

Critical Discourses, a Review, “Ozioma Onuzulike at the Strauss Gallery”, New York, 2023

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/rjhlsid.v5.i1.11

Abstract

Critical Discourses, *OZIOMA ONUZULIKE*, dares a look at the artworks of one of the leading *transvanguardist* modern Nigerian artists of the Nsukka School, Ozioma Onuzulike. In a hermeneutic discourse the four series of artworks by this master ceramist are analysed to unravel the employments of commonplace images/imageries as narrative mechanisms in his visual stories. Indeed, grounded in the deft indigenous (and emphasis on the engagement of heterogenous resources) philosophy of the Nsukka School, and under the tutelage of the grandmaster EL Anatsui; It is pertinent to reflect and recognize biography as a provisional means of sifting artistic substance (Kubler, 1962). Engaging commonplace Nigerian, albeit West African symbolic food crop, Yam (and the Palm kernel shell, for example); Ozioma forges a coinage-metaphor for a historical discourse of trade, migration and the reality of hardship, even the reality of death in modern world history. Engagement of commonplace symbols, in fact, transformed these symbols/symbolisms as the calculus that not only mechanized the discourses of trade, migration; even the mysteries of faith and the audacity of modern-day travel, but made possible the reality of modernity and modernity in art discourses.

Keywords: *Critical Discourses, Review, “Ozioma Onuzulike at the Strauss Gallery”*

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Background to the Study

Marc Straus, 299 Strand Street, New York, United States of America (September, 2023); presented new works by Ozioma Onuzulike, (henceforth. OO, OO's, Ozioma, etc). This was Onuzulike's first Solo exhibition with the gallery. A leading figure in the contemporary ceramic art scene in Africa, Ozioma presented works from his four series of ceramics artworks: 1. *Palm Kernel Shell Beads*, 2. *Yam*, 3. *Honeycomb*; and 4. *Chainmail*. These works address matters that are not only historical and contemporary to Africa but also the world over with respect to colonialism, migration, and global warming.

This article takes on (i) a biography of the artist to locate him on a background in an attempt to route his artwork; (ii) a hermeneutical analysis of the works in this exhibition; and (iii) a reading of OO's oeuvre to locate him on the postmodernist discourse of contemporary African art world, albeit the total art world / *tout le monde*. The essay implicates a Biography of the artist as a first entry to emphasise and underscore the place of the background and antecedence of Ozioma as a first condition to reading and comprehension of his artworks. These postmodernist stances implicated in the artworks are a consequence of the ideas, processes imbibed in the long years of his keen study and eradication at the Nsukka Art School.

Biography

Ozioma Onuzulike was born in 1972 in Achi, Enugu State, Nigeria, He graduated from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka Nigeria. OO is currently professor of Ceramic art and African art history, Department of Fine & Applied Arts; and Director of the University's Institute of African Studies. Among solo exhibitions, Seed Yams of Our Land was held at the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Lagos, Nigeria (2019). A presentation of his poetry collection of the same title was also published by the CCA.

OO's works were included in the exhibition held at the Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, UK, arising from the [Re:] Entanglements Research Project led by Professor Paul Basu. Onuzulike is a fellow of the Civitella Ranieri Centre, Umbertide, Perugia, Italy, where he completed a residency under the UNESCO-ASCHBERG Bursary for Artists. Additionally, he is a 2011 recipient of the African Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship Award of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). OO was also 2010 Leventis Postdoctoral Research Fellow, University of London Centre of African Studies, SOAS; and an alumnus of the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, USA. His work is in the collection of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Lagos, Nigeria; Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University, Cambridge, UK; Princeton University Museum, Princeton, New Jersey, USA; The Design Museum, Munich, Germany; Hudson Valley Museum of Contemporary Art, Peekskill, New York, USA; Donnersberg Collection, France, among others.

