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A Glimpse into Our

by dele jegede

# VISUAL CULTURE

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ETROPOLITAN Lagos serves as a case study in urbanization and visual culture.<sup>1</sup> As the economic and cultural capital of Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, Lagos exerts a magnetic pull on people from all over Nigeria and across the West African subregion. From neighboring countries like Benin, Togo, Ghana and Liberia, Lagos is host to a motley of more than 200 ethnic groups. Population figures show that this is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. In 1960, it had a population of about one million. Today, with a sprawl that now embraces what used to be the suburbs—Shomolu, Ketu, Mushin, Ikeja, Agege, Ogudu, Egbe, Festac

# Student Art

By  
Dale Jensen

It is not unlikely to find that our foreign friends form the greater part of the audience in attendance at any important art exhibition in this country. This, perhaps, is an indication of the fact that Nigerians are not generally receptive to art exhibitions—a fact that sets one wondering whether there are enough well-organized exhibitions to justify keeping blazes on our passive audience, bearing in mind that the end result of art exhibitions does not consist in how much money is realized but in how much knowledge is dispersed.

It is in the light of this that I consider the last art exhibition by the students of the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, held in Lagos a huge success.

All the five schools that make up the Department—Sculpture, Ceramics, Graphics, Textiles and Painting—were properly featured at the exhibition. The School of Painting presented some subtle and accomplished paintings, abstract and realistic, that would completely destroy the erroneous belief held in some quarters that art schools kill the genius in man. If you take a look at Dede Segole's "Seizing it Out", "Conspiracy", "At it", "Hypocrite", "Dialogue" or "My father's", you will find that here is a student whose virtuosity will be acknowledged even by the most cynical critic. If you find some of his paintings difficult to comprehend, this may be because he is a conceptual or introspective at times. Even then all



But by C. Adigbo

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Powers by student graphic artists

his paintings have a particularly charming aesthetic appeal.

Yusuf's "Grazing" and "Horse Race" should be mentioned not only for the cool and warm feelings they convey but also for their spatial organization.

However, I feel that some of the paintings are either too naive or unpoetically to stand the searchlight of objective criticism. They also vitiate whatever solid reputation the School of Painting may have been struggling to build. Their colour scheme was harsh and drawings awkward. I am referring to S. Asirvadani's "Ritual" and D. Achamele's "Merry Making II". In fact, you might wonder, on seeing Achamele's "Merry Making" whether it was painted by an "Airport artist" or by an art student.

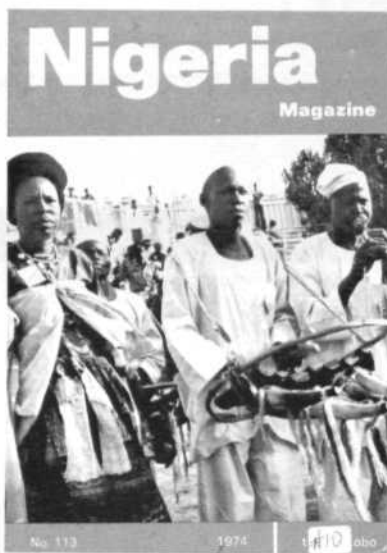
The School of Graphics excelled in varied presentation—press advertisements, record and book jackets, book illustrations, mascot, package design, table stands, posters, photography and life drawing. Most of the pieces had an amazing degree of finish that tended to ridicule the printing machine! However, I feel that there should be further improvements and attempts should be made to up-date teaching methods if graphic graduates are not to find themselves in embarrassing situations in Advertising Agencies keeping abreast of modern advertising gimmicks. This, however, is not to overlook the fact that they have availed themselves of every opportunity the Department could offer and one would not hesitate to give them due credit if one realized that academic discipline should not be an end in itself.

The School of Textiles followed up its show with a scintillating Fashion Parade. It was one of the most successful highlights of the week-long exhibition. And it did not only exhibit textile pieces designed and produced by students, hand-woven materials were also brought, weaving being the latest addition to textiles.

But I am disappointed with the ceramics. This is a section where standard has refused to excel that of last year. They achieved a feat with

(Contd. on page 36)

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Nigeria Magazine, NO. 113, 1974.

Town, and several others—the population has exploded to well over six million. A significant number of youths from other parts of Nigeria and beyond, whose imagination has been stirred by tantalizing anecdotes about Lagos, hold on to the dream that this city is the center of civilization: their civilization. Lagos, for them, is a city flowing with milk and honey. Choked by a network of bridges that connect Apapa, Ikoyi, Victoria and Lagos islands to the mainland, Lagos has more than 50% of all the vehicles in Nigeria. But, as Lagosians will quickly warn, the city takes no bull: "Eko o gba gbere."

