

Visual Poetry: A Critical Perspective Of Narrative Events In Practice Of Watercolour

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Abstract: Personal perspectives are influenced by experiences gained over a period of more than two decades in practice and interacting with green spaces, other artists through their works and concepts. Standing by road or travelling across the length and breadth of the Northern Nigeria, it is common to see men lined up on bicycles and women carry firewood and sticks in juxtaposition with green space. Our fascination to patterns in nature and other references from photograph of places inspires and stimulates our intellect and imagination. The uniqueness of the spontaneity of watercolour is the end product. Watercolour has become a media that is not attracting artists in Nigeria. This paper is recommending an attitudinal change to bring about a rebirth in watercolour media.

I. INTRODUCTION

An idea in critical perspective of narrative events in the practice of watercolour is an attempt to depict visual poetry of daily activities in different panoramic manner. There are so many stimuli around the artist for creative contemplation – Markets, Streets, People, Buses, waterside, Bicycle riders, and green spaces. (See Figs 1). Waterside is one of the interesting places to paint for an artist when looking for subject matter. It has the attribute for artistic meditation and contemplation, the boats, people, and shanty houses. In realization of this, the compositional structure of paintings in this paper captures the rhythm of practices in watercolour that seems not to generate much interest in contemporary Nigerian art scene. It is evident in most recent exhibitions, galleries and public places that watercolour is becoming an art for the kids or beginners. Also, emphasis on practice in schools of art seems to give credence to this position.



Figure 1: John Oyedemi, Waterside, 2014. 76X56cm
Source: Artist



Figure 2: John Oyedemi, *Setting Out*, 2014.76X56cm

Source: Artist

Powers 2014, in art discussion topics on Watercolour revolution, reveals that Watercolourists began a revolution a few decades ago... It was not taken seriously by museum curators, college art professors, art critics, art judges and the contemporary art world. The revolution expanded watercolour exposure to the public by the creation of thousands of watercolour societies, regionally, nationally and internationally. Its imagery expanded into abstraction and beyond watercolour medium expanded into water media which included all water-based paint such as acrylic, gouache, tempera, and mixed media.

It is significant to state that in the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria experienced a surge in the production of watercolour based art. In the 2000s, the practice was almost completely suspended. The reasons alluded to this is that; some artists have come to see watercolour as a difficult media while others avoid exploring with it for their ineptitude to handle. To control the flow of the media depends on the flow of water usage and this makes it difficult for most users. The expectation of younger artists may be to see growth and development in the practice by artists/watercolourists' like Sam Ovraili, Ini Brown, Kolade Oshimowo, Jerry Buhari, John Oyedemi just to mention a few. Attitudinal change in the practice of watercolour is further compounded by our school system, which has not done enough to promote this media. Collectors' attitude is also worrisome. They are apt to collect what they feel can be a good investment and possible notion; watercolour is not a serious art and as such not much of a collectable item. The art market has a great role to play in the promotion of watercolour else the making will be at low level.

The works of watercolourists like Ini Brown (b.1963), (see plate.1) and Sam Ovraili (b.1961), (see plate 2 and 3) in the late 80s and early 90s is worth mentioning in visual poetic narrative of events in watercolour practice because of their influence on younger Nigerian artists.

A write up on Ini Brown in 2015, describes him as, 'unarguably the most versatile and prolific Watercolourist in recent times to have graced the Nigerian and African art scene. His creativity, ingenuity and dexterity with the watercolour medium is simply breathtaking. His unique technique in the dramatic use of watercolor is awesome'. (<http://www.artpal.com/brownini4>).



