

COMMENTARY ON SELECTED PAINTINGS OF AGAKU SAGHEVWUA AMOS

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Abstract

Documenting artists while they are alive has curtailed the distortion of biographies and artistic achievements. Over the years, it has been observed that many writers struggle to give vivid explanations about some artists who produced artworks, but were not known while alive. This narrative is gradually changing whereby exhibition catalogues today carry the artist's biography and a few explanations of the exhibits. This paper is a product of one of such exhibitions whereby some of the pieces of information were obtained from the exercise. Agaku Saghevwua Amos is a painter who has chosen to capture socio-cultural issues in his works. Examples of renowned artists worldwide are presented to give a background to painting activities. The works are purposively chosen to meet the intention of the paper using simple random sampling. The qualitative method is used to analyse the works by making commentary on issues related to the subjects.

Keywords: Commentary, Painting, Artists, Artworks.

Introduction

Agaku Saghevwua Amos is an indigene of Benue state, Nigeria, who obtained his first degree from the University of Maiduguri. He later went to Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, where he obtained his Master's Degree and a PhD in Painting respectively. Agaku is currently lecturing at the Department of Fine Arts, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria. He is

a consistent studio artist who equally finds pleasure in reading and writing poetic notes on artworks. He has participated in exhibitions, written many articles, and attended seminars and workshops at various levels. His artworks are usually colourful and smooth in texture. Some of his works are found in prominent buildings like the famous Senate Building in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, among others

Samuila (2023) testified that during Agaku's PhD programme, I watched the progress of his exploration as he worked in the studio tirelessly. He abandoned every comfort to face his studio practice. Sometime last year when he approached me to write on his works, I did not hesitate because of the personal experience I have had with his studio practice. Now that his interest has been shifted to exploring cultural and peace issues, particularly that of the plateau people, I can easily link this to his love for Jos which he normally goes back to for his holidays. In this paper, a peep into some examples of works done by renowned artists across the globe is presented.

Artists as Agents of Social Change

When it comes to art and social change, there are no limits Art can be used as a form of protest to raise awareness about important issues, and even to call for change and societal justice. For centuries now artists have been using their creativity to shed light on the world's problems and fight for justice. Today more than ever, we need art that speaks truth to power (artsartistsartwork.com, 2022).



Fig I: Pablo Picasso. Oil on Canvas, 349.3cm x 776.5cm, 2019.
Source: artsartistsartwork.com

It is not a mistake that the most influential artists in history were, more often than not, also political figures themselves. artsartistsartwork.com (2022) observed that "Pablo Picasso painted the Guernica; the most represented photograph in history, The Fallen Soldier, was by Robert Capa; and the most famous work of literature, Shakespeare's Hamlet, was written by a playwright who was also an activist". What they all have in common is that their works continue to inspire millions of people around the world today. Could Agaku's attempt at exploring the cultural and peace issues of Plateau people be an effort to shed light on the problems of Plateau and or fight for justice?' we are living in a time of global crisis, where politics affect all our lives in some or another. Positive change is possible, but politicians most especially Nigeria's are not going to fix things on their own. We need to do our part as artists by educating ourselves and the populace on the issues and taking action in our communities. When inspiration strikes, artists like Agaku pick up a pen, or a paintbrush or grab a camera.

Symbiosis between Art and Agriculture

Art and agriculture share a crucial connection that has inspired land preservation. The Hudson River School, a mid-19th-century American art movement, provides a classic example of how artists found inspiration in the beauty of landscapes shaped by Agriculture. Ariel Zakarison for instance, an artist and regenerative farmer, explores the intersection of art and agriculture by creating sculptures and paintings inspired by her family's 660-acre grain farm in Washington State.



Fig. 2. Ariel Zakarison, A Bird, A Fish, and A Prairie, Medium: not known, Dimension: not known, Year: not known. Source: NYC Food Policy Centre (2023).

Zakarison's artworks depict the balance between human cultivation and the biodiversity of regenerative farming by illustrating wild fish and birds in fields of diversified wheat. Using materials sourced from the land, such as scraped iron, snake skins and cotton cloth, in her sculptures, although Agaku may not have been deliberate about the use of materials such as Zakarison's. He, however, is inspired by the fields of Jos Plateau, just like the manner Zakarison connected viewers of her art with the natural world. The diverse agricultural landscape depicted in her paintings is intended to advocate for the preservation of family farms like hers. The works of artists like Perry and Zakarison, in and of itself, bring attention to the need for sustainable farming and the preservation of rural landscapes, by offering a visual testament to the beauty that could be lost to urbanization and industrialization (NYC Food Policy Centre, 2023).

Agaku's Cultural, Peace and Agrarian Explorations

One of the indigenous ethnic groups in Jos that the artist captured in one of his paintings is the Afizere also known as Jarawa, who are known for their unique dance patterns and gymnastic styles.