Lagos is color. It is theater. It is music and movement. It is also a city of paradoxes. It is inclusive and accommodating, providing the weak and the strong, the wealthy and the indolent equal opportunities to succeed in their chosen tracks, "Eko gbole o gbole." Long before it became the dominant cultural discourse in the West, the inevitability of postmodernism had become a fait accompli in Lagos even though the people themselves do not necessarily couch this phenomenon in the current arcane jargon. It is indeed striking that much of what Western theorists belabor has been the norm in Lagos and, indeed, in some other African metropolitan centers. No greater confirmation of this assertion is needed than a visit to any of the numerous throbs of activities: Mile 12, Olosa, Jankara, or Oyingbo. Lagos conjures the visual equivalent of one huge, seamless canvas. It is a canvas of multiple forms, united by an enchanting kaleidoscope of colors. In terms of the dynamics of composition, Lagos comes across as an asymmetrically balanced work of art. The impressive, palatial buildings of Ikoyi, with their designer gates and heavily fortified walls, provide a stark and interesting contrast to the crowded and time-tested "face-me-I-face-you" bungalows of Mushin, Shomolu, or Ebute Meta among other locations. Go to Iyana Ipaja. Visit Ojuelegba. Stop by Idumota and Oke Arin. Try Ipodo in Ikeja or Alaba International Market. If you are still not convinced that the kinetic verve emitted at these venues is comparable to the vibrancy of the best Impressionist paintings, perhaps you missed the opportunity to savor the scenes from a vantage position. In that regard, we make this recommendation: take a trip to Oshodi Oke. Here, on the overpass linking Oshodi with Apapa, pause for a moment and take a look at life below on both sides of the overpass. Behold the bubbling sea of heads. Here, life is a cacophony of colors; a symphony of movements. From your privileged standpoint, you cannot

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but be intimidated by this expansive, festive congregation. This, perhaps, is one of the few spots in the world where one can observe the largest concentration of the African Diaspora. An endless stream of Molu E buses, danfos<sup>2</sup> and taxi cabs, all in their yellow colors, provides a colorful accent to the scintillating panorama. As that beguiling pop star, Lagbaja, crooned in one of his albums, "Dis is Lagos."

The music—if we may use that term as this pertains to Lagos—that assaults your ears comes from diverse sources. First, the public buses: those rickety and reconfigured mechanical contraptions that frequent the highways and crooked alleys. Balanced precariously on the doorsteps, one hand wagging and slashing the air, are the "bus conductors" whose responsibility it is to collect bus fares. And this they do with a huge dose of enthusiasm and relish but with minimum decorum, decency or courtesy. By profession, Lagos bus conductors are insolent. These are "conductors" without any orchestra. Yelling at the top of their voices, bus conductors beckon to passengers: "Balende-e-e-e! Obalende-O-o-o-o!" "Agege...Age-ri-ge lyana Ipaja...!" To this regular bellow, you must add other sounds—from irrepressible taxi drivers who would rather forgo functioning headlights than drive without perpetually placing their hands on the horn; to Okada, the commercial motor bikers who derive pleasure, it would seem, from embarrassing others with high decibel horns. Lagos is a city in perpetual motion, and artists could not have wished for a better environment to draw inspiration from. As they force their way through throngs of people on ever-busy streets, cart-pushers and other porters intimidate pedestrians. Street vendors meander through long stretches of traffic, advertising all manner of products, from "pure water" to lingerie; from "gala" sausage rolls to digital telephones that actually ring. Considering the determination and inventiveness of Lagos vendors, it might not be long before they sprint after commuters, carrying portable television sets that transmit live programs. "Dis" is Lagos.

## The Visual Arts

Given the reluctance in some Western quarters to abandon the use of such demeaning terms as "tribal" in relation to African art, one can appreciate the conspiratorial unison with which culture brokers in Europe and the U.S. continue to respond to issues about contemporary African art. Let us make this very clear: the West finds it difficult to embrace the idea that it does not have—neither has it ever had—any monopoly on creativity. In scholarly circles, particularly in the West where the discourse of contemporary African art has become essentialized in recent times, defining the terms of reference remains a critical issue. In Nigeria, this is no less so. Considering the social, economic and educational handicap that many Nigerian art students face, the concern for financial success occupies a much higher stratum than any scholarly erudition on some abstract concepts that frame the production of art. What, you might ask, do contemporary Nigerian artists care about how their work is perceived, dissected, processed, and branded so long as they are able to "discharge" all their work on the exhibition circuit in return for cash? What do contemporary Nigerian artists care about contributing to the discourse of creative boundaries in an environment where society is largely unconcerned about a rarified discourse that thrives mainly on sheer academicism? Does it matter that Nigerian artists are categorized as modern or contemporary, popular or postmodern? Granted that artists have the right, at least on occasions, to remain artists and not be bothered by hair-splitting theories, we pose the question: how are Nigerian eggheads in the academe contributing to the debate on appropriate classificatory mechanism for African art? What is their position on modernism and postmodernism? What are their views on postcolonialism and visual culture?

