

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN ART: AN ANALYSIS OF AVAV JOSHUA AONDONA'S PAINTERLY EXPLORATION OF KWAGH-HIR MASQUERADES

PROF. GUSHEM O. PHILIP

Department of Fine Arts,
Ahmadu Bello University Zaria,
Kaduna State,
Nigeria.
pogushem@gmail.com

AVAV JOSHUA AONDONA

Department of Visual and Creative Arts,
Federal University Lafia,
P.M.B 146, Lafia
Nasarawa State,
Nigeria.
joshuaavav@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper focuses on abstract paintings, with source of inspiration derived from the Tiv Kwagh-Hir masquerades. Kwagh-Hir denotes Tiv folklore which Hagher (2003) avers that it originally started as a result of a revolt cult in the early 1950s. The Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades are presented as sculptures. The authors observe that, contemporary art practices involve the use of senses, minds and bodies by the artists to find out and make meaning of what they see, feel and experience in the environment. The problem of this study is centred on exploring the aesthetic forms derived from the Kwagh-Hir masquerades into abstract painting.

The aim of this study is to adapt and create abstract paintings using Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades with specific objectives to create forms derived from Kwagh Hir animal masquerades, represent the aesthetics of Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades in painting, identify the design elements inherent in the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades, create abstract compositions in painting using Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades and to preserve visually the fast eroding culture of the Kwagh-Hir masquerades. The study explores the aesthetic forms perceived on the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades by means of the studio based research, which are rich with possibilities for contributing to body of knowledge concerning creative processes. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources. The paintings created by the artists can be seen as an attempt at mastering a new language, for artistic expression.

Keywords: Kwagh-Hir, Aesthetics, Abstract, Masquerades, Contemporary, Exploration, Analysis

Introduction

Artist over the globe have the desire to express themselves in diverse ways. For example some artists have experimented in painting, by deriving inspiration from natural objects, from landscapes, man-made objects and so on. Contemporary art practices involves the use of senses, minds and bodies by the artists to find out and make meaning of what they see, feel and experience in the environment. Information is gathered and new skills developed, including "thinking skills." These aforementioned acts of creativity can be reflected to contemporary art practices. Contemporary art is more than beautiful objects, images, poetry or music. It is taking forms, images, colour, ideas, and transforming these in art works that resonate, inspire and provoke the beholder.

The contemporary art practices are often about taking discordant elements from one's environment, and reordering these to create works with profound messages. The authors have noted that, globalization has impacted contemporary art trends. Diffusion of borders and divisions among countries, classes and monetary systems have dramatically affected the arts, often blurring differences among styles and movements.

Alubo (2012), highlighted culture as a shared way of life which is a characteristic of a group or society. Benton and Diyanni (2002) contended that, culture is a way of living built up by a group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next. Gushem (2008) maintains that, from the beginning of humanity, art has been inseparable from every human activity. He further pointed out that human beings have used art to record various issues bordering on the cultural, political, social and economic well-being of the people. Culture has opened up so many doors for expressions in painting in the selection of subject matters and in the unique styles of presentations. Contemporary Nigerian artists have drawn inspiration for creating paintings from mask, masquerades, dance, and puppets. Contemporary Nigerian painters like Gani Odutokun (1946-1994), Kolade Oshinowo (1948), Abiodun Olaku (b. 1958), and Ben Chuka Enwonwu (1921-1995) have experimented in painting using masks and masquerades as sources of inspiration.

The Kwagh-Hir Theatre plays a significant role in the cultural expressions of the Tiv of Nigeria. The Kwagh-Hir theatre according Hagher (2003, 2014) provide secular entertainment that seeks to address political, economic, religious, education and socialization issues through the enactment of the past and contemporary events by humans using mask, puppets and masquerades. Kwagh-Hir masquerades have provided the artists with enough inspiration to create contemporary paintings portraying the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades in colours as it projects their aesthetic potentials in painting. The paintings created were developed through a practiced-based research upon which Nigerian contemporary artists can adopt to address political, religious and socio-economic inequalities in the society.

About the Artist

Joshua Aondona Avav was born in 1983. He hails from Ibi Local Government Area of Taraba State. He attended the University of Agriculture Staff Primary School Makurdi and completed in 1996. He then attended Government College, Makurdi where he obtained his SSCE in 2003. He proceeded to the University of Maiduguri, and graduated in 2008 with a BA degree in Creative Arts specializing in Painting. He continued his quest for knowledge in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria where he has obtained a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree in Painting with the Department of Fine Arts. Joshua is currently an academic staff with the Department of Visual and Creative Arts, Federal University Lafia, Nasarawa State.

