

## Creative Radicalism in Contemporary Nigerian Art

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**Article DOI:**

10.48028/iiprds/ijdshms.v14.i1.10

**Keywords:**

Radicalism, Artists,  
Art media,  
Transformation  
techniques and  
forms.

### Abstract

The study began with a radical definition of history as an important template to address creative radicalism in contemporary Nigerian art. We discussed the works of four artists with a glimpse of their radical creative postures in the sourcing of art media, production techniques, and emergent art forms. These variables, with the aid of conceptual, theoretical, technical, and morphological analyses, show they stand out as radical experimentalists. Findings show that El Anatsui explored the creative potentials of alcoholic bottle tops in creating giant sculpture installations, which he transformed into radical artistic statements in the politics of representation to confront the snares of colonialism and assert artistic and political freedom in a post-colonial space. Also, the sculptor, Ndidi Dike, who, in deploying a discarded canoe suspended with chains, creates a new idiom in our understanding of the story of slavery and the middle passage. In his own way, the ceramist Ozioma Onuzulike transformed ceramic works into social art to interrogate the condition of social anomie as a creative intervention. Another artist, Ngozi Omeje, transformed terracotta fragments to construct new realities in ways that are both radical and innovative. The study concluded that these artists have transformed the Nigerian/African artistic space into an arena for the radicalization of their art for the benefit of human society.

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### **Background to the Study**

History has been defined in different ways. One of the views defines history as an evolutionary process that has come to depend on the theory of social Darwinism. Another view by Michael Foucault sees history as one of continuity and displacement. In other words, history is far from being linear in the succession of past events. Thus, the chain of linear evolution is broken by events that may evolve only to be displaced by other successive events. Another view is that history is about past events, although it sometimes seems difficult to mark out when the past is past. This is because new historicism seems to argue that the past can only be interpreted from our present historical horizon and that there is no history with a capital H. This is because, at any given moment, we are makers of history. An utterance made a few seconds ago is already history. There is also a radical conception of history in which revolutionary events such as a *coup d'etat* may alter a sequence of events and usher in a different chain of events as a new pathway into history. We are offering these definitions of history to make a single point. This means that creative innovation may follow the path of evolutionary history, in which what is new is both a continuation and an extension, if not a renewal of the past. In the context of this study, the concept of history, which is radical and brings about sudden change and transformation, may be similar to the ways in which creative artists can bring about a radical change in the movement of art. For over four hundred years in western art, art was based on the theory of mimesis, according to which it is said that art imitates nature. Thus, was born the art of naturalism. Suddenly, however, a revolution occurred in western art, which displaced mimesis with non-objective art based on the aesthetics of purism and fragmentation/synthesis of form. From then on, a new direction occurred in western art, which continued to shape art events in radical and innovative ways.

The present study argues that contemporary Nigerian art may have followed the unfolding of history as something evolutionary in some ways. While the history of contemporary art may be said to be evolutionary and powered by creative innovation, there are some contemporary Nigerian artists, the paper argues, who have radicalized their art because their works mark a clear departure from the simply innovative and delightful. In their works, we see the force of original thinking and creative imagination defining new creative directions in ways that surprise and even enchant. We examine the works of a few contemporary Nigerian artists and how they sought to reinvent their art in radical ways, from their media to their techniques and forms. The rating of their creative radicalism may vary from artist to artist or assume greater importance in their use of media, the evolution of their techniques, or even the radical or aesthetic agitations in their works.

### **El Anatsui and his Radical Experiments in Sculpture Installation**

So far, no African artist has excelled in their innovative art practices more than El Anatsui, a sculptor and installation artist. We classify him under the rubric of contemporary Nigerian art because he has made Nigeria his artistic home. He joined the teaching staff of the department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 1974. Since then, Nigeria has continued to be his artistic base for more than four decades. During

these decades, he has experimented creatively in different directions. He carved in wood using wood panels arranged in clusters. He embellished their surfaces with bold curvilinear designs, later combined with more delicate design clusters, which heightened their aesthetic qualities. He did this for decades and sometimes introduced colors into these sculpture panels as if to infuse his sculpture with painting as a cross-border phenomenon. He had also experimented with found objects such as palm oil mortars, which have canoe shapes. These he drafted into his art so as to interconnect the past with the present. His shifting images have continued to thrill his audiences. His works are in the collections of many art galleries, both in Nigeria and Europe.

