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So Much is still to be Done

Interview by
Chika Okeke

G

R: Let us begin with the Second International Symposium on Contemporary Nigerian Art which you convened three years back. What were your primary reasons for taking on the project?

Udechukwu: I think the time was overdue for the second symposium after the first one that was held in Nsukka. So many things have happened and there are a lot of activities in the Nigerian art scene. Nigerian art is attracting more and more attention outside the country, so I thought that we should come together to talk about issues related to contemporary Nigerian art; and of course it happened that Uche Okeke who convened the 1976 symposium was turning 60, so that became a galvanizing point for that effort.

GR: Couldn't the symposium have come earlier? Did you have to wait for Uche Okeke to turn 60?

Udechukwu: Well, let's face it, I believe that a symposium like this should be organised by art historians and scholars who are not studio people. We are studio people busy painting pictures and so on. Since they didn't seem to be planning anything we felt that we could take the initiative as it were to call people together, afterall I did not organise the conference myself. I did it along with others.

GR: Is it still part of the failings of the art historians and scholars who have also been blamed for the dearth of art literature and scholarly activities in contemporary Nigerian art?

Udechukwu: I think the problem is squarely in their own court. Their job includes curating, making proposals, and seeking the necessary funding for exhibitions as well as writing the appropriate cata-

logues and so on. The artists, painters and sculptors are expected to produce works of art. It is after they produce works of art that the historians and critics can talk about the art. It is too much to expect one group of people to be producing art and writing about it as well. So the fact that the art historians have not performed as well as they should is partly responsible for the problems today.

GR: It is believed in some quarters that the participation of foreign agencies and individuals in the promotion and documentation of contemporary Nigerian art is anything but healthy.

Udechukwu: What is the alternative? If you can't do something and then someone does, are you saying it is better not to have anything than to have it done by someone from outside? I think if one follows that argument then most of the research done by our own people would not have been done. If you think about the contributions of people like Kenneth Murray for instance, of Duckworth, of Danford, Michael Crowder, Ulli Beier, and others, if you remove their contributions, I don't know how much we have left in Nigeria. I have heard this argument concerning whether people should exhibit in foreign cultural institutes, but I ask, what is the alternative? Do we just stay away at home waiting for the day our people wake up from sleep? So I don't buy that argument. Foreigners can play a role and it is our duty to play a more substantial and significant role. So the challenge is for us. It is counterproductive to just keep complaining and only frown that they (foreigners) should not do what they are doing. Why don't we provide alternatives? In the area of literature the problem is not there. There are many Nigerian critics and scholars. In the early Fifties Gerald Moore, Ulli Beier and a few others were very active in writing about our literature. But by the Seventies our people had taken over completely, which means that people like Bernth Lindfors, Robert Wren and Don Burness could still write and nobody is saying that they shouldn't write because they are contributing something useful and these come together to form the corpus of literature which students and researchers can benefit from. The same thing is

not happening in the visual arts.

GR: Back to the symposium, what was the response of foreign and Nigerian artists and scholars in terms of attendance and participation?

Udechukwu: There were well over fifty papers and several, in fact most came from Nigerians artists and scholars. There were, of course, contributions from people in Germany, England, The United States and the Czech Republic.

GR: With hindsight, how successful was the symposium? What problems were there?

Udechukwu: Given the conditions under which we operated, it was fairly successful. We were able to have all the papers presented as it were. The participants were very happy with the level of organisation which could still have been better. I think the greatest constraints we had were in the area of funding. If we had more money than we did, we could have made it even more successful in terms of organisation.

GR: Are you saying that you approached certain individuals or corporate bodies but failed to get anything?

Udechukwu: We wrote a number of corporate bodies and individuals and some of them responded positively while others were not forthcoming as it were. If we had planned it for a period of about two years, I think the response could have been better. But since we were tailoring the programme to coincide with Uche Okeke's 60th birthday we had to work with the constraints of time which was why I said that given the conditions under which we organised the symposium, I think we didn't do badly.

GR: With the symposium behind you now, what projects, if any, do you intend to go into next?

Udechukwu: We have said that they, art historians, should do this kind of work, but we have papers from the symposium and it is important that they be selected, edited, and published. The 1976 papers were not published, which was a great loss. Quite a few of them were published individually by their authors, but I think that given the calibre of papers from the last symposium, we should publish a book from the selected and edited papers. But of course one needs money to do that.

GR: Sometime ago you complained of the apparent lack of interest, among artists, in attending art exhibitions. Did you notice the same attitude during the symposium?

Udechukwu: What I was really complaining about concerned art exhibitions which is just a question of one or two hours to look at what other artists, one's professional colleagues, have done and give them the needed moral support. My argument was that we cannot be complaining of how Nigerians do not encourage artists, or appreciate art; that government does not promote art, yet the artists fail to encourage themselves when the least they can do is to attend exhibition openings.