In Plate I titled "Plateau Cheer" is the painting of an energetic lead dancer who directs the other dancers on what to do. Holding in his two raised hands are the white whisky tails of an animal. The dancer in a hilarious mood showcases his attire made of cowry shells and waves the whitish animal tails. This exercise is exciting to watch as many tourists across the globe troop to Jos to have a feel of such an organised and gymnastic display. At several international cultural competitions, the Afizere (Jarawa) dance troupes have represented Plateau state and Nigeria respectively. The artist manipulated the blue, brown and yellow ochre on both the background and the figure which allows the white cowry shells to stand out.



Plate I: Plateau cheer. Oil on Canvas, 84cm x 99cm, 2019.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Another example of the Jarawa dance is seen in plate II, titled "Delightful". In this painting are three flutists who are depicted in a single line with each dancer holding his flute on his lips. This kind of dance is mainly done by male dancers who blow the flute and still dance at the same time. The flutes create the melody which flows with the three drums. Like the first figure earlier discussed, the three dancers are decorated with cowry garments, caps, yellow short knickers and white snickers. On the elbows are white animal tails firmly tight, while on the legs are palm leaves made into small ball shapes that carry tiny stones inside which give crackle sounds when the legs are hit on the ground. All these are harmoniously done to produce a good melody for the dance.



Plate II: Delightful, Oil on Canvas, 99cm x 84cm, 2019.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Anytime a visitor goes to Jos, the person will be greeted with the sight of cultural items like the various dance groups in the state. On any occasion, one of such groups is invited to perform a dance. Another dance group in plate III, titled "Joyous" has three dancers like the previous ones. What is peculiar about this group is the dress. Here, the dancers wear a singlet and place knitted cowry shells across the dress. In the previous works, the dancers used the knitted cowry shells as their shirts while here they used singlets. It is important to note that various dance groups of the Jarawa have some variations on their dresses depending on where they are coming from and what they intend to achieve.



Plate III: Joyous, Oil on Canvas, 84cm x 99cm, 2020. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Apart from the Afizere cultural dance groups, there are other ethnic groups who possess unique cultural attires. Among such is the Berom ethnic group who form one of the largest populations on the plateau. The Berom as seen in Plate IV use the locally crafted xylophone made of animal horns. The horns are chronologically arranged in different sizes to give different sounds. The entire composition is made in such a way that the object is formed with a stand as well as a long rope. Two sticks are used to play the xylophone, it can be made to stand or can be hung on the neck while the musician plays the instrument. It can be played by one or two persons at a time as seen in this image. This musical instrument is also used by other ethnic groups in Plateau state.



Plate IV: Kundun aá... Oil on Canvas, 100cm x 100cm, 2020.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

In Plate V is a person making the local xylophone. He is depicted with his working instruments and highly engrossed in his activity. Behind the "engineer" are cactus plants neatly arranged. The Berom and some cultures in the Plateau use cactus plants to make fences. Their houses and farms are mostly protected with cactus plants, however, modernization is gradually eroding the use of cactus in most of the residential areas.



Plate V: Engineer devotee, Oil on Canvas, 88cm x 122cm, 2022. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

"Irigwe Woman" is a painting in Plate VI. The back view of the woman with a child on her back shows the energetic posture of a hardworking woman. She carries some tubers of yam on her head as she moves about for people to buy. This is a common scenario in Jos city whereby the Irigwe women hawk goods on their heads. They are commonly known as Matan Miango. Even though some women from other ethnic groups are found to be part of the hawking business, however, the Irigwe are popularly known to have dominated this business. The artist is thrilled by the resilience of the woman who not only hawks the yams but also carries a baby on her back.



Plate VI: Irigwe woman, Oil on Canvas, 99cm x 84cm, 2019. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Jos City, the capital of Plateau state, has been the envy of many tourists and business people. The city is a melting pot which brings people with diverse cultural, social, economic and religious backgrounds. The busy nature of the city is a result of the tin mining activities that took place during the colonial period. After independence, the city became the capital of Benue – Plateau Province. Subsequent governments came with their developmental projects. One such gigantic project is the construction of the Jos Main Market popularly called Termius Market. It became one of the biggest ultra-modern markets in West Africa. THISDAYLIVE, (2024) holds that "by the time it was commissioned, the market stood out as the biggest indoor market in West Africa"

In 2002, the activities of terrorists brought down the huge and admired Jos Main Market. Sounds of blast were heard in one faithful night from the market which later came with blazing fire that engulfed the entire market at once. The nation was thrown into a shock as the news went on

air. THISDAYLIVE, (2024) says "The burnt Jos Main Market held a special place in the soul of Plateau State and its people. Billions of naira were lost and many people lost their means of livelihood. The entire state mourned because the revenue hub of the land had been destroyed. The artist who has been a resident of Jos, in a nostalgic manner depicts the beauty of the market and its illusive presence as of now. He realistically represents the colours of the former market and its splendour. THISDAYLIVE, (2024) collaborates as, "it was aesthetically resplendent, a sheer architectural splendour! Almost immediately, it became a tourism delight in its own right". See plate VII.



