

## INTRODUCTION

### Exploration in Creativity

*Trends: Six Artists Single Platform* is the title of this third edition of exhibition of art works of some Nigerian artists put together by the National Gallery of Art, Nigeria for Dak'art Biennale. The first was in 2006 titled *A Glimpse into Nigerian Art (Heraldic Exhibition of the Project 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: A Story from Nigeria)* and the second in 2008 titled *Naija*. This year's edition examines the manifestation of icons associated with African histories as exemplified by slavery, immigration and industrial consumption through the works of six Nigerian artists working in diverse media, yet in concert as regards subject matter. This exhibition is an exploration of these subjects in diverse dimensions of abstraction, mainly through installations and photography.

Over the years, most of the exhibitions put together in this part of the world, not only with this theme and concepts, and not only by the National Gallery of Art have been mostly paintings, sculptures, ceramics, graphics, textiles and so on, with paintings usually dominating all presentations. We have heard many complaints on this lopsidedness, and the general feeling is that audience are not always stimulated with these forms of art, not only in Nigeria, but in many other parts of the world. The truth also is that artists have exhausted all areas, especially media of these forms of art; hence they have resorted to go into new areas using new media that will interest people. It is with this consideration that the National Gallery of Art has chosen at this time to present something different for this special edition of Dak'art Biennale, – Installation and Creative Photography which has not been seen often as these other forms of art mentioned above. It is expected that this, in essence will, be the beginning of a journey by the National Gallery of Art to look at these areas of visual art critically and provide necessary information not only to the general public, but for use by art teachers and art students. A good start into these areas of art will attract good appreciation of them.

The assignment to curate this special and first in the series of such exhibitions by the National Gallery of Art has been a worthy challenge accepted whole heartedly. We are glad for the opportunity of putting the package together because it is something unusual from this part of the world, and especially, from the National Gallery of Art. One of the major challenges of curating an exhibition of this nature is that, it involves mainly forms of art (Installation and Photography) that are not yet very popular or well appreciated in contemporary Nigerian art scene as modern, though, installation is not new to Africa as far as art is concerned. At this juncture, it may be useful to let some of our audience know what the term installation stands for.

### Installation Art

The Webster's Dictionary of the English Language International Edition defines installation as an apparatus set in position for use. The use can be of any kind, but the concern here is usual art. In this fold, Simon Wilson and Jessica Lack defined installation as the term used to describe mixed media construction or assemblage, usually designed for specific place and for a temporary period of time. Continued, they stated that installations are works that often occupy the entire room or gallery space that the spectator invariably has to work through in order to engage fully with the work of art. And that some installations are however designed simply to be walked around and contemplated upon or are so fragile that they can only be viewed from a doorway or one end of a room.<sup>1</sup>

Another near definition from Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia stated thus:

Installation art describes an artistic genre of site-specific, three-dimensional works designed to transform the perception of a space.

Generally, the term is applied to interior spaces, whereas exterior interventions are often called land art; however the boundaries between these terms overlap. Installation art can be either temporary or permanent. Installation art works have been constructed in exhibition spaces such as museums and galleries, as well as public and private spaces. The genre incorporates a very broad range of everyday and natural materials, which are often chosen for their evocative qualities, as well as new media such as video, sound, performance, immersive virtual reality and the internet. Many installations are site-specific in that they are designed to exist only in the space for which they were created.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, it is actually where modern installation art takes its bearing from, site specific, that is, installations are constructions assembled on sites and usually gigantic. It sometimes involves the use of many materials or objects to form a whole.

It was stated that installation as a nomenclature for a specific form of art came into being not too long ago. Simon Wilson and Jessica Lack stated that:

In 1961 in New York, class Oldenburg created an early environment, *The Store* from which his counter and plates with potato and ham comes. One of the outstanding installations using light is James Turrell Miscellaneous materials (mixed media) light and sound have remained fundamental to installation. <sup>3</sup>

Its first use as documented by the OED was in 1969. It came to prominence in the 1970's <sup>4</sup>. This form of art was traced to artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters's Merz art objects, and it is said to have been in existence since pre-historic times, but only made popular by the mid-twentieth century<sup>5</sup>. Before this time, terms such as "Environment", "Project art" and "Temporary art" have been used to describe this form of art. From his works produced from about 1957 onwards American artist, Allan Kapre is said to be one of the originators of environment art. The creation of installations became a major art and in modern art from that time increasingly from about 1990 and many artists have made them<sup>6</sup>. This in essence, means that installation art has always been there, may be not with the characteristics and form in which we have them today. There is transformation, especially in the use of media and content. Out-door abstract sculptures of some early masters are installations in nature, that is, they are designed to fit into specific locations.

