OLISA NWADIOGBU: THE COMPULSIVE ARTIST AND HIS BURDEN OF IDEAS

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INTRODUCTION

Ernst Gombrich, the eminent twentieth century art historian, in his book Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance (1966) notes that the Renaissance artist "had not only to think of his commission but his mission" (cited in Mitchell, 2013:109). However, Nwadiogbu (1998) opposes this in part, stating: "Let the artist think of his mission not his commission."This is an aspect of his ideology that makes me refer to him as a compulsive artist because what inspires him is not materialism, but the divine.

Olisa Nwadiogbu (b. 1960) is a Lagos-based professional artist who has been practising full-time since 1987 after his graduation from the Institute of Management and Technology (IMT), Enugu, where he studied from 1980 to 1985 with specialization in painting. Nwadiogbu is one of the leading artists of his generation and is one of the artists who in the 1980s redefined studio art practice as a full-time engagement rather than a part-time activity. Prior to this time, all notable academically trained artists in Nigeria practised their arts on the side. These pioneers of full professionalism were favoured by a sudden rise in art patronage, described by many as an art boom. During this time – the early period of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) – many banks and finance houses were founded, and "Between 1987 and 1993 phenomenal profits were reaped by these financial bazaars simply by selling off their foreign exchange quota allocations to cash-starved commercial banks and ailing national and multinational industries. Awash with naira (the local currency) ... a number of highly paid bureaucrats of these finance houses looked to the cultural sector as an arena to flaunt their wealth" (Nzegwu, 1999:2). The boom in the art market was so intense and alluring that artist-lecturers like Sam Ovraiti, Ben Osaghae, Duke Asidere, Bona Ezeudu, Nsikak Essien resigned from their jobs. Abiodun Olaku resigned from his government job and others in advertising agencies and private establishments also left their jobs to become full-time professional artists.

The art boom in which Nwadiogbu's professional trajectory began was short-lived as the ugly consequences of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in Nigeria in mid-1987 under the dictatorship of General Ibrahim Babangida began to manifest. Nzegwu (1999:2) notes that SAP "was an economic death knell that shut down local industries and sapped the life out of [the] ordinary Nigerian." By the early 1990s, most of the new banks and finance houses were in crisis and the effects were immediately felt in the art market. As the economic crisis deepened, a number of commercial galleries went down and some professional artists who were working full-time began to look for alternative sources of income. While some artists migrated to the West, Nwadiogbu, the compulsive artist, stayed the course

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but taught art at St. John's College, Palmgrove, Lagos, from 1993 to 1996.

"Effort": A Retrospective Exhibition

"Effort" is Olisa Nwadiogbu's most expansive exhibition that held at the National Museum and Monuments, Onikan, Lagos, from November 16-20, 2014. The retrospective featured works created between 1997 and 2014. Nwadiogbu is quite eclectic and this body of works shows a range of stylistic shifts conditioned by evolution and maturity. His most recent pieces are more conceptual than his earlier works.

Nwadiogbu's works dating from 1997 to 2006 represent his engagement and exploration of traditional aesthetics and themes – referencing the Igbo in particular – expressed in stylistic modes that could be called Afro-modern. This alternative modernism with its ideological frame of synthesis is an attempt by modern African artists to negotiate between Western aesthetics and indigenous sensibilities. The earliest preeminent proponent of this attempt was Ben Enwonwu (1919-1994). Art historian and critic Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie establishes this firmly in his book Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist (2008). Ogbechie states: "Enwonwu established a template for interrogating indigenous aesthetics in modern Nigerian art through his appropriation of Igbo and Edo arts [while]...the Zarianists basically inserted their exploration of indigenous aesthetics into the existing visual language of modern Nigerian art" (2008:151-152). Nwadiogbu acquired the strategy of synthesis directly from Enwonwu, in whose studio he worked for a year (1992-1993). The well-known artist Bruce Onobrakpeya also benefitted from Enwonwu's ideas through an apprenticeship in his studio in 1962 (Pruitt, 1999:88). Nwadiogbu's artistic explorations in engraving came from his encounter with Edward Iyang's engravings in 1992. Iyang was at the time an informal student of Onobrakpeya.