GR: We have seen quite a number of retrospections in recent times. It appears we are entering a significant stage in contemporary art.

Udechukwu: I don't know which ones you have...

GR: We have seen Ben Enwonwu, Ben Osawe, Irein Wangboje, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Sina Yussuf, Uche Okeke, and of course, we have seen your own retrospective exhibition.

Udechukwu: I believe that it is good once in a while to see the path which an artist has trodden over the years; to look at his development as an artist. There are two reasons for that. One is that you can see a total profile of the artist. The second is that other artists can also benefit from seeing that to get somewhere as an artist, one needs a couple of years to really mature and produce work that is lasting and significant, and profound. So I think that is essentially what retrospectives are supposed to resolve.

GR: When is the right time for an artist to have a retrospective of his work?

Udechukwu: The art historians have a role to play here. They should decide from time to time when an artist has done enough work to warrant a retrospective. But many of the cases we have had so far have been tied to birthday anniversaries. The late Enwonwu's retrospective was in conjunction with his Seventieth, Onobrakpeya's too, was with his Sixtieth and so was Uche Okeke's.

GR: Your own retrospective at the Italian Cultural Centre, Lagos, was titled 'SO FAR....' why?

Udechukwu: So Far... can be read in different ways. It can be so far so good, so far so bad or whatever. It can be read as a journey that is so far... this is more like taking stock of what has been done so far and by implication stating that as long as one is still alive there is still a lot to be done. So it says this is what I have done so far. I hope I will be able to do more.



Ugulu (Harmattan), 1993
 acrylic on canvas, 140 x 100

GR: Concerning your recent works, we notice something new. There are more shapes and colours than lines for which you were previously known. What accounts for this shift in style?

Udechukwu: Well, I don't know if lines had always been there from the beginning...

GR: Yes. For instance Pat Oyelola talks about the sensitivity of your lines - lines manifested as linear trails of a moving point, but in your recent pictures we see more colours and bold, flat shapes.

Udechukwu: I believe that reading was based on the fact that for many years I concentrated on drawing, and in drawing, lines become more prominent. We have line in painting alright, but one is also dealing with masses, shapes, and colours. What has happened is that I am beginning to go back to painting. For many years I was not painting. Although I stated in a paper written many years ago

('Towards Essence and Clarity', Nigeria Magazine), that I was going to transfer some of the experiments in drawing to painting, I never got round to doing it. Now I am just beginning to do what I proposed more than ten years ago.

GR: So we are seeing a sort of going back to painting because we notice that before your uli experiment of the early Seventies you were painting in the traditional sense of it. With uli you went into drawing and lines, and now you are tracing your steps back to painting. You want to attempt painting with the

experience of your uli experiments.

Udechukwu: Yes, I think so.

GR: There is a minimalist tendency in your space organisation and one can see traditional uli wall painting as a historical precedent, but does uli also explain the vigorous texturization evident in your recent work?

Udechukwu: Of course. As I said somewhere else, uli traditional wall painting in some areas of Igboland have akika patterns as the background - akika patterns by the way are geometrical patterns

which are created in monochromatic colour. In the Agulu/Nri area for instance, the artists paint over the laterite background with a coat of Aja nwa mmuo which is red and while the Aja nwa mmuo is still wet, they go over it with the fingers or ntecha which is something like a rag. In the course of the rhythmic hand movement, the paint in those areas where the ntecha presses on the wet colour lifts revealing the darker red laterite in the background. So they have their finger or ntecha creating those kind of textures, which I have tried to create. There is a link between what I am doing now and akika pattern in uli painting.

GR: Your use of forks, razor blades in creating these textures marks a departure from the uli wall painter's approach, and even from your usual painting techniques.

