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NIGERIAN WOMEN ARTISTS' VISIBILITY IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES: A TRIUMPH AGAINST EXCLUSIONS FROM ART GROUPS AND COLLECTIVES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Nigerian artists began forming art groups and schools from the 1950s and 1960s. These art groups advanced the reclaiming of Nigeria's artistic cultural heritages. However, even in the post-colonial and post-Civil War 1970s and 1980s many art groups and art institutions had few or no female members that participated in their activities. This essay reviews notable art groups in Nigeria from the earliest to the more recent. It also identifies the prominent women artists that had contributed to modern Nigerian art history. The essay also looks at the changes in the 1990s' and identifies contemporary art and its liberal and individualistic approaches as what caused decline in art groups in the twenty-first century. It will identify the women making impact in Nigeria's art scenario in the twenty-first century. The essay argues therefore that the liberalizing nature of twenty-first century contemporary art practices in Nigeria may have endeared more visibility to Nigerian women artists.

KEYWORDS: Nigerian women artists, art groups, art schools, modern Nigerian art, contemporary art, post-colonial art, twentieth century, twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

Art groups and associations were critical in forging the narrative of art history in Nigeria. However, one common thread among these groups was that they had been predominantly spaces for excluding women artists. In reviewing the history of modern art in Nigeria, the essay tries to locate some of the female artists of the colonial and earlier post-colonial era. This essay therefore reviews notable art groups in Nigeria from the earliest to the more recent. It also questions why women artists were excluded at the early stages of cultural solidarity through art groups.

The essay also looks at the vicissitudes in the 1990s' and the more recent 2000s' contemporary art practices in Nigeria. The paper will therefore try to identify the vibrant women artists of the pre-independence and the three subsequent decades of post-independence modern Nigerian art. This was when art groups were popular in Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper will also identify the women artists who are making impact in Nigeria in the twenty-first century. The paper also suggests why many women artists of the early and mid twentieth century may have been either passive members or entirely excluded from the activities of the art groups and schools in Nigeria.

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ART GROUPS AND SCHOOLS IN THE COLONIAL ERA: 1922 -1955

Nigerian artists began forming art groups and schools in the 1950s and 1960s. Before then, Aina Onabolu (1882-1963) had mastered representational style and perspective through his personal efforts and also through further studies in London and Paris in the 1920s (Vogel, 1991:179). As the foremost western-trained artist and art tutor he engendered a new modernity that redefined Nigeria's artistic productions at the turn of the century. Onabolu introduced Western academic art in Nigeria's secondary schools' curriculum in 1922. Onabolu was influenced by Euro-American ideas that were becoming internalized by African artists of the early twentieth century. These crops of African artists manifested their progress by believing that the "old Africa had to be swept away to make way for the new" (Vogel, 1991). However, as Chika Okeke-Agulu notes, Onabolu's affirmation of "academic realism did not quite accommodate the complexities and paradoxes of the colonial experience" (2013:58). Colonialism had caused, in some cases, abrupt break with Africa's artistic traditions and inferiorized them through flawed ethnographic and anthropological methodologies. I argue also that by introducing western art and not indigenous art into academic institutions, Onabolu's may have brought inconspicuousness to Nigerian women's art practices such as textile, mural/body painting among others. These were aspects of Nigeria's indigenous arts that are not taught in Nigeria's formal academic institutions, and which Euro-American historians had in the past erroneously termed 'lesser' art.

By 1928, Kenneth Murray a British educational administrator of the colonial government joined Onabolu as an art teacher in Nigerian schools. He was also the acquisition officer for the country's diverse cultural heritage and had interest in sustaining and preserving cultural artefacts. For that reason, he encouraged budding art students to seek inspirations from the sufficient artistic materials in the colony's indigenous traditions. Murray's students included C. C. Ibeto, Uthman M. Ibrahim, D. L. K. Nanchy, A. P Umana, J. O. Ugorji and Ben Enweonwu. Murray's prominent students were men suggesting that few women were studying art in secondary schools. This is in spite of the fact that women were at the helm of many cultural institutions of diverse ethnicities in Nigeria. We may assume that at that time more women were invested in indigenous art institutions where they practiced and produced pottery, textiles among others. Nonetheless, few names stood out in the quest for western art practice.

