

# Engaging the Mundane: The Art of Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Osodi on the Environmental Question

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the works of Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Oshodi, experimental Nigerian artists, who explore different media in constructing mirrors through which the effects of global warming could be viewed as a plausible reality. Like their counterparts elsewhere, they are sensitive to the changing climate. Using historical, technical and stylistic approaches, the paper analyses their thoughts and work processes. It proposes that the body of works created by these artists highlight, in a stark way, the basic concerns on environmental degradation, as well as the need for caution in man's drive for production and consumption.

**Key words:** Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi, George Osodi, environmental degradation

## 1. Introduction

The Nigerian traditional society had many richly expressive art traditions which resulted from the many core beliefs and practices it shared with other African peoples. The artists usually produced figural sculptures in terracotta, wood, and metal as well as other objects like utensils, farm implements and ornaments. They were neither exposed to the multi-directional creative exploration in techniques nor the limitless range of materials which the contemporary artists have discovered are ideal for creating visual imageries and objects of utilitarian needs. Interestingly, a considerable literature exist on African art, much of it, including Willet (1975), Fagg (1977), Fagg & Plass (1964) and Kleiner (2005) provided concrete information on styles, forms, and functions of different African ethnic wood carvings, pottery, bronze works, masquerading and rituals across the continent. On contemporary African artists and their works, some scholars including Kasfir (1999) and Milbourne (2014) have also made some useful contributions. While Kasfir took a cursory look at the formal content and background of works of some prominent African artists, their patrons and mediators, and their struggle for identity in the postcolonial world, Milbourne examined works of some contemporary African artists which bother on land matters or make reference to the environment.

Outside Africa, some writers have equally made exciting contributions on works of some contemporary artists who have ably made relevant visual references to their environments. For example, Philips (2003) has sought to pinpoint Steven Siegel's fascination with geological configuration that is continuously influenced by human-induced changes. (Boettger 2008, p. 39), on the other hand, has attempted a cursory catalogue of 'innovative women sculptors who worked in nature into a new presence in the art world'. Perhaps another important literal contribution that appears to highlight some meanings in environmental art is made by Grande (2004). The writer attempted reflective interpretations of some works rooting them firmly in their surroundings.

In Nigeria, several artists have attempted to create relevant imageries that specify meanings in visual and concrete language. Such artists include Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Osodi. These artists have used their art to showcase the implications of natural resource mismanagement on the environment. This paper discusses their works, with recourse to the artistic traditions that precede the contemporary creative practices and issues in Nigeria, in an attempt to appreciate the critical dimensions their work processes have taken and the metaphoric quality their works exude. And while it analyses the formal qualities of the works, it also appreciates their contributions to the debate on environmental issues.

## 2. Studio Approaches and Influences

From 1957 to 1961, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Yusuf Grillo and Demas Nwoko, among others, were students at the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (later the Ahmadu Bello University). As students, they protested against the Academy approach to art production which was being taught to them by their teachers. They wanted their practice to reflect their culture. But 'this does not mean', argued Onabrakpeya, 'that we are closed to what is going on in the West. We are open to modern techniques, ideas and scientific development' (Picton 1997, p. 13). It was this principle that guided their practice and helped in marking out the modern Nigerian art distinctly (as the then Zaria crop of young artists was known to have charted the course of modern Nigeria art). Uche Okeke went further to formulate what he termed 'Natural Synthesis' - '... a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art of its own sake' (Okeke cited in Deliss 1995, p. 208) - which was to help develop a distinctive formal programme at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he later taught art for many years. This initiative was a welcome development at Nsukka particularly, where students' approach to art became very

exploratory. Even at other places where the other pioneer art students of the College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria had influences, experimentation with materials and techniques were adopted. The desire to discover new media and fresh ideas has continued to drive the spirit and process of art practice in the country.

