

Archiving Nigerian Contemporary Existential Realities: Ben Osaghae and His Dialectical Paintings

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Abstract

A greater percentage of contemporary art practice in Nigeria has been adjudged by major Nigerian and foreign art critics, writers, historians and curators to be ahistorical/apolitical and lacking in critical and cutting edge 21st century art making strategies that are prevalent in the West and elsewhere. And although most contemporary Nigerian artists that practice at home use primarily the modernist formalistic modes in expressing concepts that some people consider prosaic and anachronistic, a few of them still engage the contemporary socioeconomic and political experiences and among this small band of artists is Ben Osaghae. Hence, this paper is a critical analysis and contextualization of Osaghae's paintings that deal with our collective postcolonial experiences which are more abysmal than pleasant.

Keywords: contemporary Nigerian art, postcolonial existential realities, oil subsidy, corruption, moral and social perversion.

1. Introduction

Modern man has been able to understand a great deal about ancient cultures through their visual arts. In other words, a work of art is a visual archive that reveals aspects of a people's social mores and collective experiences. Within the context of the contemporary, some critical observations have shown that much of the art being produced today in Nigeria are in "stasis... 'apolitical'... 'ahistorical,' existing largely in a contextual and temporal vacuum" (Silva, 2009) although some might argue otherwise. However, how can we understand our contemporary existential challenges through mimetic paintings of Fulani milkmaids, Eyo masquerades, traditional dancers, and other idyllic scenes that are more anachronistic than contemporary? Even as some contemporary Nigerian artists engage contemporary quotidian realities in their art, their style is criticized/devalued since many international critics and some national critics have questioned the currency of the predominately modernistic styles used in mediating these contemporary experiences. Thus, the critical and pertinent questions are first, whose responsibility is it to determine and define what is relevant and what is outmoded? And second, "why is it that contemporary African art needs to "go to the West" before it can be appreciated in Africa?" (Castellote, 2012, p. 25).

The recently published book, *Contemporary Nigerian Art in Lagos Private Collection: New Trees in an Old Forest* (2012) is a locally funded project that attempts to validate local contemporary Nigerian aesthetic canons as against the hegemonic Western-oriented artistic paradigms currently propagated by the Western art oligarchy and their apostles. Comparing the two sides of the divide, Jess Castellote, the editor of the book writes:

Looking at the works actually collected in Nigeria, something calls our attention immediately. The view of contemporary Nigerian art that emerges is radically different from the one portrayed in recent books on contemporary art in the continent, for instance: Contemporary African Art Since 1980 (Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu), African Art Now (the Pigozzi Collection), Angaza Afri[k]a: African Art Now (by Chris Spring). Even a cursory glimpse shows the seemingly unbridgeable gap between one set of works and the other. These are two "worlds" with differing theoretical and practical approaches. (p. 25)

Out of a total of some 267 images of artworks by more than 70 artists from 30 major private collections in Lagos, Ben Osaghae has 12 images, making him the most represented artist in the volume. The high number of Osaghae's paintings in this book authenticates their quality and popularity; hence, one can assert that Ben Osaghae is an important contemporary Nigerian artist with a modernist tilt and this essay engages his practice as an archivist of modern Nigerian socio-political and economic experiences.

Ben Osaghae was born in 1962 in the ancient city of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria. He trained at Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State, Nigeria and graduated in 1986 specializing in painting. He taught painting, life drawing and history of art at his alma mater between 1991 and 1995 after which he voluntarily resigned to have more time for his studio practice. Osaghae is currently based in Egbeda, Lagos, Nigeria where he paints as a full-time studio artist. Osaghae's contemporary/modernist paintings are obvious in their critical interrogation and documentation of Nigerian postcolonial experiences; and by engaging topical existential issues, his paintings become mementos of our contemporary experiences. Unlike most contemporary Nigerian art which has been described as static, apolitical and ahistorical, "existing largely in a contextual and temporal vacuum" (Silva, 2009), Osaghae's paintings have their roots in our collective postcolonial experiences; hence, they exist in "real space" rather than a "temporal vacuum." Writing on the artist and his works, Kunle Filani (2010) notes that:

