

In Conversation

Kelani Abass and Jude Anogwih

Painting as an art form is witnessing an interesting transformation in contemporary Nigeria art. In 2009, Kainebi Osahenyen, presented at CCA Lagos a new body of work 'Trash-ing' which was seen as a new beginning in contemporary Nigerian painting. In *Man & Machine* (2011), you showed a new body of work that comprised of painting, photography and sound. Do you see yourself as that agent of change, sustaining the change in our very notion of art?

Change is a constant aspect of life. As a person who is interested in the ideal of transformation, I always look for ways to communicate my deepest thought and impression.

Chinese artist Wang Quingsong up until 1996 was making paintings and treating them like a diary, but with China changing so quickly, he decided to express his feelings about the rapid change with a faster medium and he chose photograph.

Art is multifaceted hence it cannot be limited to one form. In the midst of an accelerated global change, every development and innovation is an added advantage for me as a contemporary Nigerian artist. I have always believed that my boundaries are inexhaustible. I am always ready to explore new forms and concepts that are beyond the scope of my immediate imagination. The themes I wish to explore and the materials I am using.

Sound is a physical phenomenon that stimulates the sense of hearing, it is an element that complete visual experience, I grew up with heavy noise of printing machines and tapping sound of type-writers around me so I wanted my audience to experience the same feelings I had growing up, with *Man & Machine* exhibition.

Painting, photography and printing are artistic processes with well-defined history of engagement. *Àsìkò* is the new body of work that brings to a shared premise through painting and installation the past and present, intermingling forms: geometry, time, people, machine, smudging non-gestural brushstrokes and colour. How did you come about the concept of incorporating these processes in your work?

An artist shows influence from the society in which he lives, the materials available to him, as well as the technological advancements of his time. Painting, printing and photography are intricate aspects of my life and development. I am bringing forward my past as a printer into the present as a painter and I am excited about the future. In this body of work I hope you will be able to catch a glimpse of the past, the present and the progressions ahead.

Where do you get the photo images in your paintings?

Most of the images I use are gotten from my family archive such as the photo albums and calendars.

The pictures in Àsìkò indicate an interesting moment of social circumstances (Owambe) and the presence of the sitters in the family album series reference culture and history. Why the fascination and emphasis on family history and portrait?

Many of the images used were taken around the time Nigeria gained independence, changes occurred at that period that were recorded one way or the other, people were trying to imbibe western cultures in the way they dressed and the kind of food they ate, but they still preserved their cultures through social functions and gatherings. People were more stable financially due to the availability of jobs and there were lots of vernacular photographers around which made it easy for people to hire them for functions.

Contrary to the general opinion on "Owambe" as merely a social party or as being ostentatious, it brings people together and affords youth the opportunity to learn and know more about their culture. In recent times it has become more like a co-operative society where people gather to support themselves one way or the other to achieve common goals. This reminds me of "Egbe Aroo"-the traditional mutual aid farmers, known for supporting one another in clearing and cultivating farmlands which later led to the liberation of Egba people of Abeokuta between 1775 and 1780 from Oyo kingdom.

However the body of work 'Àsìkò' is inspired by the relationship I had with my father. He introduced me early to the world of design. Though I lost him when I was twelve, every photograph of him reminds me of the momentous time I shared with him.

I also incorporate images of events that happened before I was born as way of learning about and trying to understand the extent of family gatherings and community interactions such as naming ceremonies, traditional weddings, house warming etc.

How would you describe the new direction your work is taking?

I will say it is in progress, the more research I do while developing an artwork, the more satisfying is the outcome. So, for me, the process is more important than the finished work. The concept or idea involved in my work takes precedence over traditional aesthetics.

Could you explain the steps leading to a single painting in the Àsìkò exhibition?

'Baale Nlado' from 'Calendar Series' is informed by early designs of "BOMODE OKU" Calendars, in the 70s printed by my father's printing press. The image I use in this particular piece is derived from an old metal plate used in reproducing photograph in letterpress printing, created with silver-

coated plates and treated with acid to make them sensitive to light, which is the same technique used in daguerreotype (the first photographic process suitable for widespread use).

This work is inspired by the idea of letter setting in letterpress printing and greatly influenced by the history, culture and monarchy of Abeokuta. It shows that documentation is highly important when rotating power and should not be taken lightly. February 1975 as illustrated in the work marked a significant period in the life of the Baale and Nlado people of Egba during the reign of Oba Oyebade Lipele.

The pose of Baale Nlado can be compare to J. A. Green's photographs of the Ijaw Chiefs that generated discussions at one of the Art-iculate Lecture series at Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos by Lisa Aronson, Associate Professor of Art History at Skidmore College, New York. It raised an engaging debate about the way Ijaw Chiefs posed, asking if it was an indication that they were subjugated by the West or it was just their natural way of posing for photography.

The creative process of the work started with the enlargement of pixelated 8x10cm photograph to fit into 90x120 cm, with a professional camera. This is followed by the editing of the text I got from my family archive, then a large direct imaging printing of the text and image on paper, I carefully pasted them on canvas like old cut and paste artwork for offset printing and laminated with glue and applied modeling paste. I allowed the work to dry before applying thin layers of acrylic repeatedly to achieve desired mood and transparency.

What are the related effects of working with images from your family album?

Photographs generally convey authority because of their indexical quality. They have the effect of bringing distant memory to fore, and this applies to images from my family album.

These photographs enunciate a particular moment in the history of my family and that of my country. Working with the images gives me the opportunity to see the forgotten, remember the familiar and experience new creative thoughts and vision. Most of the short captures memorable moments of celebration, and also function as cultural memory.

Àsìkò offers a thematic exploration of culture, history and artistic representation. Do you think painters and visual artists in Nigeria are engaging enough with critical processes in their works? What is your view on workshops and articulated art programmes in artistic research and production?

These programmes afford the artist the opportunity to know what goes on in the global arena, through close and at times intensive discussions. In addition they promote creative workshops and thoughtful reasoning among artists. The outcome of this will automatically affect artists positively and reflect on the work they create.

On the impact of these workshops and programmes on my practice, I will say they are inestimable. Looking at it from the background I was coming from, as an artist that studied painting, and once

painted realistic subject using photographs as references, with less critical and intellectual depth, I was discontent with the resulting quality of my effort and felt that my painting was not all that art should be. I wanted to do more.

Around this time, I responded to a call that I can confidently describe now as a changing factor. It was the CCA, Lagos and Triangle Art workshop in October 2010. This workshop was held at location outside of Lagos called the Stone House, Alakuko, Ogun State and facilitated by Anawana Hobol and Romeo Gongora.

I was selected among other artist from every area of practice, and more than seven different countries. This workshop was not centered around production of work, but rather on the process of creating work; the importance of artist collaboration in artistic practice as well as artist presentation and portfolio review. At the end of the two weeks duration of the workshop we had a public presentation that showed my first collaborative installation and mural with the graphic artist Karo Akpokiére.

Shortly after this, I attended a 12-week mentorship meetings spread across a year by Bisi Silva that focused on "beauty", and the influences your readings had on your presentation in relation to beauty. These were enlightening developments processes and are fundamental to shaping my career.

Can you explain the reason behind your choice of Àsìkò as the exhibition title?

Àsìkò is a Yoruba word meaning time, a limited period during which an action, process, or condition exists. The body of work I am showing is a research on my family autobiography highlighting a particular period in my existence in relation to socio-cultural realities of my community. The philosophy underlying the title of this exhibition led me into believing that though the old customs and traditions, religion and beliefs, heritage and history are all disappearing, I will always be inspired by its richness, reflect on its components and recreate its mortality through my art.