Currently, African artists and scholars in Western cultural and educational institutions are at the vanguard of confronting discriminatory attitudes that color opinions, critiques and decisions in matters pertaining to contemporary African art and artists. Through a spate of exhibitions, attendance and participation at conferences, in cyberspace chat rooms and at informal gatherings, in numerous



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publications, at several professional fora and on innumerable platforms, stereotypical assumptions are being queried. Modernist canons are being ruptured, artificial boundaries and compartments challenged, and the notion of contemporary African art as peripheral, adjunct or intuitive is often rigorously contested. Postmodernism, in contradistinction to the enlightenment and rationalist hegemony of modernism, is concerned with the celebration of inclusivity and multiplicity. Western cultural brokers, particularly those who are committed to the supremacy of a linear narrative, are no longer granted the comfort of inflicting any patronizing agenda on contemporary African art. Modern art must be seen as an integral part of the Western agenda under which the African continent was mindlessly partitioned and European culture imposed on the "natives." It became normative for the colonized to view their own world—indeed, to conceive it—from the perspective of the colonizer. Postmodernism is concerned—and I say this with healthy skepticism—with subverting the modernist rationalization of cultures. This cultural rationalization recognizes a linear axis; it celebrates the primacy of science, technology, and industrialization while undermining the resilience of spirituality and the resilience of the human spirit. It is the homogenization of cultures that postmodernism is committed to preventing. The notion that there is a global culture which is dominated by white, European male canons is no longer tenable.

But if the change in attitude that scholars and artists in Western cultural centers envisage is to be enduring, and if contemporary African artists are to capitalize on the rumored or actual death of modernity, African artists and scholars must also see themselves as part of the global movement. Here, I throw in a cautionary note. The global doctrine that I envisage does not insist that one should be purged or sanitized of one's individuality or cultural identity. This globalism indeed celebrates a polity where individuality is recognized as an empowering attribute; where the collective does not privilege one single dominion. Contemporary Nigerian artists and scholars are, hopefully, aware that an isolationist approach that neglects the battles being waged in other fronts is unproductive and self-deprecating. Contributing to the discourse necessitates that Nigerian artists be conversant with trends in the field, not necessarily that they might be better placed to copy them, but that their work might benefit from an appreciation of what they can do to contribute to a global culture. An understanding of the criticalness of culture and society in the determination of what constitutes art is a *sine qua non* to the production of vital art. Impressive as the tenets of postmodernism are, contemporary Nigerian artists run the danger of becoming irrelevant and totally marginalized if they hanker after ill-digested Western fads. A critique of postmodernism from the perspective of the Nigerian and the African artist provides a platform from which dissenting voices may be clearly heard.

How does the current situation affect Nigeria? Environmental, social, political and cultural conditions substantially influence creativity. The issue is not whether Lagos is postmodernist enough. Rather, it is what brand of postmodernist art does Lagos produce? It is imperative that a skeptical attitude be adopted in contemplating these issues. The social, political and economic conditions that encourage creative indulgences in Lagos differ substantially from those of Western artists. It must be recognized that nothing diminishes the contemporary Nigerian artist faster than the misguided notion of wanting to be more American than America.

Lagos has always enjoyed the unique privilege of playing host to the cream of Nigerian artists. As the cultural and, until early in the 1990s, the political capital of Nigeria, artistic activities derive their legitimacy only when they have been enacted or re-enacted in Lagos. All artists, groups and schools—from Aka to Ona, Auchi to Zaria, from Osogbo to Ondo—acknowledge the drawing power of Lagos. Since the era of Aina Onabolu and Kenneth Muray, the primal power of Lagos within the Nigerian visual arts world has never been in doubt. Unfortunately, this has not gone beyond national borders. The magnetic power, not to mention the economic potentials of Lagos, has not earned it the desirable international, continental or even regional clout. A little over a decade ago, in the mid-1980s, Lagos appeared on the verge of assuming the role of Africa's cultural capital. But this has since proved to be a chimera. Politically and economically, this was a

convulsive period in Nigerian history. Wracked by corruption and administrative ineptitude, the country found itself in the throes of a succession of military take-overs. In August of 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida, through a palace coup, summarily relieved General Muhammadu Buhari of his duty as Nigeria's fifth military ruler. The economy, as usual, became one of the central rationalizations for effecting change of government. Nigerians had become so familiar with soldiers' game-plan that they could predict the reasons any power-hungry soldier making his first radio and television broadcast would give for seizing power: political instability; hospitals without drugs; social malaise; indiscipline; increase in crime rate, unemployment and, of course, a wobbly economy. The list could be longer, of course, depending on the imagination and inventiveness of the new despot. It was not any different when Babangida seized power. Remarkably, this period was probably the most buoyant for contemporary Nigerian artists. The tone for this cultural renaissance was set, remarkably enough, during the Buhari era. This was when art graduates realized, like thousands of others who graduated into the unemployment market, that there could be a silver lining in the dour clouds. One of the first areas where the necessity for economic survival prompted a new creative enterprise was the fashion industry. Although this was not restricted to college-trained designers, it was obvious that Nigerian artists had latched on to something exciting—something that also brought in money. The lesson that was learned from this particular enterprise was clear: self-employment was best employment.