Nwadiogbu's engravings deal mostly with Igbo culture, art, myth, and philosophy. Elongated and stylized figures bear some stylistic resemblance to those of Enwonwu, but they are distinguished by their firmly delineated forms. The figures found in Fulani (plate 1) resemble *Mbari* figures with their long necks, complex body designs and cylindrical structures. *Nwa Agbomma* (plate 2) portrays a young Igbo woman holding a mirror, standing before a wall with decorated *Uli* designs. Her accoutrements suggest that she is dressed for a very important event, probably her *Igba nkwu*, traditional marriage ceremony. The artist seems to have used her posture and countenance to convey the traditional concepts of beauty and chastity. Also addressing feminine beauty is a somewhat seductively posed woman with permed and blue-coloured hair who dominates the picture space in Anyanwu Ututu (plate 3). The exotic fan and multicultural symbols and designs speak of her cosmopolitan nature. The imprint of lips suggesting osculation and the texts on the pillowcase: "my love"; "I love u"; "love is blind"; I go die o", express amorous passion which could be based on either love or lust. The dialectics of love and lust are complicated by the money symbols in the lower register, an indication that the woman could either be a professional sex worker or a loose woman whose pastime is "money for hand, back for ground."



Plate 1. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Fulani, 2005. Agbomma, Acrylic on engraved tiles, 60 x 60 cm



Plate 2. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Nwa 2006. Acrylic on engraved tiles, 100 x 62 cm



Plate 3. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Anyanwu Ututu, 2006. Acrylic on engraved tiles, 105 x 120 cm

The artist's pondering on procreation and its ideas in traditional Igbo life are expressed ideologically in *Omuluzua* (1997), Ife m ebewu na otu (2005; plate 4) and *Obiechina* (2007). *Ife m ebewu na otu* is the desire by women to have many children and the artist has incorporated images of akua'ba, a fertility figure from Akan culture, Ghana, to give visual emphasis to the concept. *Anyanwu esi owelle na* (plate 5) portrays the performance of the great masquerade Mmonwu Ogonogo at sunset, an important funeral ritual for a departed initiate of the masquerade cult. "Anyanwu esi owelle na" is a dirge that the masquerade and his retinue chant to establish the transition of the initiate

from the physical realm to the spiritual realm. "Anyanwu esi owelle na" which translates as “the sun has gone through the west" is a symbolism for death. *Mmonwu Ogonogo* is an important Onitsha masquerade whose dramatic performance at Ben Enwonwu's funeral is well described by Ogbechie in his monograph on the artist (Ogbechie, 2008:213-215).

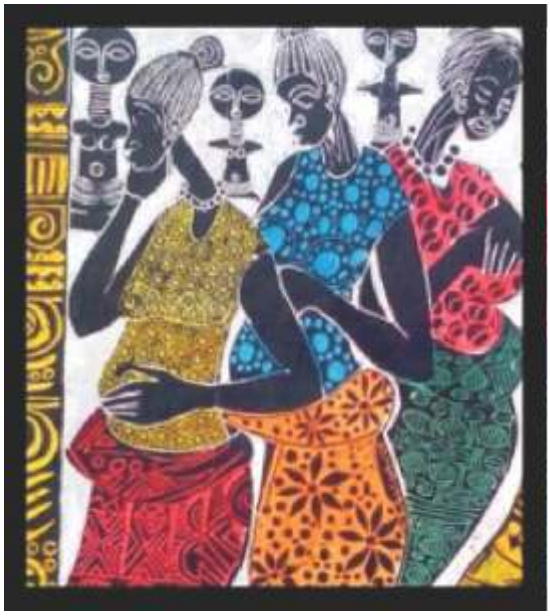


Plate 4. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Ife m ebewu na otu
2005. Acrylic on engraved tiles,
50 x 56 cm



Plate 5. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Anyanwu esi owelle na
2006. Acrylic on engraved tiles,
60 x 60 cm

