

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE: SALIENT THEMES FOR THE CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PAINTER

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Abstract

The contemporaneous happenings of different eras have always influenced the making of fine arts. The Futurist painters, a 20th century European movement, for example, emerged in the course of the World War II. Futurism was a key artistic and social development in 20th century art history, originating and most active within Italy, but also a movement whose ideas spread to Russia, England and beyond (Adams, 2009). Current issues as sectarian conflicts, kidnappings, assassination, and bad leadership has not only brought uncertainties on Nigeria's nascent democracy but also weighed the country down economically, socially, politically and educationally. Contemporary Nigerian artists however seem to shy away from such poignant contemporary issues as democracy, insecurity, terrorism. Even when they seemingly interrogate such issues, it is always an unconscious rendition. This paper examines some recent competitions and exhibition entries whose themes and sub-themes show how participating artists interrogate and interpret the given themes and how they unconsciously/consciously end up making allegories of politics, democracy whilst unwittingly rendering social commentaries. The author believes that, current challenges within Nigerian democracy and the democratization process, offer a lot of painting and exhibition themes therein. The author also believes that essential stylistic movement(s) may just as well emerge if these young contemporary Nigerian painters would be more purposeful, consistent and better encouraged.

Key Words: Discourse, Themes, Challenges, Contemporary, Salient

Introduction

The making of art has always been influenced by the happenings of different eras such as Futurism; a 20th century European movement of essentially painters, for example, emerged in the course of the World War II. The artists of Futurism produced paintings based on contemporary events of that time. According to Adams (2009), the Italian writer, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founded Futurism when he published his Futurist Manifesto in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909. Marinetti passionately laid out his ideas, which would later on form the central concepts of the movement.

Futurism was a key artistic and social development in 20th century art history, originating and most active within Italy, but also a movement whose ideas spread to Russia, England and beyond. In the Futurist manifesto, Marinetti declared his hatred of old artistic and political traditions, and a love of new technologies, for travel and warfare, for nationalism and violence. The Futurists would reject political correctness and embrace any new cultural innovation, 'however daring, however violent', which proudly displayed the 'smear of madness', (Adams, 2009).

A glean into the Futurist paintings and titles appropriated them are a pointer to the "daringness, violence and the smear of madness" that existed then. These paintings are: *Nose Dive on the city* by Tullio Crali, 1939 (Fig.1), *Shaken Flight* by Tullio Crali, 1939 (Fig.2), *Impressions of Bombardment (Shrapnels and Grenades)* by Luigi Russolo, 1926 (Fig.3), *Burning city* by Gerardo Dottori, 1929 (Fig.4), among many other such titles (see the illustrations below).

Nose Dive on the City [Tullio Crali, 1939]



Fig. 1, Tullio Crali, Nose Dive on the city, 1939, medium unknown, size unknown.
(source: [www/cartridgesave.co.uk/](http://www.cartridgesave.co.uk/))

Self-taught painter Tullio Crali joined the Futurist in 1929 and developed the aero painting style with his realistic depictions of flight, based on his own experiences of flying. In his 1939 painting *Nose Dive on the City* (Fig. 1) one can see a great understanding of aerial depth. Adams (2009) says, “he represented, and perhaps celebrated, the new concept of attack from the air, with a fighter pilot’s eye-view of dive-bombing”. This painting, just as the others in the twentieth century period, were birthed at a time when rapid changes were taking place in many fields of human endeavour, Rapid changes in technological advances, medicine, politics, new technologies for travel, warfare, for nationalism and violence the art as well. The Futurist particularly focused on pictorial depictions of the new technologies, for movement and battle, for political-violence and nationalism. The word “aero” which signifies air or aircraft: aero dynamism, aerospace was by this era drawn into the orthography of Futurist painting thus came about the word “*aeropittura*-Aero painting” a synonym for optical speed, movement, aerial mechanization and the mechanics of aerial warfare even sound.