Ben maintains a measured balance between reality and illusion. He develops the intellectual offerings in tandem with the emotional outpouring, thereby lending robust aesthetic credence to social understanding ... For an artist who trained in a skill-oriented polytechnic, it is remarkable how well he developed himself intellectually. (p. 4)

Osaghae's intellectual capacity is very evident in the titles of his works with their descriptive and poetic nuances. He says: "My titles are very poetic. I place a lot of premium on my titles so as to poetise the paintings" (Osaghae, 2012). He further notes that he has always been intrigued by such titles as El Anatsui's *The Ancestors Converged Again* (1995). To Osaghae, a good title "beautifies an artwork" (Osaghae, 2012). Titles are so important and central to Osaghae's art making strategy that they serve as "preliminary sketches" from which the real works evolve. Osaghae's predilection for socio-political issues places him on a stage where very few contemporary Nigerian artists can be found. According to him, his paintings don't sell fast and he sees this as a worthy price to pay for posterity (Osaghae, 2012). In another context he states that, "Perseverance is the name of the game" (Osaghae, 2010, p. 30). Unlike Osaghae, most contemporary Nigerian artists would rather produce paintings on common and trite themes like market women and milkmaids than deal with contemporary socio-political issues that are not as saleable. Sylvester Ogbegie captures the situation when he says: "The landscape of Nigerian art today is full of moribund ideas and practices, laden with regressive forms from artists who are not focused enough on professional development or too focused on commercial success" (Ogbegie, 2009).

2. Engaging the Postcolonial Realities

Chika Okeke (2009, p. 34) notes that: "In many parts of Africa, political independence brought utopian dreams that soon crumbled under the burden of postcolonial realities." And Chinua Achebe in his last book *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* (2012, p. 51) states that: "Within six years of this tragic colonial manipulation, Nigeria was a cesspool of corruption and misrule. Public servants helped themselves freely to the nation's wealth. Elections were blatantly rigged." Achebe (2012) also elaborated on how the British colonial government rigged and manipulated the first elections to favour Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first prime minister.

To most Nigerians and others, Nigeria is a perfect example of a warped and failed postcolonial dream, a quintessential example of dystopia. Nigeria is a practical example of the Igbo saying, "To be in the river and be blinded by soapy water." With Nigeria's enormous natural and human resources, we really should be ashamed of our current state irrespective of what the British colonial government did or did not do. But more than fifty years after independence, Nigeria has remained burdened by various forms of socioeconomic and political challenges that have become hydra-headed monsters -- the embezzlement or mismanagement of public funds, nepotism, tribalism, and religious conflicts. The consequences of these factors weigh heavily on the masses and the challenges of survival are enormous. According to Ben Atonko and Mohammed Shosanya (2009):

Though Nigeria is the 7th exporter of crude oil with about 38.6 billion crude oil reserves, a large percentage of the citizens hardly enjoys the benefits of being an oil producer ... Nigeria's per litre price of petrol is ₦65 and this was arrived at after intense lobby by pressure groups in the country. In several OPEC members, citizens pay less than 50 percent of what is paid in Nigeria. In Saudi Arabia, it is about ₦18. Most nations sell below 50 cents per litre and have not tampered with the pump price of the product in recent time.

In contrast, the Nigerian situation is the opposite of what obtains in other OPEC member countries. One of the incessant increases in the price of petroleum products happened on January 1, 2012. On this day a litre of petrol jumped from ₦65 to ₦141, a 116% increase due to the removal of a subsidy on petroleum products which some Nigerians

believe is a fiction. And, according to Professor Tam David-West--a petroleum minister during the era of General Muhammadu Buhari and minister of Mines, Power and Steel in the General Ibrahim Babangida government: "[T]here is no oil subsidy. Oil subsidy in Nigeria is fiction, it doesn't exist and it is a fraud" (David-West, 2011).

