

Three of a Kind: Looking at the Styles and Techniques of Three Nigerian Contemporary Sculptors

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DOI: 10.56201/ijgem.v10.no11.2024.pg74.81

Abstract

The study examines the recent sculpture pieces of three contemporary Nigerian artists in terms of style, techniques, media and to a certain extent theme. These sculptors are Adeola Balogun (b. 1966), Kenneth Njoku (b.1972) and Sulayman Taiw (b.1967). The objective is to see if there are similarities or differences, having been artistically raised in the same historical period, and other reasons for such, to ultimately shed light on their works for collectors, analysts and general education on sculpture pieces. The method is by direct- object study coupled with descriptive survey after intense study of their catalogues, interviews and direct observation of works in their studios. The results show three artists in one genre who apparently work in isolation yet reflecting significant technical cum stylistic mutuality. The works invariably, expresses the unity of spirit of an epoch with its infinite technologies of sculptured image rendition. The material usage show strong resolutiwit to maximize homebred resources. Training background seems to be responsible for similarities noticed as all trained at the Delta State University and the University of Benin; religious beliefs differed but is not traceable in their choice of themes. The study has tried to explain other factors responsible for this for enlightenment and progress in the discipline.

Keywords: style, techniques, materials, themes, contemporary sculptors.

Introduction

Sculpture has been a core aspect of the visual arts since the advent of image making. It is conjectured to have appeared at the third stage of the evolution of image making after body decorations and mural (Aniakor,2005). Sculpture is also at the pristine artistic needs of modern man as an object of faith substantiation, referant for “other” authority, survival and sucour for personal achievement. Proof of these claims abound from in prehistoric relics to most current artistic expressions across the continents. Early man painted, sculpted, mimed situations and sang with regard to all the above. Nowhere as Africa has art been effectively and for a long time been

integrated into other aspects of life more than it is today globally. By contemporary sculptors, is meant sculptors working in Nigeria and elsewhere in the last fifty years remaining relevant on current issues in the main. It is equally important to note that in Nigeria attention to the generation of artists born since 1960s as academic subject is not adequate for many reasons. Worse still for those younger than that, yet they are now very active on the art scene globally. One of such reasons is the short supply of particular studies of individual artists such as these sculptors. This underscores the necessity for this study.

Over the years art has evolved according to man's shift in ideologies, technical discoveries and intercultural exchanges amongst other factors. It is important to note that each historical era of human existence had its material, ideological and spiritual preferences and exploits. These historical contexts are reflected in the art of such era more than several other activities of man. This amongst other reasons is why art is and will remain a document of history (Kleinbauer, W.E. 1982). The recorder of these activities, the artist deserves to be understood so that his documents will be better appreciated and utilized. The justification for the study of artists and their works can therefore, not be overemphasized.

Through search of works in published exhibition catalogues solo or group, few books published on them enough of each artists' important works were studied for this paper. Study visits were undertaken during which interviews were conducted with each artist. These interviews centred on their techniques of art making, motivation, stylistic approach and preferred themes. The historical contexts in which these artists grew was a strong mould in determining the evolution of their work pattern. Nigeria from the 1970s up to the mid 1990s was a prosperous country with good educational systems, booming economy, accommodating diverse social, cultural, technical and ideological leanings but also the contradiction at the same time. They saw the oil boom and its doom, good government and bad government abundance and scarcity. This was the period these artists grew up and was thus influenced by the conditions. They trained in some of the foremost art schools in Nigeria, the Universities of Benin Benin City and the Delta State University Abraka mainly with complimentary exposure at Yaba and Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. These experiences are reflected in the works showing how relevant the works are to their historical contexts and how the artists are products of the period.

Adeola Balogun has worked in my *college – trained* style of naturalism in the production of portraits for his clients. This is usual for all fine artists in Nigeria so as to satisfy their patrons many of whom are only barely visually literate. Even when he began to deviate from matter of fact naturalism to abstraction the need to carry along his patrons was important to him. However, he dwells in the stylistic waters of *stylization*. He begins with the recognizable then embellishes with all manner of textures, masses and voids but the naturally, recognizable motif still remains.

