

CLAY COMMENTS ON OUR ENVIRONMENT: NGOZI OMEJE AND HER INSTALLATIONS

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing concern for the state of our climate and the physical environment owing to much devastations being caused by ozone depletion, air pollution, environmental degradation and other forms of man's inflicted damage on the ecosystem. Many artists around the world have lent their voices to the debates and discourses on the subject. Among them are such Nigerian young artists as Bright Ugochukwu Eke, Thaddeus Ochiebo, Nnenna Okore and Ngozi Omeje. It would appear that the contributions to the discourse by artists working in the clay medium, such as Ngozi Omeje, have hardly been heard. Omeje is a female ceramic artist based in Nsukka, south-eastern Nigeria, who uses ceramic elements for her sculptures and installations. Our paper highlights the work of this emerging talent not only by providing insights into her person and background as a ceramic artist but, especially, by examining her works in the light of climate and environment change discourses. Our paper does not only bring to light how ceramics is adding a voice to the current global issue of climate and environmental change but also provides knowledge on an aspect of the current trends in contemporary Nigerian ceramic art practice.

Introduction

Writings on contemporary Nigerian ceramic art cover considerable historical and critical grounds. These are wide ranging and include aspects of the history of its development since the early 1900s ("Pottery Manufacture in Nigeria", 1911; Duckworth, 1938; Na'Allah, 2001; Fowowe, 2004) and, especially, since Michael Cardew's work at the Pottery Training Centre, Abuja where Ladi Kwali came to limelight as perhaps Nigeria's first globally celebrated modern potter (Hassan & Shuaibu, 1962; Aliyu, 1978; Clark, 1978; Na'Allah, 1980; Cardew, 1988; Harrod, 1999; Moloney, 2001 and 2008; Ahuwan, 2003; Agberia, 2005; Edgeler, 2008). Interesting studies exist on the ways by which the Cardew legacy at Abuja has been nurtured in the country by his immediate successor Michael O'Brien (Akinbogun, 2006 and 2009). There are also important studies on the techniques and themes of experimental artists in the clay medium such as those by Demas Nwoko (Williams, 1966), El Anatsui (Oguibe, 1988; Ottenberg, 1997), Abbas Ahuwan (Okpe,

2003; Ikibah, 2004), Benjo Igwilo (Anatsui, 1976; Aniakor, 1977; Udechukwu, 1996; Onuzulike, 2005 and 2007), Chris Echeta (Ene-Orji, 2003; Okeke, 1996; Onuzulike, 2007), Tony Umunna (Ene-Orji, 2003; Echeta, 2011) and a host of others. There have been as yet little or no studies that show how the work of contemporary Nigerian ceramic artists has lent a voice to the on-going dialogue on climate and the environment. This is a significant gap in the study of contemporary Nigerian ceramic art, considering the fact that the practices of ceramic artists who are engaging with the current global issues of climate change and environmental degradation in other parts of the world have received attention. For example, the American ceramic artist, Steve Belz, has been spotlighted in the *Ceramic Now* magazine as using the ceramic medium to "express the beauty of nature and the tension created by man's manipulation of our environment", ultimately aiming to expand "our society's compassion for the natural world" (Belz, 2012). There is also Jeroen Bechtold who uses his series of

ceramic sculptures, entitled "15 Claim", to draw attention to climate change. His works have been described as "remarkable", having accomplished "many artistic and human objectives" ("Climate Change and the Art of Jeroen Bechtold", 2012).

