

The Humanisation of Machines in Kelani Abass's Recent Works

Jerry Buhari

In 2011 Kelani Abass' solo show 'Man and Machine' drew our attention to the relationship between humans and machines. The works tickled our sensibilities about the energies and interactions of material as an inanimate object and matter as a living being. Using visual strategies that evoked memory, dream and illusion, Kelani explored the three and two dimensional worlds with expert draughtsmanship. Among the drawings in the show was a series titled 'Illusion 2011', which seemed to situate the figures in a dream world yet they still connected us with his realistic studies of machines and machine parts. Aesthetic nuances of modern Nigerian artists Onobolu and Lasekan were shrewdly and imaginatively incorporated in the works.

Writing on the exhibition, artist and art historian Frank Ugiomoh observed, "We are thus presented with a seamless transformation in an installation of diverse subjects that is central to humanity's native obsession to create prime objects..." In Kelani's new compositions, he persuades us to see the intertwining relationship that man establishes with the machine. In one work it seems as if man is chained by the machine, whilst in another we see the superiority of man over the machine symbolised by the manipulative presence of the human hand. We are left to wonder if the machine controls the man or if man is in charge.

Kelani explained that he created the works in "Man and Machine" from his experience in his father's printing press where he worked for several years as a machine operator before gaining admission into art school. In pursuance of this autobiographical voyage, he now presents us with a body of work in which the machine has been given a soul. These new works are so realistically painted that they could be regarded as the whole of the parts that was witnessed in "Man and Machine". Here, Kelani has named some of the new works as 'Family' and in so doing gives them a human spirit. The machines of his father's printing house have become family. Among these is 'Family Portrait' 1, a realistic rendition of an old printing machine. This work could be considered as Kelani's way of reflecting on the role the machines have played in his life and indeed the life of his entire family and all of us. The 'Precious' machine is family because through it the source of the family's livelihood is found. To see these machines as family also tells us about the intimacy and relational dialogue that the artist has established with them over the years. Today, for many people, the smart phone and similar electronic gadgets are "more family" and closer social relations than other human beings. This is evidenced by how little communication takes place in a gathering where many sink into their smart phones or ipads.

Perhaps this was not the way Kelani first encountered these machines. I want to imagine that his early encounters with them may have been frightening, like confronting a monster, especially with their strange noises, grotesque movements, and dark colours. And it is possible that as he visited the printing house frequently the sounds may have become musical, even conversational. With time, therefore, the printing house may have become an extension of his home and by implication, his family.

In 'Family Portrait 1' 2013, Kelani seems to take on a romantic dialogue with this machine. First the view he chooses is strongly suggestive of the outline of a female form. The upper white-ish disk part on the top left related to the rectangular one at the bottom right of the machine evokes a girl standing by a mirror. As in others of the 'Family' Series, I am able to see this female form because Kelani – through his representational rendition of these images (no longer machines) and in the way he frames each one of them with delicate intertwining lines reflective of the old inner picture frames – visually persuades me to see them as an extension of his family pictures. This is a refreshing treatment of a favourite subject of artists, "Girl by the mirror".

The 20th century saw artistic freedom stretched to the limits. It was the period when the very meaning of art and what it stood for was questioned. It was the period when artists became obsessed with manufactured objects. Mundane and ordinary objects were taken as they are and given artistic status. Suddenly a bicycle wheel, a urinal and a wash-hand basin found their way into the gallery. Marcel Duchamp called them "ready-mades". Andre Breton (in "Dada and the Fantastic", Croix & Tansey, 1980) declared that what art is, or what is considered an art object, is the decision of the artist. The artist redefines the meaning and perception of what art is. Here, in Africa, when it became difficult for African and Nigerian artists to purchase imported art materials, they turned to the rich stockpile of discarded objects characteristic of our consumerist lifestyle generating work reminiscent of the Dadaist spirit. I dare say that Kelani's work combines all these aspects in his personal and authentic artistic creation. This visual vocabulary is not limited or restrained by time, space or geo-cultural identity.

Kelani Abass can be said to belong to the group of artists in Nigeria who have worked with disparate materials with specific reference to machines (or machine parts) as a motif. These include Ayo Aina's installation 'Jolly Ride' (2008) or Richardson Ovbiebo's two dimensional relief 'Frozen Dreams II' (2010). Outside the country Abu Bakarr Mansaray's drawing 'Beyond Creation' (2004) comes to mind as does another artist fascinated with machine Uzo Egonu's screen print 'Music Machine' (1981). Each of them approach the object and subject in unique ways. Ayo and Ovbiebo's work can be said to address issues of social commentary whilst Egonu's work reflects on the founders of the art of assemblage. Kelani's work can be regarded like Robert Rauschenberg.

Rauschenberg, if we recall, was one of the leading assemblage artists known to intuitively juxtapose objects and images indiscriminately on a picture plane. Rauschenberg and his colleagues took their realistic images literally and placed them on the picture plane with little compositional consideration or visual rationality. Kelani's works on the other hand restrict the usage of objects to those with which he has an intimate connection. His compositions are less of an intuitive collection of objects on the picture plane; and more of careful, almost geometric arrangements intended to bring each part together in the harmony of a "functional" life. The family must be stable, organised and harmonious.

Kelani's works tease the extent to which an object can be regarded as real or unreal. Reality does not reside in matter only, neither in material objects alone. In his world these two fields engage one another in a counter discovery. In them the artist creates, for us to share, a reality that is a constant dialogue of seemingly opposing energies. But, we may pose the question, why is man obsessed with the object of his/her creation? Consider again, for a moment, our relationship with the cell phone, computer or our modern electronic gadget...

Kelani has included his Calendar Series 'Baale Nlado' (2012), 'Olori Nlado' (2012) in this exhibition. One is compelled to draw a historical connection between our ancestral origin and the intrusion of western culture in Kelani's Family and Calendar series. This elicits a meditation on the paradox of development and modernity, and raises connections between the foreign machines/agents (tools) of colonial exploitation and the "calendar" which timed it. The works in the Calendar Series suggest a photo-documentary of Africa's ensnarement with the mirror, camera and other colonial trappings. The familiar posture we see in Calendar Series "Baale Nlado" is typical of colonial photographs, a posture acquired and perfected at the advent of colonialism. The consistency of this posture, irrespective of the political or social status of the people who posed appears staged-managed to present the African as dead, frozen and unable to accommodate the European picture machine. And what is the significance of 1975 in this work? For me, it references the end (death) of Nigeria's civil service and ushers in the period of the militarisation of Nigeria.

Kelani's works are an exploration of reality. They are a refreshing presentation of what painting can be in contemporary Nigerian art. Here machines have been given a new visual reading. A reading connected to and with the artist's upbringing. A personal story of how/what an intimate relationship with machines can do. The detailed rendition and the deliberately plain backgrounds grant them multiple readings. We are confronted with old printing machines illustrating the biographical narrative of a life enriched by experience. Our reading calls for an ability to evoke our sense of history, our present, a frozen state in the development of post-colonial Nigeria, and perhaps, in a most

uncomfortable way, a future that is blurred by our past. Kelani's 'Family Portraits' and 'Calendars' are journals of a people's pilgrimage, in each one of us grappling with/in hope or despair. Only those who practice contemplation and those who can dialogue with images in quiet patience are given entrance into the fascinating creative world of Kelani.

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Notes

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