It is suggested that "installations in the 1980s and 1990s were increasingly characterized by networks of operations involving the interaction among complex architectural settings, environmental sites and extensive use of everyday objects in ordinary contexts. With the advent of video in 1965, a concurrent strand of installation evolved through the use of new and ever-changing technologies, and what had been simple video installations expanded to include complex interactive, multimedia and virtual reality environments".(Themes, 199)

A number of institutions focusing on Installation art were created from the 1980s onwards, suggesting the need for Installation to be seen as a separate discipline. These included the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh and the Museum of Installation, London, among others.

What is common to nearly all installation art is a consideration of the experience in totality and the problems it may present, namely the constant conflict between disinterested criticism and sympathetic involvement.<sup>7</sup>

Giving the above considerations and, viewing African art of old in form and content, and in their rightful abodes confirms that this form of art (Installation) that is now being embraced as a new form of art today outside the continent of Africa has always been there, and is being generally developed too. Just like painting, sculpture and other forms of visual art that have tradition, installation also has its unique tradition in Africa. In most traditional African societies and environments,

particularly in the shrines, abound creative installations in one form or another. In the shrines where traditional art works form a major part, other paraphernalia which form part of the entire display are usually installations or wall-hangings. This is the real nature of installation today which the west is claiming originated from them. This obviously cannot be true!

It is obvious that the new form of installation in Africa has strong foundation in traditional African art, which forms the bedrock of modern art in the western world. This has equally given birth to the installation art which the west has classified as the major part of its post-modernism from which Africa is being wrongfully excluded. We should recall that it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that Pablo Picasso, Paul Cezanne and their group developed from African art forms what is today their modern art. Whereas western critics and scholars are holding onto the view that any art work that does not possess certain traits of abstraction is not modern and prefer to label such as ‘Contemporary’, but it should be noted that abstraction is one of the main characteristics of African art. This has been discussed in many art fora both within and outside the African continent and has been put in publication for people to read and take position on this vexed question of confused use of terms.

While, it is not surprising therefore, that installations are being generally embraced as post – modern art, the fact as stated above is that installation is not really new to Africa or indeed, to many other societies in the world. Krydz Ikwemesi stated in his write up here that installation has been a common feature of most societies, and that what is recent is its full appropriation as whole art. In addition it may be agreed, that some materials are new to Africa, as they have not been used here in this form of art until recently.

With the improvement of technology over the years, artists are more able to explore outside of the boundaries that were never able to be explored by artists in the past. The media used are more experimental and bold; they are also usually cross media and may involve sensors, which plays on the reaction to the audiences’ movement when looking at the installations. By using virtual reality as a medium, immersive virtual reality art is probably the most deeply interactive form of art. At the turn of a new century, there is a trend of interactive installations using video, film, sound and sculpture. **8**

The obvious is that, like modern European art, post-modern European art development has generated various issues that will come up in art fora for stimulating discussions that will enable general public know from when this form of art came into being and how it has developed. This however, is not the major issue in this package and will be addressed appropriately in another presentation.

Suffice it to say here, that installation art is developing in Nigeria as in other countries and is being widely embraced by many modern Nigerian artists in its ramification, for the possibilities it offers for experimentation and creativity. The activities of some of the artists who are working in this form of art have greatly attracted attention of National Gallery of Art, Nigeria, which has set out to promote them to international level. One of such efforts is this exhibition with the hope it will organise more of this through which installation art will be added to its rich collection as well as encourage private collections. Although, it is appreciated that, some installation art works cannot be collected due to their nature which includes materials used and size. Some are put together in such a way that, they can only be viewed once after which they cease to exist, except from photographs.

### **Photographic Art**

Photography remains a documentation of an object for what it was when the finger pressed the shutter button and captured it. In other words, the act of taking a snapshot of an object records a moment in an event or object, but never stalling growth or decay potentials of the object/event or physiological transformations. Hence, with photography “time is distant whereas space is present” as Ludeking has noted.