Although she was not among Kenneth Murray's students, Afiong Ekong (1930-2009) is often regarded as a contemporary of Ben Enweonwu. Both had furthered their studies in art in England in the early 1950s. Ekong's had been actively involved in promoting modern art and art institutions in Nigeria in the colonial and postcolonial setting. She was the foremost academically trained female artist from Nigeria to have held a solo art exhibition. She was also part of the selection committee that organized Nigeria's independence art exhibition. (Okeke-Agulu, 2015:141). Ekong used the ideals of Western realism to explore subject matters and themes that basically reinforced the primordial African scenario. Her works therefore were also in tandem with the Murray School's essentialist notion of African art. "Murray school" refers to the group of students who had been trained by Kenneth Murray.

Some art collectives however did not originate from formal institutions. The Oye-Ekiti workshop was initiated following the papal order of the 1930s that allowed catholic church missionaries to include aspects of African culture, thought to be harmless, as part of their Christianization experience. By 1947, two missionary priests, Kevin Carroll and Sean O Mahoney encouraged local carvers in Oye Ekiti to use traditional Yoruba art styles to create Christian themed sculptures. Some of the carvers' works eventually decorated catholic churches in many parts of Western Nigeria. The sculptures were criticized on one hand for what some Yoruba Catholics saw as 'pagan' shrines of their ancestors. However, the workshop provided an alternative motive power to reinvigorate Yoruba sculpture tradition. It also counters Onabolu's pioneering approach to art tutelage in Nigerian schools which emphasized Western realism as opposed to conceptual indigenous arts. Notable among these carvers were Lamidi Fakeye, George Bandele, Areogun, Johnson Esan, Otooro.

As significant as the workshop may have been the age-long guilds of carvers and bronze casters were men. Thus, women were absent in the Oye Ekiti workshop experiment. Women practiced pottery making, weaving, embroidery and other textile practices, and indigenous painting techniques. Therefore, it may be argued that the initiators of Oye-Ekiti workshop could have included women artists in their effort at repurposing indigenous arts. For instance, the interior of Christian churches could adapt the

indigenous Yoruba *adire* textile art. Notable women artists that worked in indigenous art styles included Mgbadunnwa Okanumee, a renowned *uli* painter from Nnobi, Eziafo Okaro an *uli* painter and Felicia Adepelu of Igbara Odo, Nwazupuite of Ishiagu, Sabina Jenti from Yola and Ladi Kwali from Abuja (Ikpakronyi, 2004, p.9) However many artists that later emerged from art institutions in Nigeria have deviated significantly from normalized gendered art. A peculiar case is that of Princess Elizabeth Olowu, the daughter of the Benin Oba Akenzua II. Born in 1945, her father, who clearly saw the evolving dynamism of colonized cultures, allowed her to learn from the usually secretive palace bronze casters when he saw her enthusiastic interest in modeling (LaDuke, 1991:23). This enabled her "cast aside centuries of taboos to become a bronze caster" (LaDuke, 1991). Olowu later studied sculpture at University of Benin.

ART GROUPS, POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND INDEPENDENCE: 1955-1966

The political consciousness of the 1950s and 1960s emancipated Nigeria, as with other countries in Africa from colonialism. Chika Okeke-Agulu (2013:58) connects the decades to when the Western world was recovering from the horrors of World-War II. Many African nations were besotted to the philosophical considerations of Léopold Senghor's Negritude. These heightened expressions of nationalist and Pan-African sentiments influenced the trajectory of post-colonial modern Nigerian art (Nzewi, 2013:30). With the founding of tertiary institutions from the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, more formally trained artists emerged in Nigeria.

