

READING 'IMPULSES'

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The willingness of artists to challenge the meanings of art provides the platform of power and dynamism upon which art thrives today. In this little piece I address Krydz Ikwuemesi's *Impulses* by showing that his art is premised on an alternative historicity of both modernism and traditionalism and also possesses certain cognoscibility which any one with a keen and cognitive knowledge can read.

Impulses is an art exhibition by Krydz Ikwuemesi which took place at the National Museum of Ethnology in Japan in 2008. As a visiting professor in this museum Ikwuemesi undertook a comparative study of Japan Art and Igbo Art as part of his ethno-aesthetic research on cosmology. Having studied in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he is also teaching, Ikwuemesi has carried out researches on the cosmology of the Igbo people using a popular iconography of *uli* of which the Nsukka Art school is most popular. He therefore tries to look at the Japanese own traditional iconography in a parallel context with the Igbo *uli*. For Ikwuemesi, therefore, the mystery and individualism of *Impulses* lies in his seminal dexterity and prowess in the *uli* idiom.

Uli has survived years of intense artistic and cultural volatility whereby some 'postmodern' art practitioners advocated for its abandonment. However one can easily ascribe this volatility to the inherent tensions brewed by progressive Western modernism which sought to identify art with stylistic developments rather than by human impulse. However the argument remains whether *uli* has fallen victim to modernism's self-referential autonomy by which a work of art is governed by the mysterious internal laws of style. The dilemma of *uli*, therefore, may not lie in a religious attachment to its style but in its willingness to submit to continuous re-appropriation, and a rejection of the isolationist and nihilistic paradigms of Western (post)modernism. In this sense *uli* is expected to play a double role: in addition to expressing the finer things of humanity it should also mirror the everyday world of social and political life. Ikwuemesi

lives up to these two responsibilities thereby remaining within the matrix of a discourse generated by progressive modernism and conservative modernism of the 20th century. For clarity purposes, progressive modernism also known as the avant-garde tended to concern itself with political and social issues; through their art, they depicted the plight of the peasants, the exploitation of the poor, prostitution, and so on, while repeatedly drawing attention to the political and social ills of contemporary society, conditions they felt needed to be addressed and corrected, while conservative modernism looked to the past and tradition. Ikwuemesi's art no doubt straddles both genres through an attempt to remain aloof from the malignant influences of an increasingly and dehumanizing scientism of conceptualism. While he makes no recourse to the total pursuit of radical avant-gardism, Ikwuemesi at the same time does not favour the dangerous fallouts of deconstructive postmodernism. He treads softly on the slippery artistic path in order to conceive the essence of real art. The essence of real art (in my mind) corresponds to what Norman Bryson describes as "a swarm of points traversing social stratification and individual persons."¹ Real art (again in my thinking) is not invested with a monolithic power of visual narratives and in fact it may oppose what some scholars term "metacultural production"². Bryson considers the power of painting to reside in, for instance, the thousands of gazes caught by its surface, and the resultant turning, and the shifting and the redirecting of the discursive flow.³ True to Bryson's words, Ikwuemesi's own art redirects the discursive flow; it emanates from beyond and does not favour the traditional Marxist idea of ideology disseminated by the dominant class. His art generates a certain ideology which could be ascribed to a set of representations that emerge from nowhere; that which breeds its own notions of power.

Ikwuemesi consistently contests, on intellectual ground, the covert references to art projects as prescribed by the normalizing and "essentializing nomenclatures of modernity."⁴ He does not believe in the specific historicity of the art discourse. Perhaps he eschews the bandwagon by rejecting the dominating paradigms and parameters of the agency or what Michel Foucault calls "judges of normality."⁵ Ikwuemesi believes that the word *uli* is an alternative modernity that should not be 'disciplined' within a hegemonic

consciousness. I have observed that the greatness of Ikwemesi's art lies in the rejection of a peculiar historicity of knowledge construction. He however, forms part of what Tunbridge and Ashworth call "alternative thesis."

In *Impulses* the paintings seethe with energy, the colours are dramatic and in motion while the forms resonate with thick, thin, and impulsive lines. Some figures are in bawdy embrace with hairs dissolving into a reddish whirlpool of fire suggestive of a world that seems to be lost in an erotic carelessness. In some of the works labyrinthine lines meaningfully convolute into a mythic creature – Dragon. Yet in some other works a figure is almost eclipsed in the earth's mould with lines elaborately knotted to generate creatures like lizard and other esoteric entities. Perhaps a phallic reader may offer an interpretation to the dangling ropes underneath most of the figures. Many things generate meanings in this exhibition but one obvious, dominating icon remains an image of chimerical forms suggesting that dreams come true. And for Ikwemesi, the dream of *Impulses* is very real. I shall come back to dream.