The word photography was used for the first time by Herschel, which he translated to mean 'light writing'. Derrida has extrapolated same idea with “photo-logos” (light word in a literal sense or word written with light). Photography as a word stresses the centrality of light acting on chemicals to produce images the way they are in nature in its processes. The implication then of the terminology is that it is subject to narration and reading. More so viewing photographs is accompanied by explanations and in texts they are usually given captions<sup>9</sup>.

Photography on the other hand does not have tradition in Africa, as the use of camera was entirely new to Africans. The technology did not originate from here and we cannot lay claim to it like the West. The images produced from the camera would have been a surprise to Africans. They were not part of the creative process and the product/s of the camera were not seen as original or creative. Equally, with particular reference to Nigeria, the photographers themselves were not recognized as creative artists until the emergence of an indigenous artist photographer J.A. Green in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the words of Tam Fiofori:

Luckily for Nigerian photographers their collective battles for recognition and respect as creative artists started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on the

international scene; with the works of Nigeria's first and confidently self-acclaimed "Artist Photographer" J.A. Green. He was a very talented and obviously well trained photographer who has to his credit the most poignant images of the British colonial military subjugation of Southern Nigeria and the Niger Delta. Based in Bonny (now in Rivers State), Green Photographed "Europeans, colonial structures, events, construction projects, local occupations, customs, landscapes; portraiture of elite individuals and family groups, and produced prints of these photographs with all of them bearing the stamp of J.A. Green Artist Photographer at the back! European visitors filled whole albums with Green's photographs and took them abroad as souvenirs of their travels. **10**

In Nigeria, no other name was heard aside that of Green in the area of photography until 1930s when some forms of cameras started coming in and people started to take interest in photography. Some of them trained outside the country and at home in schools and as apprentices, and started taking photographs not only of human beings, but of anything that interested them. Some of their works were highly appreciated, and this encouraged them to further develop themselves in this area. Tam Fiofori again stated that: **11**

As from the thirties photographers trained under the apprenticeship/understudy system had set up studios in most of Nigeria's major cities and towns. They put in motion the long tradition of personal and family portraits, documentation of social events, marriages, naming and funeral ceremonies; which over the years have taken pride of place on the walls of family homes and in volumes of photo albums, which are showcased to visitors at every opportunity. Thus, generations of Nigerians continue to patronize, appreciate and treasure the works of studio/portrait photographers.

The forties and early fifties saw the emergence of Nigerian press photographers whose works in newspapers (largely because of the frontline role these newspapers played in fighting for independence from British colonialisation) won them recognition. With the advent of Colonial Office Information Departments with virile photography sections and their subsequent transformation after independence into similar Federal and State government establishments; a new generation of Nigerian 'official' documentary photographers emerged and attained recognition and admiration. With the establishment of an advertising industry in Nigeria in the late fifties and sixties also came a new generation of advertising/commercial photographers. By this time had also come into the

profession many Nigerian professionals who had been trained in ‘tertiary’ photography institutions in Britain and the U.S.A.

Sunmi Smart-Cole is one of those that were trained from outside the country. He was actually trained in USA and became a good and popular photographer. He contributed positively towards the development of photography in Nigeria.

In his first one-man exhibition on return to Nigeria from the U.S.A. curated by Yinla Odunlami and mounted by the National Council for Arts and Culture at the National Theatre, Lagos, an incredibly inspiring and stimulating collection of his black and white photographs were displayed.

According to Yinka Odunlami:

Sunmi Smart-Cole the man who was destined to bring real honour and respect to creative photography in Nigeria in December, 1978 descended on our art/photography scene like a colossus. His creativity in photography was infectious, but in addition he let it be known, rather like Ben Enwonwu in fine art, that photography should henceforth combine creativity with intelligence and in fact be elitist.<sup>12</sup>

Odunlami who was also the curator of the exhibitions informs further that:

The works (black and white photographs) displayed showed vigour, majestic understanding of the interplay of light and darkness through a competent use and adjustment of the lenses of the camera. The works in fact became more instant art collections of the elites in society and of general public interest for their focus, like all great art works, on man, society and environment.<sup>13</sup>

Sunmi Smart-Cole himself of course became instant social success and his work stimulated a lot of new generation of creative photographers, some of who are now into art journalism where Smart-Cole himself had turned his creative interest to and, is now currently the Art Director of a major newspaper.

But on the whole, because of the depth of creativity, Smart-Cole brings into his photography, it would appear more appropriate here to call him a photo-artist whose breadth of interest in man and society has made him an icon in the field of creative photography.