Today, modern Nigerian artists are restless, always seeking for new ways of expression and reaching out for new ideas to play with. The 'still-life' and 'milk maids' ideas that used to be popular themes among young Nigerian artists are no longer very fashionable or centre of interest among many artists. There has been a perceivable drift into what might be called metaphoric use of what began as a means or process, and besides one can see how this became distilled into strong visual imageries that speak volumes about the present. Conceptual works and wholesome visual imageries that are borne out of strong creative inquiry are gradually flowering in the Nigeria's visual art arena. The spirit of experimentation among the artists, and influences within and outside, may be advanced as the reason for this trend. The Ovuomaroro Studio (Bruce Onabrakpeya's studio located in Lagos), for instance, is a meeting place for many artists where approach to creative art is especially experimental. According to Onabrakpeya (1997), the studio has always a new idea or material to work on. Also reputed for experimentation is El Anatsui's Afrika Studio which is located at Nsukka in the eastern part of the country. Anatsui's studio is open to some students who are on industrial attachment, as well as other artists, particularly some young graduates of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (where the artist was a lecturer), who work there as assistants. In fact, many other artists' studios in Nigeria, like Ovuomaroro Studio and Afrika Studio, are technically exploratory giving the artists the opportunity to dig into their immediate environments for forms and ideas.

So, having trained in art institutions structured to allow for exploration of materials, forms, techniques and ideas, Buhari and Usman (who studied at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria), and Onyishi (who was taught at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka) have engaged their art practice, as well as their audience, with a duality of means and purpose. They undertook methodological play of observation and articulation that threw up conceptual and perceptual configurations. Osodi, however, did not have formal art training; but he grew up with the profound interest he has in art from childhood. He was a student of business studies at the Yaba College of Technology, Lagos where he had fruitful interactions with some of the college art students. After graduation from school, Osodi decided to make art a career. He eventually settled for photography and then found a variety of options open to him. He briefly worked in a newspaper house, visited different galleries and artists' studios, got apprenticed to few photographers and then opened his own studio.

### **3. Subject of the Creative Exploration**

Artists working in developed countries are exposed to quite different life experiences from those living and working in developing countries. In fact it is usual that artists' works to reflect the experiences of the societies they live in. Referring to curator Okwui Enwezor's idea of the 'tension between here and there' as a double vision, (Kasfir 1999, p. 13) observed that contemporary African Artists do not have it (double vision) as part of their artistic experience because they are grappling with marginalisation which is the most pressing issue in their own home countries. There are elements of truth in Kasfir's argument. Generally, the output of every practicing artist is filtered through the everyday reality he or she is faced with. Before colonisation, for instance, the traditional art addressed the local needs of the period, providing the natives certain types of common and prestige cloth used in ceremonies, farm implements, carved doors and stools, ritual sculpture and pottery, elaborate leatherwork and ornaments.

And during the colonial era, the direction of art changed. Influences came from Europe and new themes were developed, particularly in Nigeria where Christianity played a major role in recasting the value and meaning of art. Artists portrayed scenes from the Bible and from traditional life that were believed by the missionaries as not tending towards idolatry. The Oye Ekiti scheme championed by Father Kelvin Carroll encouraged the carvers in this direction. The Ulli Beier inspired experiments of 1961 and 1962 as well as the Mbari Mbayo artists' club in Oshogbo (1962 - 1964) also attempted to help the artists express themselves freely, and this brought about diversity in creativity. At that time, there was a level of creative freedom in the country. Besides scenes from the Bible, painters among the artists tend to represent spirit and human figures from novels and folk-tales.

The making of art, therefore, does not exist in isolation but depends on culture and experience. Culture and human experience determine, to a large extent, the form and content of what an artist produces. In the apartheid South Africa, for instance, the blacks were faced with the problems of discrimination and oppression. So, the concern of most artists then, particularly among the blacks, was a committed struggle for freedom which art could offer. Also during the Nigerian civil war (1967 - 1970), the few artists who had the opportunity to make art then, especially in the Biafran side, mostly depicted war and its victims. Refugees, wrecked soldiers and adverse human conditions caused by war appear to dominate the subject matter of most art works produced in the south-eastern part of Nigeria in those days. During the war, Uche Okeke, with the help of Abigail Ekwonna and some German activists, showed some of the works in Cologne under the title *Kunst und Kunsthandwerk aus Biafra*

(*Art and Craft of Biafra*) and, according to Aas (2002, p. 299), 'the show was not only an art exhibition, but also functioned within the general framework of Biafran war propaganda'.

