THREE ASTUTE STROKES, ONE VOICE: A CRITIQUE OF SELECTED PAINTINGS ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION.

By

Philip Obed GUSHEM Ph.D.
Department of Fine Arts
Faculty of Environmental Design
Ahmadu Bello University
Zaria - Nigeria.
E-Mail: pogushem@gmail.com
Phone: +2348077143930

*Jacob Enemona ONOJA (Corresponding Author)
Department of Fine and Applied Arts
Faculty of Environmental Sciences
University of Jos
Jos - Nigeria.
E-Mail: diademng@yahoo.com
Phone: +2348035984125

And

Muhammad Sani YAHAYA
Department of Industrial Design
Modibbo Adamawa University of Technology Yola
Adamawa State.
E-Mail: muhammadsaniak47@gmail.com saniyak47@yahoo.com
Phone: +234 8078240477, +234 8063639878
Abstract

The potency of art in the society cannot be overemphasized. Artists are integral part of the society, and hence make poignant statements of various issues ranging from social, economic, political and religious issues to mention but a few. This article discusses the varied styles, content and context of art pieces produced by three astute Nigerian artists on conflict resolution in response to the happenings in the Nigerian society. Udubrae Ezekiel, Muazu Sani Mohammed and Kolade Oshinowo, representing three different geographical areas in Nigeria, with masterly strokes and creating some art pieces on conflict resolutions. The objectives of this article is to have a critique of selected exhibits on conflict situations and the place of visual art in society in conflict management. The random sampling method was used in selecting the artists and exhibits. The record of the various works by the artists helps the society to understand the plights of refugees in crises situations and the need to address reoccurrence of wars and advocate for peaceful co-existence. Some lessons drawn and projections for the future on conflict resolution include the apt words of William Kelly in Gold (2006) when he states that “it is my previously stated belief that although “a painting can never stop a bullet; a painting can stop a bullet from being fired”. This perfectly illustrates the valuable role that the arts can have in supporting peace-building initiatives. It is the message that the artists have chosen to present in their works that have power to build peace in a community.

Key words: Painting, Conflict resolution, society, peace building.
Introduction

Having emerged from their historical and political context, the artist has the unique ability to see the world with fresh eyes. The artist has consistently used the visual arts to undermine people’s normal defense and to help create an atmosphere of peace between members of the society. An interaction furthering this atmosphere does not only take place between artists in the society who are actively participating in these activities, but also between individual who choose to attend these events. In an article, Morris (1958) observes that, “The creation of works art and their effect on people are processes which can be observed all through history; they present a universal phenomenon of human society in action. As such they are open to sociological examination. Hence, it is permitted to speak of the sociology of art”. The art in this instance refers to the plastic art of painting, which also has its sociological perspective. Artists therefore can use their works to help facilitate peace between warring groups and use their role play effectively in the society. However, for a number of reasons, artists and the visual arts have been an underutilised instruments in conflict transformation, although the arts can play an implausible role in uniting adversaries. In the society, the sociological impact of art cannot be overemphasized, however, this aspect of marriage of art and society is misconstrued. According to Suberville (2015) “I vouch for the sociology in art (and vice versa) because the artist is an unaware sociologist. The artist uses the socially constructed conventions of their own social world and produces work that speaks to such conventions and the tensions and dilemmas they cause”. Suberville’s opinion however that the artist is an unaware sociologist is questionable. The artist is a full breed sociologist and relates well with sociological issues, the artist stands a better ground of relating visually ills in the society and proferring solutions in his own unique way. Suberville (2015) further opines that:

The artist uses the socially constructed conventions of their own social world and produces work that speaks to such conventions and the tensions and dilemmas they cause. Andy Warhol, again, not only managed to shift the art world by challenging what art is, but, as any art lover is aware, the work itself spoke about the social world he lived in: one dictated by consumerism, pop culture, and large scale institutionalism. He took what the social world gave the individual and threw it back in its face. Dadaist artist Marcel
Duchamp first gave the art world a glimpse of this future tendency when in 1917 he placed a urinal in a gallery and signed it

