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NO MORE BOUNDARIES: GANI ODUTOKUN REMEMBERED BY ZARIA.

EKPO UDO UDOMA

The name Gani Odutokun may not mean much to the average Nigerian, but to the motley crowd of art lovers, he stands out as an artist whose works typify a dynamism all of its own. Characterised essentially by the use of fluid lines and a liquidised surface texturisation, his paintings have been able to hold their own in an increasingly commercialised art market.

Born forty-nine years ago in Samsons village, Nsawan, Ghana, Gani, as he was popularly known, attended primary and secondary schools in Ghana before gaining admission into Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, in Nigeria. He graduated with a first class honours in painting in 1975 and a Masters of Arts degree in 1979.

Subsequently, from 1976 until his death in February 1995, he had been teaching art at his *alma-matter*. To most art enthusiasts, the loss of Gani is a terrible blow and so this piece should be seen as a mark of respect to a great Nigerian artist who was a friend to some, a brother to others and a teacher to many a Nigerian artist. His contributions to the contemporary art of Nigeria should therefore not go un-acknowledged, but should be recorded as a testimonial for the generations coming behind.

To have a better insight into the world of the artist, we need to take a look at some of his works produced over the years. The quintessential Gani Odutokun was a strong believer in design as a critical element in art, but at the same time, he was a social commentator as well as an experimentalist. He therefore strove diligently to achieve a consensus through a consistent balance. Gani saw art as an extension of creation and therefore to a large extent the outcome of an artist's sojourn, at times, may not be pre-determined. In the words of the artist '... life is an endless circle of design, accident and design...' and therefore whereas objectives may be sought for to attain but actual

results are not necessarily obtained. This remains the frailty of human kind, nevertheless, results could also be more rewarding than actually anticipated.

According to Dele Jegede, the artist's works are in some cases '... attempts to imbue matter with a new status, through a materialisation process...' This goes to further confirm versatility of this Nigerian artist whose career as an artist and lecturer spanned over a period of eighteen years starting as a graduate assistant rising to the position of senior lecturer and Head of Department. As a practising artist, he had participated in about thirty-five exhibitions in Zaria, Kaduna, Lagos, Kassel and Bonn in Germany; London, Liverpool and Bradford in the United Kingdom. His commissions ranged from wall murals to garden sculptures and book cover designs for various organisations in Kaduna, Zaria and Abuja.

Even though Gani could be regarded as a star in the artistic landscape of Nigeria, in that he was good in most areas of the visual arts, he would be more fondly remembered as a painter. His paintings represented a sense of freedom expected of a thorough-bred artist. For example **The Triumphal Return Of The Garden City**, oil on canvas, 300cm by 170cm, a painting produced in 1991 which is currently in the private collection the proprietor of an arts gallery in Lagos, is a scenic rendition of an architectural facade superimposed on a mountainous landscape amidst caricatured images all fused together showing a resplendence of warm hues. Free flowing brush strokes, and a kaleidoscopic view of yellow, red, pink and purple pigments seen in the sky-like background. The most interesting aspect of this work is the manner in which the images are superimposed upon each other in such a way as to give the work several interpretations depending on who is viewing .

Architecture in art, which has always been a major concern to the artist, is evident in the use of Greco-Roman arches and columns as an integral part of this composition. This painting also shows the artist as an experimentalist. An idea has been '...splashed on canvas, allowed to run its course and gather its own momentum...' It is however, only in the delicate hands of a master like Gani Odotokun whose keen sense of perception could transform images created, by accident or otherwise, into works of intense appeal.

King, Queen, Moonlight And Fire, a painting in gouache, 55cm by 77cm, produced in 1988 represents Gani Odotokun as the designer *par excellence*. The essential character of this work is the artist's use of colour and tone as design elements. This he has made possible through the transposing of flat surfaces with broken lines and curvilinear striations. This is very apparent in the clothes worn by the man and woman in the painting. Effective balance is



achieved by positioning the window, from which we see a cityscape under the moonlight, on the bottom right hand corner as opposed to the top of the picture plane.

Man, it is said, is a political animal, and Gani Odutokun was no exception. As a political cartoonist, the artist showed great passion in constantly reminding the military in Nigeria that their place was not on the soap box but in the barracks. In his **The King Shares A Joke With His Generals**, an oil painting also done in 1988, alludes to the political dispensation under General Ibrahim Babanginda, whose government made pretentious claims to liberalism.

