

AN INSCRIPTION OF POLITICAL THEMED PAINTINGS: NIGERIAN SITUATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed at discussing some paintings that addresses some political issues in their themes. Theme is the subject for all the activities carried out by man because, almost everything in the world is categorised in one group or the other such as human, plants, properties, daily activities to mention but few. According to Desta (2015), themes can generate excitement, experimentation, investigation and interest in the viewers passed through the artist's message. Theme is the key to artists because, without it no concrete works of art is visible to the society. In painting, the exploration of theme started with the discovery of cave men and how they used it religiously to hunt animals, as they believed in the existence of the spirit in the art works using natural art materials. Artists later expressed their impressions using their immediate environment experiences to draw the attention of their viewers as close as possible. The contemporary painters explore themes in a diverse ways in order to initiate, innovate, invent, create and produce visual works of art through political issues. The methodology used was qualitative through a descriptive approach, in which art historical and analytical techniques were employed. The total number of eight works were purposively selected and discussed. Documentation of the past and present situation of things in Nigeria, giving hope for the future. It is therefore, recommended that scholars should study more artists' works and asses how they can be of good discussion to the audience by appropriating them to our daily political deeds.

Keywords: Inscription, Theme, Nigeria, politics and painting.

INTRODUCTION

Over time artists have been able to imitate nature and situations around them in painting, drawing and sculpture. As such, it has become impossible for them to create, initiate, invent, innovate, and produce things in the visual arts without themes. Themes are very important in contemporary Nigerian art, as such, have become varied, rich and captivating. They are generally classified into different categories such as the social, economic, cultural, environmental, religious and political themes. Most of the contemporary works are on social, political and economic conditions, and the others capture expressions of interest in nature and landscapes. According to Desta (2015), when themes are well chosen they generate excitement, experimentation, investigation and interest in the viewers, then will naturally achieve the central message outcome of the artist. This can be seeing the work titled "The David and Goliath theme was one from Christian heritage but politically used, which was one very important part of

Renaissance life. The young shepherd David defeated the mightiest warrior of the region and by so doing saved the Hebrew people”.



Figure I: **David and Goliath**, Donatello, Stone, 191cm, 1408-1409,
Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, study.com.

David (Fig. I) is depicted as a young man, holding and standing on the head of Goliath. Encyclopaedia (2019) Donatello was working for the Medici family of Florence, an independent republic usually faced larger, more powerful threats from kings and lords across Europe. Politically, Florence informally adopted David as a symbol of their city, signifying pride in their ability to sustain in a world of major powers and upholding them as a virtuous leader.

In figure 1, David also poses as a proud victor, letting viewers know that a certain style was associated with this theme, that is the theme of the underdog, remains. At this junction, it represents a promise that Florence will defend itself and will be victorious no matter the circumstances. This description has been able to picture how theme have widely used and can affects also a three dimensional work of art and not only a two dimensional painting like that of Gbadem and Orban,

Kumail (2017) observes that, artists with a peaceful message enjoy a good level of acceptance across various social climates. Artists have shared their experiences of special events through their artworks. Many artists (painters) have put their feelings and emotions on canvas to express their rejection or acceptance of many situations through their choice of themes. (Ikpakronyi 2008). Currently, themes have become explosive with contemporary Nigerian artists who have been developing their own personal languages for visual expression. They carefully select, develop and improve upon the works of their predecessors as well as their contemporaries, all in an attempt to advance art in Nigeria.

However this paper examines the works of two artists on how they response to political issues; Gbaden Blaise Gundu and Orban Iwanger Salome; who each discourse Nigeria's crises through distinctive visual strategies. These selected paintings are based on their political rendition of corruption, injustice, hardship, and hope in "quote". The study also uses some ideas from scholars like Char. R. Miller which says that "even the worst picture" Goethe pronounced "can speak to our emotions and imagination by selling them in motion, releasing them run free". The analysis here aim to position the works within Nigerian citizens and leadership, aiming at commenting and projecting how paintings can serve as a tool for passing information about our immediate environment visually.

Conceptual Frame Work

The conceptual framework for this study is hinged on Que'bec theory (2009) which states that, all art is political in the sense that it engages society in some ways, either influencing or being influenced. Hence art itself is a means of learning about culture, societal order and values. Some works speak more directly to issues relating to human rights, corruption and the distribution of class, while others speak on wealth, criminal violence and injustice. All these are concerns of Que'bec theory and government measures that sought to address issues in a society. Microsoft Encarta (2009), presumed one of the prominent critics in England at the twentieth century was William Hazlitt (1778-1830), a painter and essayist. He wrote about his deep pleasure in art and his belief that art could be used to address socio- political issues.

