



BRUCE ONOBRAKPEYA'S JEWELS OF NOMADIC IMAGES A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

Bruce Onobrakpeya as an artist, is acknowledged as a master printmaker one of the best in Nigeria, He has impacted knowledge on younger generations of artists, scholars, industrialists and individuals through his consistence practice in the studio and his annual Harmattan workshop series, which originated in 1998. Onobrakpeya's work took a new direction after the invention of his printmaking techniques that resulted in the birth of plastography and plastocast in 1967. The artist did not relent, but developed a new media in installation art. This paper will discuss Onobrakpeya's new media in his two creative works titled Nomadic Masquerade Panels I, VI and V and Scavenging in a Lost Paradise (Mixed Media, Installation) respectively. It will highlight new interpretations as regards the context of the works created and their contribution to the development of art in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Masquerades, Jewels, Installation, Panels.*

Introduction

The work of art can be dumb unless invested with words to give it life. Artists in many epochs have created works of art, which demand that, the context that informal such art works require evaluation and analysis. It is said that the artist as a medium or prophet of his or her time may create works but such instincts from where the works have emerged may be given hint of by the

artist. In all, however, it is generally accepted that the work of art often is beyond the mere words the artist offers. This is why the critic and historian is very valuable in contemporary culture and critique. In this work focus is on two works taken from *Jewels of Nomadic Images*. The selection of these works can be justified by the fact that they can be taken as quintessential to the body of work the theme has set out to project.

His recent works *Akporode*, *The Jewel of Nomadic Images* and *Totems of the Niger Delta* played an important role in the development of installation art, and in the projection and repositioning of contemporary art in Nigeria. This paper will highlight new interpretations of Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Jewels of Nomadic Images*, with focus on the symbols and motifs used, revealing a dialogue of cultural heritage and values. *Jewels of Nomadic Images* includes the following: *Nomadic Masquerades I, VI and V* (Fig. 1), and *Scavenging in a Lost Paradise* (Fig. 2).

Bruce Oboneyoma Paul Onobrakpeya is acknowledged as one of Nigeria's most prolific, renowned and respected artists. A master print-maker, painter and sculptor, he is a living legend, who is responsible for the renaissance in contemporary art in Nigeria.

Born at Agbarha-otor, Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State of Nigeria on August 30, 1932, Onobrakpeya had his basic primary education in Benin, Ughelli and Sapele.

In 1947, he gained admission into Western Boys' High School now Arewale Boys High School, Benin City. On completion of his secondary school education in Western Boys High School, Benin City, Onobrakpeya was appointed an art teacher (at the same Western Boys' High School, Benin City) and handled the job to the best of his abilities between 1953 and 1956.

In October 1957, Onobrakpeya applied and was admitted into Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, now Ahmadu Bello University, where he studied Fine Art on a Federal Government of Nigeria Scholarship. He graduated in 1961 with a Diploma Certificate in Fine Arts, which is equivalent to a Bachelor of Arts degree today.

Apart from his printmaking, Onobrakpeya was also engaged in books illustration. Among the works he illustrated are Cyprian Ekwensi's *African Nights Entertainment* (1961), Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, (1962) and *Iwe Ede Yoruba* written by Babalola.

His achievements so far include the discovery of plastography and plastocast techniques in 1967, and the establishing of the Harmattan Workshop Series in 1998 till date at Agbarha-Otor, Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria, with the aim of enhancing artistic growth through interaction, experiment and research.

The combination of assembled objects-nature and man made objects- by Bruce Onobrakpeya remains undoubtedly an integral aspect of his work in *Jewel of Nomadic Images*. This work was inspired by the materials found in his immediate environment and composed of wearable ornaments, boulders, fly whisks, metals, stones, beads, jute bags, plastocast, brass, ivory armlets, anklets, bracelets, pectoral masks, a large collection of jewelry, shells and sheet metals and leather which the artist assembled to create two and three dimensional works as installation art. However, they could be referred to as products of printmaking and assemblage, which Amoda pointed out in his discourse on Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Jewels of Nomadic Images*, as justifying the title, *Jewels of Nomadic Images*. Olu Amoda rightly noted:

Assemblage in *Jewels of Nomadic Images* is not just a question of unity but fusion, this is the state of coming into contact with another; this state is the compatibility of various objects as informed by the manipulative skill and understanding of the material science by the craftsman or artist.

(Olu Amoda 2009:6)

The genesis of the *Jewels of Nomadic Images*, can be traced to a selection of some artwork created by Onobrakpeya well over three decades ago, between 1978 and 2008, which the artist exhibited at Quintessence Gallery, Ikoyi, Lagos, Nigeria from 27 May to 17 June 2006 and currently exhibited at Ovuomaroro Studio and Gallery at Agharah-Otor, Delta State.