Soon, the art scene swarmed with a seemingly endless parade of exhibitions: group and solo. At the National Museum in Onikan, the Didi Museum on Victoria Island, the Signature Gallery at Apapa or Ikoyi, the French Cultural Center, the Italian Cultural Center, the Goethe Institut, USIS, at the University of Lagos, and numerous other public and private spaces, a succession of art-related activities became routine. Bruce Onobrakpeya's Ovuomaroro Studios played host, as usual, to a stream of students and professional artists seeking improvement, even as its flavor among visitors also grew. In popular parlance, art began to happen everywhere. The National Museum, in particular, capitalized on this, charging fees for its exhibition spaces. Still, the queue of artists waiting to rent the space was long. Even much longer was the line of top diplomats, government functionaries, business executives and friends of the arts at openings. At almost all of these exhibitions, there was usually a particular group whose presence was constant: art writers. During this time, a new protocol for opening art exhibitions was established—almost. It was one that had a decidedly Nigerian flavor. It consisted of acknowledgments, speeches, more speeches, and then the usual tape-zapping activity, performed more for media photographers than for the artist. The sale was on. Officially. In a development that made a mockery of the prevailing economic doldrums that Nigeria found itself in, artists' prices rose sharply. And their patrons, many of whom were beneficiaries of the liberalization policy of the Babangida regime, a policy that unleashed a torrent of banks on the nation, could not find enough works to purchase. Some art writers, those faithful "friends of artists," blinked uncomfortably with envy. Many wished, humorously of course, that they were artists. Contemporary Nigerian artists had never had it so good. It was so paradoxical: a struggling economy became the catalyst for a booming arts market.

Among the many factors that unleashed this creative fervor was the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) program that was initiated by the Buhari government in 1984. People were encouraged to perceive and create beauty in their environment. Local counties vied for the neatest local government awards. The desire to beautify the environment found favor with designers and artists. For the first time, public art on massive scale attracted the attention of bureaucrats at various levels, state and local in particular. In Lagos, murals sprang up on public walls. Perhaps the best example dating from this period was the stylized mural on the walls of the Orthopedic Hospital in Igbobi. At Ikeja, the statue of Chief Obafemi Awolowo mounted a pedestal and flashed the familiar victory salute. At Idumota, Yusuf Grillo's gracious Eyo sculpture was erected, just as Herbert Macaulay's statue was mounted on the rostrum, to preside over public affairs at the Sabo junction. Many more public sculptures, some of which were an eyesore, sprang up at various public places in Lagos and the sprawling suburbs. The other factor that spurred

visual activity in the 1980s was Babangida's deregulation strategy which wiped out the middle class and created a new class of nouveau-riche, many of whom flirted with the arts. Suddenly, collecting became a serious pastime among this class, heightening the dizzying pace at which artists struggled to show their work. This was also the era of elegant architectural designs, particularly at the new residential areas in Ikoyi and Victoria Island as well as other exclusive residential areas scattered in suburban havens. This was also the time that designer gates made their triumphant entry into Lagos. Artists like Olu Amoda popularized this genre, turning a simple decorative device into some of the most wonderful relief works that also double as security devices in Lagos.

## The Art Market

Babangida's economic poltergeist soon dissolved into the lagoon mist, just as the General lost favor with the public and found comfort in tactical retirement. By the early 1990s, the numerous banks that sprang up as a result of the market reforms collapsed on a massive scale. Many of the bank executives went to jail, not necessarily because they loved it. Others fled the country. Art patronage floundered and the arts stuttered. It was not unusual for erstwhile collectors to return pieces that they had earlier purchased at exhibitions. Even before the economic death knell made nonsense of this new culture of collecting, artists were known to have been given a raw deal by some collectors. The idea was to attend the formal opening of an art exhibition and indicate interest in purchasing some pieces. Red tags were then promptly placed on them, indicating, in effect, that such pieces had been sold. At the end of the show, the patron would now begin the second act: haggling over the price. The artist, stupefied and angry, would in most instances agree to a lower price. Even that did not guarantee that payment would be prompt.

## Galleries

Investment in the contemporary art market in Lagos is a huge risk. First, there is no reliable blueprint that allows investors in this area to chart a business path without occasional or, at times, sustained bouts of harassment or intimidation by enthusiastic but idle public officials. To run a successful gallery, one must be prepared to negotiate a labyrinth that is mined with unpredictable challenges from several interest groups. In a nation where there is no sustained policy on the visual arts, where the Ministry that is charged with responsibility for providing firm guidelines is itself often afflicted with disjunction and mired in petty bureaucratic politics, art dealership has evolved on its own, often in fits and spurts. Developments tend to indicate that federal and state governments' investments in the visual arts have not yielded anticipated results. Unable to attract any appreciable membership or incapable of sustaining streams of visitors on regular basis, plagued by a rash of thefts, and severely strapped for cash, the National Museum at Onikan marketed itself as an alternative space for contemporary art.