Like fine art, photography has developed in many areas and has attracted high interest in Nigeria. This development saw the emergence of many creative photographers into Nigerian creative photography scene. Some of them have come together as is the case in other professions. Hence, we have Photographers Association of Nigerian (PAN) through which they could fight their cause to attain

high recognition as those in other professions. Fortunately, their activities are being recognized by institutions and other bodies in the country, which like the National Gallery of Art, Nigeria has embraced their work as an art form and has started to acquire their works into its collection, as earlier mentioned.

The decree establishing the National Gallery of Art, spelt out photography as one of the areas it covers, but due to operational reasons this area has not been fully explored. This is why, many creative photographers have complained of not receiving the needed attention and recognition as is given to artists and architects. But the good news is that, as stated above, things have changed in this direction. Apart from its collection of photographs, the National Gallery of Art is now including photography in its major exhibitions, and bringing photographers together to exhibit their products as well. And according to Tam Fiofiori, efforts have been made by private galleries and cultural institutions like Mydrim, Nimbus, Alliance Française and Goethe Institut to attract collectors by mounting photography exhibitions. Individual photographers have also done the same. In addition to these, Nigeria's biggest photography exhibitions by the Photographers Association of Nigeria (PAN) featuring over 30 and 40 photographers were held in 1995 and 1996. That Nigerian photographers have also exhibited with success in Britain, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Japan and USA within the last decade **14**. this is a positive development.

Nigerian creative photographers have through the association made themselves and their works popular. This has given confidence to other organizations and institutions to show and acquire their works into their art collections. It should, thus be noted that we are discussing an exhibition that involves installation and photography both of which are, in their unique creative way, presenting new trends of experimentation, exploration and developments as contribution to modern art.

### **Curatorial Consideration**

As mentioned above, the presentation of these forms of art, especially installation, has not been common in our modern art scene, even though there have been evidences of this in some of our other exhibitions. Photographic and installation works are only occasionally included in exhibitions organised by art galleries, collectors and institutions. Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Lagos and Ben Enwonwu Foundation for instance, have also been putting up exhibitions in this direction in the recent past. Obviously, apart from the activities of these two and probably a few others, this is the first time that emphasis is being given to these forms, especially from the National Gallery of Art, Nigeria with detailed information on the subjects. We should recall that the National Gallery of Art had packaged several photographic exhibitions that tell the story of Nigeria from a

different perspective, that is, from the political angle. They include; *Nigeria since Independence* (Pictorial exhibition 1960 – 1994) held in 1994, *Legacy of Leadership* (Pictorial exhibition for some of the great leaders of our time (1960 – 1995) held in 1995, *Zik, the Legend of Our Time* (held in 1996), *A Retrospect on General Abacha's Regime* (November 17<sup>th</sup> 1993 – September 30<sup>th</sup> 1997) held in 1997, *Nationalism and Development* held in 1999, and *Seeing Hope, Living Hope* 2007 (A pictorial exhibition on the man Olusegun Obasanjo and his years of stewardship) held in 2007.

But the obvious is that, the presentations of these are usually different from this one, as creative works on their own.

The acting Director-General (Abdulahi Muku) has, in appointing us to curate this exhibition also kindly consented to our selection of six artists (four artists and two photographers) which gives us the title of the exhibition *Trends: Six Artists, Single Platform*. Trend here seeks to identify or show the various aspects of development in modern Nigerian visual art till date. Arriving at this number of artists for the exhibition is based on circumstances beyond our control, part of which is the size of the hall that was secured for the exhibition. However, the number of artists does not discourage us from doing a full work as expected of professional curators. Thus, this exhibition is to serve as foundation for subsequent ones in this direction. But to begin work, we employed all the necessary ingredients required of a curator in the packaging of an exhibition.

Thus, having noted that these areas (Installation and Photography) have not been reasonably developed in our modern art scene, we requested for essays on them – that is, on installation, from Krydz Ikwuemesi, on photography from Lemi Ijeoma and a general overview of the theme of the exhibition provided by Chuka Nnabuife, the essence of which is to further make our audience to better appreciate these forms of art. As earlier noted, this exhibition is a strong foundation upon which the subsequent ones on installation and photography will be built.

The essay of Chuka Nnabuife throws more light on the thematic exploration of the focus chosen for the exhibition. It discusses trends and developments from different art schools in the country as well as some movements in modern Nigerian art scene. After this, he uses his works to highlight one aspect of the sub-theme of this exhibition, immigration.