Uzo Mmili (plate 6) is a vertical composition with two women coming back from the stream, carrying pots of water. Icons of royalty and the kingship institution in Igboland are the subjects of *Ife eji eme Eze* (1997; Figure 7), *Enyi bialu* (2005), *Ekwe na kpo dike* (2006), and *Onye iche na Nwaya* (2006). While these works glorify the institution of kingship in Igboland, they simultaneously question the fallacy: Igbo enwe eze, Igbo do not have kings, which according to the Igbo anthropologist and Nri-ologist, M. Angulu Onwuejeogwu, was a translation of the colonial district officer's statement after Eze Nri Obalike was compelled to abrogate “the rules of abomination related to the earth cult I sube nso ana” in August 1911 (Onwuejeogwu, 2002:23-24). Nri was a strong hegemony and the king and his agents controlled the rituals and laws of the land and the staff/symbol of ozo/eze in most parts of Igboland. After the rituals of abrogation, *isube nso*, at Eke market, Nri, the district officer told a gathering of Igbo leaders: “Now, go to your towns! You are no more under Eze Nri, You are under the king of England, Igbo have no king.” Translation: “Kita, jebenu na obodo unu! Eze Nri adi achizi unu, Eze obodo ndi ocha na achizi, Igbo enwero eze” (Ibid.:24). Onwuejeogwu has defined sixty-four kingship institutions existing in Igboland from AD900 to 1900 (Ibid.:4).

The Igbo Ukwu antiquities and the burial chamber from which a large number of them were excavated are important archeological evidence that locate kingship institution in Igboland in antiquity. In Idia (plate 8) and Ife Head (plate 9), Nwadiogbu has used classical Benin and Ife portraits to valorize the creative and technological ingenuity of these ancient cultures which the West in early period tried to deny (see Quartey, 2010: 5-15). In each of the works, the iconic portrait is framed with compact design. The multicoloured design that

frames the image of Queen Idia reflects her femininity; while the two strips of design that border the portrait of the Oba bespeak the austere grandeur of the ancient



Plate 6:
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Uzo Mmili,
2006.
Acrylic on engraved tiles
119 x 36 cm

The Christian icons of dove and tongues of flame – symbols of peace and the Holy Spirit – are key elements in Peace Lady (plate 10) and Born Again (Pentecost) (Figure 11). Born Again (Pentecost) is a horizontal composition with eleven heads of men and women with some looking like traditional masks. In their multitude, they convey the large conversion of Africans to the Christian faith and the fundamentalist phenomenon of being born-again. The act of isolating the faces could be a metaphorical expression of schism that is very common in Pentecostal churches. Yet, the isolation of the faces could be read as the falling apart of African peoples and cultures due to the coming



Plate 7.
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Ife eji eme Eze,
1997.
Acrylic on engraved tiles,
60 x 60 cm

of Christianity. Obierika of Things Fall Apart bemoans: "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe, 1958:124-125). Some have argued that materialism is a product of Western colonialism, neocolonialism and capitalism, and that the deification of money is today a predominating factor in various spiritual, social, academic, and economic institutions. Nwadiogbu has problematized materialism in Spirit of Money (Plate 12) where a female figure in spite of her material opulence looks

downcast and unhappy. The works in this exhibition dating from 1997 to 2006 are engraved plates, beautifully coloured with vibrant hues of yellow, blue, red, green, brown, white, and black. His use of cultural and indigenous forms in these works represents an Afrocentric aesthetic philosophy and the idea of an authentic modern African art that prevailed from the independence years to the late 1990s and into the 21st century. In the mid-1990s, Simon Ottenberg, an American scholar, noted the pressure on modern African artists to produce works with African themes (cited in Vogel, 2012:100). However, that has now changed and "In the twenty-first century, international curators have gradually come to value the intrinsic originality and interest of art from cultural contexts outside the Western mainstream, and no longer demand that artworks be recognizably African (though it never hurts)" (Vogel, 2012:100). It is within this ideological grid that Nwadiogbu's current creative explorations unfold.



Plate 10. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Idia, 2007,Acrylic on engraved tiles,
125 x 86 cm



Plate 11. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Ife Head, 2007. Acrylic on engraved tiles, 106 x 106 cm



Plate 8. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Peace Lady, 2005.
Acrylic on engraved tiles,
84 x 26 cm

Plate 9. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Born Again (Pentecost),
2006. Acrylic on engraved tiles,
26 x 100 cm



The works Head of a Seer (Plate 13) and City Girls (Plate 14) represent a transition period from African modernism to a more global modernism. Both works are sketchy and playful. Head of a Seer is a self-portrait that shows a conceptual and ideological shift from cultural themes to contemporary concerns of identity construction and interrogation. In this period, the artist begins to look critically at his cosmopolitan space and the City Girls attests to this critical aesthetic epiphany.