Shaken Flight [Tullio Crali, 1939]



Fig. 2, Tullio Crali, Shaken Flight, 1939, medium unknown, size unknown. (source: [www/cartridgesave.co.uk/](http://www.cartridgesave.co.uk/))

The Futurist had always embraced new technologies, particularly military hardware, and the development of ‘Aero painting’ in the 1930’s and 40’s was a key part of the movement’s later stages. Artists, many of whom had flown planes themselves, produced aero painting with varying degree of abstraction just as the painting in (Fig. 2). The painting under review is an abstract depiction of a mechanics of an aerial warfare. There is a deliberate want of creating optical agitations through the use of repetition of line and forms. Spread from the middle and around the upper portions of the work, are light penetrations from the background that emphasizes the aerial activities.

Nose Dive on the City [Gerardo Dottori, 1939]

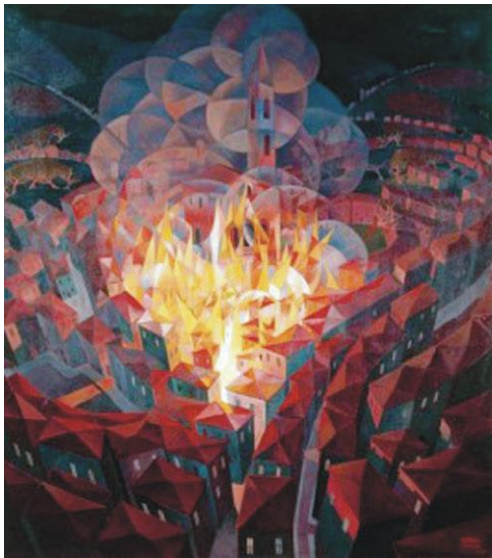


Fig. 4, Gerardo Dottori, Burning City, 1939, medium: unknown, size: unknown, source: [www/cartridgesave.co.uk/](http://www.cartridgesave.co.uk/))

Impression of bombardment is a depiction of an aerial shelling by a fighter pilot. It is again a repetition of shapes and forms, which on the ground is characterised the 'city's scape'. In the middle are emissions of circular patches that soar high into the sky. Typically, an aero painting this *Burning City* is painted with the grey toned colours except for the central area where the bomb must have dropped and exploded. The values that characterised the Futurist works can be seen in this painting like the want of speed, aero dynamo, movement and the conscious repetitions of design elements.

Impression of Bombardment [Luigi Russolo, 1926]



Fig. 3, Luigi Russolo, Impressions of Bombardment 1926 (shrapnels and Grenades), medium unknown, size unknown, source: [www/cartridgesave.co.uk/](http://www.cartridgesave.co.uk/)

The futurist painters would purposely paint series of themes on current happenings of course bearing in mind the core values of the movement: speed, light, movement, aerial mechanization and the mechanics of aerial warfare even sound. Which is why themes like *Impression of bombardment (shrapnels and grenades)*, *Burning city*, *Nose dive on the city* and *Shaking flight*, are clear depictions of the light, movement, speed and the fire power that characterized World Wars I and II. It is surmised to say that the contemporary Nigerian painters have not really shown a deliberate attempt at directing their ideas to a certain concern and the development and or use of certain iconographies.

Contemporary Nigerian artists seem to completely shy away from such topical issues as genocide, insurgency, democracy et cetera. Even when they seemingly interrogate such concerns, it is always an unconscious rendition. This is quite unlike the Futurists, where painters like Tullio Crali for example, would produce series of paintings as thematic statements of the holocaust of the raging war at the time. In recent times, this author has participated in several group exhibitions/competitions where over a hundred artworks are normally exhibited. It is always worrisome to note that of all the works in an exhibition, only

one or two of such works make commentaries on Nigeria's social problems, politics and the state of our "nascent democracy". This paper examines selected art competitions and/or exhibition entries, the themes and or sub-themes, some of which are "30th Anniversary Art Competition and Exhibition", "Out of the Frame out of the Box", "Being Young" and "Nigeria the Beautiful" among others and how the artists interrogate these above mentioned themes. How they execute their compositions and how they end up making allegories of politics, democracy and social commentaries is also of import in this discourse.

Review of Paintings by Nigerian Artists

A review of paintings below, created by selected contemporary Nigerian painters, reveals different approaches to themes, which hitherto are not democratic. Some use ideas, styles, and mannerism from existing social paradigms. Others use both existing and historical elements to orchestrate their subject matter. Notable, are political and administrative heads that have affected the course of our history at one time or the other. The paintings also evoke apt drama in their quest to make meanings.