Plate 1: Water Color Painting of Lagos frenzy 2013, Ini Brown

Source:<http://dreamestorical.tumblr.com/post/54889243026/water-color-painting-of-lagos-frenzy-by-nigerian>



Plate 2: Sam Ovraili's return to figural 2009

Source: <http://africanartswithtaj.blogspot.com/2011/12/visual-soliloquy-rescue-mission-for.html>

Sam Ovraili (b.1961)

In a similar vein, Solowole (2011) noted that,

Except in the works of Sam Ovraili, Ini Brown, Tayo Adenaike, Onabanjo and a few others, watercolour is rarely favoured by many artists, even in its so-called 'golden days' of the 1980s, 1990s through the early years of the last decade. And as prolific as Brown, Ovraili and Onabanjo were with this medium to complement the efforts of the early masters such as Aina Onabolu, Obiora Udechukwu, Uche Okeke and others, artists' adventure into alternative medium and mixed media to meet up with the changing dynamics of art and tastes of collectors – appeared to have pushed watercolour out of favour. In fact, this had also led most of the artists known for watercolour to abandon the technique.

What this meant is that watercolour practice had its 'golden days'. It is important therefore for artists to view the practice from another perspective of generating interest of the public towards appreciation of watercolour media. Anjous-Zygmunt

(2011), avers that, Sam Ovrati widely known as the most expressive water colourist in Nigeria, has the ability to not control the medium he works with but instead to speak the language of the medium, letting the medium dictate the artwork.



Plate 3: Sam Ovrati, Woman in green 1991 watercolour 53 x 35.5 cm. (20½ x 14 in.)

Source: <http://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/sam-ovrati-b-1961-woman-in-green-1991-85-c-0512d61f74>

His works are making a great impact in and outside the shores of Nigeria. In the recent times, Ovrati seems to dwell on oil based medium. It is expected that he will come back to watercolour that made him one of Nigeria's best watercolourist. An award winning artist is also known for his philosophical direction in works.

According to Okundaye 2013

Sam's exploits include the passion series and the fishes of life series. The passion series is an experimentation and report on the activities that people do passionately. These activities honour various African women ceremonies such as marriage and christening. The fishes of life series are based on the fish as a source of inspiration for colour application and exploration of shapes which form a large part of Sam's art.

Many influences around us stimulate our artistic practices, artists and the environment in which we can draw from. These influences become a stimulus, an essential part of our art making. Some are challenging while others flow with ease. This paper holds the view that inspirations are sustainable only when the intrinsic value in an object or environment generates interest that the mind can stay on. This can only be based on how strong the environment elicits responses from us to grasp the essence of the object of inspiration and hold on to it, interpret and express it in different ways. It is the mental information gathered concerning events over a period of time that comes to play in art making. Once the sketches are done to a satisfactory level, the artist reflects on it and like a flash, the work is overlaid with a wash of watercolour. Most often the sketches hold the work together as it becomes part of it.

Drawing from experiences in handling watercolour, the inspiration is cooked in the spiritual room-Intellect where it is turned; brood upon till it becomes real.

II. SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE IN NORTHERN NIGERIA

In contemporary setting in Nigeria, it is common to see local and modern architecture intersects in a direct narrative within current reality and historical consciousness. This is shaping the future in the present. Hausa traditional architectural pieces are built with mud/clay and grass in a unique assemblage. The structures are constructed and roofed with long grass and mud. It creates a dialogue between the ground and the structure that makes it look as if it grows out or sprout from the same ground on which it stands. This interaction is captured in the watercolours by incorporating symbols and motifs simultaneously across the figures and the buildings. These buildings communicate to us our past, present and future. This has impacted on the contemporary art culture in Nigeria in the works of artists like Gani Odutokun, Jerry Buhari, Sam Ovrati, John Oyedemi and many others.

Rebuilding the broken cities in the North in a painting is a series developed to portray the culture of the people, in terms of architecture and their activities. Some of the paintings on the local architecture were not sketched but painted directly on paper and in some instance not stretched. (See Fig.3). The traditional buildings are there for artistic and architectural understanding of its concepts as some stand as site-specific. The ecstatic of the moments of these structures is found in states-towns such as Kano, Katsina, Bauchi, Gombe, Daura, Zaria and many others. Artists found this constant changing pieces/icon and disappearing images inspiring to interpret in their own way and create new ideas out of them. The visual saturation of these structures in some instance represents our culture and what civilization could not take away. The visual landscape is not affected by the world around it but maintains its own uniqueness to challenge modern architectural drama.