The Artworks

In the Palm Kernel Shell Beads series, Onuzulike reflects on the historical use of beads as items of commercial exchange for slaves in Africa by European merchants. A variety of other

goods traded through the network included spices, silk, gunpowder, jewels, textiles, glass, alcoholic beverages, and mirrors. These are finely referenced in the nuanced colors, textures, and formal structures of the works in the series. It is common knowledge in the history of the slave trade that as human cargo quickly reached a premium, beads supply dropped and its worth and production vastly increased. When the slave trade was abolished, slave merchants turned to trade in Africa's minerals and agricultural resources, including palm oil and palm kernel. Indeed, this series draws attention to the palm kernel becoming a currency that surpassed slave trading.

In production, Onuzulike uses local clays to forge palm kernel shells into beads and inlays them with recycled glass and ash glazes. This is reflected in some recent Works, for example, *Danshiki with Kente Design* (2023); made of earthenware and stoneware clays, ash glazes, recycled glasses and copper wire (4,851 ceramic palm kernel shell beads). Subsequently, OO uses these new beads to weave textile structures that remind the keen artwork viewers, not of the slave trade era, but instead of Africa's *prestigious* cloths like the *Akwaete* of Igboland, Southeastern Nigeria, the *Kente* of Ghana, and *Aso-Oke* of Yorubaland, Southwestern Nigeria. Commemorated in ceramics, viewers are reminded of these textiles' ontologies in the West African weaving traditions, indeed reflecting their political and cultural standing. With these works, Onuzulike also underscores the moment when attention was shifted to Africa's agricultural resources. OO also innovatively explores the aesthetics of social change. Yam, one of the most important food crops produced in Africa, is primarily cultivated in a fertile region of land known as the “yam belt,” which stretches across Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Benin.

In Onuzulike's Yam series, suggestive textures, hollows, and recycled glasses are used to enhance the visual perception of “rotting”, that is, the way in which yams depreciate/ perish when they are not properly cared for on the farms and when grown in adverse weather conditions, viz: either lack of rainfall or excessive rainfall; and adverse temperatures. Telling a story, OO, subversively makes the production processes of pounding, kneading, cutting, firing, perforating, and at times, burning the yams, highlight the violence that we inflict on the earth. Indeed, the employment of commonplace, casual and ordinary actions are put as the leading nodes of a critical discourse. OO's work addresses issues of climate change; touches on migration, specifically as it relates to the declining well-being of Africa's youth population. Metaphorically “planting *oneself like yam*” in a foreign land in the hope of better years ahead is at the heart of Onuzulike's discourse in the series. In fact, the artist skillfully and subversively intuitively gestures a new lexicon onto the threshold of the English language. This is art's way!

Ozioma's Honeycomb series started during the Covid-19 outbreak. These works address concerns directly related to the pandemic; but also casts a larger net around issues of climate change and, more directly, addresses Africa's position as the “*honeypot*” attracting the imperial market, trade and political interests. This effectively relates to the growing interest in Africa as a major global supplier of natural resources. Africa's vast natural resources have had their own colonial footprints and contemporary muddles with governmental and private entities. In the production process of the beehives, the chard earthenware and stoneware clay bodies and recycled glasses, processed in varied high-temperature firings in both electric and gas-firing

kilns, draws attention to the ways Africa's resources are being exploited in unsustainable ways. Beyond the beauty and colour of the serial arrangement of the all-over repeat patterns of the artwork (FIG. 1), the artist subversively implodes a discourse of “*higher matters of real concern*”: exploitation and loop-sidedness in trade!

In the fourth series, the *Chainmail*; conceptual, and technical elements intersect, in fact, combining iron oxide with other colorants in the making of thousands of terracotta pieces, these implode color and nuances of age. The formal structures seen in the Chainmail series allude to how what were historically slave chains in the past have been transformed into graceful armors by true African nationalists, for example (in an immersive giant size layout), *Danshiki with Kente Design* (FIGS. 2 & 3); made of earthenware and stoneware clays, ash glazes, recycled glasses and copper wire (4,851 ceramic palm kernel shell beads). The works in the four series are linked by material, techniques of the production processes, and overlapping concepts. In all the series, the artist draws his inspiration for the layout and format of his motifs (in fact, their integral patterning's) from the grids of the textile designs of West Africa. This is his signature. By deliberate design, the artist makes textiles the *defacto* art form of Africa, definitively diminishing the emphasis on sculpture. In fact, Chris Spring (2021) and the noted art historian Christopher Ogbeche share that reality.