Dwelling on these ideas, this paper seek it position that, Gbaden Blaise Gundu respond to political issue in abstraction using fabric with exaggerated figures, multiple or heaps of leave and imaginary animals. Orban Iwanger Salome rather juxtaposes shapes and colours with direct themes focusing on the promises and the outcome before and after occupying the seat in authority. Both the artists comment on the challenges and also anticipate for hope seeing in Nigeria Must Survive and Nigeria is pregnant.

Politics and its Nature

Balancing political priorities with administrative efficiency, managing stakeholder relationships and ensuring accountability and transparency has always being a serious issues in any organization, government, institution and society at large. This is evidently seen in the Nigerian politics as a political culture also.

Politics is old as human, and can be probably tress back when chimpanzees used social manipulation in order to secure, maintain influential rank and exercise it as noted by Frans de Waal. Wikipedia (2019). The activities of living things, either human or animal, including even conflict that goes on within, between and outside, could be referred to as politics as it relates primarily on governance and as such, an exercise of power. According to Elmer Schattschneider scientist, "at the root of all politics is the universal language of conflict". Wikipedia (2019) An Irish political Scientist Michael Laver also observed that "politics is about the characteristics blend of conflict and cooperation that can be found so often in human

interactions. Pure conflict is war, pure cooperation is true love". Wikipedia (2019). Having considered this statement, it is suggested that politic is a mixed concept with conflict, cooperation, love and even war.

Paintings and their contextual Connotation

The analysis of selected works by Gbaden Blaise and Orban Iwanger Salome add more lights on contemporary Nigerian artists on their response on crises and challenges of governance as the country is concern using different medium style and theme but focusing on the same direction visually. Even though each artist react differently, they align their voices in critiquing the situation of their country base on the fact that if all community aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all and which embraces all the rest should aim at good in a greater degree than any other and at the highest speed. Therefore theses artist statements exposes manipulations, hypocrisy, greed, and insecurity, fake promises to mention but few later among the political leaders.

The following works are analyzed with the aim of bringing out the context in which the works were produced. Works in this category are; ***Wall of Ethnicity, Wall of Power, Wall of Politics, Nigeria Must Survive, Seven point Agenda, A still Moment in Benue State and Nigeria is pregnant.***

“Wall of Ethnicity” (plate I) is part of the socio-political discourse in relation to Nigeria. Wall of ethnicity is a point of division, things that divide the society and people thinking, humans base on things like ethnic values, I am Hausa, Igbo, Fulani, Yoruba, black and white and therefore reasoning is based on self-centeredness. In this composition, the artist attempts to provide a social narrative rotating around the demographic composition of Nigeria. The composition is a kinetic painting using fabric stripes. The artist uses yellow colour with scattered touches of green, red, pink, blue, black and brown. The arrangement of these colours gives the work variety, and the symmetry of circle in the composition gives it unity, balance and rhythm.



Plate I: *Wall of Ethnicity*, Gbaden Blaise Gundu
Mixed media 350cm x 381.5cm, 2011, artist's collection.

As the title entails, this piece of work represents the changing nature of the lives of the people of Nigeria from a unified entity to a tribal component. The variety of colours signifies the various ethnic groups in Nigeria fighting in the name of tribalism instead of the yellow and harmonious Nigeria that should have been the picture trending. The artist used it to represent betrayal, dishonesty optimism, and sunshine thus, no matter what; there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

The artist is deliberate in using the circular contusions which are joined to depict the network resembling the geographic highways of Nigeria. This wall shows that, the peoples of Nigeria are linked to similar cultural heritages. Whether they are fighting over land, ancestral grounds and customs and tradition cannot erase the heart of the matter that they bear similar origins. Favoritism, disagreement, tribalism, superiority, fights and quarrels among others may appear more prominent and powerful, however as a surgeon the artist use thread to join circular shapes to bring back reality; the concern of every common person is sanity.

Wall of Power

Wall of Power is made up of plentiful leaves, consisting of forestry where a lion is a king of jungle, striking out, kicking whatever at any time, devouring. *The* influence one has in the society can adequately be a product of the position of power which one occupies and allows him or her to compel obedience against any form of resistance in the society as being a giant. Ironically, the subject tries to consciously,

carefully and creatively comment on the contemporary issues around Nigeria's state in relation to supremacy. There have been heaps of issues going on extremely erroneous, which prompted the artist to execute the artistic work titled "**wall of power**" (plate II) where the lion is in charge of the forest intimidating other animals. This scenario has eloquently and vividly shown the reality of the engine (spirit) driving the vehicle (behind power), how some publics in high authority exhibit and carry on whatever they want to do, kick whatever they want in the name of "you have to clear whatever that's standing on your way in order to reach your destination of success", never minding to waste and destroy lives, they are corrupt but who can confront the loin and end the lineage.