In the light of the foregoing, in examining the theme of ceramics and the environment, we aim to use examples of the works of Ngozi Omeje, an Nsukka-based female ceramic artist, to demonstrate how ceramics is presently being used to further the current global discourse on climate change and environmental degradation. We propose a perspective on ceramic practice that goes beyond its history and pragmatic functions to the conceptual, especially as regards its embodiment of a reflective medium that addresses the state of our environment. In doing this, the choice of the works of Omeje is based on her standing at the moment as probably the only Nigerian ceramic artist whose works address headlong the issue of environmental degradation. This is significant, although the clay and mud-based installations and sculptures of another Nsukka-trained artist Alozie Onyirioha (who trained under El Anatsui) represent an important example of the use of the clay medium in the discourse of the state of our physical environment (Ojie and Onuzulike, 2009). Although Omeje's previous works had included issues of environmental significance (Ojie and Onuzulike, 2010), her expansion of her recent body of work on the subject calls for further examination.

This paper therefore addresses the key issues of the person and professional background of Ngozi Omeje, her approach to issues of environmental degradation using the clay medium and her expansion of the ceramic boundaries to include the use of other materials to complement the expressive powers of her clay components. How all these come together or intersect to forge incisive and thought-provoking statements on the current state of our climate and physical environment are examined in this paper.

Ngozi Omeje: A Brief Biography

Omeje was born in Nsukka in 1979. While her father worked as a welder in the Works Department of the University of Nigeria

Nsukka, Omeje's mother had been a trader in aluminum and plastic vessels in the Nsukka market. She grew up helping her parents and learning to put items together in her mother's shop in ways that could attract patronage. She was also drawn to her father's metal welding and fabrication processes. Interestingly, Omeje recalls having been deeply fascinated by the drum constructions of her paternal grandfather. Ojie and Onuzulike (2010) have drawn attention to the artist's "early involvement in the use of the hands for gathering and arranging materials" as having constituted "creative influences that appear to be playing out in her current mixed-media constructions and installations, most of which are realized through the local processes of folding, beating, coiling, perforating, gathering, tying and stacking". Under Okpan Oyeoku, Vincent Ali and Ozioma Onuzulike, Omeje studied ceramics in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka graduating BA (2005) and MFA (2009).

While on her MFA programme, she became increasingly aware of the conceptual works of Ozioma Onuzulike and El Anatsui and has been fascinated by the use of an accumulation of common place materials collected from around her immediate environment for her work. In the last couple of years, she has worked extensively with clay coils for both utilitarian and conceptual ceramics and has participated in a number of international workshops and exhibitions, especially in Ghana, Nigeria and the United States of America.

Omeje's Works in the Context of Climate and Environmental Discourses

Contemporary environmentalists occupy themselves with the "restive relationship between the earth's systems and human-induced changes", which of course has triggered off heightened debates about the causes and remedies to the deplorable condition of our planet (Phillips, 2003, p. 34). Nature has always devised processes of stabilizing the universe. Living and non-living things make up the earth planet where man and his physical activities tend to steadily put pressure to the biosphere. There is an increasing presence of carbon emission into the atmosphere, incessant pollution of the

natural waters, and constant destruction of geological formation of the earth. These incidents are products of man's activities which have continued to lead perversely to environment degradation and climate change. Faced with the attendant frustrations of the consequences of his negative actions against nature, man seemingly realized his mistakes and decides to seek for corrective measures. A selection of works from Ngozi Omeje's corpus illustrates how she, as an artist, has responded to issues of climate change and environmental degradation. Among her remarkably eloquent pieces, visually charged with affective imageries, are the *Mushrooms* series, *Attention Please!*, *What's the Occasion?* and the *Imagine Jonah* series.

Omeje's *Mushrooms* series (figs 1 – 3) represent clay installations that directly speak to us about the nature and state of our physical environment resulting from man's daily activities and consumerist dispositions. In *Mushrooms I*, Omeje presents landscapes dotted with mushrooms recreated in both fired and unfired clay. This is an outdoor installation. *Mushrooms II* and *Mushrooms III* are indoor installations and have been created with cardboard papers folded into pipe forms and capped with unfired images of tortoise, and of human heads on top of plastic plates, respectively.