Impulses interrogates such concepts as the epistemology of love under *On Love and Lovers* (figure 1) and *In The Night Darkly* (figure 2). Here Ikwemesi puts love on a visual exegesis to unravel its present-day atypical significance. Sigmund Freud thought of romantic love as a feeling which comes from the withholding of the sex drive from its desired object. In what he calls "aim-inhibited-sex" he declared the invention of conventional love by humankind in a bid to enjoy love.⁶ In literature it might take hundreds of pages to dissect the etymology of love. But you can quickly understand that the storyteller-Boccaccio, Chaucer, Dante-pulls back the curtain of human souls and lets the reader watch the intimate lives of others caught in an emotion we all know⁷. Others-Vatsyayana, Ovid, William IX Count of Poitiers and Duke of Aquitaine, Marie de France, Andreas Capellanus- have written how-to-do-it books, that is how to excite and satisfy one's sex partner⁸. I am constrained by space here and quite unable to stray into the realm of pornography. Love is erotic, pornographic and also dirty. In fact love is a euphemism going by humanity's present indulgence in the act of 'love'. Infatuation, sex, passion, are all victims of love. The above conceptual continuum helps us to interpret Ikwemesi's

propositions that love in some parts of the world has died yet people pretend that there are some structural arrangements put in place to check the excesses of love. That Ikwuemesi clouded *On Love and Lovers* in a swimming mass of reds speaks of love in hell fire. Then that the single thread of red mistakenly (?) drops into the greens may mean that there is a ray of hope for love's divine prescriptions.

Figures 3 and 4 are titled *Dragons and Fire*. Dragons have continued to attract humanity's fancy for many years. In the days past, a film known as *King Kong and Dragon* had filled my puerile senses with a concrete reality that I had no iota of doubt regarding the existence of both *King Kong* and *Dragon*. But today the existence of dragons has become a topic for heated intellectual discourse. But David Jones in *An Instinct for Dragons* has shown the very ethereal nature of dragons and argues that dragons first became a figment of human imagination through images of snake, eagle, panther and indeed all predators of our ancestral primates, which trigger a fear response embedded in our brains from early in our evolution⁹. But it could be concluded that for Ikwuemesi, dragons could translate to human draconianism, human despotism, human arbitrariness, human wickedness, among others. That the second segment of *Dragons and Fire* wears a human face illustrates the above point.

Ikwuemesi's *Dream* (figure 5) if I may borrow from Freud, suggests the degree of condensation of ideas which imagery facilitates. Freud further argues that dreams are brief, meager, and laconic in comparison with the range and wealth of the dream-thoughts.¹⁰ In what may seem to be an interesting analogy with Ikwuemesi's idiosyncratic creative outbursts, one could consider Freud's observation that "a dream is the fulfillment of a wish" but most often "the psychical mechanism of censorship prevents the wish from expressing itself except in a distorted form."¹¹ But for Ikwuemesi it seems that his dreams manage to escape the agencies of censorship and boldly assert themselves in a somewhat unconformist, uncompromising manner not in tandem with societal wishes. It seems his dreams radically transgress the norms of society. In Freud's terms, distortions operate by way of condensation, displacement, interruptions, obscurities, suppression, bedevilments, subjugation, among others. Dreams face cruel,

unmerciful onslaught between unconsciousness, sub-consciousness and consciousness. In the end they may never emerge as reality and they may never assail the conscious ladder. Official agencies are dream's greatest enemy and for Ikwemesi, the result of his engagement with this officialdom is nothing short of triumph, success, accomplishment. These virtues serve as totalizing enablements upon which posterity shall draw its energy.

The formalistics of *Dream* evolves as vegetative tendrils growing into a full image/figure engulfed by Globe's ethereal/corporeal complexities. Despite the enormous encompassing and suffocating global linearity stroking ominously around the figure, the figure maintains a firm poise. Perhaps the linearity is an indication of Freud's aggressive distortion which the figure surprisingly withstands.

A New Place (figure 6) and *An African Family in Japan* (figure 7) are two works I group under re-location and the difficulties inherent in itinerary. The trauma of peripateticism, acclimatization and adjustments, the phobia of foreign residency and the nostalgia of nativity must have informed this work. Arriving in a new place often comes with pangs of inclemency that is as stressful as it is short-lived. But these journeys have become almost a routine activity for artists that it is almost unavoidable especially in the midst of global professional demands. One may have to state that Japan may not be a new place for Ikwemesi who has (before 2008) visited Japan on a number of artistic and academic missions. However, these visits were short-lived as he spent few days on each. But on his one year visit in 2008 which culminated in this show one may have reasons to presume that Japan, this time is a new place for him as he had journeyed with his family of three and spent a year's residency, a situation which will ultimately give him room to experience the newness of a place. Ruth Simbao observes that 'Place' is promiscuous and like tradition, it misbehaves and does not comply with the postplace rules (or ideals) of globalization.¹² However as the world tends towards a monoculture the idea of 'place' has become fluid and Simbao would rather submit that "*deterritorialized place* continues to play significant role in the manifestations of today's cultures."¹³ Reflecting further Simbao notes:

Place remains poignant in the way human beings express themselves in embodied (and embedded) ways, even though it is no longer (theoretically) tenable to be *territorial* about the culture “of a continent, a nation or a community. Fluid places, adopted places, and anti-natalising notions of place are all part of our globalized world, but the *contingency of belonging* that is nurtured by such instability does not render place obsolete.