However, the forms and contents of their work changed later after the civil war as fortunes began to turn around due to plenteous financial flow from crude oil sales. And when the military seized Nigeria and imposed an unendurably long dictatorial rule on the country, many artists used their works to put Nigerians up to action. Although there were some artists that promoted the military administration too, the visual art climate in the country then was charged with pro- and anti-military art works. Democracy was eventually restored in the country and many artists got themselves busy with the creation of imageries that reference politics in different ways. Portraiture seems to benefit more from the local patrons who commission artists to produce portraits of the patrons themselves, or those of politicians for use as gifts items. In fact every notable politician has one or more self-portraits in his or her collection, usually received as gifts from individuals or groups seeking one favour or the other.

So, artists try to maintain their vocation under the social circumstances they find themselves, although many of them tend to fall by the wayside in their struggle for survival. In order to make ends meet, many artists depend on their collectors for direction. They work hard to satisfy them even to the point of sacrificing their voice in the creative exercise. All they want is to make sales claiming that sales, besides being a way of ensuring consistency of output, determine how successful an artist is. Of course this attitude questions the skill and integrity of such artists. However, there are also many other Nigerian artists, including Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Oshodi, whose ideas and creative processes utilise the sophisticated techniques of contemporary art and resulting in relevant social and political commentary. They refuse to be weighed down with the issue of identity which many black artists have been struggling with for some decades now. They have realised that carving or painting masks or milk maids, which became popular themes for many Nigerian artists at one point, does not make them 'Nigerian' or 'African'. They are also conscious of the fact that the world is a global community and that 'artists everywhere have always borrowed from anywhere they can find inspiration' (Loder 1997, p. 5). Besides being aware of these, the increasingly unpredictability of weather as well as frequent barrage of print and electronic campaign against global warming at all corners of the world stir their creative temperament and cause them to juggle matters of cause and effect or forms and meanings. Buhari, Usman, Onyishi and Oshodi especially have joined the current global crusade for a friendly environment by provoking thought and creating awareness on environmental matters with their art. Their works are eloquent narratives in which different kinds of media were explored to speak against over-exploitation of natural resources and degradation of the environment.

#### **4. Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Osodi: Conveying the Reality**

Buhari believes that artists have always been in the forefront of the deliberation on the environment and this has helped to shape his current ideas and forms. (McCann et al. 2014) noted that his paintings and installations lately have focused more on such themes as the ravages of bush fires, negative effects of oil spillage, and excessive consumerism. In his work of 2011 – 2012 titled *Melting Planet II* (fig.1), Buhari went beyond mere documentation of environmental transformations to depicting the agents and nature of environmental degradation, as well as its implications. With his oil on board, the artist created the earth planet which seems to be melting down subtly. Round the edges of the circular image of the earth is painted black while the centre is tensed with a brief drip-lines of white, black and red which, instead of fusing perfectly, created an interface of change with a resulting state of disorder. The bold black band appears to be gradually eating into the centre where traces of red and a tinge of blue and brown run a risk of displacement. The black and red speak of gloom and destruction that confront the earth. In fact Buhari's work is a narrative that talks of a physical reality in which nature's resources are exploited and mismanaged. The painter has successfully exploited the dripping technique in creating a chaotic situation where the planet is no longer at ease and secure for the sustainability of life. Even the white colour that brings tranquility into the creation has been displaced or converted to gray. A close look at the work reminds the viewer of the much-talked-about melting ice in the Antarctica which is a clear indication of global warming.

Buhari has continued to daze his audience with counterfeit reality, which seems actually to represent, not just to resemble, spillage and waste. He has also continued to interpret the subject of environmental degradation in a series of paintings that are provocative displays of ecological dissolution. And in terms of process, the artist adopted a method that is a vivid visual metaphor for the themes he has chosen to engage. He really spilled some materials (colours) in demonstrating spillage, and practically wasted some in concretising wastes. In confronting his work of 2005 titled *Spillage of Black Gold (in the Pipeline)* especially, the viewer is compelled to perceive the magnitude and horrific effect of oil spillage, particularly in the Niger Delta, which the artist makes reference to. The thick drippy black and grey colours splashed over a white canvas that is spotted with very bright patches of yellow, green, tinted blue and red became a metaphor for crude oil spillage over a natural landscape. It appears he is never in doubt of the effect of his process or uncertain of the sense in his compositions. He pursues

a creative cause that he feels is an appropriate response to cynical conception of resource development. It was observed by the artist that 'man and the environment are supposed to dialogue in a symbiotic relationship ... But in reality ... human beings simply waste/spill their talents/resources on the surface of the earth thereby generating wastes, spillages, pollution on the environment' (Buhari 2013, p. 33). There is no denying that this observation has compelled him to glean materials and ideas from his surroundings to 'emphasise the links between ecology and economy' (Grande, 2004:43).