Avav's paintings do not involve or portray recognizable subjects; instead colours, forms, lines, curves, textures and the vivid imagination of the artist are the key subjects and elements of his works. His paintings reveal his emotions, experiences and imaginative ideas through what can be called "abstract expression," Avav's works have sensual and tactile-qualities he incorporates as series of diverse media and style in works which have earned him unique personal style in his works. Though his works are

entirely abstract in nature, the movement and action of his subject i.e. Kwagh-Hir masquerades are effectively captured within the surface.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study is centred on exploring the aesthetic forms derived from the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades into abstract composition in painting.

The Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades are presented as sculptures and having gone through relevant visual and literary sources it was observed by the researcher that no scholarly study was embarked upon using Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades from Kastina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to adapt and explore in abstract paintings the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. identify visually the design elements inherent in the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades.
- ii. create forms of a two-dimensional nature derived from Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades.
- iii. create abstract compositions in painting using Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades
- iv. preserve usually the fast eroding culture of the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades.

Review of Literature

Wingert (2014) defines a mask as a disguise or costume worn at a festival, party or an event which is often an elegant, historical or fantastic costume. Masquerades demonstrate the spirituality of the African people. Masquerades are often symbols of the spiritual forces that validate the acts of the elders. They serve as visible expressions of spiritual forces, an authority that validates the beliefs of a society, reinforces acceptable social modes of conduct and symbolized the spiritual authority that eradicates social evils. Fosu (1986) agrees that masquerades are very important to the Africans as they serve as a link between the living and the dead.

Hornby (2005), defines a mask as "a covering for part or all of the face, worn to hide or protect it". The reason for creating mask for Africans, could be for a particular ceremony or a societal ritual. Masks in traditional African society, according to Evekosina in Saleh (2010) were understood to be where spirits were "created." In other words, a person wears the mask alongside a costume that conceals him from head to toe. The masked person becomes the figure whom the disguise is intended to represent, bringing it to life through his gestures, sounds, performances and often his possessed state.

In Africa, the existence of masks could probably be traced to Paleolithic times where art objects were mostly made of various materials which included leather, metal, fabric and various types of wood (Rebirth Africa, 2000). Aesthetic principles, religious and ceremonial values, have brought insight into the ideas and moral values that artists express in their art. African societies have rich traditions of masquerades, which are seen in plays, ceremonies and dances by masked performers. These masquerades

provide entertainment, define social roles, and communicate religious meanings. They are also important symbols of ancestors, spirits, or even form the history and culture of the people. They are considered to be crucial objects because of the essential role they play in African belief system.(www.rebirth.co.za)

According to O'Toole (2011), African masks are tangible beings transformed from the abstract concept of spirits images. A mask is an object that disguises the face of the wearer, while the masquerade refers to a complete bodily disguise of a person. African masks are not separable from African masquerades, which can be described as a process of the mask possessing a spirit. The mask is an indispensable unit of the masquerade which gives the masquerade identity by its facial feature. This captures the character of the masquerade as it creates a disguise. O'Toole maintained an opinion that in African life, masks bridge the human and the spiritual worlds.

In European art, the influence of African masks may be perhaps most apparent in the cubist paintings of Pablo Picasso. McCully (2010) states:

During the early 1900s, the aesthetics of traditional African sculpture became a powerful influence among European artists who formed an avant-garde in the development of modern art. He further pointed out that in France, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and their School of Paris friends blended the highly stylized treatment of the human figure in African sculptures with painting styles derived from the post-Impressionist works of Edouard Manet, Paul Cézanne and Paul Gauguin. The resulting pictorial flatness, vivid color palette, and fragmented Cubist shapes helped to define early modernism. While these artists knew nothing of the original meaning and function of the West and Central African sculptures they encountered, they instantly recognized the spiritual aspect of the composition and adapted these qualities to their own efforts to move beyond the naturalism that had defined Western art since the Renaissance.

Among the Tiv people of Nigeria as specified by Hagher (2014), the word "Kwagh-Hir" literally means "folktale" or a "Thing of Magic". It is an all-night secular/sacred performance of the Tiv people. This theatre reflects many of the social qualities for which the Tiv are known which are; hospitality, gracefulness, sensuality, sense of justice, prosperity, physical strength and endurance. Igirgi (2007), Torkula (2004) and Dzurgba (2012) all note that, the Tiv are found in Benue, Taraba, Nasarawa and Plateau states with the highest concentration in Benue State, Nigeria. The origin of Kwagh-Hir according to Hagher (2003), shows that; "The Kwagh-Hir originally started as a revolt in the early 1950s. He agreed that it was in 1964, the year of the 'Atem-tyo', a Tiv revolt that the Kwagh-Hir spread like a wildfire through Tiv land. Folktales are told in almost all societies with trickster characters like the rabbit, the tortoise or the cat dominating their plots, as a way to entertain young children at bedtime as well as to teach them morals on contemporary issues and tradition. The Kwagh-Hir is therefore an enactment of Tiv folktales considering that they are hunters, their stories and imaginations are full of wild animals

(Nyam). Some of the episodes of the Kwagh-Hir feature imaginative forms of wild beasts that dance to the melodious tunes of the humans. Tiv folktales are not only told about animals, but spirits (Azov) and puppets (Eev) as well. It comprises of many art forms which include, Story-telling, Poetry, Puppetry, Music, Dance and Dramatization.