Although Nigerian College of Arts Science and Technology (NCAST) was founded in 1953, in Ibadan, part of the institution was later relocated to Zaria in 1955 and to Yaba Technical Institute (now Yaba College of Technology). The history of Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST) however, cannot be told without highlighting the contributions of Clara Etso Ugbodaga-Ngu, a pioneer of modern Nigerian art. Ugbodaga-Ngu was the first Nigerian lecturer to be appointed in 1955 in the Fine Arts department where she taught, among others, the members of Zaria Art Society (Adekemi, 2019). Ugbodaga-Ngu was born in 1921. She had already taught in missionary schools from 1945 to 1950 before pursuing further studies in art in London (Adekemi, 2019). It is interesting that male students in NCAST who Ngbodaga-Ngu taught constituted the focus of most post-colonial researches on modern Nigerian art. They are more in many art history documentations than Ugbodaga-Ngu.

Following the ideologies that informed Negritude, ZAS theorized 'Natural Synthesis.' The members of ZAS used Western art materials but conceptualized their art based on Nigeria's diverse indigenous aesthetics. Josephine Ifueko Osayimwese Omigie was often been identified as a female member of ZAS collective (Omoighe, 2004:179). In her recent research "Invisible Woman: Reclaiming Josephine Ifueko Osayimwese Omigie in the History of the Zaria Art Society and Postcolonial Modernism in Nigeria," Itohan Osayimwese (2019) questions why scholarship and artistic records were silent and dismissive about Omigie's contributions to art development in Nigeria. However ongoing debates continue to suggest that Omigie was not part of ZAS.

There were other female artists who were not members of ZAS, but had studied art in Zaria and other tertiary institutions in the 1960s. Notable among them were Colette Omogbai, Agboola Oshinowo, Chinwe Abara, Wunmi Buusuyi, Betty Bassey, and Mario Pate. (Akatakpo and Ubani, 2004:183-190). Of particular interest is Colette Omogbai who graduated from Zaria in 1964, specializing in painting. She later had further studies in London and then obtained a Ph.D in Art Education from New York University. Like the ZAS members, Omogbai art also followed the hybrid concept of natural synthesis which drew from both the primal and the more recent even though she was not a member of the art collective. Omagbai's art as Okeke-Agulu (2015:253) argues, added a fresh and unquestionably feminist twist to the narrative of modern Nigerian art. Omogbai's decision to delve into abstraction and the subconscious, and evade mimetic subjects in her works, brought criticism from those who assumed that a female artist must engender feminist discourses in her art. (2015:254). Omogbai also dismissed these criticisms in an essay where she lamented that 'man' prefers art "that can be expressed in clear and distinct ideas," instead of art that confronts the intense version of existence. (Okeke-Agulu, 2015: 256; Omogbai, 1965). Interestingly, recent efforts by some researchers to contact Omogbai were unsuccessful. Omogbai's recent religious fanaticism has changed her perception of her early 1960s works. (Kalichini, 2019). In a text message, she said thus, "since I became a born-again Christian, I stopped practicing traditional art." (2019, ibid). Omogbai may have implied that

she no longer wanted to be identified with her works which were deeply rooted in African cosmologies and beliefs. It is vital to recall that Omogbai's early 1960s works convey surrealistic tendencies due to its inclination towards the spiritual subconscious and the abstract. Her works arguably may also find semblance with Oshogbo school in its reverence for folkloric and dreamlike absurdities. As Okeke- Agulu (2015:256) noted, Ulli Beier, the initiator of Oshogbo school, was also at the helm of events at Mbari Club Ibadan where Omogbai's paintings made initial entrance into Modern Nigeria's art scene.

In 1962, Beier and Susan Wenger with the help of Duro Ladipo established Mbari Mbayo Centre in Oshogbo. Mbari club developed from the Igbo concept and processes of creating mud sculptures and architectural edifices dedicated to the earth goddess Ala, which were called *Mbari.* On the other hand, Mbari Mbayo centre in Oshogbo derived its name from the Yoruba statement *mbari mbayo*, which means, "if I see, I will be happy". The school produced artists with no formal European-type education. The artists' works were usually based on folklores and myths associated with traditional Yoruba culture and religion. Notable among them are Taiwo Olaniyi (Twin Seven Seven,) Jacob Afolabi, Rufus Ogundele and Muraina Oyelami, Yinka Adeyemi, Ademola Onidokuta, Adebisi Fabunmi, Tijani Mayakiri, Samuel Ojo, Yemi Bisiri, Jinadu Oladepo, Jimoh Buraimoh, Senabu Oloyede and Kikelomo Oladepo.

