

Memoirs and Memories:

Kelani Abass in the Crucible of Conceptual Creativity

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Kelani Abass's proficiency in verisimilitude typifies the continuing tradition of professional skill acquisition characteristic of the best graduates of Yaba School of Art, Lagos. In the last four decades, many graduates of the School of Art and Design, Yaba College of Technology have demonstrated tremendous talent in painting, especially in the area of photographic naturalism. Significant among the artists that engendered sub styles of naturalism are Abiodun Olaku whose penchant for soft and tender brushwork creates moody and compelling realities – be it figurative or scenic compositions. Edosa Oguigo also fashioned a peculiar sub style by using rapid brushstrokes to generate schematic paintings that are coded in proficient draughtsmanship.

As soon as he graduated – with distinction – from art school, he immediately set himself a personal target; to become more exploratory and experimental. Kelani's first solo exhibition titled 'Paradigm Shift' (2009) at MyDrim Gallery, Lagos marked the beginning of the search for an expanded visual grammar. He perfected the use of pencil, pen and ink, charcoal, pastel and watercolour. He makes manifest the inherent qualities that each material offers in artistry. He also pays substantial attention to details in the rendition of objects, scenes and figurative images. He validates naturalism with its varying stylistic possibilities as an evergreen aesthetic reference in the annals of human history.

A proficient colourist, Kelani poetises his paintings with compelling chromatism, simulating a patina of hues, thereby bequeathing them with a respectability that comes with age on what are in fact recent paintings. He applies multiple tonalities of analogous and complementary colours in such a manner that symphonic harmony is orchestrated. He creates diverse emotions with the manipulation of earthy hues of ochre, brown and grey without making the palette dirty. Some of his paintings display complex visual appropriations, such as foreshortening, aerial perspective, acrobatic mobility and structural vitality, with seeming ease. Painterly grace dominates his pictorial compositions and spatial dimensions. He depicts objects with tactile and textural fidelity. He suspends forms in space using effective tonal manipulations to create

atmospheric illusion. He uses what can be described as neo-photorealism to depict lucid transparency and translucency.

Kelani does not want to be fixed, rather he constantly opts out of the box, searching for alternative tenors of creativity. He started burgeoning in the first decade of the new millennium when African artists became more aware of the possibility of new media in visual arts. Nigerian artists joined the global trend in the exploration of more vigorous conceptual art presentation experimenting with mixed media, installation, video and performance. Photography, for example, in spite of its long history in Nigeria, began to gain more currency as an integral component of the visual art field just over a decade ago. These factors aggregate to create new impressions in the minds of a younger generation of artists seeking relevance in the visual art sector. Whilst Kelani gradually abandoned naturalism he nonetheless retained his skillful rendition of objects that he sparingly uses as a structural balance in his new conceptual compositions.

In his second solo exhibition 'Man and Machine' (2011) at Omenka Gallery, Lagos, Kelani displayed a significant turning point in his artistic evolution. He seemed to be more interested in metaphorical allusions, using metal and machine, in effect technology, as the repository of memories. He interrogated humanity within the context of printing technology and highlighted his personal experience as a universal phenomenon. His artistic process became more experimental with the use of a wider array of media such as printed magazine and newsprint cutouts, corrugated cardboards, modeling paste, metal, as well as oil and acrylic on board. His formal structure changed from representational to embrace more abstract forms. His colouration changed from brilliant primary colour to brownish earthiness. However the occasional simulated rendition of metallic machine parts, such as wheels, gears, spools and rods, still echoed his ability to paint naturalistically. Spatial relationship became oblivious with his ambivalent use of volume and void; fading textual background was achieved in some of the triptych and diptych panels. Order seemed often restored with the blurring dots of raw red, blue and green sparingly spotted on the picture plane.

In 'Man and Machine', Kelani creatively spiced the visual experience with audio recordings of the sound generated by working machines including a variety of printing presses. The simple sound installation – a first attempt on his part – characterises his desire to push the boundaries of his painterly practice in

combination with other media. It is apparent that the new body of works in 'Asiko' have derived their inspiration from 'Man and Machine' not only in structural format, but also in their conceptual and thematic exploration of self. A self defined within the nostalgic framework of photographic memories.