The January 1, 2012, increase appears to be the largest that Nigerians have been subjected to and it took an excruciating nationwide protest tagged *Occupy Nigeria* to force the federal government to bring the official petrol price down to ₦97 per litre. However, Nigerians have continued to buy the product at much higher prices in most places. The official and unofficial increment of petroleum product prices which is a perennial problem in the annals of our history as a nation-state is the theme of Osaghae's painting titled *Pump Price*, 2009 (Figure 1). Within a blue background, images of detached tankers are seen in stationary positions indicating a strike by the tanker drivers which usually brings protests from the poor populace who bear the brunt the most. The insensitive increment of the price of the petroleum products, particularly kerosene which the yellow colour on the tanker tails symbolizes, is an act that further impoverishes those who are already poor. Most Nigerians use kerosene for cooking and any increase in price or scarcity weighs heavily on the populace. Currently, people buy the product between ₦120 to ₦150 even though the official pump price is ₦50 per litre. The collaged materials of newspaper and magazine cutouts extend the narrative of the painting while a dry pump nozzle facing a closed jerry can objectifies its subject.

Accusations of profiteering by a certain cabal from the "oil subsidy" seems to inform *Oil Addicts*, 2011, (Figure 2). The figures pushing the petrol tanker becomes a metaphoric expression of how far those smuggling the "subsidized petroleum products" out of Nigeria are ready to go to sustain their illegal business while millions of others suffer the consequences of the scarcity and the resulting inflation.



Figure 1. Pump Price, 2009, Mixed media, 122 x 122 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. Oil Addicts, 2011, Mixed media, 102 x 135 cm
Photo: The author

Using the gestural pose of a male figure in the painting *Pressing for a Living*, 2005, (Figure 3) Osaghae demonstrates the intense pressure or energy necessary for survival in Nigeria. A representation of a pressing iron in the composition reinforces the verb "pressing" found in the title. A cropped hand at the left suggests demanding hands of mistress or

dependents. And within the overwhelming yellow space, the murmurings of the hardworking man whose salary is never sufficient appear as illegible script. In this context, the bold strokes with their visual reference to fauvism become metaphors for the resilient spirit of the average Nigerian. This fauvist element is a common feature in Osaghae's paintings. He also captures the spirit of most Nigerians in the painting *Every Truck Pusher Has a Name*, 1999 (Figure 4). In this composition, four male truck pushers in different kinetic postures engage the picture plane. The diagonal handles of the trucks imprison and confine them in a vortex of menial labour. Two legs terminate in feet wearing shoes. One figure smokes a cigarette, evoking contradictory feelings of dignity and addiction. The dripped murky colour that tend to divide the painting horizontally could be read as dreadlocks and their long lengths an objectification of the length of their hardship and labour. Furthermore, the quick brush strokes and red hues amplify the raw energy and motion generated in this work. There's something interesting going on with the overlapping figures that complicate our understanding of actually how many figures are represented and what they are doing. Energy is also generated by the failure of the picture plane to hold or contain the figures. Exploring the element of line, Osaghae displays his understanding of the human form; and with threadlike lines, he not only delineates the contours of the forms but also weaves the spaces in between and around the forms to create an illusion of multiple movements, an essential element of futurism. This is more obvious in *The Clean Shave II*, 2003, (Figure 5).



Figure 3. Pressing for a Living, 2005, Oil on canvas, 122 x 90 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Every Truck pusher has a Name, 1999, Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 137 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. The Clean Shave II, 2003, Oil on canvas, 134 x 112 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. Job Hunt, 2010, Oil on canvas, 120 x 100 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