However, something radical began to manifest in his sculpture when he made creative shifts in his sourcing of media and in the development of the technical handling of media and the emergent forms that became the product of this manner of engaging sculpture. It may be said of him that, through this process, he created a new radical language in his sculpture by doing what others had seen but failed to utilize. His new radical departure in installation sculpture is as fascinating as the creative vision that brought it into being. His creative encounter in the sourcing of liquor bottle tops has become one of the radical creative shifts by which he reinvented sculpture. What did he do? Only he alone saw the potential in alcoholic bottle tops as an artist's medium. Only he alone saw that these discarded materials could be deployed by an artist and endowed with the inimitable sounds of modern sculpture in ways that are radically oriented and in ways that have challenged other approaches to sculpture representation. Did he see in the alcoholic bottle tops the possibility of interrogating the African past, especially the economic exploitation of the colonized, as well as the artistic pressure to insist on its overcoming? Did he see in the alcoholic bottle tops the possibility that it is the role of the artist to engage the snares of colonialism and the logic of its economic enslavement? It may well be that by creatively engaging the new medium that he began to source, he has moved from the periphery to the center, from which to address the harsh and ugly lessons of colonial depredations in Africa.



**Fig. 1:** A Sculpture Installation.  
**Artist:** El Anatsui

He created a new radical language in his sculpture by doing what others had seen but failed to utilize. His new radical departure in installation sculpture is as fascinating as the creative vision that brought it into being. His creative encounter in the sourcing of liquor bottle tops has become one of the radical creative shifts by which he reinvented sculpture. What did he do? Only he alone saw the potential in alcoholic bottle tops as an artist's medium. Only he alone saw that these discarded materials could be deployed by an artist and endowed with the inimitable sounds of modern sculpture in ways that are radically oriented and in ways that have challenged other approaches to sculpture representation. Did he see in the alcoholic bottle tops the possibility of interrogating the African past, especially the economic exploitation of the colonized, as well as the artistic pressure to insist on its overcoming? Did he see in the alcoholic bottle tops the possibility that it is the role of the artist to engage the snares of colonialism and the logic of its economic enslavement? It may well be that by creatively engaging the new medium that he began to source, he has moved from the periphery to the center, from which to address the harsh and ugly lessons of colonial depredations in Africa.

He began to map out his creative strategies before the horse bolted out of the stable. He collected these liquor bottle tops in their thousands, a mountain heap in his studio, to engage a lot of assistants. These collections of his new-found media were arranged in small groups based on the artist's master plan. Satisfied with these cluster compositions, the artist began to link them together into giant tapestries or installation works. In their vast scale and intimidating presence, he discovered new technical skills by which to fold them into the simulation of African cloths. When on display in a gallery space, the installations had the power to dazzle with their surface shimmering effects and their colors playing out with the magnetic sounds of the music orchestra. The history of African sculpture has been radicalized in ways that have altered the art of sculpture as we know it. Metaphorically, El Anatsui has become the father of modern sculpture, both in Nigeria and in Africa. In raising the bar of sculpture, he has used his art as a new strategy in the politics of representation and in writing a new story about colonialism. The primary aim remains that of creative freedom and group liberation, so that a man would know where the rain began to beat him. In his art, he had learned to overcome colonialism in a post-colonial space. Art can be used to restore group confidence and a truncated consciousness so that we can put back the tail of the severed trunk of our tale, says Achebe (1976).



**Fig. 2:** Waka into Bondage.  
**Medium:** Wood and Metal.  
**Source:** Ndidi Dike, (2008).

### **Ndidi Dike and her Radical Creative Engagements**

Although slavery is as pervasive in human history as part of earlier manifestations of imperialism in other lands, one notices that many artists have not dealt with the theme of slavery in their creative engagements. It is difficult to grasp the reason why. The artist, Ndidi Dike, stands out as one of the very few who have found the theme of slavery as a source of creative inspiration. For her and those very few others, slavery is a traumatic event in African collective memory. She sought through her art to retrieve something from this sad story, perhaps as an act of creative restoration and intervention because only artists can swim against the current. If gold can rust, it is said, what becomes of iron? In her spirit of creative daring, she decided to wrestle with this beast as if it were a ritual cleansing of her artistic ground. She had done so with a nobility of creative spirit and a daring will that was ever willing to take the bull by the horns. We may never know what other creative spells the theme of slavery may have cast on her. Even if we don't, her creative art is that of a restless knife that can vanquish a mighty forest. It is in these terms that she has risen to both fame and admiration and defined her creative niche with an unbounded spirit.