Meanwhile, the National Gallery of Art at the National Theater, Nigeria's premier space for contemporary art, remains a stunted space, locked within the most dysfunctional space that the federal government could afford. The oppressive temperature in the National Gallery combines with humidity to pose considerable health hazard to the poor workers who are required to tend to those hapless art works. Concerning the art works, the question is not whether deterioration will set in; the question is when, and how devastating? The National Gallery poignantly epitomizes Nigeria's bureaucratic quandary. In the two decades since its establishment, the National Gallery of Art has been beleaguered by internal squabbles and petty rivalries. In 1991, the Minister of Culture went against the National Council for Arts and Culture. It took the intervention of the Society of ministers before the National Gallery eventually regained its status.<sup>3</sup> It would appear that this new status is good only on paper. The gallery, in spite of its good

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intentions, is severely hamstrung by lack of consistency in policy implementation, which itself is a direct result of the high rate at which ministers of culture are hired and dispensed with. Since 1984, when the Second Republic was terminated by the Buhari coup, there have been thirteen ministers in total, with responsibility for culture.<sup>4</sup>

The apparent instability created by such a high turnover of public officials has had remarkable reverberations in the private sector. At the height of the economic burst, some of the galleries folded up while new ones experienced premature demise. Two major private galleries that weathered this turbulence are Didi Museum and Signature Gallery, both of which are located at Ikoyi. It is safe to say that, today, riding on the goodwill created by a new democratic dispensation, old galleries are expanding, and new ones are emerging once again. Among these are Mydrim and Nimbus, both of which are also in Ikoyi. Chike Nwagbogu of Nimbus seems poised to introduce new ideas to the business of marketing art works. Apart from having a sophisticated taste for the new breed, he initiated, in 1999, an auction sale whose significance lies in its novelty and the promise of sustenance. In spite of all of this, the professionalization of galleries in Lagos remains rudimentary.

### Artists and Epochs

In the fall of 1999, I had the opportunity to visit Lagos after a hiatus of almost seven years. It was not long before I came to the conclusion that my expectations for new creative flanks were grossly unrealistic, premature, and misplaced. Contemporary visual expressions in Lagos remain at the crossroads. Other than those artists who have already established themselves, Lagos has not, in the last decade or so, been blessed with many new artists whose work merit more than a tepid nod. It is this lack of infusion of a new dynamism that introduces an element of stagnation. One is constrained to ask: what are the art and design schools up to? My optimism for an invigorated art circuit in Lagos has a direct correlation with my exposure to, and greater appreciation of the tenor of visual expressions on a global scale. In other parts of Africa—Johannesburg and Dakar, for example—new creative frontiers are being tackled and new idioms are being explored. Old ideas are being revisited, recycled or reconfigured in a way that affirms the cultural heredity of South African artists at the same time that it amplifies their voices not only in their country but beyond. In comparison, Lagos, with a smug sense of complacency, looks ossified and dated. Even anachronistic.

There are several questions that can be posed in determining whether Lagos is creatively stagnant, or is charting a productive course. What new thoughts are artists grappling with? In the realm of ideas, how daring, compelling, innovative, outrageous, even mind-boggling, are Lagos artists? In what ways do artists in Lagos contribute to the global mix in contemporary art? What new languages or idioms, what "strange" but riveting works are being produced? Who are the ones on the cutting edge? Are there groups of like-minded, probably unorthodox but passionately committed artists who are bent on rupturing the existing order? Are there any new schools, or new art caucuses? What are the existing outlets where artists can brainstorm, disagree, or be provoked into making the huge leaps—both in imagination and in actuality—without which the arts are confined to recycle themselves and eventually peter out? In terms of methods, techniques, and approaches, what are the challenges that artists in Lagos are confronting? What new media or combinations—in photography, electronics, computer and video art, installations and non-traditional modes—are being explored? One is not even going to ask about the impact of cyberspace on the creative tempo.

Significant epochs and milestones in the visual arts are measured not necessarily by the volume of works sold at art exhibitions, however important a factor this may be, but by the quality of the works—the pathos and aesthetic dislocation that they inscribe, the visual bite or conceptual energy that they harbor. Creative authorship could sometimes be onerous, particularly where those who are involved appreciate the historical enormity of their contributions. In this regard, artists, philosophers, writers among others fall within the vital bracket whose responsibility it is to



encapsulate social thought in physical, abstract or textual forms. As visionaries, artists inspire the polity and capture social dreams, endowing them with physical presence. They catalyze robust ideas at the same time that they fire the social imagination: the communal élan vital. Lagos has always been central to contemporary art in Nigeria. It is a tradition that dates back to the 1920s when Chief Aina Onabolu initiated a dialogue with the colonial administration, resulting in a commitment to art education. This tradition has its own historical undulations. In the first two decades of this brief history, Onabolu and Murray invested their time and resources in laying what has turned out to be a solid foundation of art and art education in the country. Of course, the initial focus was on Lagos where they taught art in a number of secondary schools. By the 1950s, there had been a sufficiently large body of students interested in art to warrant its introduction at the tertiary level. Yaba at this time experienced the beginning of what was to be a long and continuous series of expansions of the art curriculum.