In Nigeria, the percentage of the unemployed has risen steadily over the years. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) the unemployment rate in Nigeria increased to 23.9% in 2011 from 21.1% recorded in 2010. The record for 2009 was 19.7% (Nwachukwu, 2012). In *Job Hunt*, 2010, (Figure 6), Osaghae uses the act of drawing water from a well, a quotidian engagement of many Nigerians whose major sources of water are privately dug wells and boreholes as a metaphor to question the challenges of unemployment and class differences. Here a wretch of the nation assumes the pose of drawing water from a well but without a bucket while two buckets dangle over him. These buckets could be interpreted as metaphors for the qualifications needed for employment or participating in the national economy. Locating the buckets in the upper section of the composition contextualizes them as the property of members of the upper class or the bourgeoisie. The wretch, exploited by this same class of people, is the product of a corrupt and ineffective leadership. The exploitation of these wretches is even more dramatically and metaphorically explored in *The Weekend Shave*, 2004, (Figure 7). Here a man displays intense agony and pain, as he sits tensely in a chair while a pair of hands representing the bourgeoisie, the government, his dependents, and Western capitalism “shave” him clean of whatever he earned during the week. His disarray is made more disturbing by the careless strokes of colour that suggest

his cloak. At the right, another wretch leans forward holding a mirror in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. He appears to be mopping the dripping sweat from his chin. With the mirror as an icon of reportage, this figure represents the "independent" print/electronic media commentator who suffers the same fate as his fellows but bears the responsibility of recording these unpleasant postcolonial experiences and burdens.



Figure 7. The Weekend Shave, 2004, Oil on canvas, 100 x 87.5 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. Law is Beautiful Business, 2011, Oil on canvas, 112 x 134 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

3. Animalized and Baphometric Forms as Metaphors for Degradation

Osaghae also uses animalized and Baphometric forms in his dialectical paintings to show the depth of moral and social perversion in our society today. Many attribute the current condition of most Africans to Western colonialism and continuing neocolonialism. However, the Veda, while recognizing that a man must reap what he sows, and that the individual man is the causative agent under karmic law, it posits that man lives currently in *Kali yuga*, the age of quarrel and hypocrisy. The *kali yuga* is predominated by irreligion and pervasion of ethical values. In *Srimad Bhagavatam* 12.3.30, it is stated that, "When there is a predominance of cheating, lying, sloth, sleepiness, violence, depression, lamentation, bewilderment, fear and poverty, that age is Kali, the age of the mode of ignorance" (Swami Prabhupada, 1993, p. 84). In *Srimad Bhagavatam* 12.2.2 it is also stated that, "In the Kali-yuga, wealth alone will be considered the sign of a man's good birth, proper behaviour and fine qualities. And law and justice will be applied only on the basis of

one's power" (Swami Prabhupada, 1993, p. 30). Unfortunately, Nigeria appears to be a very good example of this. The powerful and influential live above the law and our legislative houses are spaces where dishonourable lawmakers display their rascality.

Furthermore, one may argue that the quarrelsome and materialistic nature of the people of this age are foundational in the unbridled desire of most parents to have their children train as lawyers. And Osaghae's painting *Law is Beautiful Business*, 2011, (Figure 8) captures this regressive reality with its engendering voyeuristic pleasures. This painting shows what appears to be a court session with lawyers as apes. The ape-like lawyers are happy benefitting from other people's troubles and quarrels. The objects and forms in the composition appear to float in an intergalactic space, a common feature of Osaghae's paintings.

Corruption in Nigeria pervades all institutions including the judiciary. Thus, it should come as no surprise that most Nigerians don't trust the judicial system because of the many cases of miscarriage of justice and the constant use of the judiciary by the influential and the powerful to cover up and even legitimize their atrocities. Osaghae expresses this theme covertly in a painting titled *Miscarriage of Justice*, 2004, (Figure 9) by rendering a figure that appears to be the Chief Justice of the Federal Republic of Nigeria or some other person in a governmental position as an ape. The ape-like figure sits behind a desk with a green-white-green emblem, surrounded by five human-like figures who appear to agree slavishly to whatever decisions he takes. Osaghae made such a perceived degradation of today's man the central theme of his solo exhibition titled "Man to Apes" which showed at the Goethe Institut, Lagos, Nigeria in 2000. He stated that:

