

A Creative Engagement with Space, Metaphors and Memory

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Abstract

It is a truism in modern art developments that artists are quite often very sensitive to their artistic spaces, whether these have to do with their culture and art heritage or even their creative sites and environments and will even include their national spaces and even the entire human condition. What are these spaces, if not the sites for the ferreting out of art ideas and from which to appropriate art media, which they now transform into works of art as visual metaphors. These various metaphors are testaments to how art can serve as a tool for the preservation and retention of our collective memory. The two artists under study, El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu fit very well into the above conceptual framework. In different ways, they have been inspired by their artistic spaces, their art heritage and the social condition in Nigeria. They have each explored these artistic spaces for the nourishment of creative ideas. They went beyond this to source data and evolve suitable techniques for creating works of art as visual metaphors. Thematically, their works address the relevance of their culture in art-making. They have also addressed the changing human conditions, especially over matters such as the helpless in the society and the politics of representation engendered by colonialism and its economic exploitation of Africa, to which art can provide a point of mediation and interrogation. Of them, it may be said that art is their means of social representation as well as their means of creative intervention so that society can be saved from the threat of darkness at noon. Therein lies the significance of their works as visual representation of the human society because only the artist can swim against the current.

Background to the Study

There are three important variables in this study. They are space, metaphors and memory. Placed in context, space may be a reference to the artist's artistic space, the living environment, local and national spaces, which may even extend conceptually to include the world. Every artist is very sensitive to these spaces because they inspire him, stimulate him with artistic thoughts in encounter with human values of joy, sorrow, of beauty and ugliness, of man's social condition, of changing times and changing experiences. These spaces provide the context for creative interrogation so that serious artistic questions can be asked in order to ferret out serious artistic answers. In their contents, Achebe (1987) advises that a man should master the homestead before developing the eye of the eagle to look into the distant horizon. An artist can also explore these spaces in ways that conform to their artistic temperament. Even artistic dreams take place within these spaces in the quest for artistic discoveries and for the stimulation of artistic impulses, the desire to find out, the desire to know, and the desire to explore the unknown regions of ideas.

These various spaces are interrogated by the artist in the search for artistic metaphors. However, these metaphors cannot come into being until he interrogates these spaces in the search for artistic media and the forging of techniques as a basis for the mediation of media and their transformation into works of art. Although an artist may be inspired by his artistic spaces in the search for creative ideas, the latter can become fruitful if only the artist interconnects them with the appropriate media. Artistic media are in vain if they are not mediated by appropriate techniques as production strategies. When he is able to put his techniques into artistic motion via his medium, only then can artistic forms come into being. Even at this, even though the forms have pleasing formal qualities, they are at the same time subject to serious artistic readings in terms of their iconography and iconology. Through this, we will begin to grasp the possibilities for meanings that may exist in a given work of art. As we map out this range of meanings, we soon discover that they tell us a lot about our past, tell us a lot about our present or even anticipate the future. Whatever the range of meanings that one encounters in works of art, they ultimately hint directly or indirectly at the human condition and also serve as visual records of our collective memory. When the German philosopher Nietzsche defined history as our eternal present, he may have had in mind that works of art serve as our eternal bridges through time. In this sense, there is a conceptual link between the artist, his artistic spaces, and his metaphors as visual documents of our historical memory. In simple terms, we memorialize ourselves through works of art so that one can say, "I am" or that "we are" or "we have been." Works of art remain our only escort. Without them, we are blind.

Study Thrust and Scope

The above background provides the context for the study of any artist or artists and their creative contributions in the context of their artistic spaces, metaphors, and memories. In this study, three African artists have been selected because of their relevance to the study. They are El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu. The first is a sculptor, while the other two are painters. Of the painters, one is still practicing while the other is late. We begin with the sculptor El Anatsui. This sculptor had achieved global reputation and recognition