The whole gamut of Gani Odutokun's art would require a book for justice to be done. This notwithstanding, one can say without equivocation that in the short period the artist practised, he had produced not less than two hundred outstanding works which is by no means a small achievement. One however must look ahead and try as much as possible

to learn from the example which has been laid down by a master of the fluid line.

Time—no Boundaries, an exhibition of paintings and sculptural pieces opened June 7 at the Maison de France along Kingsway Road, Ikoyi, Lagos. Ended on June 17, **Time** was a premiere parade with regard to the stature of the artists convoked. It was possible to assemble for the first time in Lagos the works of a dozen outstanding artists from the North because the exposition was a tribute to the late Gani Odutokun, head of Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) who passed on last February 15.

Odutokun was one of three other artists who lost their lives in a fatal crash while returning to Zaria from **Vibrations**, an art exhibition in Lagos which followed a workshop organised by the Goethe Institut. An intellectual and accomplished artist, he was the leading light of the Zaria-based art intellectuals called **The Eye**, which publishes a quarterly journal

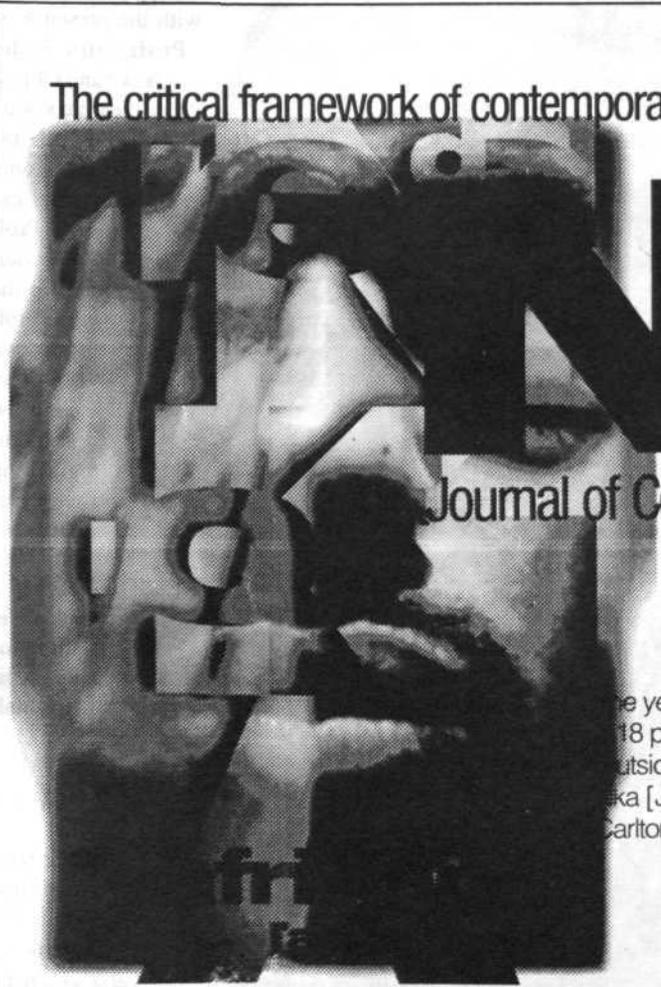
of the same name on contemporary Nigerian art.

Presented in collaboration with Alliance Francaise, Kaduna and with the assistance of Captain Usman Mu'azu, Managing Director of Universal Jet Trading Limited, **Time** brought to view 54 works altogether from four sculptors and eight painters. The sculptors were Tonie Okpe, Tunde Babalola, Matthew Ehizele and Lasisi Lamidi. In the latter group were Tayo Quaye, Ayo Aina, Jerry Buhari, Jacob Jari, Ken Adewuyi, Kefas Danjuma, Muazu Mohammed Sanni and Gani Odutokun himself.

With respect to the tragedy which befell the Zaria School early this year, **Time** was a reflection of the irrepressible spirit of man. The only way to honour a fallen general is to win the war, which is why we found the regenerative attitude of Gani's professional survivors admirable. **GR**

With MAURICE ACHIBONG.

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