In the sixties, Lagos began to assert its presence in the cultural area. This was the decade of Nigeria's independence. The presence of Grillo and Onobrakpeya in the city changed the tempo in visual circles, just as the combination of Michael Crowder, Ulli Beier and, to some extent, Eve de Negri, provided the necessary critical checks and balances. This was the golden era of Nigeria Magazine, then in its fourth decade of publication. It was the authoritative source on a variety of topics, from local festival to vintage photographs; from close-ups on artists to poems and scholarly articles. As a corollary of this development, patronage experienced its first boom. With active encouragement by expatriate interests in Lagos—the Wolfords, the Mundy-Castles and the Vaughn Richards among others—it was no longer necessary to be apologetic for daring to be an artist. The paradox to this development was that by the end of the decade, local interest had been sufficiently stimulated to initiate the rise of indigenous patronage of the arts.

The first serious attempt at catering to the taste of patrons began with artists like Festus Idehen, Felix Idubor, and Tayo Aiyegbusi at the vanguard of an incipient galleries business. In this, their activities complemented those of the Exhibition Center at Marina, the primal space for contemporary artists in the city. There were also Gallery LABAC and Afi Ekong's Bronze Gallery. With the passage of Chief Onabolu early in the sixties, Ben Enwonwu, the colossal modernist, reigned as the doyen; his status as Federal Art Adviser was echoed in the equally imposing figure of Sango, still at the façade of NEPA in Marina. Yusuf Grillo began his ascendancy as the sole authority on large-scale and tantalizing murals that still adorn the walls of public buildings in the city—at Adeniran Ogunsanya Shopping Complex and the City Hall among others. St. Gregory's College gave appointment to a young art teacher: B.P. Onobrakpeya. It was an appointment that would have significant reverberations in the visual firmament. The Society of Nigerian Artists was founded. Lagos was where things were happening.

In the seventies, Emily Aig-Imoukhuede's Gong Gallery was the dominant name in private gallery. From its nucleus at Lake Street, it expanded to Leventis and eventually moved to a more prestigious location at the Tafawa Balewa Square. During this period, a number of fresh graduates from Zaria, including this author, Kolade Oshinowo, Shina Yussuff and David Dale, added spice and color to Lagos, literally, through their paintings, prints and, in the case of this author, cartoons. A significant development in the visual arts at this time occurred. Capitalizing on the gains of the Second World and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) hosted by Nigeria in 1977, Sina Yussuff assisted Garba Ashiwaju (both of them of blessed memory) in establishing the structure on which the National Gallery of Art would prosper. Although the number of artists in Lagos was relatively small, the artists were active and saw their mission as that of sensitizing the public to the new dispensation. But it is at the art education level that the activities of three of these artists—Grillo, Onobrakpeya and Oshinowo—converged. They are primarily painters and all of them graduated from Zaria. Beyond this, however, they all share a common passion: commitment to the visual arts, to art education, and to the sustenance of a work ethos that stabilizes the field while inspiring followership.

Onobrakpeya and Grillo, as members of the proud and disciplined group of students that graduated into the effervescent mist ushered in by Nigeria's





A Glimpse into Our





**Above:** *Untitled*, Abayomi Barber.

**Preceding page:** Muraina Oyelami, *Sisters of Mercy*, oil on board, 2000 (top-page)  
Jerry Nnubia, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 2000 (bottom-page). Collection of Nimbus Gallery, Lagos.





Wole Lagunju, *Yoruba Culture*, 1996









**Above:** Victor Ekpuk, *Another Fisher man's Story*, Acrylic painting on Islamic Slate, 1997.  
**Opposite page:** Oshodi Oke, Kolade Oshinowo, Acrylic on canvas. 47.5" x 45", 1999.



Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo, *Expecting Tomorrow*,  
Acrylic, photographic film & photographs on paper, 50 x 65.5cm, 2000.





**Top:** Uche Edochie, *Picking up the pieces II*, Acrylic on paper, 65 x 50cm, 2000.





Osahenye Kainebe, *Clown, Power and Poverty* 1999 Mixed media (8 panels), size 244 x 325 cm.



independence in the sixties, certainly knew what it was to stand tall and proud amongst other students in an era when being an art major was tantamount to obligatory mendicancy. Although, in recent years, Onobrakpeya has rekindled his love of painting, producing large canvases that are grounded in historical, social and mythological narratives, his primary affinity stays with printmaking and allied media. In this, Onobrakpeya continues to plumb the creative mines, producing works that move away from the low relief terrains that printmaking thrives on. He has persistently expanded the visual vistas, allowing his eclecticism to blossom in three-dimensional installations that recall sacred shrines and groves. On the other hand, Grillo's multidimensionality is best appreciated at the intellectual level where his grasp of existentialist tenets accounts for his fertile embrace of new media, most of which he pioneered. Grillo's mastery of Christian theology not only demonstrates his embracement of diversity (he is a devout Muslim), but it also confirms the point that existentialism and religious thoughts are not mutually exclusive. Today, most prized mosaic murals and stained windows in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria bear his unmistakable imprint. This is in addition to an uncanny versatility in three-dimensional and relief sculptures, as can be seen in the major commissions that he has successfully executed in this medium.