Plate VII: Remember the time, Oil on Canvas, 66cm x 92cm, 2019.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

The painting in plate VIII titled "Green Land I" depicts a female farmer in the lush green garden. The farmer plucks the green leaves which can be used for pudding or soup. In Plateau state, many ethnic groups use green leaves to make a dish popularly known as Gwate. The meal is made in pudding form with leaves, particles of grains or acha, garden egg and any ingredient that can enhance the taste. Most of the time, the meal is made without oil and salt. This is most popular among the Berom, Afizere and Anaguta ethnic groups. In a deep-rooted intersection of artistic expression, cultural identity and the changing agricultural

landscape, the artist toed the line of the mid-19th century American art movement. NYC Food Policy Centre (2023) affirms it is a movement which, "provides a classic example of how artist found inspiration in the beauty of landscape shaped by agriculture".



Plate VIII: Green land I, Oil on Canvas, 84cm x 99cm, 2019.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Plate IX is titled, "Green Land II" which is a continuation of the previous painting. Here the farmer is a male who is seen weeding the green farm with a small hoe. The surrounding indicates that it is a rainy season whereby both the plants and grass look fresh and leafy. It reminds one of artists such as Thomas Cole and Fredric Edwin Church who captured the awe-inspiring scenery of the Hudson River Valley, portraying the marriage of nature and cultivation. The tradition of expression the serenity of rural life and the dynamic relationship among people, food, nature and wilderness.



Plate IX: Green land II, Oil on Canvas, 69cm x 99cm, 2019.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

The period of harvest comes with excitement for the farmer. An example is seen in plate X whereby the excited farmer embraces a large piece of cabbage plant. The bumper harvest might have been the source of his excitement as the farmer firmly holds the cabbage on his chest. The painting is titled, "Green and Fresh", and it reveals that cabbage is one of the vegetables that are grown in Plateau state. It is planted both in dry and rainy seasons. These are transported to other parts of the country. A second look at this painting alongside the previous two draws one closer to its affinity to Mikaela Perry's oil paintings. Where the contemporary artist's "Memories in Bloom" endeavors to encapsulate and immortalize her family farm. The collection of paintings tells a tale of life's cyclical nature-embracing moments of birth and death, growth and decay, and finding beauty in every phase.



Plate X: Green and Fresh, Oil on Canvas, 100cm x 100cm, 2019. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

There are people whose businesses depend on these green plants. There are two popular markets in Jos that are known for green plants business, they are the Farin Gada market in Jos North Local Government Area and the Building Materials market in Jos South Local Government Area. "Sometime in June" is a painting in plate XI that depicts women selling vegetables. Prominent among them is a seated woman whose excitement is captured in her smile and how she raises the green plant with her two hands. They are mostly greeted with this slang, "How market?" Spinach is a popular green plant that people use especially for Gwate as earlier mentioned. The spinach grows in large quantities during the rainy season, especially in the month of June.



Plate XI: Sometime in June (How market? I,) Oil on Canvass, 79cm x 122cm, 2020.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

"How Market II" is an extension of the previous work but this time around, the vegetable market is in July. A market woman is seen arranging her green vegetables as she waits for customers to arrive. The artist explicitly captures the green leaves which look like spinach or bitter leaves. The realistic painting reveals the plumb nature of leaves during the rainy season in Jos.



Plate XII: Sometime in July (How market? II,) Oil on Canvas, 88cm x 122cm, 2022.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

"Incursions" in plate XIII brings to light the movements of herdsmen from neighbouring countries to the interiors of Nigeria. The arrival of these invaders came with a lot of consequences which resulted in attacking the farmers and residential communities that gave them space to settle on. Their activities extended to killing, displacing and grabbing land for their cattle. Most of them are not known to the citizens, however, anytime a community tries to resist or send them away, the security personnel are swift in rescuing them. On the other hand, if the herdsmen attack a community, the security personnel do not respond rather they ask the community members not to retaliate.

In this heartbreaking situation, the artist captures the movement of these cattle with their guardians, moving freely into the bush. The bush becomes their homes and hideouts where many criminal activities are perpetrated without hindrance. Currently, these herdsmen have become landlords with large farms and houses that they did not work for. In fact, they have resolved into banditry and kidnapping. One wonders how they live peacefully in the bushes while the security personnel claim they do not know where they are hiding.