A conceptual contemplation of the artist's mushrooms is very revealing. Since almost all species of mushrooms are delicate and vulnerable, the artist appropriates them in artistic forms and compositions that metaphorically call attention to the vulnerability of our physical environment. The objects and phenomenon of natural mushrooms which, like eggs and glasses, are visual symbols of fragility have become ideas which the ceramist converted into a tangible reflection of our planet earth's frail condition. Thus, as in *Mushrooms I*, a spread of the luxuriantly flourishing earth-brown fungus sprouted over a vast area with such a brilliance and generative force induces the viewer to look at the work in rational terms for some underlying information. The hut-like shapes are entirely organic, but they have been combined into a scenario that is suggestive of a desolated

settlement of people who may have been hunted by draught, famine and other such calamities caused by climate and environmental changes.

There is one common feeling the mushrooms series arouse in the viewer - a temptation to call for a basket for "harvest". This is a concrete image the artist has used to illustrate man's innate exploitative attitudes and the on-going consumerist tendencies around the world. And here perhaps lies the crux of what constitutes the problem of man against his environment. His exploitation, particularly of most provisions by nature, is usually without moderation. For instance, lumbering activities are dangerously going on unchecked around many regions of the world to points of deforestation and desertification. This is even more obvious in the North of Nigeria where desert encroachment has since remained a worrisome issue. References to deforestation and desertification appear to be aptly illustrated by Omeje's use of paper (a product of trees) for the 'stems' of the mushrooms in *Mushrooms II* and *Mushrooms III*. Again, even the mineral deposits hidden beneath the earth and under the waters are being exploited to the finish, as represented by the plastic plates (a handy example of a petrochemical product) in *Mushrooms III*. Tapping into these natural resources for human development is fantastic, but the unanswered questions are: How rational is man in his exploitation and exploration of the resources? In what ways do his approaches to resource development affect the biosphere? Omeje appears to be interrogating man's irrationality, and fragile wisdom, with her use of unfired clay figures of the tortoise in her conceptualization of *Mushrooms II*

Interestingly, Omeje appears to agree with Tony Cragg whose interest in the physical world is survivalist at one level, but who believes that the interest would lead him to dreams, fantasy, and speculation (Tansini, 2004, p. 35). Tansini considered the aquatic life, the quantity of wastes that are flushed daily into the rivers, the oil spillage that regularly inundate rivers and oceans as well as the continuous rise of water level and decided to raise alarm in order to call attention to the spate of environmental

pollution and degradation in the world. She believes in the power of visual language because it stimulates the audience and creates reactions.

The question of species extinction and the pollution of our water bodies have been brought into tactile reality when observing Omeje's *Attention Please!* (Fig. 4) and *What's the Occasion?* (Fig. 5). These two installations are propositions principally created with the imagery of fish and turtle (probably water turtle). Each of the works stretches left and right, covering expanse of an area. What is apparent at first sight is a spread of casualties of aquatic creatures probably occasioned by water pollution. In *Attention Please!*, human intervention is obvious.

The artist has taken a step further to integrate condition/state/situation of the physical into an aesthetic metaphor in her push for attitudinal change. On the floor of an enclosure, presumed to be a dry pond, there is a gloomy picture painted by lots of lifeless turtles and fishes laid across the area. Adopting her usual method of multiplication of visual elements, Omeje successfully tensed the physical condition of the sea creatures, which by extension, reflects that of man also. It has become well known how much of our water bodies are polluted with massive dumps of industrial wastes which endanger aquatic life. Closer home here in Nigeria, the many incidences of oil spillage in the Niger Delta region have often resulted in the pollution of rivers and streams, thereby adversely effecting aquatic life on which most of the people depend for their livelihood.