because of the experimental and innovative quality of his installation sculptures, produced with daring techniques that continue to surprise and delight us. El Anatsui had practiced seriously for more than four decades as a professional artist. His artistic spaces include his early artistic experiences in his home land in Ghana and his fascination with the beautiful designs on Adinkra cloths. He spent the greater part of his professional life in Nigeria, which has become his artistic home. It is the terrain in which he discovered a lot about art ideas relating to Nok art, Akwansi stone monoliths, and Igbo Uli body art. He had produced a body of works in fired clay and wood. What has given him global prominence derives from his sculpture installations, which are inspired by his interrogation of his African experiences in relation to colonialism. He began by interrogating the nature of colonialism in Africa, its mastery of the economic strategies of exploitation for the sake of profit, and the increasing dominance of the colonial metropolis. He discovered through personal interrogations of colonialism in the spirit of Rodney that the sole aim of colonialism is the underdevelopment of Africa. This was done through the use of trading companies that brought in large quantities an assortment of British manufactured goods, of which alcohol ranked highly on the scale of colonial exports to Africa. Having discovered the colonial economic deprivations of Africa, he sought to find a way of transforming the colonial economic accesses in Africa into a new artistic story so that, out of ruins, new forms would arise. This is to say that the artist can become a mediator on behalf of his people by re-empowering them and by exploring creatively the very denials of the colonial process. Something similar may be seen in Yoruba masking known as Gelede, which translates as to placate, to soothe, and to cuddle. The implication is that women are dangerous because they are witches. If they are put to wrath, they may destroy society with their mysterious powers or place a perpetual curse on it. Under this threat, the Yoruba navigated their way around the problem by inventing a mask theater as a public tribute to these female elders so that what is destructive can be made to be constructive. Something in this has some traces that are quite close to El Anatsui's attempt to question colonialism and transform it using its import discards to arrive at a new renaissance in Africa and bring about a form of liberation. Here, the artist is an arbitrator on behalf of mankind. Which is why artists are described as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind because only the artist can swim against the current. From his artistic space or spaces, El Anatsui reassessed the politics of colonial representation with a new creative approach that is redemptive. One might even say, then, that his creative engagement with colonialism and colonization derives from the nourishing powers of his creative imagination. His then is a creative and interrogative encounter with colonialism. The question then is: how did he evolve his creative metaphors from his artistic spaces?

To address this is to go into a brief discussion on how the artist sourced his media and evolved his techniques, which led to the creation and emergence of his monumental sculpture installations. From the Nigerian artistic space, he collected thousands of liquor bottle tops in their varied shapes, designs, and colours. With the aid of assistants, these liquor bottle tops were beaten into varied shapes as suited the artist's designs. The liquor tops were arranged in clusters in the first instance and then stringed together with copper

wire as giant installation sculptures. In some cases, he maintained overall flatness in his sculpture surface, only allowing a few holes in between for the sake of design variation. Most often, the large installations, in their shimmering and surface dazzle, are folded in various configurations that give them sculptural strength and allow the artist to create surface bulges as well as depths. These have transformed his installation sculpture into marvels of aesthetic experience. Under the effects of light these sculptures in their large sizes have surface brilliance while intimidating the onlooker with their monumental size. We see therefore in these works the close relationship between an artist's artistic spaces, creative thoughts, media sourcing and the appropriation and formulation of media and techniques. The works thus become visual metaphors in space arising from the fecundity of the artist's creative depths and foraging imagination in the search of ideas that achieve creative ascent through his monumental sculpture installations.

As metaphors, the works speak to us as documents of history and of the aesthetic arousal of works of art as a means of conserving and retaining our collective memory. In postmodern terms, we see that the works are coded with multiple narratives that tell us who we are, what happened to us, and how he has used his art as a tool of mediation and arbitration so that we learn more deeply the lessons of colonialism as one of economic exploitation and its hastened steps of economic underdevelopment. The artist makes a case for the recovery of African identity and an abiding renaissance. It opens up possibilities in the nature of man's changing conditions, from slavery to freedom, from dislocation to restoration, so that we can put back the tail of the severed trunk of our tale.

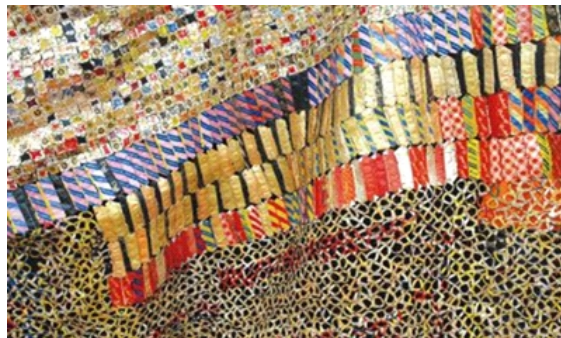


Fig. 1: Details from his sculpture installation showing his technical, shaping of the liquor bottle tops.



Fig. 2: A Sculpture Installation.

Medium: Liquor bottle tops, aluminum sheets and copper wire.