Bozimo, Zee Bradouy (b. 1970)

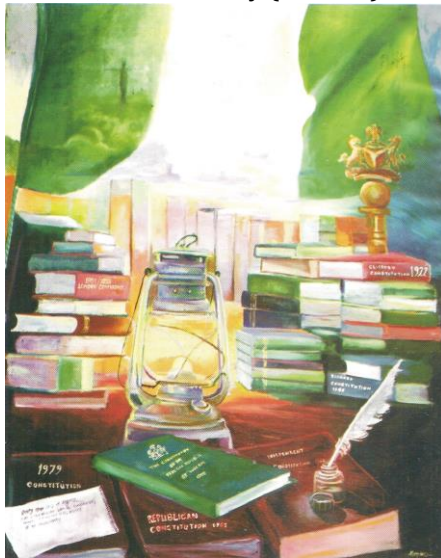


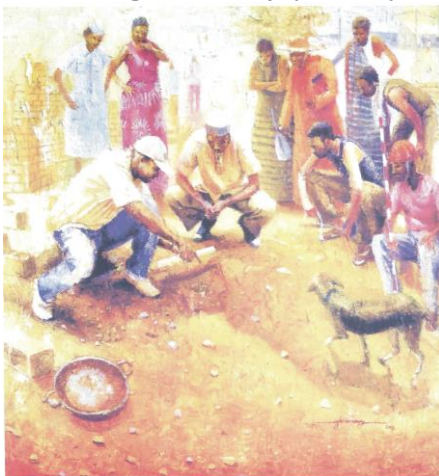
Fig. 5, Bozimo Bradouy Zee, Nigeria's Constitutional Evolution, Oil on Canvas, 137cm X 106cm, 2009. (Source: Nigerian Institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 30th Anniversary Art Competition and Exhibition, 2009)

An indigene of Bomadi Local Government Area (L.G.A.) of Delta State was born in Lagos on February 6th, 1970. He attended Army Command Secondary School Ipaja, Lagos, and had a brief stay at Yaba College of Technology before gaining admission into the prestigious University of Benin. Bozimo, in an attempt to interrogate the theme: *Nigeria's constitutional Evolution* (Fig.5) used subjects/objects such as books, a lantern, a pen and ink, the national flag, which mask other icons that are hanging faded on the sky. The books appear to copies of documented evidences of the changes that has taken place within the constitution. The lantern perhaps, is to indicate or bring light into the nation. The ink bottle at the lower right hand side of the painting may have been used to sign into law the various constitutions. Bozimo emerged the overall winner of the Nigerian institute of Advanced Legal Studies, 30th Anniversary Art Competition and Exhibition (2009). Bozimo may have succeeded in capturing the essence of an evolution, what he may not have noticed however, are the undertone elements in the painting. These include the faint picture of Sir Frederick Lord Lugard in the middle top of the Nigerian flag, the mace almost hidden at the top right hand side of the painting. To this author these subtle undertones change the context of this painting. It exposes the confusion that has bedeviled Nigerian politics right from the Colonial era. One is not able to see much of the mace, because the books have virtually covered them. Meaning, these constitutions have continued to change the course of power, and inversely powers have continuously changed the constitutions.

Jimoh Saliu Babatunde (b. 1985)**Fig. 6, Jimoh Saliu Babatunde, Amnesty, Acrylic on Canvas, 92cm X 76cm, 2010, Source: Araism Movement 7, 2010.**

Born in Lagos on August 15, 1985, but hails from Kogi State, and has been an Araist since 2008. The review of Babatunde's painting emanates from his participation in an exhibition to commemorate Nigeria at 50, organised by the Ara Studio and hosted by Thought Pyramid Art Gallery (2010). He was one of the fourteen participating artists and where a total of twenty-eight works were unveiled, only his entry *Amnesty* (see Fig.6), made a social commentary, hence drawing the researchers' attention to its worth. The Nigerian flag is evident in the top middle of the painting much like Bozimo's painting in Fig.5. An imaginary divide of the painting into two equal halves, puts the portrait of Late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua on the left hand side, and a protesting crowd on the right hand side. On the foreground of the painting are silhouettes of heavily armed men. It is not clear whether they are government forces or angry militants.