Man to Apes is a reaction against the moral and spiritual degeneracy in which [m]an is enmeshed at the moment. The decadence manifests in the unfathomable depths of avarice and of human animosities which have precipitated violence and warfare on a genocidal scale. Consequently, [m]an has become something of a spiritual midget, dwarfed by this escalating crisis. (Osaghae, 2000)



Figure 9. *Miscarriage of Justice*, 2004, Oil on canvas, 110 x 122 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Artists such as Jane Alexander, a South African (b. 1959) and Nandipha Mntambo another South African born in 1982 have also explored and synthesized human and animal features in their art, creating grotesque and Baphometric forms. Commenting on their art, Art Historians Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu (2009, p. 49) write: "Jane Alexander and Nandipha Mntambo ... plunge into a phantasmagoria in which the human and the animal are engineered into hybrid machines that expose the limits of the rationality of humanism as the threshold of social recognition." They further observe that:

At the core of ... [their] work is the relationship between representation and the real. But it also concerns how art is powerfully deployed to examine complex sociopolitical conditions and to comment on the emergent aesthetic approaches to imagining, figuring, and translating the body politics. (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009, p. 50)

The body politic of the postcolonial African nation-states is highly problematic. Focusing on Nigeria, Chinua Achebe in his book *The Trouble With Nigeria* (1983, p. 1) notes that, "The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a

failure of leadership." He further states that, "The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership" (Achebe, 1983, p. 1). The centrality of self-example in leadership affairs is captured in Bhagavad-Gita chapter 3, text 21 thus: "Whatever action a great man performs, common men follow. And whatever standards he sets by exemplary acts, all the world pursues" (Swami Prahupada, 1986, p. 186). The negative influence of African, nay Nigerian, leaders through acts of rascality and hooliganism is captured by Osaghae in the piece titled *Area-Boy Democracy*, 2007, (Figure 10). "Area-boy" is a Nigerian parlance for a hooligan; and within an overall gray-purple background, three faces that perhaps represent the three major ethnicities of Nigeria - Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo - with contorted features crowd together in a conflicting and claustrophobic space. The fourth face on the row, demonized and grimacing, could be read as an embodiment of avarice, greed and megalomaniac tendencies that characterize contemporary African leaders and politicians. The brutality and thuggery experienced during elections and in governance are suggested by the gestures of the linear figures in the composition. The visual dialectics of this work is intensified by the placement of a man wearing a bowler hat at the right register. The bowler hat has become a symbol of the people of south-south and their struggle for control over their crude oil. The man in bowler hat appears to be standing in protest against long years of political and economic marginalization.



Figure 10. Area-Boy Democracy, 2007, Oil on canvas, 136 x 128 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Osaghae in his *Prison* and *Hospital* series metaphorically shows how the failure of leadership in Nigeria has made all of us prisoners and patients. Some of his *Prison* series paintings are *Prison Choir*, 2003; *Lock and Key*, 2008, (Figure 11); *Cell Number 10*, 2010; *Prison Called Home*, 2011. *Hospital Bed*, 2008 and *General Ward*, 2011, (Figure 12) belong to the *Hospital* series. A harsh economy and difficult existential conditions have forced many Nigerians into exploring supernatural solutions to their numerous problems. Osaghae captures this in paintings such as *Prosperity Envelopes*, 2006, (Figure 13) and *Prayer Warriors 1 and 2*, 2009.



Figure 11. Lock and Key, 2008, Mixed media, 92 x 92 cm
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



Figure 12. General Ward, 2011, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 102 x 107 cm
Photo: The author



Figure 13. Prosperity Envelopes, 2006, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 80 x 73 cm
Photo: The author

4. Conclusion

Ben Osaghae has distinguished himself as an artist with a social and political conscience. His art-making strategy has evolved from a heavy impasto applied with palette knife and brush to more subtle colours applied only with paintbrushes. His gestural brush strokes and lines echo the transmutation of fauvism and other modernist art styles into personal expressive visual style and idiom. Ben Osaghae has remained faithful to a concern about sociopolitical issues and his paintings historicize our contemporary experiences in a globalized time and space.

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