Her work (Fig. 2) represents her radical encounter with slavery, for which she has deployed creative strategies that are as radical as her visual imagery is lucid and evocative. Here, she speaks with the sense of audacity with which the blacksmith hammers his iron on the anvil, daring the flaming tongues of fire. She cannot do otherwise. Her creative acts are propelled by the thunder of an artistic necessity. This is why she drafted a boat from an unknown stream, brought it into the art gallery, and suspended it from the house roof with a pair of metal chains. She filled the canoe with water to its mid-level. The audience arrived and was stunned by this act of radical

inventiveness. The canoe is the slave ship, and the water, the ocean, symbolizes the middle passage through which human cargoes were lifted into slavery. It is a daring creative encounter, epigrammatic in its message as it is stark in its visual imagery. The artist had triumphed in this act of creative mediation, so that art itself becomes a visual inscription on the face of history. One does not know what is more radical than this.

### **Ozioma Onuzulike: Ceramics as Social Art**

For many years, contemporary ceramic artists have been preoccupied with the concept of ceramics as a utilitarian art. One certainly needs a tea cup in order to drink a cup of tea, nor can one do without a ceramic plate in which to serve food to the family or even guests. One needs flower vases for interior decoration. The concept of use is at the heart of this form of art development. Having studied at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Ozioma had practiced his art for more than two decades and finally made a creative shift. He replaced ceramics as utilitarian art with a new ceramic philosophy and ideology. This means that ceramics could be used to interrogate human society, question questions, and contest new creative directions by which ceramics are embedded in the human condition. He sought new ceramic concepts by sourcing his materials from his immediate environment, including his themes and even the ceramic forms that he created. By doing so, he began to radicalize his ceramic art practice as a means of shifting his ceramic gaze on our lives and living conditions. He began to see new ways of beholding things as well as radical ways of transforming them into forms.



**Fig. 3:** Casualties and amnesty.

**Medium:** Terracotta and Plastic.

**Source:** Ozioma Onuzulike, (2009).

He soon emerged fully as an interrogator of our social conditions as well as a medium with which to transform them into works of art. He chose the farmland as the context from which to search for his visual images. He discovered that the yam could serve as a fitting metaphor for saying that the king is naked. He saw these yams as generations of Nigerians in their social conditions of anomie. Denied hope, these yams tell us about different

conditions of suffering as well as the social ravages that have decoupled them as they are hunted by a benign loneliness. He calls them "the seed yams of our land." They are seed yams and represent metaphors for the human condition. They speak to us in ways in which we develop a greater sensitivity to what is happening to us. We are like seed yams in various stages of decay. They hint at the curious ways in which we have even lost ourselves in the mist of indignity and of labors lost. Says the artist-poet: "Distant faces/Lose all charm/As minds hurry past minds/To fetch from memory's barn." This is because "unfed barns run dry/burnt barns output grotesque images/heaping mounds of sweat/on the victim's face" (2019:37). For him, the Nigerian people are seed yams fit only for rodents. Hear him: "Steely rodents/Huddle our seed yams/In rickety jaws/Racing/To offload them/In the communal farm/For another season of planting" (2019:1). These seed yams of our land are "Twin yam barns" and "Sprinkled with cool waters... and strong odors... of death's blood-smear'd bows and arrows" (2019:19). We have extensively quoted the artist's poetic musings. They have arisen from his poetic impulses, from which, like a town crier, he warns us about the dangers of the threatening waves of a violent sea. We thus see this artist as a person with a radical creative posture that has interrogated the changing times and conditions in Nigeria, in which there is always darkness at noon.