Prior to graduating from Zaria in 1972, Kolade Oshinowo had determined that the future of contemporary art lay in a thriving, energized exhibition circuit. Using exhibitions as his weapon, Oshinowo launched at the tepid art scene in Lagos and began a frenetic and demanding exhibition schedule. His success in this area has left no one in doubt that, as that popular (even if a bit vulgar) saying goes, you produce foam only by peeing on one spot. Oshinowo remains the most conservative in the exploration of media: his main forte remains painting. Within this ambit, however, he remains perhaps the greatest stylistic explorer that Lagos has produced. Although there is something patently Oshinowoesque in every piece that he produces—a creative DNA, if you wish—each work differs from the other in subtle shades that are appreciated only where one is privileged to review his oeuvre. Is he a realist, an Impressionist, a Postimpressionist, an Expressionist, or an abstract painter? Is he a documentarist, a landscapist, a social critic or a conscientious observer and student of nature? He is a little bit of all of these.

In the 1970s, Abayomi Barber, the self-effacing multidimensionalist, began a quiet revolution in a nondescript space on the campus of the University of Lagos. Returning to Lagos after more than a decade of studies and work in London, Barber joined the faculty of a program that metamorphosed into the Center for Cultural Studies later in the decade. It was in the art studio of the Center that Barber began to work his magic on young and impressionable minds whose main offences were that they were addicted to the visual arts, and were indigent. The result is what is now referred to as the Barber School, undoubtedly a critical core of what I call the Lagos School of Realism. Exemplars of the Barber School include Muri Adejimi, Kent Ideh, Olu Spencer and Toyin Alade. The Lagos School of Realism, on the other hand, would include artists like Biodun Olaku and Josy Ajiboye, the cheerful, large-hearted pragmatist whose name is synonymous with cartooning in Nigeria. Olaku and Ajiboye simulate the verve and minutiae of life. Although both of them favor mimesis, they differ stylistically. Olaku's style of realism palpitates: a residual energy tends to make his paintings bubble in a way that recalls Honoré Daumier. On the other hand, Ajiboye charts a personal track that traces a remote indebtedness to the Wyeths and Norman Rockwell.

The works of Muri Adejimi and Toyin Alade continue to fascinate their admirers. Adejimi works in the stable safety of what goes as the Nigerian version of Surrealism. Now, neither Muri nor his mentor, nor, indeed, any of his peers in the Barber School, seems to be dogmatic about Surrealism. They are not overly doctrinaire in the mold of André Breton, the Parisian thinker whose 1924 manifesto extolling psychic automatism gave Surrealism its credo.<sup>5</sup> Although psychic automatism is the essence of European Surrealism, Abayomi Barber's African version is shorn of all the philosophizing. Combining aspects of Western art training with elements of traditional apprenticeship method, Barber instilled in his "apprentices" a painstaking grounding in the rudiments of visual observation, stressing the importance of skills over the fickleness of chance, intuition or misguided creative gumption. In

the mastery of skills and techniques, no less than in the synthesis of imported and local ideas, Muri Adejimi remains the dominant artist and the crowning jewel of the Barber School.

The eighties was the most impassioned and active era: it was politically convulsive, economically challenging and culturally stimulating. As many young artists from Yaba, Auchu and Zaria flocked to the city, the exhibition scene came alive. Rahman Akar, the astute business strategist, began to lay the foundation of his Signature Gallery. At Iganmu, Bisi Fakeye stood tall and, with the solid support of two idealistic young artists from Yaba College of Technology, Biodun Olaku and Bunmi Babatunde, started what has crystallized into the Universal Art Studios on the apron grounds of the National Theater. There, Fakeye established a formidable creative bridgehead that challenged bureaucracy and won (so far at least) the respect of some administrators. At issue was the power to function as artists, unfettered by the demands of regular appointments, and unshackled by the choleric temper of clueless bosses. This move was risky at that time as most artists, particularly the successful ones, found it easier to work from the safety net that regular employment offered. Thus, Bunmi Babatunde, Biodun Olaku, and Bisi Fakeye established a colony that has confirmed the success of the self-employment dictum. Meanwhile, Olu Amoda arrived at Akoka from Auchu in 1983 and promptly began his experimentation and romance with metals turning scraps into jewels. His single-minded exploration of medium has become an obsession. Amoda's work combines poetry with sensitivity to social and political imbroglio in a way that invites comparison with the work of Melvin Edwards or, to some extent, Richard Hunt. This was the decade of the women, even if their ascendancy would amount to no more than a mere tokenism personified by Lara Ige and Ndidi Dike. Is it that Lagos is unsuitable for women artists, or that women artists have conceded the field to men?