In conflict situations, art becomes the direct reaction of the artist, and in a society, tension and other crises situations are better addressed by artists. Art can be a powerful tool for transformation at the personal, interpersonal, and organizations level. The visual art exhibitions of works of peace art can be most successful. Art exhibits are often about emotions and personal experience; thus artists have the ability to explore subjects in ways that are accessible to anyone, by presenting various versions of similar subject matter, the artists have the power to change how the past is viewed. Also, the artists have unique ability to serve as conflict mediators through the creations and presentation of their works. Rank (2008) posits that, the power of the arts to promote peace lies in their emotive nature; the art can help people feel the pathos and waste of violence, and help to instill a desire and commitment to end violence and work for peace. Picasso’s Guernica and Goya’s painting of the devastation of war, as typified in his work 3rd May 1808 are good examples of artists’ reaction to conflict situation and how such can be addressed through artistic media, to create a voice on the need for peace in order to avoid the horrid, lurid and somber look, of conflicts and wars. Guernica (Plate I) was painted in 1937 as an outrage to war and terror unleashed on Picasso’s home town.

Plate I. Pablo Picasso, Guernica, 1937, Oil on Canvas,138”x 308”

According to Shabi (2013):

Picasso's homeland of Spain is central to the meaning of Guernica, a mural the artist was commissioned to paint for
the 1937 World Fair in Paris. Although Picasso expatriated to Paris and never did return to Spain during his life, the artist's connection to his homeland of Spain is evident in Guernica, named after a small country town in north Spain that was the target of a terror bombing exercise by the German Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War.

This history of the creation of the painting *Guernica* is linked to Picasso’s personal reaction to terror, and as an artist, his reaction was swift in the depiction of the painting. In speaking about the painting, Shabi (2013) quotes Picasso’s statement that ‘My whole life as an artist has been nothing more than a continuous struggle against reaction and the death of art. In the picture I am painting — which I shall call Guernica — I am expressing my horror of the military caste which is now plundering Spain into an ocean of misery and death.’ *Guernica* is unequivocally a great masterpiece on an artist’s reaction to crisis situation and a potent medium of expression to the public glare. Today, *Guernica* adorns the wall of the United Nations office as a potent statement on the devastation of war and the need to sue for peace and reconciliation through dialogue. The ideas that are presented in the art serve to engage the viewer on both cognitive and sensory level, thereby providing a more holistic approach to understanding the dynamics present in a divided society.

The complexity of conflict in the society can be derived from socio-political and religious angles. There has not been success in reaching lasting solutions between members of communities. Therefore, it is important to look at other ways peace can be established in our society. In many global conflicts, peace building is said to be the grassroots movement started by individuals in the society. The main purpose of peace building is to form relationship between warring groups in order to check against future conflicts from occurring. Peace building allows for trust to be built between members of the communities by creating bi-communal activities, such as art events, it will become easier for the society to positively interact thus assisting in dehumanization of the community.

The arts, along with civil society based initiatives, can help in developing shared vision of an independent society, provide mechanism, for healing and reparation, and build positive relationship by changing how people relate to one another. Gold (2006) is of the
view that “artists are on a journey to reflect their surroundings and they build their lives upon an ‘insatiable curiosity’ constant intervention, and attentive critique”. These three facts stated allow artists to rarely face a problem twice because they are constantly creating innovative techniques to cope with their quandaries. The challenge that peace builders are currently facing is to create innovative responses to prevent violence from occurring. Gold noted that, each symbol that is replete has lots of meaning that is enhanced by the relationship among them by the resonance they evoke in the viewers. The aesthetic of visual form can invite viewers to become aware of images and to linger as they are supported to encounter, reexamine, and reconsider symbols and their own processes of meaning. Art exhibits can become dialogue sessions for artists who say what others cannot say. Therefore, many artists inevitably take on role of mediator by creating dialogue between warring groups, by creating subjects relating to common humanity, artists enable the viewer to imagine the experiences of the other” and this can lead to dehumanizing the enemy.