Senabu Oloyede, also known as Zaenab Oloyede Adeyemi, and Kikelomo Oladepo are two female members of the Oshogbo workshop known for their mastery of traditional Yoruba indigo batik dye technique popularly called *adire*. They incorporate Yoruba folklore and everyday social lives in their textile works. Their presence in the club reinforced the gendered and cultural association of women with textiles in most places in Africa. They have also participated in numerous national and international art exhibitions. The communal nature of Oshogbo workshop allowed both male and female adherents to explore the creative energies of Yoruba mythology in their respective areas of expertise.

Oshogbo workshop influenced another female artist, Nike Okundaye in the late 1960s and 1970s. While serving as a member of a theatre group in Oshogbo, Okundaye met and later married her first husband Taiwo Olaniyi (Twin Seven Seven), a notable artist of the then Mbari Mbayo Centre in Oshogbo. Nike's adeptness in traditional dyeing techniques came from what she had learnt from her grandmother. She also improved her drawing skills through Olaniyi's tutelage. Her themes reflect Yoruba history and mythology, her dreams and everyday activities. Invariably, Okundaye's themes echo those of the predominantly male Oshogbo artists. Yet most twentieth century art historians had given agency to male participants of the Oshogho workshop experience. Okundaye's visibility in global aesthetics is through her dexterity. She has sustained and invigorated indigenous Yoruba techniques of weaving and dyeing that were becoming outmoded in Nigeria (LaDuke, 1991:23).

ART GROUPS IN THE POST - COLONIAL AND POST- CIVIL WAR ERA: 1970-1996

By 1970, more art training institutions emerged. It was after the Civil War and academic activities had resumed at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. An arts department began at the University of Ife in 1975, and another at the University of Benin in 1976. While Nsukka art school derived ideological inspirations from indigenous *uli* body and wall paintings, on the other hand, artists who studied Fine and Applied Arts in Obafemi Awolowo University conceptualized *ona* and modelled their stylistic tendencies to Yoruba indigenous art and cultural heritages.

Uche Okeke, a member of the 1960s' Zaria Art Society had inspired his students with the concept of "natural synthesis." at the Nsukka school of arts. Although the institutions trained artists across gender, Nkiru Nzegwu (2000) in her essay, critiqued how female art graduates are mostly excluded from participating in iinternational group art shows even though the school's ideologies were inspired by women's indigenous aesthetics. Nzekwu calls this anomaly 'gender transmogrification' (2000).

It will be vital to highlight some of the pioneer and popular female artists of Nsukka School of art. Chinwe Uwatse is a notable female artist of the school. She uses mostly watercolour and oil paint media to express images alluding to the feminine form. Like many other artists, her art teachers at University of Nigeria Nsukka inspired her interest with exploring *uli* motifs. It is interesting that her teachers were all males but sensitized her of an indigenous female art which had inspired many modern Nigerian artists by the late 20th century. Uwatse's teachers included Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu and Emeka Amaefuna, among

others. Uwatse later worked as a visual arts officer from 1982-1994 at the National Council for Arts and Culture. Thereafter began doubling as a general manager at a company while also sustaining her studio art profession.

Another artist, Ndidi Dike majored in painting in her undergraduate programme at Nsukka. However, she has consistently explored varied artistic genres ranging from installation, sculpture, and mixed media painting in the past three decades. Dike's earlier works also reflects *uli* ideology, but her more recent art transcend the *Uli* rhetoric to explore conceptual and thematic compositions on history and cultural politics, and related global contemporary art practices.

