larger than those afar and vice versa. Regarding colour, it states that objects that are closer to us are richer in colour than those at a distance. A little observation proves that objects may be close to us yet produce small shadow, while those afar, may produce large ones. One object may cast several shadows depending on how it receives light and the different shadows are likely to have varying colour intensity. Shadow always emphasizes the line of horizon where it falls. Shadow can be distorted just bearing a seeming resemblance to the form that produces it. Perspective observes eye-levels, line of horizon and vanishing points, these are probably the only ingredients applicable to shadow. Even shadows have vanishing points, but these may not correspond directly to the standard construction of vanishing points or horizon line. Shadows have their own vanishing points which are called light vanishing points or shadow vanishing points.

It may sound logical to think that light and its direction or wave length could be responsible for the size and shape of the shadow as well as its intensity. In some cases, shadow images appear slim and elongated, sometimes short, rounded and stout particularly when the light reflects almost directly on the object. What is key with shadows is observation. You have to do what astronomers do to create a good shadow art because light will produce different images at different points. The success of the shown in figure v was largely dependent on a cast shadow representing two elongated legs which connect the standing figure which responds in perspective to the seated figure behind it.

Shadow and Imagery



Figure vii: Kumi Yamashita, (2003), City View, Courtesy: kumiyamashita.com

This piece presented by Yamashita is a deceptive one because what is presented is not really what the artist wants you to see. What the artist presents is a display or arrangement of well-cut alphabets but it turns out to be the image of a girl standing in the corner. Repetition, though not uniform, has given rise to this form. Do shadows have colour, texture, shape? Again we have seen the artist's will power to give colour to shadows. The painter feels three-dimensionality in the shadow he sees. The sculptor observes shadow in creating his forms. For the painter it tells him the direction of light which matters very little to the sculptor. What does light and shade mean in the context of this work? It is equal to the existence of the work, without which the work would assume a different title. It is the evidence that an object has got mass, undulations or projections, negative or positive spaces. Shadows are the absence of light ... shadows are black, black seems to be the most opaque of colours, yet you see through the shadow... how can something be transparent black? Due to their transparency, they have tendency to absorb colours from the environment and possibly manifest them for the eyes to see.

This transparent black is the most essential ingredient that has served the existence of such a composition. The painter takes light and shade and juxtaposes them with colour. If shadow had colour it should be shades of grey. The painter takes advantage of his poetic license and places colour where you least expected it. Painters have depicted shadows in bright red, green, ideas that we may find unrealistic. The light defines the form but again is it form or shape? When the lights are out what is left behind is a different form. Ideally in the absence of light our expectation would be to see a female like form on the wall, but shadow plays the role which deludes us and takes a different form in the presence of light.

Shadow and Multiple Image Representation



Figure vii: Tim Noble and Sue Webster, (2009), Wild Mood Swings, Courtesy: thisismarvelous.com

Shadow provides the artist with the opportunity to display multiple images, first the image that casts the shadow and second is the shadow itself as illustrated above. This divergent style of presentation by the artist is intent on further depicting the opinion that what is seen naturally is not different from what is depicted in the shadow.

To achieve the needed shadow, the tangible form of two seated figures, male and female, had to be well articulated and furnished with all the details that differentiate the male from the female so that afterwards when light is flooded on it would produce a replica. However, to show that the seated forms were of less importance they were rendered to appear like a "shabby cluster" of some unidentified material. As soon as the proportion, shape and the postures of the figures were achieved the rest was left to light. It is a tragedy that the shadow which is a "shabby cluster" would have to be presented alongside its shadow, they both serve as an inseparable pair.

Conclusion

The physical presence of the shadow is reality however what the artist makes of the shadow is its essence which is the message behind the artist's expression. What makes a work shadow art is essentially the appearance of a subject matter of shadow, sometimes it is in the place of the artist to create the forms that reflect the shadow creating both shadow and its essence or relying on existing shadow which could be adapted for artistic purposes. Some artists express them in the form of performances. "Shadow art" is therefore, best understood in terms of what makes it which is shadow.

The new "shadow art" is strengthened by some level of mysticism involved in their creation. However, shadow art is really not a mystery, it is merely funded by the knowledge of light and how to control its lengths and direction. It involves a series of experiments until the desired form is achieved. We may never be able to project a generic name that satisfies this eccentric perspective to shadow, nonetheless for an artist it is sometimes rewarding to look at the orange peel instead of the orange itself, the cow dung or its milk instead of the cow, dark instead of light, knowing well that something about the essence or what makes it could matter at the end of the day.

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