Plate II: *Wall of Power*, Gbaden Blaise Gundu, canvas,
Mixed media 386cm x 450cm 2010, artist's collection.

The artist meticulously developed **wall of power** as a forest region where the Lion remains the king of the animal kingdom. The presentation was conceived and inspired by the thousands of falling leaves, which litter the painting site. Huge mahogany trees, decades old, cover the site with several ancient ideas for art to take its advantage. The image of the lion was to be painted striding across the painting surface (canvasses) for the clarity of its agitation and controlling of the entire forest. One could envisage a lion

roaring in the evening after a meal. This violet action seemed to appropriate the power structure of Nigeria where unscrupulous few men and women amass wealth at the expense of the people. No joy and gladness, no love, no peace and rest, they rather feed on helpless victims leaving them hopeless with endless pains, taking away their rights forcefully, no one to rescue them, no recognition that they are human being and they have life to live too, what a tragedy?

Hesitatingly without trepidation after so many questions, the artist deliberately, in order to avoid graphical rendition, omitted the image of the lion for subsequence composition as the manipulation of the pictorial space continued; also both needed one another to continue living. “The lion hath roared, who will not fear” Amos 3:8. Even though there is an elephant in the bush that should not stop rats walking in the bush, artists should not be discourage but committed in preaching to the superior through their art works.

The second circle of *Wall of power* on plate III, exemplifies the effects of environmental interruption on it, the entanglement of the cloth partitions and the neatly wiped floor.



Plate IIIa: An entangled *Wall of Power*



Plate IIIb: Close-up of an entangled *Wall of Power*

Thus, the action of this wall depicts temporality of the real-life situations. Some ties are so dangerous that, it becomes difficult to withdraw one's self from them. The more positive and successful ones, will definitely terminate in fruitful relationships as seen in youthful and old age, life and death, day and night, happy and sad mood, bright and dull and many more, so why not plan and execute the right thing for all knowing that we are created by Him and we must resemble Him, He light the whole world with sun and moon, gives life to all, release fresh air, allow our body to function equally.....

Wall of politics

Politics is a game of power in leadership and responsibility. In view of this, this study seeks to analyse the role politics plays in the contemporary society, using the art work as the subject matter of the discussion. The painting style in which *Wall of Politics* (plate IV) was executed, portrays the Zaria Art School styles which features the playing of colours that are in harmony to one another even with fabric.

The artist in this work unhappily, stabs, slashes, punches holes and does it over and all over again with the impression that “who is free” according to the artist. This work is reddish in colour exemplify danger, hot and bloody formalistically as the element of art, as politic itself is viewed by some a “dirty game”.



Plate IV: **Wall of Politics**, Gbaden Blaise Gundu,
Mixed media 350cm x 381.5cm, 2011, artist's collection.

“*Wall of politics*” comprises five joined pieces of fabric with intentional holes created on them. From a socio-political context, obviously the artist seems to be directly commenting on the society and the way things are always being done, and the place of that individual in the whole of a thing, where is the human being placed in the whole of these things? *Wall of politics* is rendered in perforated fabric with an attempt of patching the strips. These holes represent knife stabs and bullet wounds, possibly originated from the affected personalities both the good and the bad ones during political campaigns as well as bloody governance of the Nigerian political culture in the name of power. Evidently, after causing the damage, the action to sympathize with the injured by using small amount of money to deceive people and cover up does not solve the problem as it stands out in the work using thread to stitch the holes. The question is, can the damage be properly fixed at all? Can the wound heal without a mark? Can the lost lives come back? The threads that are holding this walls shows that people work on the link they have with each other, these their connection they never lose them, whoso ever want to go into it must belong.

Nigeria Must Survive

Survivability is expected in all things be in humans, other living things and abstract things like beliefs or ideas. Readiness of continue existing no matter the conditions that might cause destructions is

paramount. The verb “must” is used to give order or advice from one who has power to keep and control. ‘Must survive’ is an indication or a pointer to the fact that, there are conditions that can make something not to survive. There is forgiveness because there are wrong doings. With differences in religion and ethnic groups, Nigeria seems to be an entity where favouritism, jealousy and corruption are bred in their numbers. There were a lot of accusation the when the artist produced the work about Nigerian disunity, years back during the civil war when Gen. Yakobu Gowon once said the unity of Nigeria cannot be sacrificed for anything, as Good luck Jonathan also proved when he insisted that, there should be no victor nor vanquish, the unity of Nigeria cannot be compromised, Nigeria must survive even though some people tried to make sure that Nigeria is divided. As an artist, Gbaden also support the motion that Nigeria should not be divided.