Lazzari and Schlesier (2008) believe that, “creativity is the quality that allows us to create something or to cause objects to come into being”. The Kwagh-Hir has been used by the Tiv to tell stories, socialize, educate, provides secular entertainment and address issues such as politics. The animal masquerades which are essential part of the Kwagh-Hir possess forms, features and characteristics (design elements) that can serve as a birthplace of inspiration for artists.

Methodology

The study was a studio based research with studio experimentation. Marshall (2010) posits that studio-based study is rich with possibilities for contributing to body of knowledge concerning creative processes primarily because it has at its foundation the Making discipline. Gbaden (2014) referred to studio practice, practice-led, art-based research, arts-informed research and practice-based research terms to mean the same thing. Sullivan (2005), one of the best articulators of the theory of visual arts practice, notes that “the imaginative and intellectual work undertaken by artists is a form of research.”

The study therefore acknowledges the contributions of authorities that have direct studies in painting moving from representation (realism) into abstraction. Painters like Gushem (1990), Oladesu (2000) and Saleh (2010). Gushem (1990) for instance transformed some selected landscapes of the savannah region from their representational states to abstracts, which this study has considered to be an appropriate method in creating abstract paintings. Data collected was analyzed and categorized in four stages namely; Representational stage, Stylization stage, Abstraction state and Geometrical stage.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are direct sketches of the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades in the event. The secondary sources included sketches from photographs and images from books and the internet. The data collected were first acquainted with by the artists, through sketches and finished paintings that were naturalistic, before a gradual transformation into abstracts through the use of colour and lines.

Analysis of Selected Paintings

The paintings created by Avav can be seen as an attempt at mastering a new language, for artistic expression open to new worlds of experience that were once in comprehensible. Busser (2006) states that, “understanding the language of art means comprehending other ways of seeing and other ways of looking that come from different places and different times”.

Sen (2014) posits that training in the elements and principles of art and design sharpens our perceptions of art world. The artist finds line and colour to be intriguing elements that actualizes and expresses his vision. The paintings selected for discussion therefore, depict a studio dialogue between line and form. Colours and form is simplified without any attempt of modeling. The use of colour is subjective and the vibrating strength of pigment aided in creating the force that uplifts the matrix of Kwagh-Hir masquerades as an essence in composition.



Plate I. Title: “Ajikoko Masquerade”, Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Oil on Canvas, Size: 100cm x 90cm, Year: 2012

The painting titled *Ajikoko Masquerade (Plate I)* captures the masquerade in full frontal action. The masquerade is painted having two long horns with each painted in brown and white in three segments on a flat circular head painted with green pigment. The sharp spikes emanating from the mouth is also painted with dark brown and patches of white. The dominant colour brown is also applied on the raffia. This masquerade form dominates the picture plane. Masquerade is a representational depiction of Ajikoko in its natural form as it shows how the animal’s masquerade body interacts with its environment as it swings vigorously. The raffia movement within the arena is an essential characteristic of the animal masquerade and also for this study. The large brush strokes of brown in the painting, describe the agitation of the animal. The Ajikoko animal masquerade is represented as a deer and a monster in the Tiv Kwagh- Hir world.



Plate II. Title: “The Extraordinary Mental Feat”, Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Acrylics on canvas, Size: 100cm x 90cm, Year: 2013

The painting titled the *Extraordinary Mental Feat (Plate II)* is a repetition composition inspired by an animal Kwagh-Hir masquerade executed in Acrylic on canvas. The design elements identified such as lines colour and shape where utilized in creating new visual forms. The painting was rendered in an unnaturalistic form using the dynamism of line in varying lines to capture the fluid yet energetic mood of the animal masquerade as it performs. The animal masquerade forms have been completely reduced into lines that suggest organic motifs and patterns. Details are eliminated to enhance unity in the simplified composition. The use of large and thin brush strokes of burnt umber, yellow and brown projected the channel of the figure towards the atmosphere in an upward imaginary motion. In the Kwagh-Hir world, it is an event that is competitive among various groups showcasing their creativity and skills. It is however, a remarkable act or achievement involving courage, skills, and strength that is aimed at winning medals which inspire extraordinary things i.e. beliefs (akombo) among the Tiv people.