The artist's skillful use of commonplace images and imageries (for example, Yam, chainmail, even reuse of slavery symbols and honey combs, above) taken directly from his locale in Nigeria, indeed, these are equally reminiscent of his other West African neighbors; all are seminal routings of the discourses imbedded in his art. With his sub-Sumption of these discourses in his forged images from the smoldering furnaces of the kiln, Ozioma implodes narratives of colonialism, modern day loop-sidedness in trade; even directs attention to matters of migration and issues of climate trade affecting the entire world. OO arrests these symbols (Yam, chainmail, honeycomb, etc), forges them into key metaphors in the narrative flow of the stories bound in his artwork. Hence, these images are conjured into living symbols that are transfigured into symbols of the times. This is the miraculousness that the master speaks aloud in his works.

Furthermore, OO's entire use of indigenous and heterogenous resources, draws attention to his training at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka's Art School in both undergraduate and postgraduate years. It is significant to mention that the 70s were the years when the cream of the dicta were at their most fervent. Ozioma imbibed the ELAnatsui and Uche-Okeke Uli doctrines of seeking for art making materials and resources from the locales. Indeed, that dicta is amply formatted in the Igbo metaphor (and proverbial lore) “*Nkwu di namba nee yellu mba nnee*”, comfortable translatable to reflect: *the peoples' wood is the source of their cooking fire*”. That metaphor is further appended with an admonition “*Anya dialli but anya ekee*”. This readily draws attention to: *the eye of the keen observer (of one's own society) is likened to the python's eye*’ (E,J. Alagoa, 1997).

Closing Remarks

Ozioma Onuzulike's art took New York Strauss Gallery visitor by storm. The deftness of the images from Nigeria must have left the ordinary viewer *wide mouthed in awe and wonder, oyame*

lenuu (to borrow a Yoruba gestural expression). The temerity of his *africanite* was not only “*the shock of the new*” in images and imageries from the continent of Africa beyond the gallery informed stock images and imageries of the late 60s and the 70s culminating in the likes of *magicienne de la terre*. OO's images are deliberately crafted and forged in the smoldering heat of the Kiln. These artworks are a product of a transformation and deliberate scientific production. These artworks are modern and express African modernity in the contemporaneity of the new millennium. These works reflect the Shape and Time of a new set of objects that symbolize the new artworld of the *transvanguard*. Products of the forges of Nigeria's foremost art academy, these artworks speak volumes on the emergent spaces of Nigerian time. Indeed, these are the lodestars of the emergent discourses of modern African art. In a world plagued by climate change and the reality of disappearing natural resources and materials for real art creation, Ozioma's transformative feats in material heterogenous sourcing draws our attention to the tremendous “raw materials” still resting untapped awaiting our reimagination and creativity. In fact, a reading of historical change that puts Africa at the center of change, here debunks the erstwhile history of style. Instead a history of the development of shapes forged directly in the kernel of academe is put in place!. Leaving all viewers “*wide mouthed and in awe*”, Ozioma Onuzulike, Strauss Gallery, 2023; in the same vein leaves the world of aesthetics and art criticism in real dilemma. That is the luggage for a future study.

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All Images Are Taken from Ozioma Onuzulike's (2023). *Portfolio*, Marc Strauss Gallery

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Fig. 1: Ozioma Onuzulike : *Danshiki with Kente Design*, 2023 Earthenware and stoneware clays, ash glazes, recycled glasses and copper wire (4,851 ceramic palm kernel shell beads) 80.25 x 63 x 4.75 in (160 x 204 x 12 cm)



Fig. 2: Ozioma Onuzulike *Danshiki with Kente Design*, 2023 Earthenware and stoneware clays, ash glazes, recycled glasses and copper wire (4,851 ceramic palm kernel shell beads) 80.25 x 63 x 4.75 in (160 x 204 x 12 cm)



Fig. 3: Ozioma Onuzulike *Konkosa Armour for the Oba* (125kg; 9,147 ceramic palm kernel shell beads), 2021, highfired earthenware and stoneware clays, recycled glasses, ash glaze and copper wire,