

# ENVIRONMENTAL CERAMICS: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

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## ABSTRACT

*In Nigeria there are various environmental sculptures exhibited for public view, as well as installation that address climate issues. To a large extent, these make research for academic purposes substantial in the field. Such documentations, however, are not available for environmental ceramic artworks. Since there are little or no environmental ceramic installations across the country till date, even with the new trend of contemporary ceramic installations being executed across the globe, it has become necessary for Nigerian ceramists to embrace such developments. Over the years, some ceramists in the country have attempted to produce works which can serve for environmental installations or outdoor sculptural pieces but, due to reasons mostly related to finances, these works end up in miniature stages, glazed and sold out as decorative pieces. This paper is primarily concerned with the challenges involved in establishing the practice of ceramic sculptures/installations as an environmental art in Nigeria. The paper is expected to inspire individuals, governments and corporate bodies to work the patronage of outdoor ceramics in Nigeria. The paper also discusses existing environmental ceramic art works, reviewing works of selected prominent artists around the world as a way of investigating the challenges and the hindrances that have discouraged Nigerian artists from engaging in this practice. The related works of prominent artists like Nnenna Okore, as well as emerging ceramists like Chinenye Emelogu and Arinze Eze will be briefly examined in this context. Finally, it offers suggestions on how they can be resolved, as well as the benefits therein.*

## Introduction

Environmental art has gained much prominence, especially in the twenty-first century; installations embracing different areas of the visual arts have been conceptualized and executed in the creative exploration of this trend. The major emphasis of this art is on the spatial interactivity between the viewer and the artwork, whereby the impact of such interaction is deemed to be more lasting. This is because it engages them (that is, the viewer) in a three dimensional feeling of the artwork. The term "environmental art" is very vast, and it encompasses a lot of implications in modern art. Many present day artworks that have been defined by art scholars and critics as contemporary tend to be large in terms of proportion, an advantage that aids in giving some form of strength in their visual impact to the society,

and many of them are usually exhibited outdoors. One common feature of an environmental art work in the past is the aspect of its being made specifically and permanently for a particular location. In recent times, however, environmental artworks are often ephemeral and also involve collaborations between artists and professionals from other fields like scientists, educators and even communities.

Reliable observations have revealed that this practice in the area of ceramics is still relatively new in Nigeria. The art trend in Nigeria, as far as modern art is concerned, has evolved drastically ever since the revolutionary initiative by the pioneering members of the Zaria art Society in 1956. The ripple effects of their radical and conceptual approach to art, which entailed merging traditional art elements with modern

art (a process termed as Natural Synthesis) has played a fundamental role in the shaping of the various art styles practiced by many formal and informal art institutions today. Contemporary art in the Nigerian context has embraced a wide vocabulary of thematic language in the visual arts. The sculptures, paintings, ceramics, fashion and other aspects produced by the present generation of artists have addresses themes that reflect on significant issues affecting the world today, to the extent that they can compete with their colleagues in the global art world. These artists have somewhat established themselves on the national and international platform, judging by the vast array of radical creativity in their impressive environmental artworks.

Some Nigerian artists have created artworks that could be categorized as environmental artworks since they have themes that address environmental issues. Nnenna Okore in her installation "Egwu Ukwu", uses biodegradable materials in creatively reconstructing popular Nigerian clothe designs. Bright Eke's "Acid Rain" is an installation of several wrapped water sachets containing acidic residues from battery cells that are suspended from the ceiling, with a theme that addresses the environmental hazard caused by industrial pollution. Ekenechukwu Anikpe's "Strata Series", is an installation of different coloured plastic straws placed in transparent glass pyramids depicting the nuances of stratification both from the social and ecological perspectives. Jelil Atiku's "Quest for Gaia", is a video performance in which the artist, painted whitely and in the nude, dramatises against a background of a burning bush, the effects of incessant bush burning and its ecological implication of the earth. Onye William-West's "Burning Ice" is an installation consisting of large blocks of ice drifting in an already polluted part of a pond that were set ablaze till they finally melt away, thereby illustrating the impact of global warming caused by unnecessary release of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

The major objective of this research is to examine the prospects of Nigerian ceramists who are already engaging in or intend to delve into environmental ceramic art. This

will be achieved by first establishing what the term environmental art entails. Also, works by renowned international ceramists that are environmentally inclined will be briefly reviewed. Finally, the Nigerian situation as regards environmental ceramic art will be discussed; here the works of selected prominent artists like Nnenna Okorie, and emerging ceramists like Chinenye Emelogu and Arinze Eze will be examined and discussed. This examination will consist of comparing their works with environmental art works by already established international ceramists and visual artists. The research will be concluded by a brief discussion of the challenges Nigerian artists' face that discourage them from translating most of their ceramic artworks into environmental pieces.