Figure 1 : Jerry Buhari, *Melting Point* (2011-2012). Oil on board. © ArtHouse Contemporary Ltd.



Figure 2: Jerry Buhari, *Fall and Spill History* (2005). Oil on canvas. ©Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution



Figure 3: Jerry Buhari, *Spillage of Black Gold (in the Pipeline)*, 2005 Acrylic on canvas © ArtHouse Contemporary Ltd

Similar to Jerry Buhari's painting approach is Kuti Usman's. Usman was taught by Buhari at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and both of them have had artistic encounter, in one way or the other, with painter Gani Odutokun who taught them at different times. It is therefore not surprising to see some similarities and

connections in the forms and method of their work. Remarkably, vulnerability and violence resound in much of their work and the viewer is effectively carried along in their visual narratives. In his *Whirlwinds* series, Usman set out to confront the viewer with lively imageries of how phenomena around man were classified as normal or abnormal. He employed a systematic methodology to direct attention to what global warming is and feels like. For instance, the artist crafted some visual chaotic situations and spatial conflict with dripping method which was achieved by pouring colours on canvas and allowing them to run in drips from one end to the other. These drip-lines were defined with brush strokes, which effect, particularly in *The Victims* (fig. 4), helped to create a seemingly eruptive tornado that splashes hot lava from above. The use of brilliant colours of fiery red and yellow with white evokes an unsettling imagination of a dispute between the earth and the sun due to a raft of consequences arising from man's use and abuse of natural resources. Lying prostrate on the ground, behind the spattering storm, is a figure representing the dead who succumbed to the challenging weather conditions. And standing in the background, a little far behind the figure, are quivering figures draped in garbs of dazzling red, yellow and white. They tend to generate multiple interpretations when cast against human condition, whether physical or psychological. Usman's compositional prowess is perhaps more evident in *The Troubled City* (2003) which, though in the same technical register with *The Victims*, presents apparent image of a scourge - a bloated, spinning and blazing sun suspending over a small patch of foliage green and threatening to consume every life. The white, luminous yellow and red splashed here and there warm up the landscape. The brushstrokes, sometimes superimposed on one another and on the vertical drip-lines, accumulate to create the images of the sky, the sun and the vegetation. Each splash of colour confirms that the atmosphere is tensed. Like in *The Troubled City*, *The Victims* shows concentrated vibrating lines of radiant hues. But in *Hope Frontier* the artist created a virgin landscape that is characterised by natural order. Other works in the *Whirlwinds* series address the idea of climate change in other ways.



Figure 4: Kuti Usman, - *The Victims* (2003).  
Oil/enamel on canvas



Figure 5: Kuti Usman, *The Troubled City* (2003).  
Oil/enamel on canvas

Uche Onyishi also addresses the problems of waste management in urban areas. His current works explores non-biodegradable materials in ways that concretises the ecological implications of poor waste management, gas flaring and oil spillage. In *Climate Change I* (2013), the artist gathered plastic bags of assorted colours, burned them into amorphous shapes and then cast them on a tree that shed its leaves (fig. 6). With this exercise, he transformed the natural tree into an artificial one, thus creating an unsettling uncertainty on the rest of the trees around it. In spite of its colourful outlook, the work evokes the rhythm of conflagration and seems to suggest that man must rethink his subversive approach to exploitation and use of natural resources in which his consumption habit and attitude to conservation of nature is open to question. Also in a related work (fig. 7), the artist installed pieces of burned plastic bags in an indoor space where it suggests a trail of iridescent smoke seeking for vent. Here, the scorched plastic bags are attached onto a sheet of chicken mesh (with nylon threads) and set sprawling on the floor in the direction of the wall. And like a throng of ants, they appear to climb close to the ceiling before they now head towards the window. Looking closely at any of the burned plastic bags, the viewer feels the underlying effects of combustion and the vulnerability of the physical material in entropy. In short, there is a dynamism to Onyishi's works that provokes relevant questions about artificiality and global warming.