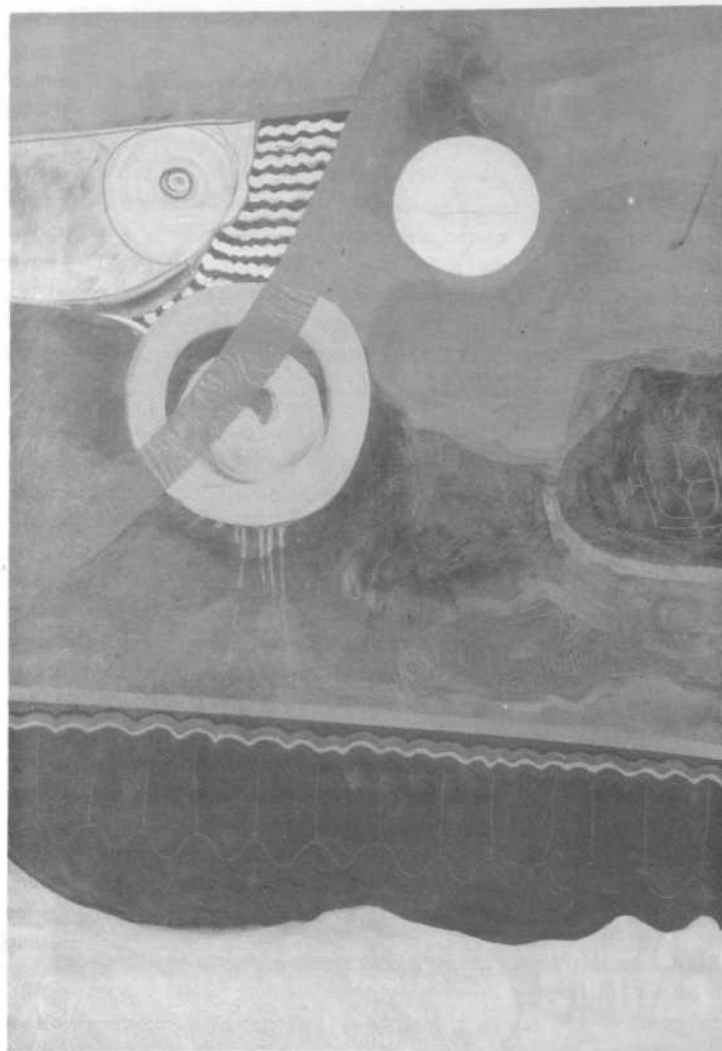
Udechukwu: I believe other artists have used tools like that but for these recent works I discovered that I could achieve some of the effects I wanted using such tools as the fork which is like a comb. It can create parallel lines so if I am using acrylics, when the painting is still wet, I could go through the surface with plastic forks which will then reveal the underlying layer of colour. Of course with the razor blade I can also scrape wet paint to reveal the underlying colour, or the canvas itself that is already stained with pigment. The same thing goes for watercolours, one can remove areas with razor blade when the pigment is still wet to create some very interesting effects.

GR: Sometimes you also introduce dots or lines which you described as 'hemming' and these again are used in traditional uli to emphasize motifs or patterns. I see a possible link between the hemming we see in your work and that seen in uli wall painting. Yet there is also a striking visual relationship between these uli design techniques and certain aspects of Aboriginal painting. How far can one stretch the cross-cultural affinities especially in the light of your earlier work on the similarities between uli and Li, the Chinese art of drawing and painting?

Udechukwu: Well I have not really looked at it but there are possible areas of correspondence in the use of dots and breaking up of large spaces with textures which of course appear in the paintings from other cultures. You should not forget that when you reduce a painting to the basics, you are dealing with lines, dots and masses. Of course when you want to emphasize contours or boundaries you use lines or dots to do that.

GR: How have acrylics affected your painting, since you have not been working with the medium until recently?

Anybody who should know about the artists living abroad should be reading the relevant literature on art. This implies that those who ought to know about these artists should know, whereas those who do not, still have a lot of work to do. There is no time that this home audience we are talking about will know or recognize those living abroad when in the first instance, it does not know about the home based artists.



Udummili
(Rainy season),
1993
acrylic on
canvas,
140 x 100

Udechukwu: I used acrylics for the first time in the early 70s but for many years I had been painting with oils and watercolours. Now I am slowly going back to acrylics. What I find exciting about acrylics is that they enable me to work as fast as I prefer to. When I am working with them I can go on with a picture for hours on end, and this is possible because the paint dries very quickly and I can lay several successive layers. With oils, it is a different thing because you have to allow the paint to dry or you end up with a very muddy surface especially if you have to do all this scraping and scratching.

GR: Are you saying that if you were working with oils some of the techniques you are exploring now may not be possible? Could that possibly account for the shift?

Udechukwu: They might be possible but I don't see how I can lay a glaze and go back to it in three hours if I am working with oils.

GR: There are areas in your paintings where

you combined ink and acrylics. I doubt if such combinations would be very possible with oils.

Udechukwu: What I have done in some cases is that I draw on the canvas directly with ink and then I go over that with acrylic medium to secure it. In others, I go over the varnished drawing with lightly laid colours so that the white of the canvas is not retained as the background colour. Now I am not aware that I can do that with oils, nor that I can finish a drawing, it dries in hours then I go over it with varnish, and then lay colours on that.

GR: How would you describe your current thematic focus if there is any such thing?