Krydz Ikwuemesi's essay brought out the emergence of installation art and the various issues arising from it with regards to its originators and issues which need to be addressed. Issue of appropriation is central to him, while the essay of Lemi Ijeoma traced the history and development of photography generally from various perspectives. The essays are well focused and give useful insight.

It is worthy of note that, installation is not an aspect of art that artists specialize on in school as is the case with sculpture, painting, ceramics, graphics, textiles etc. That is, it is not yet instituted as a separate discipline. As a result,

artists selected to present works in this medium for the exhibition are trained in different areas of visual art. Jerry Buhari, for instance graduated as a painter from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1981, had his Master of Fine Art (MFA) in the same area in 1985, Osahenye Kainebe graduated as a painter from Auchu Polytechnic in 1986. Burns Effiom is a graduate of literature from the University of Calabar in 1986 after which he attended several visual art workshops through which he has built himself up as a visual artist. Ayo Aina graduated as a Painter from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1990 and obtained the Master of Fine Art (MFA) in the same area in 1996. All of them, as a result of trends/developments and experimentations have embraced installation art, and have used the same to make various statements as with other art forms on various issues in the society.

Jerry Buhari presented only one installation work for this exhibition titled *Dark History*. According to him, the work is a historical narrative that draws ideas from human slavery and projects its continuum in modern forms of slavery in the political and economic life of the African continent. He adds that the black slices of wood have become a recurring medium in his works in recent times. The work explores man's destructive tendencies. It references Africa's dark historical past and connects this to the post-colonial discovery of natural resources represented in oil wells. The scattered pieces of wood, he says approximate partitioned Africa of the past as a fragmented continent, the painted chains replace metal chains (representing brute force) used in dragging captured young Africans into slavery. The use of synthetic robes is deliberate multiple signification of evolution in the use of brute force in the past to more subtle and deceptive methods of enslavement of the modern world according to the artist. In his view, slavery has not stopped, but only evolved from one form of exploitation and oppression of a certain group of people by another. To him, the selfish exploitation through oppression of one by another is more of a decadent state of the human heart than a question of colour or race. The round painting hanging on the wall represents a mirror of slaves in a mystic voyage by the artist. One slave, he says stands up among the many in defiant supplication to the Almighty and the figure symbolises struggle for freedom. As resilient face up on which hope is planted.

In September, 2009, the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), Lagos put together an exhibition of installation works of Osahenye Kainebe titled *Trash-ing*. The exhibition attracted wide reactions/comments from the public. According to Bisi Silva<sup>15</sup>:

*Trash-ing* signals a new departure from his well-known large-scale neo-expressionist paintings towards the incorporation of more conceptual concerns through a format that increasingly borrows from an installation orientated process. Losing none of his gestural signature strokes, nor the luminosity of his colours or the edginess of his subject matter, *Trash-*

*ing* highlights some of the issues that have pervaded his work for over a decade. In the recent works, these existential, political, religious and everyday themes which habitually manifested with a degree of playfulness are presented less implicitly in favour of a suggestiveness which attests to the state of maturity he has attained in his career.

Osahenye moves seamlessly from the metaphysical to the physical, from the unreal to the real, foregrounding issues for which he is well-known and expanding on others such as globalisation, consumerism, man's inhumanity and the environment forming the enthrall(nodal) focus of this new body of work. In so doing, the exhibition's title succeeds in playing on the multiple connotations of the word to 'trash' to signify destruction, abuse, rejection and waste. It also serves as an explicit reminder on the one hand of man's disregard for one another and on the other, towards the environment.

One of Osahenye's works exhibited is titled *Casualty* which has been selected for this show. It is a recycling work made of a thousand beer cans. According to Bisi, the artist, on sighting the burnt cans near a garbage dump of a hotel in Auchi, "was instantly confronted with thoughts of war, cruelty, melancholy, pain, displacement, anguish and deformity and he started conceiving ways to install this large scale work to express the force and the power that he felt." Whether the totality of this and other works of the artist mark the beginning of the 'new' face of contemporary Nigerian painting remains to be seen<sup>16</sup>.