Marcia Kure, in an almost minimalist approach, uses brush and ink to comment on the deplorable social conditions and disturbing happenings in Nigeria. Some of her works also reference feminine concerns. Her recent artistic explorations are deeply conceptual as she combines cut outs, fabrics, watercolour using collage methods to create images that look a bit like humans. Kure's contemporary art interrogates the ambiguities in the fluid concept of cultural identity within a hybrid global community. In the installation titled *The Three Graces* (2013), Kure celebrates notable women in African history. Kaego Uche-Okeke doubles as a painter and textile artist. She also worked and retired as a curator at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. At the moment, she is the curator of Asele Institute, Nimo (Oyelola, 2004:143). Some of the other female artists who studied at Nsukka would be mentioned or discussed as individuals in the ensuing study of contemporary art in Nigeria.

Notable female artists and art historians of Ife School are Aderonke Adesanya, Nkiru Uwaechie-Nzegwu, Sherinat Fafunwa-Ndibe. Aderonke Adesanya had taught African Art History at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan for many years before relocating to the United States of America. Presently, she is a professor of art history at the James Madison University. Adesanya has done many researches on Yoruba art. Nkiru Uwaechie-Nzegwu has had a most fulfilling career in African studies. Her areas of interest include African contemporary art, African philosophy and Gender studies. These women among others, are incidental in bringing visibility to the ideologies of these art institutions through their numerous exhibitions and art history researches.

Of the sixty-three artists that participated in the Nigerian visual arts exhibition for FESTAC, only seven were women (Oshionowo, 2004:145). FESTAC was the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture that was held in Lagos in 1977. In spite of allegations that it was deeply fraught with corruption, gross waste and embezzlement, the festival also reinforced nationalist and pan African ideas following Senghor's Negritude (Nzewi, 2013:16). The event was staged at a time when Nigeria's economy was booming from the proceeds of its crude oil. Moreover, the Yakubu Gowon's military government had wanted to affirm Nigeria's position as the 'giant of Africa' that had fully recovered from the aftershocks of the late 1960s civil war. As Ugochukwu Nzewi (2013:16) points out, these key social and political happenings provoked a social activist approach to artistic productions as typified in the works of Obiora Udechukwu, among others. Women who had distinguished themselves in the sphere of traditional pottery, textiles and indigenous mural paintings would have participated in the Nigerian visual arts exhibition for FESTAC.

Subsequent groups that emerged from the mid-1980s were not strictly guided by mutual aesthetic tenets. They were largely associations that offered members platforms for exhibiting their art works. By this time, many Nigerian artists had developed a more personalized approach to their art outside of the de-colonization rhetoric. Also, more Nigerian women artists explored other forms of artistic production such as painting and sculpture. Nonetheless, many women artists were not participating actively in exhibitions at the national and global frontiers. With art groups like AKA circle of exhibiting artist that emerged in 1986, one may have assumed that its membership would be all-inclusive. Yet, AKA still tolled the prevailing trajectory of previous associations. AKA included mostly academically trained artists from Nigeria, and an artist of Ghanaian origin, that were working in Eastern Nigeria (Aniakor, 1986). Most of its members were affiliated to the Nsukka School of art.

One queries the rationale behind making the group (AKA) an all-male collective while excluding renowned female artists that had studied at the Nsukka School and who had attained commendable level of professionalization in their artistic practice. For instance, the members of AKA held their inaugural show in 1986 in the same year Ndidi Dike held her first solo exhibition titled *Mixed Media Expose*. Dike was at par with most

members of the AKA group in the nature of works she creates. But she (Dike) and the likes of Chinwe Uwatse who had studied at Nsukka were not members of AKA circle of Exhibiting artists. Other female artists that emerged from various institutions in the 1980s included Omolara Ige (Yaba College of Technology), Sokari Douglas-Camp (London), Anthonia Okongu (ABU, Zaria), Flora Ilonzo(IMT, Enugu) and Veronica Otigbo. Some of these female artists have attained enviable feats at global art shows without belonging to art cooperatives.