Nothing better captures the theme of this current exhibition than when the artist states that "another body of work evolves from my experiences gathered from another machine, the camera. Photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. It captures an illusion; the intermingling of two inseparable elements, time and space, and the overlap of the past and the future." 'Asiko' indeed predominantly concerns man and the camera. Kelani investigates the photograph and the idea of the portrait, the manipulation of the photographic image, and nuances of representation of people and the self. Three series of works namely 'Family Portrait', 'Calendar Series', and 'Family Album' – all from 2012 - 2013 – consider the concept of the portrait from an intimate space to the public arena, offering contrasting approaches that play off one another and challenge our perceptions. Integral in this new body of work is a conceptual and thematic exploration of self, an investigation not only of identity but also of the ways, means and the manners or styles of representing that identity. Growing up, Abass was ensconced in the trades of his parents. His mother was a secretary who dealt with letters, typing and keeping records, and his father owned a printing company. The young child's environment was filled with the mechanical reproduction of texts, images and meanings. The printing processes certainly fascinated Abass as a teenager. He joined the workers in drawing, setting letter types and possibly assisted in the actual printing of graphic materials. The smell of ink and paper that dominated the pressrooms became an aroma of nostalgia arousing childhood memories. Impressions of machines and machine parts, printed texts and photo reproductions were engraved permanently in his young mind.

Contextually, certain experiences fuel creative contemplations. Sometimes, the more bitter the experience, the better the imagination. Kelani's childhood memories turned obtrusive with the interplay of the loss of his father and the feudal acrimonies that often traumatise polygamous households. When trial enfeebles the heart, the nostalgic aroma of ink turns fetid. Art then becomes therapeutic, and the creative processes serve as both physical and spiritual sanctification. Kelani Abass found solace in the visual and conceptual

documentation of his personal challenges. Parental memoirs such as old photographs, hand written texts and graphic images become reference points for the enlargement of his creativity.

The narrative which begins with 'Family Portrait' 2013 comprises three paintings of printing presses. Each one is a compelling photo-realistic representation of a different type of printing press, painted verisimilitude in oil on canvas. They are without doubt working machines, but here, there are no smudges of ink or grease, no crumpled paper or offcuts, no spare machine parts or reference to the workplace. They are clean, shining almost perfect, with their pristine surfaces glimmering and glinting with delicate metallic colouration. Like the old-fashioned studio shot, the backdrop has been carefully chosen, in this case to be plain and in soft muted colours. Everything has been prepared for this important recorded moment. Each 'character' is formally posed, suspended, still in space, captured in a 'portrait'. And each is poignantly surrounded and set off by a delicate, golden metal frame, intertwined and embossed at specific points with decorative and bejewelled floral medallions – all painstakingly painted. Kelani is not just painting machines, but giving expression to objects that symbolise family. But where else could Abass begin the narrative if not from the machines that were central to his childhood experiences?

Whilst 'Family Portrait' 2013 represents inanimate objects, the story continues with the animate in 'Calendar Series' 2013 which also highlights a transition from the personal to the collective. Starting with a portrait of his father, his maternal grandmother and father, it finishes with portraits of two royal majesties of Egbaland, the Alake of Egbaland, Oba Gbadebo I and Oba Ademola II, imbuing the work with a political and historical context. Of more historical relevance are the printed texts on the background of the paintings highlighting remarkable events in Abeokuta from the early 19th to the middle of the 20th century. The series are in single panels and the pictorial surfaces are creatively rendered with a transparent patina of earthy colours.

In the final series, 'Family Album' (Asiko) 2013, Kelani uses laminated printed photographs, mainly of groups and family gatherings, that he recovered from the collection of his parents. He has restored, re-snapped and enlarged many of the old photos in black and white prints. Working with multiple layers invoking time and change, he textures and collages the picture plane and pastes the photos, either singly or in multiple pictorial arrangements, onto the canvases,

with each composition made up of single, diptych or triptych panels. Carefully and repeatedly applied layers of thin paint achieve desired transparencies and ambience. The top layer is composed of printers' markings, strips of colour chart, and the time and date of the original photographs in bright digital typeface, which of course had not been invented then, thus neatly contextualising the narrative within the trajectory of technology. In 'Asiko 2', 2013 the final layer is lively sketchlines, demonstrating the artist's renowned mastery of draughtsmanship and naturalistic representation, and adding an extra personal touch.

For Kelani, art is a profession that has sequential processes and eventual output. He diligently respects workshop practice, is meticulous, neat and very organised, and his home-studio speaks volumes about his systematic approach to materials, methods, techniques, storage, restoration and preservation of art and related matters. He often attends exhibitions and participates in creative workshops, and he is an avid reader. All this contributes to the growth and development of the faculty for exploration of fresh possibilities. Kelani stands out among his peers in his critical engagement of concepts, and the successful articulation and translation of these ideas into visual artworks is founded on his mastery over methods and materials. The skilful naturalism of his early work remains apparent and is cleverly combined with the results of his more recent experimentation with a variety of media and techniques. To echo Kelani's 2011 statement quoted earlier, the provocative gathering and intermingling of content, media and techniques in 'Asiko:Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History', successfully echoes and interrogates the overlap of human identity of the past and of the future.

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