In the manner of a collaborative group of artists called *Simparch*, whose *Clean Livin'* brought the issue of environmental sustainability into the art arena and converted the conventional notion of land as artistic scenery into the idea of landscape as a contested area of political and ecological activities (Ullrich, 2004), Omeje has further highlighted critical issues of environmental degradation and climate change using such other works as *Imagine Jonah I* and *Imagine Jonah II* (Fig. 6). The *Imagine Jonah* series represent perhaps her most significant and sophisticated mixed-media installations that

yield multiple interpretations. The work shows a very laborious creative process and was the opus of her MFA project which subsequently instigated the making of several other visually transparent connections between space and tactile realities by the artist (see Figs. 7 – 9). In the work, she systematically set countless strands of fishing lines running from the ceiling (of the hall where the work was installed) down to about 10 centimeters away from the floor. At the tip of each fishing line, close to the floor, is tied a ring of baked clay, representative of fishing baits. While some of the rings are smoked for some visual effect, others are left to retain the natural colour of the indigenous Nsukka clay. On the floor, under the suspended circles of clay, is uneven spread of countless number of clay rings also.

Suspended in-between the ceiling and the dangling rings of fired clay are triangular shaped slices of coloured Dunlop footwear material and many pieces of sparkling white Styrofoam fastened to some of the drooping fishing lines. It must be remembered that both Dunlop footwear and Styrofoam are petrochemical products. These pieces of Styrofoam and footwear materials have been arranged by the artist in ways that collectively form a large shape of an apparently dead whale bloating under transparent, illusive water created by strands of countless fishing lines running down from the ceiling. The white Styrofoam and the brilliantly coloured shreds of footwear are calculated and arranged to reference our attraction to the benefits of oil and its products. The large but dead fish which they define comes through as a whale with sparkling, colourful scales poisoned under water. Interestingly, the fate of this creature has been represented as resulting from man's consumerist attitude to natural resources. This is because the fishing threads appear to reference long drilling pipes used in 'fishing' up the jewels or treasures of the earth, represented by the many rings of clay. The threads also come together to simulate a torrent of rain – perhaps acid rain, which results from man's pollution of the atmosphere through his use of industrial plants.

On a different level of interpretation, the title, *Imagine Jonah*, generated from the Biblical text, appears to be a poser to Omeje's audience regarding the subject of climate change and environmental degradation. *Imagine Jonah* – imagine the thought of Jonah without food, water or clean air for 3 days in the belly of a fish! Imagine the condition we keep ourselves when we refuse to do what we ought, in this case, when we refuse to conserve our natural environment. The obvious lesson may be one of a change of attitude. Just as Jonah repented and went to Nineveh, human race should refrain from actions leading to environmental degradation.

Conclusion

Ngozi Omeje has employed variegated media, in company with clay, to describe the condition of the environment, explain social

and natural events that strike climatic references, and reconstruct a range of human experiences, particularly in connection with environmental re-ordering. In other words, her work runs into tripartite interpretative directions which fit into the globally prevailing discourses on climate change and adaptation. Omeje has raised issues of unmediated experience where nature interrelates in a harmonious dialogue that creates patterns of organic occurrence; where things run their course. Thus, her creative efforts become semblances of corporeal narratives that readily have links to the ongoing concern about the environment. She accumulates elements and arranges them in manners that automatically activate her configurations. Clay has played a vital and critical role in this project as the activating elements in her aesthetic and conceptual narratives.



Fig. 1a – Mushrooms I; Clay



Fig. 1b – Mushrooms I (another version) Clay.



Fig. 2 – Mushrooms II. Clay, paper.



Fig. 3 – Mushrooms III. Clay, plastic plates, paper



Fig. 4 – *Attention Please!* (One of the Mushrooms series). Clay, paper.



Fig. 5 – *What's the Occasion?* Clay.



Fig. 6a – *Imagine Jonah (I)*. Fired clay, fishing line, Styrofoam, Dunlop shoe material.



Fig. 6b – *Imagine Jonah (II)*. Fired clay, fishing line, Styrofoam, Dunlop shoe material.



Fig. 7 – *Ripples*. Fired clay, fishing line.



Fig. 8 – *Image*. Fired clay, fishing line.



Fig. 9 – My Own. Fired clay, fishing line.

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