Plate III. Title: "Atem-tyo", Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Oil on canvas, Size: 100cm x 90cm, Year: 2011
The painting titled *Atem-tyo (Plate III)* is an abstract composition executed in oil. This painting shows an animal masquerade figure that has lost its natural form thus, creating an illusion of chaos. The large brush strokes of black and red amidst symbolize the brutal unrest of the Tiv revolt in the early 1950s (Hagher, 2014). The red and black pigments used in the painting explain pictorially the revolt which was a result of the Tiv consciousness and the economic and political consequences that lead to the massive killings of the Tiv people by the foreigners (white men). Details are eliminated through the reduction of forms to enhance the philosophical message in the composition. The painting is concerned with non-representational shape and form that speak to the devastating effects of the 1950 revolt. The black forms are symbolic of lifeless human bodies lying in a pool of blood. The elongated thick black brush stroke speaks also to the helpless nature/state of the revolts victims.



Plate IV. Title: "Untitled", Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Textile ink on Paper, Size: 64cm x 52cm, Year: 2011

The Painting titled *Untitled (Plate IV)* is a composition executed using textile paint on paper. The geometric nature of forms in the painting was inspired by the cubist works of Picasso while imbibing the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerade form that shows the distortion of the animal figure into elongated, geometric and animated shapes. The composition captures a scenario of a typical Tiv environment in plane regular shapes. The animal figure was flattened and simplified into forms creating organic shape with characteristics of triangles, rectangles, squares, amoebic shapes broken into fragments and forms that overlap and penetrate each other. Palette knife was used to create thick textured layers in the application of the textile paint. The colours used in this composition include yellow, orange, red and brown. The use of bright pigments above the dark tones is perhaps a testament of the Tiv people rising from the destruction of revolt and regaining their way of life in a victorious mode.



Plate V. Title: "Hemen I", Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Acrylics on canvas, Size: 100cm x 90cm, Year: 2013

The painting titled *Hemen I (Plate V)* is a stylized composition inspired by Kwagh-Hir animal masquerade executed in acrylic paint on canvas rendered in a display of dynamic action that involve spiral, curved and horizontal lines. The composition creates an illusion of an animal figure breaking dawn with its arms spaced apart perhaps in the middle of an energetic performance. The design elements identified such as line colour and shape were used in enticing the vibrant movement of the masquerade. The combination of colours involved in this painting include burnt umber, yellow, blue, purple, white,

pink etc. The constant use of pink and purple in the painting symbolizes royalty and wealth, while the repetitive use of line contributes to the overall visual unity of the work. Small organic motifs are scattered all over the picture surface to portray the rich culture of the Tiv Kwagh-Hir masquerades.



Plate VI. Title: "Womanhood ", Joshua Aondona Avav, Medium: Acrylics on canvas, Size: 100cm x 90cm, Year: 2013

The painting titled *Womanhood* (Plate VI) is an abstract animal masquerade painted in acrylic. The design elements identified such as line, colour and shape were used in creating new visual forms. The form created, are suggestive of nude-like female figure rendered in dark brown lines. The large brush strokes are complimented with small and larger dots of brown signify the feminine nature considered to be an attribute of a woman. On the right hand side of the painting is an emerging breast from the bust of the female. The overwhelming presence of orange on the foreground signifies love. The orange sits in sharp contrast with the bright pink image which all is significant of the feminine nature. In the Tiv culture, womanhood is attributed to wifhood and motherhood as noted by Torkula (2004).

Conclusions

The paintings discussed are attempts at exploring colour and line to represent Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades form in space. In the compositions, the artist's idea is an important aspect of the works. The idea becomes what can be termed as moving force. The paintings are set to convey specific meaning rather than to depict a scene, person or even the Kwagh-Hir masquerades. The abstract illustrative representation that makes use of colour and lines is intended to represent something one cannot see with the naked eye.

The study has created a relationship between painting and sculpture by exploring the three dimensional forms of the Kwagh-Hir animal masquerade into abstract painting. In the course of the study, it was discovered that images of masquerades can be transformed from representational form to non-representational forms. The study also revealed that some of the masquerades can be deconstructed in different forms to form interesting compositions that can be visualized as un-objective images. The study has also made evident a painting concept based on Kwagh-Hir animal masquerades which has in one

way or the other revealed the creative opportunities that abound in our immediate environment and can be ensnared by any creative mind. The idea of abstract arts is to create works of art that has no recognizable subjects. The artist painted with emotions hoping to capture his subconscious thoughts on the canvas. With abstraction's decisive rejection of recognizable imagery in favour of experience, abstraction unlike other styles and movements has transitory and local interest, serving as a viable choice to contemporary artists.

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