A second artist in our study is the painter, Obiora Udechukwu. He is one of the most consistent artists that have emerged in contemporary Nigeria's art landscape. He had painted and practiced for over four decades, held solo exhibitions, and participated in many group art exhibitions in different parts of the world. Although he now teaches and practices in the United States, his artistic space remains in Nigeria, and Igbo land in particular. What did he derive from his artistic space in terms of inspiration? Over the years, he has seriously interrogated his heritage of Igbo art and culture, as well as the changing dynamics of the Nigerian social condition. His works tell us something about his thematic concerns in his artistic space. He has been preoccupied with the issue of refugees, whose inspiration could have come from the Nigerian civil war, when thousands of malnourished children stood under the threatening shadows of instant death, not excluding all other refugees in Nigeria produced by the effects of poverty, hunger, armed banditry, and other social ailments. He is also fascinated by the economic profiteers known as Stevedores, who have exploited cheap labour to erect their pillars of wealth. He had also addressed the issue of the scarcity of water. In his works, we see that the artist is very concerned about the condition of the helpless in Nigerian society, the Almajirai of the North, and other beggars that stay out under the hot sun begging for alms. The artist nourishes his empathy for them through his works.

His Metaphors

How did the artist arrive at his metaphors through his creative engagements? From Igboland, one of his artistic spaces, he had studied and mastered the Igbo art of female body painting known as Uli. He had studied the range and repertoire of Uli symbols, their types and linear configurations. He had appropriated them into his drawings and paintings in order to create his own art modernity as a barge of his self-identity. He had evolved different approaches in his creative exploration of Uli symbols and their visual lyricism. This is very clear in a drawing which he executed in pen and ink, with the title Alhaja.



Fig. 3: Alhaja

With marked dexterity, we see something of his economy of means in the brevity and assurance of his lines and how he combines tones in their tonal subtleties to create the woman of aristocratic status displayed in her head gear, voluminous dress, and array of body ornaments. There is a sense of spontaneity and effortlessness in engaging his medium. The artist is also a good printmaker. In the foreground of the picture is a group of figures in silhouette, overlapping another group of figures rendered in light blue tones, all facing inward. Behind them is a towering pink mountain or hill, behind which is the blue sky, over which the artist shows us a horizontal line of inscriptions appropriated from the Uli repertoire of Uli symbols as an inscription across the sky. The artist is consistent with the brevity of his artistic statements; they are concise and epigrammatic, as if this were a visual poem. Here, simplicity is not simple but hankers after a poetic abbreviation.



Fig. 4: Writing in the Sky.
Medium: Seri graphic print.



Fig. 5: The Silent Ones.
Medium: Acrylic on paper.

The artist continues to interrogate the human and social conditions in Nigeria, such as the deprivation and helplessness, their sorrows and pains, and their continued recession into anonymity. As in all his production strategies, his artistic spaces provide inspiration for

his artistic thoughts, which focus on the helpless and forgotten members of society for whom he has a lot of empathy. This is in keeping with Achebe's observation that one does not have to be a beggar to appreciate their helpless condition. One needs only to use his imagination to appreciate what it is to be a beggar. Because the artist is a social agent and arbitrator, he strives to use his art as a creative intervention, as if metaphorically to put a wedge in the threatening waves. His painting of the Silent Ones is his own way of teaching society moral and ethical lessons that we all share. We should not forget the silent ones among us who may have been suffering in silence amidst the social denials of human society. His creative arts are redemptive, if not a moral restoration, through his own brand of artistic interrogations and contestation. From his artistic spaces arise his artistic thoughts under inspiration from the same artistic space, which sets in motion the appropriation of media and supportive techniques in the production of works of art. These works become monuments and conservators of our history and of the various rhythms of life. They are important creative gestures for the human memory. Which is why they are regarded as historical documents so that a man may know where the rain began to beat him.

Conclusion

We began this study by discussing and clarifying three important variables, namely: artistic space, or spaces as both human conditions and living environments. In this context, the artist nourishes his artistic thoughts through the power of his creative imagination. He proceeds to source and appropriate art media from these spaces, economic, social, political, and cultural. He develops marked skills from these spaces in order to produce art as visual metaphors in their full visual import and social insignificance. He produces works of art that interrogate man's social condition and changing times. Ultimately, these works help in the preservation and conservation of our collective memory. They help us to know who we are, what we have been, or even what we are going to be within the cycle of life. The two artists, El Anatsui and Obiora Udechukwu, fit very well into the above conceptual frame, not only in the artistic thoughts and inspiration but also in the interrogation of the artistic spaces, the appropriation of media, and the formulation of their production techniques. Their works are creative interventions that address various aspects of human society, whether it is the interrogation of colonialism and the politics of representation, or it is about the helpless and the socially diminished in society. Their works are like mirrors held out to our faces. They confront us with their gaze so that we can, through this gaze, begin to see ourselves and our changing social condition. They are their creative tribute to human memory. As visual testimonies, they are memorable signposts in our journey through life.

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