On a final note, it is important to categorically state here that the research is meant to create avenues for further investigation into this issue, and also stir up the interests of future visual artists, particularly ceramists, into exploring this area.

### **Contextual Definition Of Environmental Ceramics**

The key term "environmental art", used in this project is somewhat vague and has been associated with a wide range of meanings. It is therefore important to define as well as briefly discuss it within the context of this research before delving into the subject matter. Also, a clear distinction will be made between this term and others like outdoor and monumental ceramics that it is closely associated with.

There are two distinct categorizes of environmental ceramic artworks. The first category generally refers to art that addresses ecological issues, while the second deals with art that is closely related with the natural, such as the formal, the political, the historical, or the social context.

It is believed that previous examples of environmental art were developed from the painting and realistic representation of landscapes. The painters in those days cultivated the creative ability to connect with their immediate environment and express or

interpret what they perceived therein within their artworks. Although this type of art is believed to have been introduced into the art scene in the late sixties and seventies, the first stage of its development was said to have been initiated out of mounting criticism for sculptural works of art that were exhibited outdoors because they were said to be in disharmony with the surrounding. By 1968, many of the sculptures, alongside the difficulties posed by the sales and acquisition of their very large art works, were compelled to seek more innovative ways of meeting these challenges. Thus, many of them went further to exhibit their works in desert and landscapes, going beyond simply depicting the landscapes to integrating their art with the landscapes, or, in other words, "engaging it" (Beardsley, 2009).

Environmental art has now become a movement of its own, even reflecting and addressing the boundaries of urban landscape. In fact, as public art grew and evolved, artists were inspired to perceive the urban landscape, not just as another environment but also as a means to relate ideas and concepts about the environment to a much broader audience they can freely communicate these creations to.

Designated terms for art like "outdoor" and "monumental", as stated earlier, have meanings closely related to environmental art. Outdoor Arts is the "umbrella term, used in the UK, given to performances in various genres (theatre, dance, circus, spectacle, music or any combination of the above) that are created for outdoor public space like the streets, or in town squares, parks and other public spaces. Outdoor art has a purposefully wide definition and is inclusive of solo performances through to large scale spectacle and from community processional projects to stunning outdoor interactive visual installations." (ISAN,2011). Monumental art, on the other hand, is actually directly connected to size. From the previous elucidation of environment art, all the basic attributes of both the outdoor and monumental art are not only part of the features but also ways through which environmental art can be expressed.

Also, with regards to its historical development and in the aspect of its

figurative implication, environmental art has been described by "a profusion of terms" (Bower, 2009) that are closely associated with it like soil art, earth art, eco-art. These sequential train of terms all delineate environmental art to a constructive definition of art to art "with" and "for" nature rather than that is simply "about" or "in nature" (Agerstoun, 2007). In summary the features of an environmental art work, according to Hull (2010), can be described as follows:

"It tells us more about nature and how to vividly and visually express its processes, or give us an orientation about the threats assaulting the environment; it is greatly inspired or influenced by forces and substances in the substances in the environment; is concerned with environmental forces and materials, creating artworks, affected or powered by wind, water, lightening, even earthquakes; re-envisions our relationship to nature, proposing new ways for us to co-exist with our environment and reclaims and remediates damaged environments, restoring ecosystems in artistic and often aesthetic ways " (Hull, 2010).

### **Review of Environmental Ceramics Sculptures by International Ceramists**

Many international ceramists have created ceramic installations and sculptures addressing diverse environmental issues. The works of three international ceramists, among the rest, will be discussed, and they include Jay Strommen, Courtney Madison and Eugene Hon.

Jay Strommen's several three-dimensional works titled "Stone Temple Pilot Series" are mixed media pieces (PLATE 1). Identical clones of a young child's head were casted and mounted on bases of fired clay or wood. These pieces often mimic elemental social groups. The cloned models reflect the diverse postures and body language individuals naturally express themselves with in a group or association. In these works, the artist is actually protesting against the anomaly of scientific attempts in genetic cloning (Polansk, 2001).

Courtney Mattison's larger ceramic wall installation titled "*Our Changing Seas: A Coral Reef Story*", is a reference to the Pacific coral reef (see Plate 2). The project was actually a thesis project that was exhibited at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration headquarters within the U.S. Department of Commerce in Washington, DC. *Our Changing Seas: A Coral Reef Story*, consists of two-foot wide sea anemones, a variety of coral species, and big nasty globs of algae stretch floor to ceiling, each item in the installation a handcrafted ceramic that was glazed and fired. She further bolted each of them to one of twenty-four panels that are then affixed to a self-supporting metal grate. The work is colourful, especially at the bottom left corner, and depicts a complex ecosystem with anemones and diverse species of coral. However, towards the middle she illustrates degradation, coral bleaching and finally algal domination. The artist through this installation, attempts to draw attention to the declining state of this aspect of marine life where "degraded states occur on reefs when rising sea temperatures, overfishing, and land-based pollution come into play as a result of climate change, high fishing pressures, and coastal development" (Baum, 2011). In a sense she has succeeded in merging art, science and advocacy.