Looking at the painting, one comes to terms with agitation, protests and the bitterness that characterized the clamour for resource control in the Niger-Delta. Going by the silhouette of crowd of restive youths brandishing all sorts of ammunitions in the foreground of the painting and the group of rioters in the top right side of the work which are symbolic of the crisis in the coastal region. The artist may have succeeded in capturing the issues of amnesty; what the author sees is a deeper political message. Every now and then one hears of crises in society, and how the leadership either pretends not to know or tells lies about them. If not, why would Mr. President be smiling in the midst of chaos? How come he is the most identifiable subject in the painting?

Osaretin Eghosa Henry (b. 1981)**Fig. 7, Osaretin Eghosa Henry, Unifying Spirit – a road map to development, Oil on canvas, 36.6 inches X 38.8 inches, 2012. (Source: Life in my City, 2012)**

Osaretin, who is a graduate of the famous Auchi Polytechnic in Edo State, is a studio based artist residing in Abuja. Osaretin, in an attempt to describe the state of being young, ended up with a painting that makes

socio-political commentary (Fig.7). In an art competition/exhibition, (Life in my City Art Festival, 2012), with the theme: *Being Young* where ninety artists participated, only Osaretin presented a painting that bore socio-political mannerism. He evoked a dramatic situation typical of youths, the engagement with chatting and argument. Unknown to Osaretin, he has succeeded in dramatizing, in his painting, an argument and or chat about democratic issues. In this democracy of ours, we as the citizenry argue a lot about who owns where, who owns what? Most youths, as the ones in the painting, spend time arguing and chatting about this democracy and the democratization process. The youths in the painting are from different disciplines of life, and will stand in the sun at the expense of their jobs, because there is an argument on ground. The map of Nigeria drawn on the ground by the lead character is perhaps to affirm his position in the argument.



Fig. 8, Osaretin Eghosa Henry, Fragments of Unity, Oil on canvas, 45 inches X 45 inches, 2013, Source: Life in my City, 2013.

In another attempt at winning, Osaretin produced a painting *Fragments of Unity* (Fig. 8) as his entry for the 7th edition of (Life in my city art Festival 2013); where he emerged overall winner. In an exhibition that saw one hundred and thirty participants, only Osaretin again presented a painting that made a socio-political commentary. In a bid to interrogate the theme *Out of the Frame: Out of the Box*, he created an "Animal farm" scenario. Only this time, the animals stood for people in the Nigerian government. The Dog seated at the top middle of the painting, is suggestive of "Mr. President", who was Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. The painting was out of the box indeed. What he may not have noticed is that, he exposed a lot of issues on our democracy. The injustices in government, power sharing, and how corrupt practices hibernate in government amongst other things. Some of the animals are seated not on chairs and far from the table; why? Others are underneath the table; why? The animals seated around and on the table are plump; why? An obvious case of "monkey dey work baboon dey chop" within the polity.

Dudu Oritsejolomi Stanley (b. 1978)



Fig. 9, Dudu Oritsejolomi Stanley, The Resolution, Mixed Media, 0.75ft X 0.5ft, 2010, Source: Embassy of Spain.

Dudu, who is also a graduate of the famous Auchi Polytechnic in Edo State ply his trade in Lagos. Dudu, in an attempt to interrogate “Celebrating 50-5: Independence and Rapprochement Spain-Nigeria”, ended up with a painting that makes political commentary (Fig.9). In an art competition/exhibition, (Organised by The Embassy of Spain in Abuja, 2010), where he emerged overall winner. In an exhibition that put up twenty-five participants, only Dudu presented a painting that made a political and bilateral commentary. Dudu (2010) explains his painting as “this piece celebrates Nigeria’s 50th Independence anniversary and 5years of the Spanish cultural week in Nigeria. It’s about the conflict resolution in governance, and other aspects of life”. The author of this paper at this point views the feel of the long established relations between Nigeria and Spain going by the flags of the two nations that flank opposite sides of the divide. There are books, documents and wide spread sheets of papers scattered on the floor of the foreground perhaps an evidence of a lengthy deliberation. The two main figures in suit and “agbada” are having a pleasant handshake which is indicative of an agreement being reached. Flanked on both the right and left sides of the work are other people who followed to make up their country’s delegation.