Adeola is a master of discarded materials and unarguably one of the best metal sculptors in Nigeria today. He uses waste metal scraps which he *up circles* to useful art making media. He uses wrought iron, steel, aluminum, polyester and foil in his sculpture exploits. He believes in the concept of

waste to wealth in a consumerism culture such as contemporary Nigeria the wasted excesses should be retrieved for directed purpose. His techniques include stitching, piping, hook and lock, weaving and stapling especially when working with used lithographic plates.

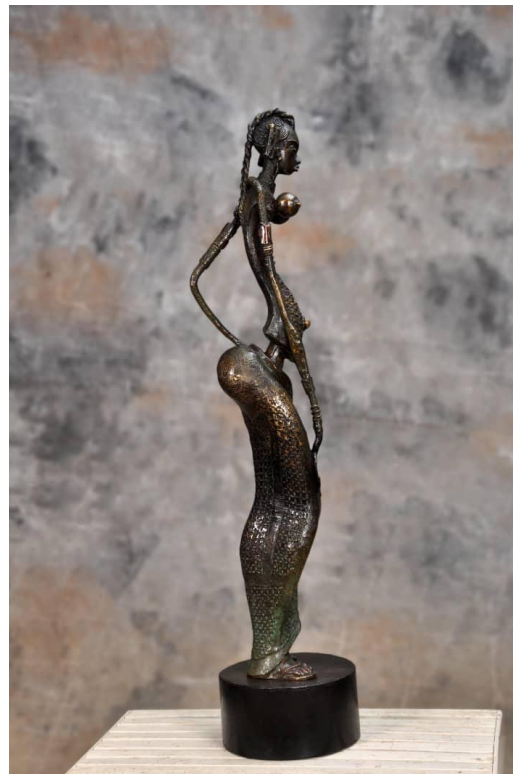
“My artistic philosophy is pivoted on the need to see every discarded material as a veritable universal metaphor and medium of interrogating myriads of socio-political and cultural issues I feel strongly about. I usually acknowledge the laden history and morphology of previously owned materials as inspiring interventions in my creative trajectory and sensibilities. The validation of these tangible rejects in my work usually heightens my visual deliberations profoundly”.

“Regarding my artistic mentors, I have a vast number of them that it will be difficult for me to mention them all because I have them both at local and foreign levels. However, I can not but mention those that I encountered in the course of my academic pursuit beginning at the Yaba College of Technology. This was my foundation. These personalities included Tolu Filani, a notable sculptor in the genre of humanoid sculpture, the Late God'stime Nwaji who introduced me to welded sculpture, Peter Coker, Olu Amoda and Raqib Bashorun are also recognized”.



Fig. 1. Balogun, O. Adeola, Supreme Mechanism, 150cm, 2020.

Njoku Kenneth is also notable for good draughtsmanship with his chosen sculpture medium



beginning with clay and wax with which he creates his model for casting. Even working with direct cement his mastery of imitative art is protean. He has produced numerous portraits of dignitaries

Fig. 2. Njoku Kenneth Bust of Agiame Atuwashi II Olu of Itsekiri Fig. 3. Njoku Kenneth Puberty, metal 94cm Ht. 2020

across Nigeria with tremendous accuracy. But off the survival instinct of doing the will of patrons, Njoku is an *abstract expressionist*. He believes, “that as an African expressionism is the artist natural creative nest. He does not have to contemplate how to go about it, it comes almost spontaneously “(2023). He carries the double garb of a *photo realist* and *abstract expressionist* depending on the task. For instance, as a devout catholic he has created many images of Holy Mary for many parishes in realistic form while his abstract expressionist forms are in many collections worldwide.” I enjoy the abrupt transition of volumes in African sculptures. The dominance and emphasis of double curved surfaces, the sharp distinction and contrast of concave and convex surfaces, the exaggerated features on the trunks and other minor forms. This Consciousness was

inspired by my supervisor Mr Ellis Erimona during my MFA degree in uniben in 2002. He sent me to my village to understudy the art elements and sculpture features of the ochii people of igbo extraction. My findings resulted in the fusion of these elements to western Aesthetics in Sculpture especially movement. It's like adding movement to static igbo sculptures. This resulted in what I will tag highbreedized sculptures.”

“My birthday is 3rd March 1972.: I prefer to retain the visual culture of my people in my works rather than seeing things strictly from western viewpoints. Mr. erimona ones told me to speak of what i know about my culture and allow others to project theirs.