Eugene Hon, a South African ceramic artist residing in Johannesburg, used a rather unorthodox approach in his ceramic sculptural installations by blending two dissimilar aspects of the visual arts that is ceramics and graphics. His installation consists of projecting drawings on ceramics sculptural pieces in an environment with subdued light to create a dynamic form of visual narrative in his themes (Plate 3). The installations also reveal the ephemeral nature of ceramic works, as evident in the shifting animated linear reflections from the projector. In his own words, Hon (2011) reflects: "...my ceramic statements are a creative response to the literary sources I engage."

### **Review of Selected Nigerian Ceramic Artworks with Thematic Environmental Implications**

Ceramists in Nigeria have produced works that are explorative in their approaches with strong dynamic themes addressing a wide range of issues, although mostly streamlined towards socio-economic, political and socio-cultural aspects of the polity. Indeed, intonations of environmental tendencies may be identified in most of the works, in that they are mostly installations. Installation art possesses one of the attributes of an environmental art in that context. Still the works of some of these ceramists tend to deviate towards that direction in terms of their thematic contents, but as a result of not understanding what the term implies, their definitions have been compromised to simply conceptual works of art.

It is a fact now that with the availability of the internet, the organisations of highly budgeted art workshops and exhibitions hosted by local and foreign companies within the country, there are now noticeable changes in the attitude of the present generation of ceramic students in art institutions over the country. The nature of ceramic artworks by these students is evolving drastically and becoming more adventurous conceptually with rich themes that reflect on more serious global issues like climate change among others.

The selected works by prominent international artists like Nnenna Okore, as well as emerging ceramists like Chinenye Emelogu and Arinze Eze, that will be reviewed and briefly discussed are a reflection of this new revolutionary trend in contemporary ceramics in Nigeria. These artworks foreshadow more radical engagement and explorative inclinations towards environmental ceramic art by future ceramists.

Nnenna Okorie is a graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka and an assistant professor in the North Park University. Renowned as a female environmental artist, she has received several awards and attended several residencies worldwide. She has been exhibited in several prestigious galleries and museums including the museum of art and

design New York and the October gallery, London. She uses different kinds of biodegradable materials in most of her installations, in which she transforms and regenerate forms based on observations of ecological and manmade environments (2007), many of them consisting mostly of ceramic items. For instance, the materials in her installation, "Egwu Ukwu" (see Plate 4) created in 2009, are mostly a combination of clay and burlap.

Chinenye Emelogu is a ceramist and graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she is currently continuing her graduate studies. She is quite experimental in her techniques and sourcing materials from her immediate environment she produces environmental ceramics that address ecological challenges from the global perspective. The work *Aka ji Ala* (Plate 5), for example, consists of a crude construction of a globe which the artist textured by sticking little morsels of clay to its surface. There is a depiction of a white palm print against a dark inked circular background on a part of this globe, and sections of it have deeper shades of brown clay than the rest. The title of the work literally means "the hand that holds the earth", and metaphorically depicts the fact that much of the climatic threats and imbalance the world is witnessing today have been caused to a great extent by the side effects of some of humankind's technological achievements.

The work in Plate 6 is an environmental ceramic installation by Arinze Eze, which is unique in terms of its structural appeal, both bearing the semblance of a pile of felled wood. On a larger scale this works has the potential of creative interaction with any public space, as well as the provocative thematic content it possesses that address the ecological threat of deforestation.

Although these works have not been glazed (which could be permitted within the context of environmental art), they were mostly exhibited outdoors, in galleries, studios. Nonetheless, that reason alongside their scale does not restrict or impede their description as environmental artworks.

### **The Nigerian Environmental Ceramic Art: Challenges and Recommendation**

There are numerous challenges that confront the ceramists intending to embark on major environmental ceramic art projects, whether on a small or large scale. Some of them will be discussed in the following paragraph.