The sight of these people used to be a sign of harmonious living and a people who provide the citizens with milk and meat but today, their sight brings mix feeling of terrorism and anger. The artist uses his brush strokes to capture the rich grasslands that are in the savannah.

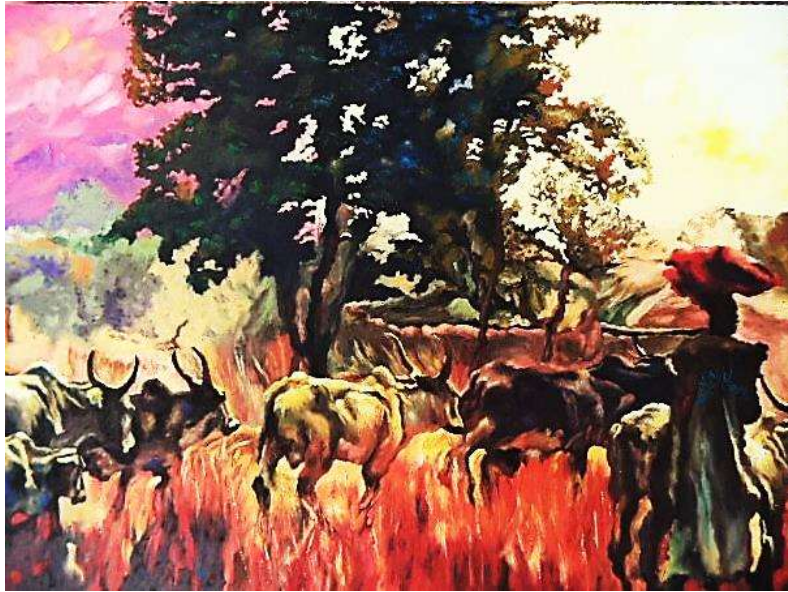


Plate XIII: Incursions'. Oil on Canvas, 64cm x 68cm, 2019. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our dreams.

The Plateau story continues with the eruption of crisis which started on 7th September, 2001 and has continued to date. Human Rights Watch (2010) held that, "violence suddenly erupted between Christians and Muslims in a city where diverse communities had coexisted peacefully for years and which had prided itself on avoiding the intercommunal violence that had plagued neighbouring states". "Why, What, How?" is a painting in plate XIV that depicts angry looking people with sticks, Machetes and other dangerous-looking objects in their hands. This is a common scenario in Plateau state whenever a crisis begins. Sometimes one wonders why the crisis, what causes such and how it all started. These questions are mostly asked when there are crises. This has gone beyond Plateau State; it is now in every part of Nigeria.

People in Nigeria today are filled with anger because of bad governance. Intolerance among citizens is increasing every day and the unity of the country is on the verge of breaking into pieces. The artist has lived all his life in crisis-raiding areas; from his state of origin, where he was schooled and his present place of work. This painful experience is

noticed in the vivid depiction of the figures' vicious looks and greyish colour combinations.



Plate XIV: Why, What, How, Oil on Canvas, 80cm x 122cm, 2020. Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

The result of the crisis in any community is seen in loss of lives, property, hunger, relocation and resettlement. "Internally Displaced" is a painting in plate XV which describes how people are forcefully chased out of their communities because of crisis. There are situations such as floods, wildfires, earth tremors and tornadoes that also cause relocation of people across the globe, however, in Nigeria, the situation is mostly experienced because of crises, violence, riots and attacks. The artist carefully chose his figures and depicted them with some items that they were able to hurriedly move out with.

Today in Nigeria, there are internally displaced camps in almost all the states of the federation. It is really heartbreaking to see citizens living as fugitives in their own country while the people they elected are busy fighting for resources with no intention of salvaging the deadly situation. All that matters to them is how to win elections and grab positions, period. The painter's commentary on this subject matter goes beyond the realistic rendition of the figures but touches more on the effects the situation has on internally displaced persons.



Plate XV: Internally displaced, Oil on Canvas, 61cm x 92cm, 2018.
Source: Plateau Yesterday, Today, and Our Dreams.

Conclusion

The artist concludes his narration by painting a scenario in plate XVI which he captures, "Farewell to Covid 19". The pandemic came with its challenges which affected both human lives and the global economy. The painting captures a popular sign that welcomes commuters as they come to Jos, the capital of Plateau state. Images of cars are seen plying the dual road while the sides depict the serene plateau atmosphere. This brings a sigh of relief as the cool weather welcomes visitors to the city.

The entire painting process in this exhibition takes viewers to the experiences of the artist while in Jos as well as in other parts of the country. Both his fantasy and agony are captured in his choice of forms and content. Saghevwua's manipulation of his palette to soothe his emotions is carefully revealed which flows from one painting to the other. In a nutshell, even the arrangement of the works started with cheers and ended with cheers despite the few agonizing moments that were displayed in some of the works.

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