By the 1990s, Africans had become more receptive of fresh technological innovations of communication. In the visual arts, these innovations and the processes of globalization made connectivity and mobility to the Western world easier. As Nzewi rightly observes, it meant gaining inspirations from various "international artistic approaches, media, and art forms, including conceptual art, installation, new media technology, and performance" (2013:13). Also, the neoliberal multiculturalism of the globalized art world from the late 1990s underscored emphasise on individuality as opposed to shared aesthetic notions in interrogating postcolonial experiences in Africa (2013:13). Nzewi argues that this is the clear manifestation of a shift in artistic production in Africa in the 1990s. (Ibid). This shift is the vast array of artistic practices that informs the repertoires of contemporary art in Nigeria, as elsewhere in other African countries.

DECLINE OF ART COLLECTIVES AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ART IN NIGERIA: 1996-2000s

By 1996, AKA circle of exhibiting artists began decreasing its regular annual exhibitions after a decade. One common thread among the art groups and schools of art reviewed so far is the few female artists' presence. However, the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) bridges this gap by involving artists of both gender in its membership and annual exhibitions. The society (SNA) was established in 1964 and "it began as a national body that formulates policies and sees to it that ethics of the art profession is observed in Nigeria" (Okeke, 1982, p.35). While it is beyond this essay to determine how SNA upholds the ethics of art professionalization, the group still exists and its numerous exhibitions and workshops at their various state chapters enables its members participate in art shows. SNA has no aesthetic dogma guiding its members like the previously mentioned art groups. As such its non-discriminatory policies encouraged many women artists to participate. The SNA has also organised numerous art exhibitions that encouraged and prioritized women artists in Nigeria. In fact, a national female art association materialized shortly after the exhibitions, and the resulting book publication, it (SNA) had organized for Nigerian women artists in 2001 and 2002 (Dike and Oyelola, 2004)

The Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN) started in November 2001. FEAAN emerged shortly after the National Gallery of Art (NGA) in collaboration with the National Council of Women's Societies, had organized an exhibition exclusively for women artists in Nigeria on October 1, 2001 at the 41st independence anniversary of Nigeria. (Ikpakronyi, 2004, criticize p.12). The association has sponsored many art exhibitions which brought creative freedom, greater agency and visibility to many Nigerian women artists. Unlike in the Western world, Nigerian artists developed more interest in contemporary art possibly from the late 1990s. By 1999, Nigeria had instituted a democratic government. Before then military despots had heavily suppressed political and social activism. Many Nigerian activists, intellectuals and artists, who criticized the despots suffered brutal assaults. Women, including women artists, had to put up with much antagonism not only in a patriarchal culture, but also in an era of military dictatorship. Thus, democracy in the new millennium, may have initiated a euphoria of freedom in Nigeria. Many visual artists began engendering social and activist concerns in their art. It may be argued therefore that Nigeria's democracy at the turn of twenty-first century may have provided an auspicious moment for Nigerian women artists whose creative ideas aligned with the ample liberty in contemporary art. These developments heralded the founding of the Female Artists Association of Nigeria in 2001.

In the past two decades of the 2000s, many female artists have deployed contemporary art to interrogate issues that highlight women's art practices, patriarchal hegemony, excesses of the emerging democracy in Nigeria, among others. These emerging concerns and coupled with globalized contemporary art practices of conceptual art such as installation and new media technology like conceptual photography, video art, performance art, among others, provide ample approaches to creating thought-provoking art. Notable Nigerian women artists of the twenty-first century who reside in Nigeria or the Diaspora are Peju Alatise, ruby onyinyechi

amanze, Olawunmi Banjo, Nnenna Okore, Lucy Azubuike, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Fatimah Tuggar, Unoma Giese, Zemaye Okediji, Aisha Augie-Kuta, Chineze Araka, Priscilla Nzimiro, Taiye Idahor, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Amarachi Okafor, Abigail Nnaji, Ndidi Emefiele, Patience Torlowei, Mercellina Oseghale Akpojotor, Ngozi Omeje, Addis Okoli, Anthonia Nneji, Ayobola Kekere-Ekun among others. Note that this paper did not mention all contemporary Nigerian women artists and most of them do not belong to any art associations.