The idea took a centre stage of experimental manipulation of forms and figures developed into low relief sculptures that he refer to as plastocast, a technique Onobrakpeya discovered in 1967. However, this metamorphosed into bigger relief or paintings and, in some cases pictures that are gravures. This process of transformation, the migration of a design from one artistic medium or combination to another, is what Onobrakpeya describes as ‘Nomadic’ (qtd. in Layiwola 22). He also regards the migration transcultural movement of concepts as a form of cultural nomadic migration. Here, Onobrakpeya creates movement from one political zone to another-Agbarah-Otor, Benin, Sapele, Zaria and Lagos-the cultural experience he derived from those cities which is very vast. Being Urhobo, Onobrakpeya has also absorbed the culture of the Benin and that of the North where he sojourned, as a student in the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria from 1957 to 1962.

For Layiwola, the second meaning exceeds the first one as ‘Nomadic’ involves (in addition to the movement of cultural icons identified in a particular geographical location) the various materials employed in his art works some of which, come from nature. Others could come from computer parts, pendants, vehicles parts and even from refuse heaps. (Layiwola 2009.22)

The epoch is as a result of six miniature plastographs later increase to nineteen plastograph prints which the artist created in 1985 during the period categorized as the Symbols of Ancestral Groves (Ubogu 2011). Another set of pictures created came from the Sahelian Masquerade era, (1985 – 1988). However a lot of small prints, which the artist created during the above mentioned period consisting of about forty nine artworks were also proofed together in a montage titled “Image I subsequently followed by Image II and Image III in 1993 (Onobrakpeya 2009. ix).

The Jewels of Nomadic Images came into limelight as a result of the transformation of miniature prints from paper to low relief metal foils and plastocast. This necessitated and generated the production of images composed of such items as amulets, hanging purses, necklaces and other pendants as a basis for installations. A typical example of such installations is Akporode that is highly embellished with jewelry and other Images with different textures and form showcased in his works titled Abadina and Millennium Mask (Onobrakpeya 2009. ix).

The Jewels of Nomadic Images made a great impact when showcased in an exhibition in Quintessence Gallery, Lagos in 2006; It focused on Onobrakpeya's artistic philosophy which exposed artistic style and techniques, showing the continuous use of nomadic medallions and jewelry in his artistic migration of Images in a holistic manner, as seen in the works curated by Olu Amoda, which included Nomadic Masquerade Panel I, VI and V, Scavenging in a Lost Paradise, Tunics Surrounded by Pillars, and a host of others in mixed media. The following segment will focus on Onobrakpeya work, Jewels of Nomadic Images, looking at Nomadic Masquerade Panel I, VI and V, (fig. 1), Scavenging in a Lost Paradise (Mixed Media). These works have quality traits that include sensitivity, flexibility, originality and the organization at skill of the artist.

Onobrakpeya's Nomadic Masquerade Panel I, VI and V

Onobrakpeya's Nomadic Masquerade Panels, created in the Jewels of Nomadic Images, is a clear departure from his large pastograph prints to miniaturized images that are experimental in nature in terms of approach and techniques. These works reveal a gradual transformation of images from one artistic medium to another, which the artist regards as Nomadic, with the miniature art forms on paper gradually moving to low relief metal foil and plastocasts (Ekpo Udoma 2009. 35).

The Nomadic Masquerades Panels draw attention to the artist's manipulation of, and the use of forms to create images from his immediate environment, inspired by existing art forms that he found within his locality. Visual of the Nomadic Masquerades Panels I, VI and V and its visual perception, the works form a basis for installation art of Onobrakpeya. These panels the artist created with metal frames that look like standing figures with broad shoulders and necks on an anatomical metal frame standing a in round. Panels I, VI and V are arranged in a row with similar features, which can be disintegrated if necessary. Nomadic Masquerades Panels I, VI & V which stand as installation art forms were created by Onobrakpeya with a background comprising of jute fibre in dark lines of greenish black colours in three panels. The painted sack cloths look like typical nomads' cloths. The content of work is abstract and reveals an understanding of the interactions and way of life of the nomadic people of Northern Nigeria, whose regalia are normally adorned with jewelry, beads, leather purses, hanging amulets and

cowries. Onobrakpeya also used bicycle chains, computer circuits and modems, pendant while some amulets consisted of spark plugs, wrist watches, tap heads, bracelets, beads, cowries etc.