The encumbered spirit of the artist is finally let loose and what we get from Nwadiogbu in 2014 are largely automatized expressions that evoke aspects of abstract expressionism, fauvism, and surrealism. They are gestural, playful but serious. The soul of the artist predominates in this oeuvre and the visual expressions substantiate Finley Eversole's understanding that, "The soul sees the road ahead and, when allowed expression through the creative arts, can bring forth works of deep prophetic insight" (Eversole, 2009:xiii).



Figure 14. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
City Girls, 2013. Acrylic on canvas,
123 x 123 cm



Plate 12. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Spirit of Money, 2005
Acrylic on engraved tiles,
120 x 38 cm



Plate13. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Head of a Seer, 2013.
Mixed media
121 x 121 cm

While exploring the techniques of dripping, dribbling, splattering, and splashing of paint on the support, Nwadiogbu relies on automatism which allows him to draw on his unconscious mind. The resulting works are largely fortuitous expressions that are engaging in their evocation. alley of Decision (Plate 15) looks like a landscape with a flowing river and a tectonic surrounding with fields of colours interlocking like a jigsaw puzzle. As it is above, so it is below Plate 16) is a dramatic nonobjective artwork that evokes the concept of sameness or law of correspondence. The colours and forms in the lower area appear to mirror those in the upper space, with an overall effect that is soothing.

VAn inferno and a serpentine streak of white appear in Flowing with milk and honey (Plate 17), raising the question of whether there can be milk and honey – metaphors for riches and wealth – in a burning space? The answer is yes, and Nigeria is an example. The schizophrenic state of Nigeria and most of its citizens can be read in Hot Afternoon (Plate 18), a metaphor for extreme discomfort. Ultimate Search 1 (Plate 19) displays densely layered gestural forms and colours that recalls the work of Jackson Pollock, the iconic abstract expressionist. Pollock like Nwadiogbu was a figurative painter before he went into abstract/nonobjective painting.

The artist, although not a worshipper of a sun god, pays homage to the presiding deity of the solar system in Sun God (Plate 20). The ethereal quality of the work stimulates what has elsewhere been referred to as “cosmic solar consciousness” (Okwuosa, 2011:17). In Black Singer (Plate 21) and Two Musketeers (Plate 22), Nwadiogbu explores the sgraffito technique in establishing basic facial features. Both works are fantasies that merge abstraction and figuration with elements of surrealism and fauvism.



Plate 15. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Valley of Decision, 2014.
Acrylic on canvas, 73 x 82 cm



Plate 16.
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
As it is above,
so it is below,
2014. Acrylic on
canvas,
132 x 92 cm



Figure 17. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Flowing with milk and honey
2014. Acrylic on canvas,
125 x 110 cm



Figure 18.
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Hot Afternoon,
2014. Acrylic on canvas,
122 x 92 cm



Figure 19. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Ultimate Search I, 2014.
Acrylic on canvas,
122 x 92 cm



Figure 21.
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Black Singer, 2014
Acrylic on canvas,
70 x 81cm



Figure 20. Olisa Nwadiogbu. Sun God, 2014.
Enamel, spray paint and acrylic on canvas,
186 x 122 cm



Figure 22. Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Two Musketeers
Acrylic on canvas,
93 x 81cm

The latest works coming out of Nwadiogbu's studio represented by Road (Plate 23), plays with the idea of recycling. Ogbechie in his essay entitled "Osahenye Kainebi and The Conundrum of Contemporary Painting" notes that, "Anatsui's success as a globally validated installation artist is driving modern Nigerian art in an entirely new direction. The new focus on recycling in contemporary Nigerian and African Art bespeaks this paradigmatic shift" (Ogbechie, 2009:n.p.). Nwadiogbu's explorations in this stream are idiosyncratic and reflect his dynamic and eclectic aesthetic



Figure 23.
Olisa Nwadiogbu.
Road, 2014. Plastic bottles,
acrylic on panel,
186 x 186 cm

CONCLUSION

Appropriately entitled "Effort," this display is a critical survey of some of the important periods in Nwadiogbu's professional practice. The artist's consistent effort has brought about interesting bodies of works that are evocative and entertaining as well as educational. Nwadiogbu's resolution to stay the course reminds me of Krishna's (God's) instruction in the Bhagavad-gita 3.15: "It is far better to discharge one's prescribed duties, even though faultily, than another's duties perfectly. Destruction in the course of performing one's own duty is better than engaging in another's duties, for to follow another's path is dangerous" (Prabhupada, 1986:202). Olisa Nwadiogbu, the compulsive artist, shows us a life well spent in exploration.

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