Plate V: ***Nigeria Must Survive***, Gbaden Blaise Gundu,
Mixed Media 18 cm x 20 cm each, 2007,
Dr. Steve Uvara’s office, Former Bursar Federal University of Lafia.

Nigeria Must Survive (plate V) is a mixed media painting by Gbaden. The painting has two sides of a coin. The first side is the map of Nigeria with its green white green colour at the centre of which lies a big hole. The second side is the reproduction of the same map, but this time using purple for the positive area and red for the negative area at the centre of which is the sign of an attempt to knit two torn parts, and at the uppermost part lays a small size flag of Nigeria in its original colours of green white green. The use of variant colours has, no doubt, given the work a sense of variety and unity. In this composition, the artist tries to represent the nature of the Nigerian socio-economic and political problems, which

manifested as ethnicity, regionalism, and bigotry. The hole at the centre of the first side is also a pointer to that. On the second side, the artist depicts the effort of concerned individuals to knit the two parts of a falling nation, that is Northern and Southern parts, to restore the past glory of the Nigerian State.

Seven Points Agenda, A Still Moment in Benue State and Nigeria is Pregnant are some of Orban's works that she uses to express dissatisfaction about the happenings in the country.

The painting titled "Seven Point-Agenda" ironically listed invisible items or projects that were never come into implementation by the then government, formalistically, gun which represent security, electricity power, fuel flowing, water supply, good shelter and colourful Nigeria is well spelt on the work, never the rest the birth of these agenda is undefined



Plate VII: Seven Points Agenda, Orban Iwanger Salome,
oil colour on Board, 60 X 35cm, 2010, Artist Collection.

A Still Moment in Benue State depict an elephant (metaphorically a monster) a snake, bandits and a quiet still environment that is been swept by killing the citizens thereby turning the whole communities into bloody deserts. The monster exist carrying and eating the wealth of the state while others stave and died of hunger because of lack of farming leaving farmers with a question of "if those who are willing are also being attacked then what will happen". Difficulties and boundaries hindering one from attaining ones dream height, deep though by the artist

came out with the a heap of snake that can swallow money and no one will question whereas potential citizens cannot access ordinary basic need of an average person.



Plate VI: *A Still Moment in Benue State*, Orban Iwanger Salome,
colour on paper, 30 X 20cm, 2025, Artist Collection

In essence, this work speaks about difficulties which brings struggle, hardship, poverty, insecurity and many more in Benue State.

Nigeria is Pregnant: pregnancy is crucial in all aspect of life, without it there will be no birth, be in knowledge, human, animals, ideas, thoughts and otherwise. Plate VIII, was conceived after so much meditation about president Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's 7- Point Agenda by the artist which focuses on power and energy, food security, wealth creation, transportation, land reforms, Security and education. Expectations from pregnancy varies due to individual circumstances and experiences, however every pregnancy is unique.



Plate VIII: Nigeria is Pregnant, Orban Iwanger Salome,
oil colour on Board, 60 X 35cm, Artist Collection.

In plate VIII the artist consciously and deliberately describe a beautiful anticipated nation to come with overflow basic amenities. Nigeria is Pregnant is a political heartfelt prayer, agitating for hope, better and well-being of the country. Let there be peace, justice, unity and all the promises during campaign come into existence in the next birth of Nigeria.

Conclusion:

In the course of study, the analyses of selected works by Gbaden and Orban show clearly that Nigerian painting serves as a powerful medium for critiquing governance, they speak on how fake promises are being promoted in the name of political culture handling it from generation to generation. Seven points Agenda, A still Moment in Benue State, wall of politics and wall of power shows the manifestation of it all. Both works of the artists portrays Nigerians in attempt to situation the country's stagnation,

instability, political crises, and insecurity to mention but few. Most of the formation is abstraction, where the context moves in the area of the challenges and limitation faced by Nigerian citizens.

This paper therefore concludes that the entire world is an imprint of voices from God, Genesis 1. Psalms 29. The voice of the Lord is upon the waters, breaks the cedars, divided the flames of fire, and shakes the wilderness.... The voice of artists comes from their products communicating directly with viewers. Therefore the artist's voice is mystic and cloth in wisdom which only interpretation can unravel. This mystical nature was what gave early man freedom to exist in the tight environment, painting, drawing and engraving on the wall. Artist voices are in their paintings too to help establish authority, create and manage the country. Nigerian painting should not be used as decorative purpose only but as a political commentary.

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