Within the three panels, colourful threaded hose, metal foils, plastocast, shells, metals, leather with a computer diskette and hanging amulets on a plastocast background are seen withing the frame work of the compositions around the necks of the three nomadic panels standing, Onobrakpeya replace the nomadic beads with colourful threaded hose inform of beaded necklace combine with natural beads, hanging amulets purses as computer moderns, spark plug and CD with beads attached to it, hanging on the bodies of the nomads, the installation of this objects depict balance composition, and aesthetics value.

According to Bola Olowo (1995. 643), the design strategy of Onobrakpeya's work relates to configurations in architecture, jewelry, textile design and rely on repetition for emphatic spatial harmony. Eventually the element of space differs in each of Onobrakpeya's work and is usually congested, originating either from deliberate intention or the nature of the medium in the installation works. Olowo however ascribes the congested nature of Onobrakpeya's compositions to the influence of the dense and seemingly congested ecosystem of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where he grew up.

The three panels from I, VI & V, have colourful improvised jewelry and the dark background colours of the sack cloth form a base to project the improvised objects on the bodies of the nomads.

The composition of the Nomadic Masquerade Series has elements of growth, space, light movement, dynamics and expression embedded in its structure. The use of colours by the artist overwhelms the colours that are in relationship with the objects; these mixed media installations therefore have colour characteristics of value and interisily. The possibilities of the artist recreating and replacing existing objects with others (such as replacing beaded necklace with ropes nacklace) and using computer modems, plugs and amulet purses are extremely interesting and creative. Further investigation on the mixed media work shows that the composition does not lack colour components. Hue, value and intensity play a vital role in enhancing the aesthetic value of the finished installations created by the artist. The use of objects (in the mixed media composition) in their natural state without the application of colours also creates depth in the

works and the installations on the panels can be perceived in three dimensions. The focal point of the composition are the objects installed around the neck region in the art works. The beads, are presented in the form of ropes toward the chest region, and spark plugs are used to represent pendants with necklace chain.

There is a high level of realism and semi-abstractness in the items of creativity in Onobrakpeya's works despite the stylization of form in the installation works. Images in most of the compositions have elements of vertical and horizontal shapes, as well as characteristics of various techniques used in realism. Realism as a process and an aesthetical device is evident in the works and there by offers opportunities for interpreting the symbols and motifs used when the Jewels of Nomadic Images are viewed from a certain distance, revealing an intriguing blend of cultural values.

The compositions also interpret the use of jute fibre, as the art forms that are usually used to embellish nomadic robes are were replaced with found objects, such as spark plugs as pendants, threaded hoses replaced gold chains and plastocast was used to create endless varieties of motifs.

Scavenging in a Lost Paradise (Mixed Media)

This art work is based on the scavenging of objects and a revolutionary technique in mixed media which could be referred to as environment art, because of the objects used in creating the work.

The objects used in this work also consist of art forms found within the artists immediate environment such as computer circuits including modems, CDs, bicycle chains, spark plugs pendants, motherboard pendants, car spare-part pendant, pendants made from metal foil etching and thread; beads, computer part pendant with beads, threaded hose, beaded walking stick, and raffia woven whip.

The objects hanging on the installation works are semi-realistic art forms on a panel created with sack cloths joined together in triangle and square shapes on patches of blue hues black, red, and

bluish gray background. On top of the work, three figures are fused together in yellow, with ultramarine blue, and a mixture of prussian blue around the figures. cerulean blue was also used by the artist on the panel and the beautiful colour background has different art forms created with long decorated raffia whips hanging on the left side of the composition. Also evident is a motherboard pendants, spark plug pendant, bicycle chain, and a computer circuit pendant and beaded necklace. A decorated walking stick is situated in the middle of the art work as well as what looks like a decorated machete, to right hand side. A long motherboard pendant consisting of a CD and metal foil, a computer circuit, long beads, metal foil with raffia are situated at the bottom, and, finally, a decorated raffia whip.

The composition is imaginatively reconstructed in terms of the artist's choice of objects in the creation of the art work and the ability of the artists to adapt innovative relationships side by side with the art forms created. The compositions are quite interesting and highly impressive and well organized with a touch of "playfulness-a sense of humor and ability to experiment freely" which reveals fluency and a readiness to allow the free flow of ideas (Getlein 2002. 13)

An overview of Onobrakpeya's Scavenging in a Lost Paradise reveals images of moving masquerades with strong facial expressions at the top most part of the work. The objects installed are compacted and congested, and the composition is very in a holistic manner which could be regarded as the artistic style of Bruce Onobrakpeya.

Conclusion

The mixed media installations created by Bruce Onobrakpeya are critical creative expressions of the artist which reveal his understanding of, and innovation in creativity. These installations highlight Onobrakpeya's exploration and utilization of local materials from his immediate environment to create installation art in mixed media.

