

Introduction.

In 2009, I visited MyDrim Gallery where an exhibition 'Paradigm Shift' was taking place. It was the first solo exhibition of artist, Kelani Abass whose work I was unfamiliar with at that time. On display were over twenty paintings mostly in the naturalistic representational style characteristic of the Yaba School of Art, Lagos. The images were of children playing, market women and other depictions of everyday life. Whilst his draughtmanship and technical proficiency were evident, the claim of a 'paradigm shift' seemed more aspirational than real for a young artist barely out of art school. Two years later when he presented his second solo exhibition, 'Man and Machine' (2011) at Omenka Gallery, Lagos in which he explored man's relationship with technology, the new direction in his work were visible. Taking as his starting point an interest borne out of his formative years working by the side of his late father in the family design and printing business, his fascination with the power of technology is presented visually and contextually in the exhibition. On that occasion the centrality of the figure was dispersed to the background and the use of bold colours had dissipated into soft hues of green and brown. In addition some of the paintings included the depiction and inclusion of objects such as fragments of metal salvaged from obsolete or non functioning printing presses as well as other media such as photography for the first time. The presentation was completed with a sound piece – a cacophony of different printing presses in operation. The 'shift', which was nascent in the first exhibition, had now become apparent in his artistic process and production as well as contextually.

The Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos is pleased to present the third solo exhibition by Kelani Abass, 'Asiko: Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History'. In this body of new works, a paradigmatic shift becomes noticeable as he explores the possibilities inherent in painting, photography and printing, issues already suggested in 'Man and Machine'. In 'Asiko', he highlights personal stories against the background of social and political events built around three interrelated bodies of work which also engage time and memory. The first and most symbolic is the 'Family Portrait' series. However this series does not include the image of a person, instead objects

such as the first typewriter which included in the exhibition will be used as part of an interactive installation by the artist's mother and the audience. The typewriter the first purchase to start the printing business is used to begin the story of the family's trajectory. In the three paintings, the printing press is positioned full frontal and centrally and except for the 'decorative' framing no other element is included in the picture reinforcing the importance of the object and positioning it as a timeless reference. However with each painting, time is inextricably implicated through technological developments and its symbolic entanglement with the family history.

The second body of paintings the 'Calendar series' he appropriates the template of the 'Bomode Oku' an engaging way of telling stories and remembering events that have happened in a community. As a child, Kelani recalls clients coming to the family printing press with images of a loved one (usually deceased) and asking for a 'Bomode Oku' calendar that highlights the story of their town and community. Kelani pays homage to this form of archiving and remembering and uses it for his own purposes in the 'Calendar Series' by using images of his late father, maternal grandfather and grandmother to create family calendars. In addition he acknowledges the history of the family background in Abeokuta by creating calendars of two important Yoruba Kings Oba Gbadebo I and Oba Ademola II whose reign in the late 19th and early 20th Century had an impact on the south West region of Nigeria.

The last series of paintings 'Family Album' are large paintings embedded with photographs that place the nuclear family within the group at social gatherings and important events extending a personal narrative to include the extended family and friends. By making a private narrative part of a social collective, he comments on the universal reality of his experience. In these paintings the images of the past and present, analogue and digital, painting and photograph coalesce seamlessly, conflating space, time, and medium. 'Asiko' meaning time in Yoruba is a nostalgic as well as a cathartic tribute to a father who despite the passage of time, his memories remains embedded in the fabric of the present. This is most visible with the inclusion of a book of

'knowledge', a material witness to the thoughts, ideas, encounters of Alhaji Sumola Ajani Kelani.

The arrival of Kelani Abass at this personal and professional juncture can be better understood through the local context and the environment in which the works are created. 'Asiko' is a critical and artistic milestone that has accumulated over the past four years through a search for a personal visual language borne out of lived experiences. He looked for and took advantage of opportunities that involved exploring, experimenting, collaboration, research and critical thinking. These included an international workshops such as Triangle Workshop (2009), a 12week mentorship programme that focused on developing one's research and critical thinking and applying to it one's creative process (2011), he prioritised attending exhibitions including visiting his first international exhibition the Benin Biennale in Cotonou (2012), he took part in the month long intensive art school programme organised by CCA, Lagos (2012) as well as several other workshops, seminars and lectures. In commenting on artists whose works have interested him recently the name of John Baldesarri is prominent and other artists whose work he admires include Wilhem Sasnal, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas among others. Coming from an educational art background in which painting sits at the top of the artistic hierarchy, this intensive continuous informal learning process has contributed to his critical and artistic development.

As with many painters Kelani uses photography as a preparatory tool for their work but very few artists in Nigeria have placed it on the same level as painting reinforcing hierarchical barriers between the 'art' of painting and mechanical procedure of photography. Could the breaking down of these barriers, which is evidenced in this body of work signal a new departure in the relationship between painting and photography in Nigeria? Whilst this might seem like a new trend for many for Kelani it is a natural progression that begin with printing, followed by painting and in the last few years with photography. It also places him within the nascent experimental drive locally by artists such as Lucy Azubuike, Ndidi Dike, Kainebi Osahenye, Mudi Yahaya, and Victor Ehikamenor who continue to push the boundaries

especially in terms of their art and the use of traditional medium. On this occasion painting is presented with photography, printing and even the performative not as a support but as part of the expanded field of contemporary art practice. Kelani is dissolving the boundaries and constraints of his educational background allowing him to weave a complex narrative of fact, fiction, mediums and materials that comment on the family, technology, time history and politics.

I would like to thank Kelani Abass for his dedication in pursuing his artistic journey without constraint. My appreciation to Prof. Jerry Buhari and Dr Kunle Filani for their insightful essays as well as to Jude Anogwih for his tireless contribution to making this exhibition successful. We appreciate the support of the Institute Français for their support of this exhibition and in particular this publication.

Bisi Silva

Curator

Director, CCA, Lagos