#### **Ngozi Omeje and her Technical Radicalism in Ceramics**

**Just** as the sculptor, Ndidi Dike, has been competing with her male counterparts in sculpture, so has Ngozi Omeje in ceramics. As a young ceramics student who studied in the department of Fine and Applied Arts, from which she graduated and became part of the teaching staff, she had worked very hard and was beginning to earn the eagle feather in her profession. She broke away from all known ceramic practices in her time and charted a new innovative direction for herself. How did she do this? Her story is as fascinating as it is delightful. Whether by planning or by intuition, she saw new creative possibilities in the clay medium. Other ceramists had worked the clay medium using diverse techniques, such as throwing, slabs, pinching, and even coiling techniques, to produce ceramic works. Their works are quite fascinating. However, the ceramist has overcome their ceramic innovations by opting for a new mode of ceramic production using the traditional clay medium.



**Fig. 4:** The Elephants.

**Medium:** Ceramic terracotta Fragments.

**Source:** Ngozi Omeje.

She realized that transporting ceramic works to an art exhibition location or site is quite burdensome because of their size and weight. She set out to solve the problem. Using the clay medium, she began to produce clay fragments in large numbers. Toning some of them with chosen colors, she fired them in the kiln from which she now obtained her terracotta clay fragments. She soon learned that these clay fragments could easily be transported to any art gallery and installed on site as works of art. With this, she had overcome the constraints of classical ceramics and launched her new ceramic program through her ceramic installation work. With this achievement, her ceramic works have been featured in both national and international exhibitions, whether in Japan, China, Europe, or America. In her works, she memorializes her experiences of childhood and her family pedigree, particularly her father's prestigious title as an elephant.

In Fig.4. She demonstrates her unique abilities in ceramic installations that are more than life-size in scale and visually intimidating. In one of her installation works (Fig. 4), we see how she is able to install two giant elephant creatures in both their front and rear postures, with emphasis on their huge size, volume, and weight, including suggestive and anatomical handling. In this context, her creations become site-specific and simulate the effect of visual immersion. Her technical revolution in ceramics derives from the way hundreds, if not thousands, of terracotta fragments are transformed into giant elephant creatures. Each creature is thus a product of ceramic fragments installed in place through the use of very tiny plastic strings, which are then coupled into place. Yet, the works have a visual transparency because one can see through them in relation to the surrounding space. Amazingly, this does not deny the volumetric quality of the elephant creatures. The works are quite stunning in their aesthetic density and as a visual delight, which is worthy of artistic celebration. Her creative radicalism has brought about the emergence of a new ceramic art phenomenon. This means that a ceramic form can be conceived as fragments from which new ceramic realities can be created or constructed. Her ceramic installations are thus her innovative gestures to a creative imagination that is at once fecund to signal the arrival of a new creative harvest. Ngozi Omeje, as an installation artist, has triumphed, and the art world has accorded her recognition.



## Conclusion

We began this paper by discussing some definitions of history as something that can be evolutionary, dialectical, and even radical. It can also be subject to continuity and change, or even continuity and displacement. It can also be the product of an utterance made a few seconds ago, because we are always historicizing. In the context of this study, the radical aspect of history was chosen as a revolutionary moment when the chain of events is broken and a different set of events take over as a template both for the occurrence of the radical and the unexpected. We discussed the works of four artists in terms of their sourcing of media, the evolution of techniques, and the production of art forms that have been described as of radical quality. Thus, their creative radicalism derives from the fact that they chose or opted for new radical creative directions in the deployment of their media, techniques, and forms in ways that continue to delight and amaze, and often times, leave us with their puzzlement. Even at this, we admire their media, technical, and production revolutions, which have taken art practices to new frontiers as never before. In their works, El Anatsui, the sculptor; Ndididi Dike, the sculptor; Ozioma Onuzulike, the ceramic artist; and Ngozi Omeje, the ceramic artist, have broken new creative grounds in ways that have begun to change the landscape of contemporary Nigerian art. They have done so through their radical creative visions, through which art has begun to wear a new aesthetic garment. Never in the history of contemporary Nigerian art have the very few done so much for the very many in terms of their aesthetic upliftment. Their art is a tribute to both human society and its underlying history. We live in their admiration for such radical and creative conquests.

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