Ken Njoku speaking further on his creative philosophy says; “In another stance, I regard making portraiture as copying either from pictures or other references. It requires skills but not as much skill as creating artworks in the sense of African artists who emphasize originality. I enjoy the freedom of exaggeration by the African wood carver who boldly ignores the anatomical possibilities of the human structure and expresses independently human forms in his own dialect.” The above elaborate statement was harvested during several of our interviews with the artist in his studio at Ugbiyoko, off Ekhehuan road Benin City.

Fig. 4. Njoku Kenneth, Mother and child, metal, 67cm Ht.2008



Fig. 5. Njoku Kenneth,



meditation, Bronze, 50cm Ht. 2019

He uses cement fondu, wrought iron, bronze, polyester and wood effectively. He is an adept in discarded materials of all sorts. He is a meticulous bronze caster in the Benin tradition.



Fig. 6. Sullayman Taiwo, *Royal Dance*, Stone, 49cm Ht. 2007



Fig. 7. Suleiman, *Knowledge*, Bronze, 15cm Ht. 2007.

Sullayman, Taiwo as all *college – trained* artists in Nigeria has been exposed to mainstream Euro- American visual arts. They begin with it then later remember that there are art traditions in their parent culture then they reluctantly begin to return to it. To some a reasonable synthesis is achieved like Sullayman but to many it's an escape from rigorous practice in either modes. Sullayman is strong in the Euro – American convention which he synthesizes with the later day African tradition. He is largely a college – trained western - regarding modernist. He is still enchanted by such concepts as *simulacra simulation* of Jean Baudrillard. His themes can thus be understood better from perspective of imitation even when he tries to abstract forms. This you can see in supposedly abstract work titled *Knowledge* (2010). This tendency is nakedly obvious in another work, *Besides a Successful Man* (2021) also cast in bronze.



Fig. 8. Suleiman Taiwo, *Beside a successful Man*, Bronze, 47cm Ht. 2021.

Sullayman is a stone carver, with forays into artificial stone, combination of metal and stone, wood and metal, polyester but also works bronze.

Conclusion

The crux of this paper has been the analytic examination of selected works of three active contemporary sculptors born and bred in Nigeria from the second half of the twentieth century. These artists are Adeola Balogun, Kenneth Njoku and Sullayman Taiwo. Of note is their training in the most resourceful art departments in Nigeria in the last three decades which enabled them to be taught or and mentored by very good brains in the art ecosystem. The artists belong to the set of born since independence who have appeared significantly on the art scene beginning from two decades thereafter but the literature has not given them adequate highlights. Yet the historical context of the era was loaded with events which conditioned and continue to shape the aesthetics and content of art in Nigeria. Prominent amongst these, is the harsh economic conditions imposed by incompetent rulers and the wrong policies they operate. The waste to wealth material sourcing theory was a direct impact of this economic hardship. But our artists through creativity turned it into a regime of innovation in sculpture media adoption, improvisation and synthesis. Thematically, the artists mirrored the thoughts, feeling and social economic conditions of the people. Some other iconographic allusions of the influences have been highlighted in the analyses of the works of the three sculptors studied.

These artists exhibit mutuality in the sourcing and use of sculpture materials. All three work in metal but at differing levels of intensity and technical competence. Njoku appeared to be foremost bronze caster amongst them. Sullayman is a matter of fact *naturalist* loves stone real or simulated and has excelled in it in addition to grafting of cement and metal. Adeola can be described as an *abstract* artist and ó invariably has a higher passion for metal discards, metallic machinery accessories like, nuts bolts, joints, rings, pipes etc. All are well trained in the mainstream western sculpture techniques and representative mode. Njoku an *abstract expressionist* has returned to his roots in expressive art. He still uses western style at the request of his clients when portraiture is involved. Significantly, he is not pedestrian in the rendition of subject matter. His other colleagues are not yet out of that domain. Adeola has seen the gains and expressive freedom in stylization but is still tied to the apron strings of verisimilitude. But his introduction of colour in his works like his colleagues is liberative from the austere monochromatic appearance of many sculpture pieces. In all these sculptors, contemporaries in many respects, are indeed three of a kind.

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