Figure 3: John Oyedemi, The Synthesis, 1998.38X56cm
Source: Artist

GREEN SPACE IN OUR ENVIRONMENT

The visual appearance and attractiveness of towns and cities are strongly influenced by their green spaces. A high quality built environment with the buildings, access roads and public spaces cannot alone ensure that a town or city is an attractive and appealing place to live and work but the landscape of green spaces contribute as much to the quality of the urban environment as good architecture. Green space is the meeting place of culture and the environment, the places where what users see is infused with meanings of past and present, engendering memories and feelings (Matsuoka & Kaplan 2008 in Sati 2014).

Green space can play a psychological role to an artist. From the view of chromatics, lake blueness and vegetation greenness belong to impassive colours that make people calm down. If there is not enough blueness and greenness but full of exciting redness in the metropolis, the tendency will be a lack of a peaceful environment for the residents (Shi, 2002 in Sati 2014).

The common the denominator noticed in the practice of watercolour in Nigeria is the ineptitude of artists to green spaces despite the lushness and its aesthetics. Most watercolour paintings depict people in activities in villages and cities.



Figure 4: John Oyedemi, *The Market setting*, 2014.76X56cm
Source: Artist

III. THE PROCESS

Exploring with watercolour is exciting, through practice and determination to achieve a proficient goal. The goal of every artist is to develop a unique way of depicting a subject matter. The works/paintings are developed by studying the technique of many watercolourists without being a slave to any. Some watercolour paintings could begin with sketches developed from life studies, pictures, and imaginations which come through practices, experiences and observations.

The watercolours combine pencil and washes of colour together, allowing the pencil marks/lines to finish the work. The paintings are not intended to make a realistic design but are expressions of abstract structures. Most of the watercolours are also kept simple as much as possible to achieve crispy effects without over-working them.

- ✓ *COLOUR USAGE* - the colours are represented in a subtle manner. Water is not used arbitrarily on the palette but used to achieve transparent effects of earthy colours, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow, reds, green and Prussian blue.
- ✓ *WHITE PAPER* - white areas are left without colour/wash of colour while in some instances light washes of colour are applied. This is to strengthen the compositional structure of each concept. The creative relationships of crispy forms and shapes interplay in the white areas in an interchange to create a balance of sort.
- ✓ *TECHNIQUES* - Various techniques were adopted to achieve each piece. Wet on wet, dry brush, glazing and flat washes that result into abstract spaces.

IV. ABSTRACT SPACE

Abstract spaces are created in an effort to achieve a puzzling effect. Certain portions are not defined to allow the eye to complete or just left vague for interaction between the beholder and the work. Some even asked 'what is this?' The abstract effect is more effective in some works in this review than others. Experimentation with expression in watercolour through textural transparency technique focuses on using bold and thin lines, to create shapes in multiple transparent layers. Strong value patterns are arranged in a simple rendering to make statements about events. The energy of the subject matter is further enhanced by the patterns, middle ground, background and the Foreground.

V. TRANSCENDENT STROKES

Do paintings speak or paint speaks when applied to a support? Paint/colours direct with an inaudible voice which can be heard inwardly as if someone is speaking to us. When a coloured stroke is applied, it leads to another through a voice when an individual is conversant with the language of colours. The language of colours is harmony, discord, complimentary, analogous and knowing colours reaction/behaviour is very important. Each stroke transcends to the next in a rhythmic order until a composition is fully achieved.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigerian artists can be major players in the world's watercolour art scene. This is dependent on the following:

- ✓ Artists in Nigeria ought to see watercolour as a flexible media and can be easily handled through practice.
- ✓ Workshops in watercolour painting/media should be organized on a quarterly basis by different facilitators.
- ✓ Art colleges/schools should teach and encourage students in the practice of watercolour medium to open up new frontiers.
- ✓ Galleries and art collectors should be encouraged to collect and promote the watercolor paintings.

VII. CONCLUSION

The works of Ovralti and Brown is of great influence to the watercolours of Oyedemi and also of many other young Nigerian artists. It is has impacted on the conceptualizing, composition, practice of watercolour media and its resurgence in practice. Exhibitions on watercolour paintings can open up new vistas in Nigerian art scene.

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