The eighties was indeed an exciting period. Coinciding with the prevailing wave of enthusiasm in the visual arts was a complementary vibrancy that came from a totally unexpected quarter: the print media. As media organizations, particularly newly established ones like The Concord, Newswatch, ThisWeek and The Guardian, energized the nation through creative and refreshing packages, there emerged a core of writers on the arts desks—Ben Tomolaju, Toyin Akinosho, Jahman Anikulapo, and Gbile Oshadipe and many others—whose focus on arts and culture opened up a new chapter for the literati and the cognoscenti. This was also the period that cartooning made the biggest impact, what with Bisi Ogunbadejo, Boye Gbenro, Obe Ess, Dotun Gboyega, and the late Dokun Abioye, undoubtedly one of Nigeria's greatest draftsmen. Active cartoonists of this (and of a much earlier) period also included Kenny Adamson, Cliff Ogiugo, Osasuwa Osage, Ebun Aleshinloye, Bayo Odulana, Tayo Fatunla and Moses Ebong. This was the decade that the Cultural Policy was launched.

It is apparent from the foregoing brief overview that one's disappointment with Lagos pertains to the relative dormancy that the nineties brought about. This may be attributed to a variety of reasons, perhaps the most plausible being the onset of the apparent systemic decay that is a concomitant of several years of mindless political tinkering by the military. This apparent stagnation may also be attributed to an entrenched political ineptitude and the platitudinous proclivity that was the hallmark of bureaucracy, especially in the federal department of culture. The Nigeria Magazine was eased into uncerecermonious desuetude by the authority of a Federal Director of Culture who mistook the seething anger of a nonplused public for acquiescence. This was a department that must indeed be indicted for perfecting a sadistic approach to matters pertaining to artists. The directorate silenced the Nigerian Magazine and substituted the voice of its director for the cultural collective. It squandered several opportunities at initiating or facilitating what may have been a vibrant biennial on the West African coast, and insulated itself from critical professional groups. But even such egregious insensitivity to critical issues in the field was perhaps not the singular most devastating factor. This honor must be given to the educational system where instructors were so embattled by a barrage of social and economic woes that all they did was simply exist. Truancy, cultism, brigandage and acute indigency combined to strip colleges and universities of



their sense of mission. Absenteeism became the standard by which students' graduation was computed: the longer your college was shut down because of a rash of strikes, the better your chances of graduating without learning much. GR

## NOTE

1. The notes from which this article was based were generated in the fall of 1999 when I was in Lagos to undertake research on visual culture in Nigeria. The research project was made possible by a grant from the Central Research Committee of Indiana State University, to which grateful acknowledgement is hereby made.

2. "Molu E" is the local name for public buses in Lagos. When, in the sixties, these buses were introduced as a replacement for the wooden truck known as "bole kaja," it was given a number of aliases. One of these was "mold it," a reference to the temperamental and irreverent bus conductors who were ready, at the least provocation, to mold any cheek that refused to pay the correct fare. In time, "molu e" became a derivative of "mold it." Other aliases of the bus were "digi e" ("dig it") and "jalekun e," ("break its door"). "Danfo" is the term used for (ideally) 9-sitter mini-vans that are much more nimble than the molu e, and faster to fill up. It is a coinage that implies independence. The uniform yellow color that these as well as all taxi cabs in Lagos sport was introduced during the tenure of Alhaji Lateef Jakande, the civilian governor of Lagos from 1979 to 1983. For a detailed focus on popular culture in Lagos, see Patrick McNaughton, *dele jegede et al, Five Windows into Africa*. (Interactive CD-ROM) Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000.

3. This author was then the President of the Society of Nigerian Artists. Shocked by the arrogant attitude of the Minister of Culture at that time (1991), the Society began its campaign by publishing a full page advertisement in the Sunday Times drawing the attention of General Ibrahim Babangida to the minister's egregious disregard for public policy. After the minister, Lamban Gwom, was removed from office, the Executive of the SNA, again at the behest of this author, met with Sam Oyoibaire, the new minister of culture. Eventually, during the term of Walter Ofonagoro, the anomaly was rectified and the National Gallery returned to its statutory role as a parastatal.

4. The following are the names of those who, beginning in 1984, served as ministers with responsibilities for arts and culture, in order of succession: Emeka Omeruah; Anthony Ukpok; Tony Momoh; Maman Anka; YY Kure; Lamban Gwom; Jerry Gana; Alex Akinyele; Uche Chukwumerije; Walter Ofonagoro; John Nwodo; Ojo Madueke; Graham Douglas.

5. As one of those who were inspired by psychoanalysts Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, André Breton encapsulated the Surrealist ideal in the "Manifesto of Surrealism" which was published in 1924. He defines Surrealism as "Pure psychic automatism, by which one intends to express...the real functioning of the mind. Dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any esthetic or moral preoccupation... Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the undirected play of thought." See William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 64. (Quoted from Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, (11th Edition). New York: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001, p. 1037.)