Udechukwu: I haven't really looked at the body of my recent work to be able to determine the focus. But there are works which make comments on personages in our recent national history as well as on figures in world politics. There are pictures that refer to man's condition generally, and there are those that comment on ethnic relationships in Europe and elsewhere. For instance in Germany I noticed there are many tribes, I use 'tribes' because that is what they use for Africa, and there is a deep intertribal friction there. I have pictures based on landscapes and there is a series, *The Seasons*, which reflect the cycle of life. Then of course there is the large painting I produced in Germany that refers to the Black man, his condition, and his history. These might provide a clue to what I am engaged in right now.

GR: You seem to have become more philosophical when compared with your series on *No Water* or *Rhythms of Hunger*, and some of your other thematic preoccupations in the past.

Udechukwu: May be one can say that but even in those earlier works there was always questioning which is what all philosophical enquiries are involved with, and those series you are talking about were raising questions on human conditions. They made explicit comment on very topical issues whereas the recent works are a little bit more implicit.

GR: The socio-economic situation in Nigeria now is at best discouraging. As an intellectual, an artist, or as a citizen you feel the pulse of the time. But as an artist where does frustration come in and where does inspiration begin? One is aware that there are arguments that such a social environment as we find ourselves now inspires artists while some harp on the destructive propensities of situations like this. What is your position?

Udechukwu: My position has always been

that the work produced by an artist is his response to his immediate experience and history, and if the historian or critic is able to look deeply at the work, he could be able to make the link between the formal images of the picture and the social conditions or environments in which the artist exists. I believe that these links are always there. When the artist responds to an event, inspiration is involved because to produce a work of art there must be a measure of inspiration. There is of course the mechanical, the reportorial kind of response which reveals the artist's ability to handle his media. But the response which each artist makes to a given situation belongs to him and is reflected in his work. I don't know what kind of frustration you allude to, but for me my basic frustration over the years has been that I am aware that Nigeria is capable of creating a viable economy, a good environment. The people can be galvanized to create a nation which Black people all over the world will be very proud of, but this has not happened.

I don't think that a greater percentage of the population is happy with what is happening here at present. There is a lot of suffering and it is believed that Nigeria could do better than it is doing at the moment. So as an artist I also feel the crunch of inadequate funds for living, lodging and transportation, and other necessities of life. You find that you cannot readily do what you would like to when so much time is spent searching for fuel, for cooking gas, and even water. These are things that should not be happening. They slow down the work that should be done and that is my major frustration.

GR: Some artists and intellectuals have therefore decided to leave to find more conducive environments outside Nigeria where they can continue their work. What is your thinking concerning this exodus occasioned by the increasingly worsening socio-political situation?

Udechukwu: Talking about 'exodus', how many have left in relation to the entire population of artists, writers and scholars?

GR: Not any sizeable number perhaps, but the quality of people that are leaving is impressive or rather worrisome.

Udechukwu: How many artists of the Ben Enwonwu or Bruce Onobrakpeya class live abroad? I believe among the writers too there are quite many of the Soyinka class resident here in the country. So I really do not see so much of this exodus.

GR: But a visit to the institutions of higher learning and cultural establishments gives a rather dismal picture of their situation. Many more are even

threatening to leave if...

Udechukwu: My attitude to leaving is quite simple. Even before the current social crisis, some people elected to live abroad and academics in the past were quite mobile. Many travelled outside the country for short periods, but I think that what is happening now is that the likelihood of returning now for these who travel is minimal. There is a saying that if things are good for the river, it will be good for the fish. So, if the condition here improves, I believe most of the artists or intellectuals who have left 'permanently' will return, but if it worsens, many more will leave.

GR: And you foresee a situation where you will be forced to leave too?

Udechukwu: I don't know whether I will leave in terms of a permanent domicile abroad. But if I see that I can no longer operate here, if my work begins to suffer so much that I cannot attend to my primary office and I find a more conducive environment elsewhere, I will not hesitate to move so I can continue with the kind of work which ultimately I will be remembered for. If for instance a writer finds that he cannot write in Nigeria but can in South Africa or Moscow, if he discovers that he can write his best novels abroad, it is better for him to leave and produce the novels than stay here wasting. Ben Okri left Nigeria before the economic down turn, he elected to live abroad and if he had lived in Nigeria and could not publish those works, I would prefer he leaves for England to write *The Famished Road* than stay here hedged by socio-economic frustration.

GR: And what would be the relationship between the artist living abroad and his home country? How much of information is available to him concerning his homeland outside of the usually refracted information in the international news media?

Udechukwu: If the artist lived in his homeland for some time, he will maintain the links. As an artist there will be a bridge, a spiritual link between him and his homeland. I could liken it to a psychological umbilical cord that can not be severed. His essential self, no matter the distance, is still bound to his homeland. The situation is even better now that there are faster communication links and more frequent visits to the artist's host country by people from home. It is easier for the artist to become aware of actual situations in his homeland. But as I always say, if he is sensitive as an artist, there will be no break.

GR: But then he will be creating for a different audience. **GR**