Ajah Godwin N. (b. 1986)

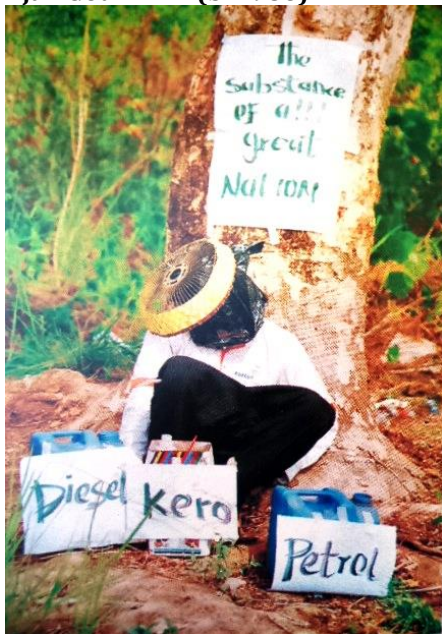


Fig. 10, Ajah Godwin N., The Holy City, Installation, Variable, 2009, Source: Life in my City, 2009.

Godwin a graduate of the Fine and Applied Art Department IMT Enugu, presented an installation to the 3rd edition of (Life in my city art Festival 2009); with an aim to interrogate the theme “Nigeria the Beautiful”. In a work that set out to interpret beauty, Godwin uses an environmentally interactive narrative surrounded by tattered view. In this installation (Fig. 10) there is a man seated and leaning his back against a tree. With his head dropped forward. There is an inscription just above his head pinned to the tree. The message reads “the substance of a !!! great nation”. Right in front of the man who is perhaps a fuel vendor are three gallons of fuel, labeled “diesel, kero and petrol”. In a theme that exudes “Beauty” this artist evokes a visual paradox where beauty assumes dejection, is un-kept, and is tired. Socio-economically the author sees a visual metaphor that highlights Nigeria’s fuel crises.

On a wider scope this substance of a great has mostly been responsible for our un-greatness as a nation. Nearly all of Nigeria’s conflicts emanated from the sale and wealth generated from this commodity; the Nigerian civil war, the spate of corruption in the country, mistrust among the various regions, most of the coup and counter coups and most recently Niger-Delta revolt yet the installation is entitled “The Holy City”. Such societal ills summed up were what Fela Anikulapo Kuti-1980’s referred to as “Government magic”.

Conclusion

The article has indicated the different approaches artists have in response to themes they encounter during exhibitions and competitions; this trait characterizes the paintings under review.

Contemporary Nigerian painters rarely paint current and or political issues/themes. Even when they do, it is usually for other reasons such as monetary gains and to impress their audience. Take a visit to any art exhibition or art gallery in any part of the country. Hardly would paintings addressing issues such as the insurgency and mayhem caused by Boko Haram, “Fulani Herdsmen”, “Unknown Gunmen” et cetera or national restructuring conference among other things be agog in such paintings. Young painters it seems, would rather paint romantic and enticing themes. But when they choose to deviate at all, they, in the long

run use ideas, elements, symbols, mannerisms, techniques and themes to provoke reactions from the juries and the public. The provocations could at times be understood as in-depth social commentary, political satires, historical narratives and very strong allegories; the reviewed paintings within this text have indeed succeeded in this regard.

Despite the fact that young painters will always want to paint to make sales, the author affirms that not all works must sell. While some paintings make sales and gain more audience for the painter, others would not. At times paintings that seldom make sales make very more valid contributions to the discipline.

It is this writer's strong belief that, Nigerian democracy and the democratization process, insecurity, terrorism et cetera contain a lot of painting and or exhibition themes, therein for the young contemporary Nigerian painter. Who knows! movement(s) may just emerge if these young contemporary Nigerian painters would be more purposeful and consistent in this regard.

Contemporary Nigerian painters should despite the odds continue to paint Nigerian situations.

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