Fatimah Tuggar is a Nigerian artist working in the Diaspora. She combines objects, images and sounds from diverse cultures, geographies and histories to question the diverse methods that media and technology impinge local and global identities. Her mode of artistic inquiry are mostly assemblages, collages and montage. Peju Alatise is a multimedia artist who uses diverse materials to make sculptural pieces that question social-cultural issues. She also explores literature, symbolism and traditional Yoruba folklore. Alatise's themes centers mostly on gender disparity and women's rights. One of her major achievements was the 2016 Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship which enabled her represent Nigeria at the Venice Biennale in 2017 (Udobang, 2018).

Mercellina Oseghale Akpojotor assembles discarded pieces of ankara fabrics, and pastes on canvas, into colourful images of Nigerian women. (Wilson, 2018) Toyin Ojih Odutola is a Nigerian American known for her multimedia drawings. Odutola employs her drawings to confront the entanglements of her black identity. Ngozi Omeje is a ceramist whose work repeatedly progresses from the bounds of the utilitarian into the intriguing sphere of ceramic installation. She uses grainy clay assemblages attached to strings and suspended from the top of the gallery space, to configure unique ceramic forms. Ngozi teaches art in the department of fine and applied arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Njideka Akunyili Crosby creates vibrantly patterned photo-collage works from images of Nigeria's pop culture and politics. While the artist is influenced by childhood experiences in Nigeria, Akunyili's academic brilliance gained her numerous art fellowships and emergence as an exceptional artist in the Western-controlled global art arena. Olawunmi Banjo delves into the genres of hyper-realism and surrealism in her drawings, and uncovers the physical and veiled realities which confronts us individually and collectively (Alakam, 2014). ruby onyinyechi amanze's Diaspora experiences foc us on cultural hybridity. Her work acknowledges questions of displacement, anxiety and identity and nostalgic reminiscences of places in Nigeria, London and United States. (Mclean, 2019). Her graphite, ink and colour drawings are shaped by textile design, photography, print-making and architecture. Patience Torlowei uses high fashion to highlight the consequences of environmental degradation in Africa and irradiate the beauty of nature. Her hand-painted dress "Esther" is acclaimed for its scenic portrayal of the painful havoc caused by environmental degradation. (Givhan, 2019).

Nnenna Okore uses found objects like jute, paper, strings, sticks and unfired clay to create massive installations. Okore's media are mostly natural or degradable materials from the environment found in a state of disuse. Okore raises questions of fashion consumerism in Nigeria, and the fragility of her media heightens the transient nature of human existence. Lucy Azubuike explores conceptual photography, performance art, collage, and painting through which she makes metaphorical references to issues of female gender biases and environmental degradation in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Several art historians have given reasons why women artists in Nigeria, as elsewhere, are marginalized. Susan Vogel cited unsupportiveness from government as part of the reasons why many women artists from Nigeria have not excelled in professional studio practice. (Vogel, 1991:190). Moreover, quite a number of female artists who reside outside Nigeria appear to excel in their artistic endeavor. Perhaps it makes one wonder if the absence of art residencies and fellowships in Nigeria are critical to the inclusion or exclusion of both male and female artists. Although women's inability to sustain art professionalization beyond the graduate years may in some cases be linked to patriarchal hegemony it may be crucial to see if perhaps there are other points to this often not acknowledged.

The female artists of the twenty-first century explore contemporary art practices of conceptual art, new media technology, performance, among others. Their creative outputs are ingenuous and exceptional and can compete favourably with those of their male counterparts. I therefore argue that the individualized nature of twenty-first century contemporary art practices brought visibility to these female Nigerian artists. Through their artistic exploits, they may have proven that

societal barriers are normalized social constructs and the biological differences of humans do not determine the nature of art they choose to practice. This paper therefore considers the liberalizing atmosphere of twenty-first century contemporary art practices as possibly influencing the growing number of emerging Nigerian female artists in the local and global frontiers. The essay therefore connects Nigerian women artists' recent interests in contemporary art practices to the individualized and liberalized nature of contemporary art that enables artists create and devoid of the constraining ideologies of art groups, art schools and associations.

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