

## Critical Discourses, The Transvanguardist Pictorial Turn and Matters Arising

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### Abstract

Critical Discourses engages the artworks of a leading modern Nigerian artists of the Nsukka School, Ozioma Onuzulike (henceforth. OO, OO's, Ozioma, etc) as a leit motif of transvanguardist art. In a hermeneutic discourse the Four Series artworks by this master ceramist are analysed to unpack the employment of commonplace images/imageries as narrative devices in atypical art of the transvanguardist pictorial turn's visual stories. Indeed, grounded in the deft indigenous (and emphatic 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, G 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, the reality of hardship in travel, and even death in the travails of the modern movement of people in search of greener pastures. The artist's engagement of commonplace symbols like the yam tuber, in fact, transfigured as the calculus that not only stemmed the discourses of trade, migration; even the mysteries of faith and the audacity of modern-day travel, this artists of the episteme made possible the reality of modernity and modernity in art discourses. OO's artworks are, therefore, engaged as leit motifs of the transvanguardist oeuvre. Hence, artworks of the Series are sufficient grounds for a critical look at the problematics of this pictorial turn.

### **Background to the Study**

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 focusing on colonialism, migration, and matters of climate change. This article, therefore, takes on (i) a biography of the artist to locate him on a background in an attempt to route his art; (ii) a hermeneutical analysis of the works; and (iii) a reading of OO's *oeuvre* to locate him on the postmodernist discourse of the 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 emphasize the place of the background and antecedence of Ozioma as a first condition to a reading and comprehension of his artworks. These postmodernist stances implicated in the artworks are a consequence of the ideas, processes imbibed in the years of his keen study at the Nsukka Art academy; exposure to the international artworld via exhibitions and travel; and the years of informal tutelage and study.

### **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, Nigeria, the *Kente* of Ghana, and *Aso-Oke* of Yorubaland, both in 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 highlights 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", indeed, reflecting the way actual tubers of 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 the electric and the 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. Indeed, textiles are arguably, the most visible of Africa's cultural signifiers, in fact, and in territories where populations are of African origin in the rest of the world, avers Spring (2012).

The artist's skillful use of ordinary 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 change 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*”, comfortably 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**

The *transvanguardist pictorial turn* remains "a shock of the new", to borrow a phrase. The shedding of the canon makes reading and interpretation of *transvanguardist* works problematic for the professional art critic not steeped in the exhibition encrypted history that this paper undergirds. The *transvanguardist turn*, burst asunder with a gamut of peculiar images/imageries never borne before. This was the first consequence for the enjoyment of art lovers, not only in the Nigerian art world, but faraway places like New York. For the expert art critic and historian, it is an offer of a new set of iconographies for analysis.

The deftness of the images from Nigeria leaves the ordinary viewer *wide mouthed in awe and wonder, oyame lenuu* (to borrow a Yoruba gestural expression). The temerity of the artists' *africanite* is not only "the shock of the new" in images and imageries from the continent of Africa, but these new artworks also disrupt any gallery's 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. For example, the artist Ozioma's 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. Reflecting the shapes and Time of a new set of objects that symbolize the new artworld of the *transvanguard*, these artworks must be interpreted and analyzed with a new set of criteria that takes cognescence of the ides=as and processes behind their production. 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 reimaginings 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", the artworks of the *transvanguard* in the same vein leave the world of aesthetics and art criticism in real dilemma. That is the luggage for another study. Beyond the light of contemporary African art and its endorsement by western standards *via* galleries, collectors and auction houses, whose attention oils stars and allots values; the artworks of *transvanguard pictorial turn*, deftly speak in distinctively self-determining voices. With a nose in the air for the epistemic pool of *Reve Noire* and *Nka dicta*; and the overarching political consciousness of the afro-centricism framed in the pan Africanist stances of leading independent African countries like Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana.

African artistry simply reflected these trends. In *simulacra's* of the Kwame Nkrumah (1965) ideological *cultural turn and the fever of independence*, reflecting ways of being African in singular expressions that affect differences between Africa and Africans, between identity and nationality; between expression and politics (Simon Njami, 2016; EL Hadji Ndiaye, 2022). Onuzulike's art reflects a simulacrum of the dicta of his former teacher, the legendary EL Anatsui, himself a graduate of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Technology, Ghana.

It is revealing to diagnose that the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the fashionableness of “recycled materials and the recourse to materials from heterogeneous sources”. This in turn reflects a material turn that demands a new set of ideas and dicta for the art historian and art critic alike. Soberly reflecting the reality that art is a commodity for the international market; Africa and other emergent territories of the new world still daring to decolonize and find her footings on the world arena; the dicta remain in the grip of the West. However, register our cultural presence remains a *condition sine que none* of our political emancipation.

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