Scarcity of funds and other incentives is one of the most discouraging aspects in the execution of a major art project, especially one that is meant to be exhibited outdoors. Granted, the artist has sketched up a proposal of an intended environmental ceramic project, complete with the pictures of marquee samples, sketches, summary of the operational costs and all that, but he or she usually meets a brick wall when it comes to the acquisition of funds. There are cases where these projects, after being commissioned by the government, were either delayed or eventually abandoned. Although ceramic works are really not too expensive to make due to easy accessibility of the medium, the issue is that on a larger scale other factors come into play. The fragile nature of the medium is one of them due to the fact that it makes the chances of accidents practically inevitable, thereby complicating the budgeted costs allocated to them. Besides, the sequence of complex and discouraging protocols one has to go through in order to obtain these funds is another problematic matter entirely.

It is of vital importance that governmental and nongovernmental parastatals associated with arts and culture should be enlightened on the importance of these environmental ceramic art projects and the potency of the messages they communicate to the society. Also, the public itself should be given a new orientation on how to perceive these artworks. The media will play a significant role in this since media outlets like, radio, television shows, news papers, magazine and the internet will enable wider access to a large audience. as long as the study of art is indirectly regarded as a minor course in the Nigerian educational curriculum, the attitude of Nigerians towards it will be limited, and the implication of this could lead to further misconceptions in the perceptions of these artworks, complications in the implications of major art projects as

well as impinge on the development of art in the society.

Finally, the attitudes of Nigerian ceramic artists towards environmental ceramic art should also be addressed. Ceramists should be encouraged to stretch their imaginations in the limitless conceptual possibilities the medium clay harbours and how they can be harnessed and transformed into significant environmental ceramic installations and sculptures.

### Conclusion

Nigerian ceramic and non ceramic artists have been well known for their explorative and arresting artworks with concepts that embrace the basic tenets of modern art in recent times. Even though some of these works have strong allusions to environmental art thematically, there are not usually categorised as such. There are notable works, however, like some of the works of Nnenna Okorie, where ceramic items are among the included items in some of their installations. But in such cases these works are actually classified as environmental *sculptural* installations and not environmental *ceramic* installations, since ceramics is a part and not the major medium in these works of art.

On the international stage, there are ceramists that use ceramic installations to address environmental issues. Artists like Heather Knight and Jay are among the notable few. Yet the artworks of these mentioned artists bear semblances with the art forms of many Nigerian ceramists, whether students or professionals, aspiring

to delve into this area. The question of fund, orientation, awareness by the public, preservation of created works due to the fragile nature of the medium are among the challenges that restrict them from creating and most times exhibiting such works.

This paper, having discussed these challenges, proffered suggestions such as enlightenment campaign by the media, various art oriented bodies in the organisations of solo and group exhibitions focusing on environmental ceramic installations and sculptures. Also, projects and workshops could be organised to teach interested ceramists and non ceramists who nurse the intention to engage in environmental ceramic art on how to make strong visual statements concerning the environment, using ceramics as medium. Major firms and companies, as well as relevant ministries in the Federal Government of Nigeria, should be approached by reputed ceramists or art organisations for funds to embark on large scale public ceramic art projects with necessary precautionary measures for their preservations.

Finally, art topics in the academic curricula, especially in the primary and secondary levels, should be expanded to stress on areas that highlight on these aspects of modern art. When all these challenges are addressed, the Nigerian ceramist involved in environmental ceramic arts will eventually find a viable platform for the sustained exploration and development of their themes and concepts within the modern art scene.

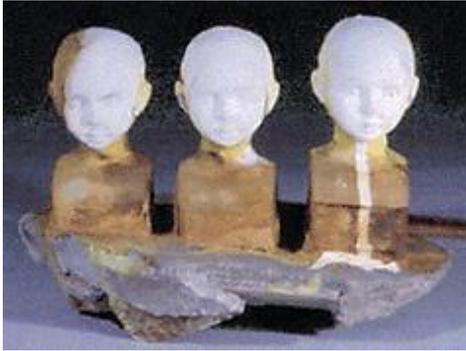


Plate 1. Jay Strommen. *Stone Temple Pilot Series*. Fired clay and wood. 30"x65"x7". 2001. © Jay Strommen



Plate 2. Courtney Mattison. *Our Changing Seas: A Coral Reef Story*. Glazed ceramic ware. 120"x180". 2011. © Mike Cohea/Brown University



Plate 3. Eugene Hon. *And the Ship Sails on*. Ceramic Installation with Protected Animation Invariable dimension. 2001 © Eugene Hon



Plate 4. Nnenna Okore. *Egwu Ukwu*. Clay and burlap. 30"x65"x7". 2009. © The artist's website [www.nnennaokore.com](http://www.nnennaokore.com)



Figure 5. Chinenye Emelogu. *Aka ji Ala*. 30"x30". 2009. © The artist's collection



Plate 6. Arinze Eze. *Scorched stacks*. Fired clay. 44"x20". 2010. © The artist's collection

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