The approach in Onobrakpeya's works is inspiring and creates the opportunity for greater awareness, flexibility and freedom in the use of techniques, styles and skills using improvised and recycled materials in their natural state and some times with application of colours. This study highlighted effective use of found objects such as sack cloths beads, spark plugs, cowries

bones, fibre and metal foil in the production of mixed media art works, and the interpretation of symbols and motifs.

The study portrays the economic advantage of avoiding the use of imported western manufactured objects, by resorting to the use of recycled objects in their natural colour to enhance the creation of artistic works. Onobrakpeya's mixed media installations therefore of found and the reconstruction of objects as alternatives to the imported materials for mixed media installation.

Finally, Onobrakpeya's art works help in protecting our environment; the artist is environmental friendly, and this is evident in his use of recycled materials in the creation of his art works. Clearly, his composition showcases transcultural objects or icons identified in particular geographical locations, and other materials employed in his art works are indicative of movement by their nature. For instance, some of the material used come from vehicle parts, computer parts, beads and other discarded materials. Nomadic Masquerades are a fractional aspect of the Jewels of Nomadic Images through which Onobrakpeya reveals that society could be reflected in art by using discarded materials as a point of contact to recreate creativity towards a positive change in the development of modern art in Nigeria.

Bruce Onobrakpeya's works will benefit and inspires art historians, critics, artists, students individuals, industrialists and art collectors who come in contact with them. It is my viewpoint that the artist's work will play a significant role in the future of African art and that of the rest of the world.

LIST OF FIGURES

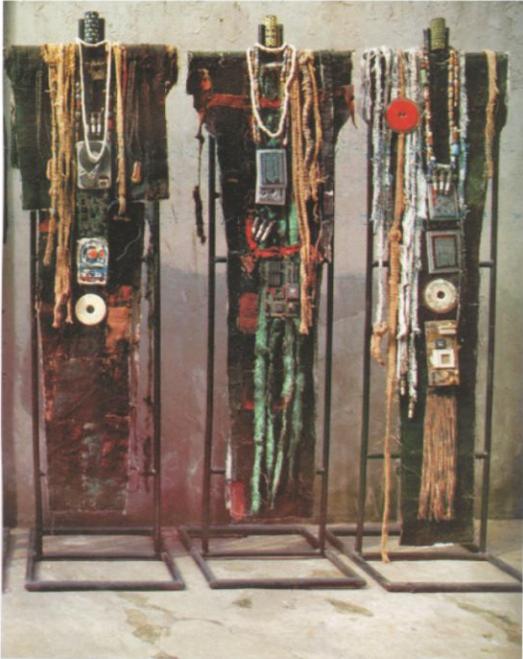


Fig. 1

Nomadic Masquerades Panels I, Vi & V

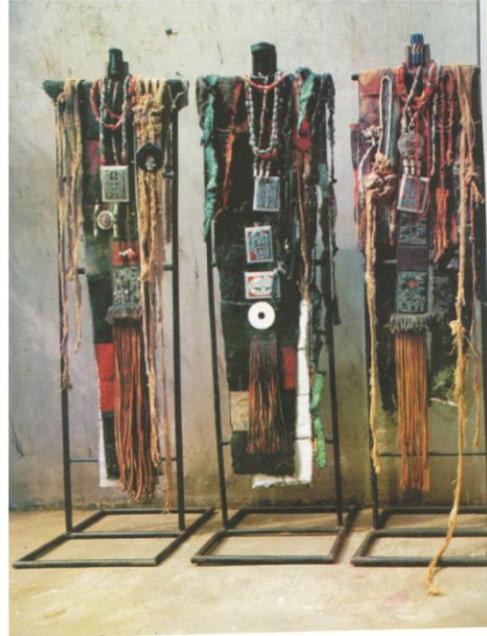


Fig. 2

Nomadic Masquerades Panels I, II & VII

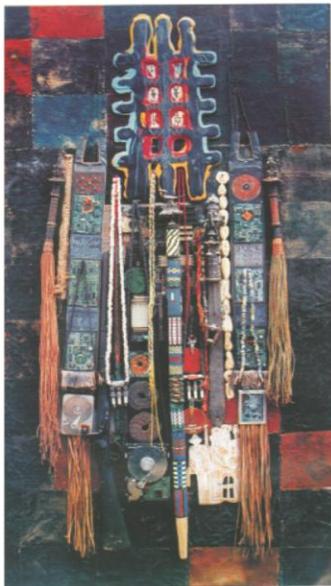


Fig. 3

**Scavenging in a Lost Paradise
(Mixed Media)**

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