Figure 6: Uche Onyishi, *Climate Change I* (2013).  
Plastic bags on a tree.



Fig. 7: Uche Onyishi, - *Climate Change II* (2013).  
Plastic bags and chicken mesh.

George Osodi is a curious photographer. He sees the world through the camera lens and attempts to narrate an intimate experience of the natural world as well as encourage his audience to focus on initiatives that are aimed at reconstructing the devastated landscape. He has worked on several earth-related bodies of work (including Oil Rich Niger Delta) in which he exposed, in strong visual forms, man's flagrant abuse of his environment. In most of his earth-related works, the artist creates a vision of the world perceivable in fragments according to framed shots revealed from the lens of his camera. In exploring environmental condition in a global context, Osodi appears to have diagnosed the key problems of environmental degradation and have come up with a prescription. According to him,

It is amazing to know that all of these elements are from the Earth and that a majority of the substances of interest and value that are found beneath the African earth's crust have proven to be a curse instead of a blessing in most cases, perhaps due to bad management and lack of care ... We must love the world that loves us first by holding ourselves at one with nature (Osodi 2014, p. 237).

With a warm concern for earth, Osodi produced several photographic images that literally and metaphorically illustrate an adverse and physically desecrated globe. His works pose as a complex of confrontations and of problems that man must solve in order to liberate the environment and placate nature. In fact they capture and provoke the viewer to interrogate the motives and the propelling force of the transgression against the earth. Fig. 8 especially paints a story of oil exploitation activities in the Niger Delta where pollution in various forms have caused the populace untold hardships. Although it is usually difficult to take a concrete and genuine steps towards better management of the environment, especially when the economic survival of a nation is at stake, and some corrupt and powerful groups are involved, benefitting dishonestly, works such as Osodi's earth-related body of works (see fig. 9) stand as both a conscientious judge and teacher among people.



Figure 8: George Oshodi, *Oil Pipeline Pollution* (2007) - from Oil-rich Niger Delta series, Fuji crystal print. © Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

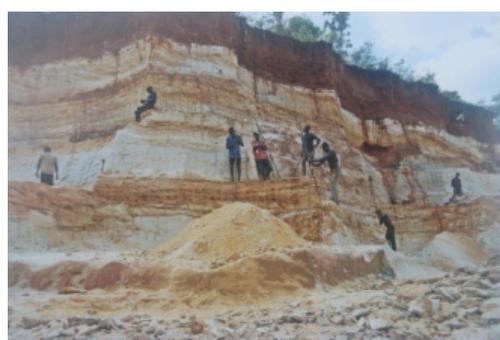


Figure 9: George Oshodi, *Fine Sand for Building, Okigwe, Nigeria* (2011), Fuji crystal print. © Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

## 5. Conclusion

Material culture and experience have provided some Nigerian artists with paintings and sculptural forms loaded with associative possibilities. While their works have varied, one constant has been the apparent grandiose experiment with materials that characterise them and the dramatisation of environmental uncertainty that steadily sets in. On encountering their works one must recognise materiality, intensity and fluidity as a way of understanding that encounter. In a time like this, when the world is trapped in a messy fog that blurs human vision of brilliant future, prints, paintings and installations of some Nigerian artists (such as Jerry Buhari, Kuti Usman, Uche Onyishi and George Osodi) committed to clean and safe environment lend weight to the fight against environmental degradation. It is already common to see some of these works in different Nigerian galleries. The artists have brought their illustrious backgrounds to contemporaneity in their attempts at creating visual imageries that tend to analyse, discuss and argue the realities of the environment, with particular reference to the changing climate. Undoubtedly, there is an expectation for more commentaries from a wider population of Nigerian artists in this regard. But the reality of the threats posed by the mismanagement of natural resources, as well as wrong attitude to waste management, is increasingly becoming clearer to the present generation of artists who, with eloquent narratives, are now becoming more actively engaged in the climate change debate.

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