Burns Effiom is in search of all that art can offer. Thus, his works emanate from scanning the veins of the dynamism of the so called art. It is infinite, timeless and mysterious, full of questions, answered and unanswered. His installation works of three (3) pieces titled *Regeneration* explores time, space, movement and evolution of matter. For better, for worse, he says is a cliché of endless interpretations. The paddles, he says evolves from being a tool of trade to a staff of honour, traversing from the sea to the hinterland. Regeneration of castaway functional objects can result in a new life aesthetically, visually considered in artistic assemblage. Different from the above, he says are the women who carried paddles during their marches and dances as demonstrations of unity. Elaborate paddles have been attributed to the Urhobo, Itshekiri and Ijaw of the Niger Delta. In this regard, paddles, he says, are metaphors for direct involvement in social and religious life of people. They are symbols that describe a man's profession, rank and economic status, and they appear in situations removed from their utilitarian function, where they are transformed into objects associated with prestige and ritual.

Put appropriately in the context of this exhibition, the paddles signify movement (migration) of people from one point to another. The artist linked this to

the period of slavery, where slaves were moved from the hinterland to the coastal areas. At various locations, they were moved in local canoes to central places where they were shipped away to America and other parts of the world where they were needed. Along these routes were found some of these paddles by the artist. Thus, the paddles symbolise slavery which is the central concern message that makes this work fit into this exhibition.

Aside installation, Burns presented four paintings. In one of his paintings, *Passport Picture* is a satirical song rendered in Nsidibi gestures refraining the issues of faceless travellers amidst the dominant issues of travel passports. According to the artist, many people are still enslaved with or without passports in human consumption or inhuman conditions. The work is actually a satire to modern slavery of the girl child who is exported to different parts of the world, especially Europe for prostitution. In spite of all the noise about passport many of them are taken outside the country without passports. His other two paintings *Climate Song* and *The Song of Climate* dwells on environmental problems. According to him, many of Nigeria's environmental problems are those typical of developing states. Excessive cultivation, he says, has resulted in loss of soil fertility, and increased cutting of timber has made inroads into forest resources, defying reforestation efforts. He went into history and statistics recounting that in 1985, deforestation claimed 1,544 square miles of the nation's forest land. Between 1983 and 1993 alone, Nigeria lost 20% of its forest and woodland areas. But oil spills, burning of toxic wastes and urban air pollution are problems in more developed areas.

In the early 1990s, Nigeria was among the 50 nations with the world's highest levels of carbon dioxide emissions, which totalled 96.5 million metric tons, a per capital level of 0.84 metric tons. Water pollution is also a problem due to dearth of renewable water resources. Fifty-four percent is used for farming activity and 15% for industrial purposes. Safe drinking water is available to 78% of urban dwellers and 49% of the rural population. The principal agencies are the Environmental Planning and Protection Division of the Federal Ministry of Works and Housing, and the analogous division within the Federal Ministry of Industries. In 2001, 26 of Nigeria's mammal species were threatened. Nine types of birds and 16 plant species were also endangered. Endangered species include the drill, Presuu's red coleus, and the Ibadan malimbe. The Sahara Oryx has become extinct in the wild. All these, the artist says, are caused by environmental problems.

His other painting, *Weather Report III*, is also about climatic condition. According to him, the thatch houses in the work signify settlement in sub-Saharan Africa. The deep blue colour, he said signifies flood, while the brown background represents the land and the earth. To the top right of the work are plant like formations, standing as opposites. They are actually supposed to be on ground, but are suspended in the air signifying deformation of the land due to industrial

consumption and subsequent pollution creating a dis-balance of disharmony in weather and climatic conditions. The yellow to the top left side of the work reminds us of the sun swirling in disturbing purple, referring to the thinning out of the ozone layer.

Ayo Aina's art employs metaphor, humour and irony to address critical issues of social and political injustice as well as environmental degradation while industrialization, with its attendant problem of waste generation, he says, offers a rich menu of junk to satisfy his creative appetite. As an artist in this recycling age, he positioned himself as a recycling machine, powered by mixed media and multimedia. All his works presented for this exhibition employ humour and irony to comment about the various inhuman and anti-social experiences of a society whose failures has been aided by her own internal systems and pervasive, materialistic propensities. In his work *Oga, Piss Make We Piss* are three men connected together by a pipe with a tap on one end, and under the tap is a half full bucket of coloured water (piss). According to him, the two men behind are at the mercy of the man in front who controls the tap. That man needs emancipation from mental slavery. Ayo says that *The Price of Freedom* is executed with nails, blood (paint), chain, cloth and barbed wire. The work is about a spiky path (created with sharp nails) that leads to freedom. His third work titled *Child Trafficking* is executed with clothes. Clothe racks and wheels show how little children are being taken into slavery in the name of greener pastures. Although, it is believed that slavery has been abolished, it still comes in different shades. His fourth work titled *One Happy Family* is a remodelled bicycle with 4 seats (one cushioned and 3 spiky). The rider in front represents a ruler who sits comfortably under an umbrella and controls the bicycle while the 3 riders behind do all the work. This, according to the artist is another form of slavery.