In fact, in line with Simbao’s remarks Ikwuemesi’s *A New Place* and *An African Family in Japan* underscore the existing tensions intrinsic in the linear dichotomies of *here* and *there*, Diaspora networks, global migrations, movements, settlements, refugees, illegal immigration, asylum seeking, location and dislocation among others.

More works like *Practicing Believer* (figure 8) highlights the sensitivities inherent in religion as the world continues to lie critically helpless in the event of its overwhelming catastrophes. That the world today is enmeshed in a web of unresolved conflicts could be as a result of the believers’ beliefs. Again as much as religion remains an unresolved conundrum it could, however, be classified as the greatest bane of humankind. The rendition of this work calls to mind Chike Aniakor’s style of line drawings which achieves a composition through a subversive negative space arrangement. In *Practicing Believers*, there is a negative figural transmutation of spaces which are enveloped by rhythmic lines of varying breadth. Yet the figural spaces did not lose the intended shapely formulation of humans in supplication gestures.

Beneath Ikwuemesi’s heretical and divergent points of visual depiction lies a mind with sterling and superlative qualities of ‘nature’ appreciation. This could be a means of solemn withdrawal from some multitudinous arsenal of issues yearning to be addressed. *Farewell to Spring* (figure 9) and *Farewell to Autumn* (figure 10) are two works which re-direct our engrossing articulations of Ikwuemesi’s deep but provocative visual narration into the less contemplative subject of ‘nature’. Although nature put into another

context could be highly contestable but surely Ikwemesi does not wish us to look beyond the 'nature' he presents to us. While the earth in *Farewell to Spring* is plastered with wavy lines of green punctuated by a stroke of red, the earth in *Farewell to Autumn* is splashed with cascading reds. Both have also been interchanged with trees and skies of different colouration: while the one has a red tree dissolving into a moon of yellow the other has a brown scorched tree breaking into a sky of moving yellowish-green. No doubt, the unstoppable speed of Ikwemesi's colours and lines may attest to his own nature and perhaps personal philosophy that life should be a system of continuous movement, activity, work and unmitigated moments of creative excitement.

It is on the above final note that I wish to conclude that works from *Impulses* are basically rendered in a familiarly conventional medium yet the artist is radically determined to advance a cause of this medium which some people have proclaimed its death in certain quarters. Yes in the manner in which Victor Burgin declared the end of art, the end of traditional art history and the end of conventional art theory in the 1960s and 70s when conceptual art emerged, one does not expect a vehement rejection of Ikwemesi's stylistics in the face of the 'post-conceptualist' paradigms. Not only that Ikwemesi tells the world that *Uli* of the Igbos is not just an art style but something which is durable and changeable within the parameters of change itself and not within the parameters of official discourse. Perhaps it is high time artists dissociated themselves from obfuscating paradigms.

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water colour on paper, 2008



Figure 5. *Dreams.*
water colour on paper, 2008

water colour on paper, 2008



Figure 6. *A new place.*
water colour on paper, 2008



Figure 7. *An African family in Japan.* water colour on paper, 2008



Figure 8. *Practicing believers*, water colour on paper, 2008



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Figure 9. *Farewell to Spring*, water colour on paper, 2008



Figure 10. *Farewell to Autumn*, water colour on paper, 2008

Endnotes

¹See Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holy & Keith Moxey *Visual Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1988), P.71

²Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses this term as a counter criticism of the hegemonic imposition of oral and intangible heritages by UNESCO using a universalist paradigm that may be counter-productive to existing cultures. The context should not be misunderstood. See in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “World Heritage and Cultural Economics” ” in *Museum Frictions*, Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja, Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, Gustavo Buntinx, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Ciraj Rassool, Duke University Press, 2006, p.181 -196

³ Norman Bryson, *Visual Theory* p. 71.

⁴ Swadin Sen et al, ‘We can protect our past?: Re-thinking the dominating paradigm of preservation and conservation with reference to the world heritage site of Somapura Mahavihara, Bangladesh’, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 6 (1), 2006. p. 80.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p.304.

⁶ See Melvin L. Wilkinson “Romantic Love and Sexual Expression, The Family Coordinator, Vol. 27, No. 2 (April, 1978) pp. 141- 148. From : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/581829> accessed on 9th September 2008 at 02: 37.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See William J. Goode, The Theoretical Importance of Love American Sociological Review, Vol.24, No. 1. (Feb., 1956), pp.38-47. : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2089581> accessed on 9th September 2008 at 03 pm

⁹ See David Jones, *An Instinct for Dragons* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, J. Strachey, ed & trans. (London: Hogarth Press &The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953), p. 279.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 121.

¹² Ruth Simbao, The promiscuity of 'Place': contemporary Zambian art and the Afropolitan inter-face, Paper presented at the Heritage discipline Colloquium, organized by The Heritage Disciplines Project together with the African Programme in Museum and Heritage Studies at UWC and the Office of International Affairs at Emory University, held at the Center for Human Research, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, on 8 and 9 October 2009. p. 8.

¹³ Ibid, p. 8