All the artists in this fold explore in their works issues of deep social concern juggling with spatial perception expressed in metaphysical 'dream' paintings, or thorough ingenious constructions.

It should be recalled that we are also presenting works of two photographers in this show-James Iroha and Ebiware Okiy. Uche James Iroha graduated as a sculptor from the University of Port Harcourt in 1995 and Ebiware Okiy graduated as an Economist in 2004 from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile -Ife. The duo, as earlier highlighted, went into photography because of the love they have for the profession. As with the artists discussed above, they too have made some statements through their works.

Uche James Iroha through his works is telling us about leadership role in Africa which he says has been drawn by greed to feed like leech, on crude oil deposits. This work is inspired by evidence of corruption which makes living a big challenge for most Africans who now opt to leave their countries for Europe and

America in search of a better life. In this chain of reactions we have another global issue of illegal immigration and labour displacement on our hands.

The general idea of the series titled *Not for Export*, he says, is quite simple that deals with issue of priority in misplacement. According to him most governments in Africa concentrated their attention more on natural resources which in most cases resulted in series of conflicts e.g. Diamond in Congo and the Niger Delta issue in Nigeria are good example. This calls for re direction of attention back to most important resources, which is human resource that we have. He lined up people in a regimented manner in an attempt to mirror back to the society, especially Africans the fact that human resources are, the most important, yet they are the most neglected and abused. The works in this series in the exhibition are titled *Not for Export – Family*, *Not for Export – Soft Drink Hawkers*, *Not for Export – Butchers*, *Not for Export – Auto Mechanics*. The works make interesting series.

Ebiware Okiy, in his work talks about the various happenings in the society. That is, he documented them graphically not only for now, but for future generations to see.

In *Slave Boat at badagry*, the artist just documented the beautiful sky that he saw at a particular time over the background of one of the boats used to convey slaves. The question he asked is why must there be a beautiful sky over a place that he thinks represents one of the darkest times in the continent. Badagry Slave Port is one of the places where slaves were brought together from the hinterland before they were shipped away to America and some other parts of the world where they were used mostly as labourers in plantations. This crude act went on for a long time before slavery was abolished and many of them set free. The *Shouting Man* represents the shout of freedom not only from slaves, but people when they were freed from certain burden. But the theme is appropriate here. His work titled *Victory Ride* also talks about freedom. He used the work to document what happened to one of his friends in Benin City, who on hearing the announcement of the court ruling in 2008 in favour of someone in authority that he knows and decided to leave his duty post for a victory ride on a motorcycle in solidarity. The *Okada Riders* on the other hand talks on the contrary, about demonstration. One forms of commercial transportation in Nigeria today is popularly called *okada*. It is a common thing in our society today that the okada riders are known to present a united force during demonstrations over anything that happens, especially to their members as captured here in the work. *Trailer Man II* talks about the manners and ways Africans risk their lives to celebrate or demonstrate by hanging themselves on moving vehicles and motorcycles. Of course, many have lost their lives through these acts. According to the artist, the work is a visual representation showing that Africans, Nigerians in particular are very brave, as they do this often and are not mindful of the inherent dangers.

## Conclusion

For the breadth of talents in Nigeria, it reveals that this exhibition, the first in the series from the National Gallery of Art of Nigeria is timely and appropriate as it kick-starts a journey into areas of visual art that have not been given deserved attention. Working in a variety of ways, with proper command of the necessary technical skills for use in their chosen media, the artists presented, display remarkable understanding of the themes they explored in their works.

The National Gallery of Art remains the apex of all galleries of art in Nigeria charged to promote modern Nigerian artists and their art works through identification of necessary areas needed to do so both at home and abroad. Hence, her participation in many art fora cannot be over emphasised.

This appears to be a very good debut to present to an international audience (at Dak'art Biennale) curators' samplings of current exploration and developments in installation art and creative photography in Nigeria. We expect the artists presented to be widely known in these fields in the next few years.

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