It is important to note that, although art can play an important role in peace building. It can also hinder peace processes. Art has the ability to present ethnical dilemmas, represent miscommunications, negative emotions. As much as art can help build peace, it can also impair it and create new barrier between groups. However, a school of thought believes that, the art can do more good than harm in promoting peace and reconciliation. For art exhibits offer images and text in a modest form where those who wish to participate can look, think, discuss and create. Cohen (2005) noted that participation in those exhibitions can help to re integrate people into their community. By doing so, both contribute toward co existence and reconciliation.

Three Astute Strokes: An Analysis

*Search Party During Jos Crisis* which measures 24” X 36” is an oil on canvas painting executed in 2001 as an aftermath of the Jos crisis of 2001 by Ezekiel Udubrae. This painting shows a canvas aflame with
warm colors of reds, oranges and yellows and some figures seemingly engulfed in the fire. (Plate II).

Plate II: Ezekiel Udubrae, Search Party During Jos Crisis 2001, oil on canvas 24”x36”
Private Collection

According to Onoja (2014) in analysing the painting, he states that:

In this painting, Udubrae has documented visually, the destructive tenderizes of wars and crisis, and the attendant pains of searching for loved ones even in the heat of the crisis as represented by the feminine gender with babies on their backs. This painting also underscores environmental degradation as symbolized with the trees striped of foliage and life. Rhythmic flow is achieved in this painting through the upward swirls of the brush in curvilinear movements upwards using dark shade of blue and yellow.

Looking at this painting, the viewer will be compelled to think of the aftermath of a crisis and also environment issues and the best way to avoid such crisis in the future.

This painting provides visual account of the mounting hostilities that started in Jos in 2001. Various authors have given statements and solutions to the conflicts on the Plateau; however, the artist’s visual presentation is easily comprehended to give voice to the conflict situation and a need to end same. Best (2007:3) states that “Violent
identity-based inter communal conflicts are no longer new to Nigeria. Since the eighties, Nigeria has witnessed an upsurge in the occurrences of conflicts. Most of them have traditionally occurred in the north of Nigeria.” He goes on to state that “Jos, a city in the north central region of Nigeria (also sometimes known as the Middle Belt region) previously known for its peace and tranquillity, joined the growing list of locations with violent conflicts from the early nineties, with the biggest crisis occurring in 2001”. Higazi (2011:2) lends voice to Best (2007) when he states that:

Plateau State is currently the main site of ethnic and religious violence in northern Nigeria. The past decade has seen recurrent crises across the state, in urban and rural areas. Thousands of lives have been lost in these violent conflicts, there has been extensive damage to property, and the development prospects of the state have been set back.

For meaningful development to take place, the pursuit of peace and the discouragement of violence and conflicts must be advanced. The advancement of peace drive is evident in Udubrae’s statements in Jos, the Plateau state capital and other parts of the country where conflicts hold sway. Another recent example of painting in conflict situations is *After the Blast*, created in 2015 in response to Jos bomb blast that claimed lots of lives. This painting trails the step of old sages in the field of using art as poignant statement to all and sundry. Picasso’s *Guernica* and Goya’s painting of the devastation of war as typified in his work *3rd May 1808* as earlier stated are good examples of artists’ reaction to conflict situations.

*Refugees During Jos Crisis* (Plate III) is another work executed by Udubrae in 2006. It is an oil on landscape painting measuring 24” X 36” and it is in the artist’s collection. The painting is composed of multiple figures with some carrying load walking into the canvas symbolic of an unknown destination. The predominant colour used in this painting is blue in its shades and tints used in interlocking contract with the other warm colours like browns, reds, orange and yellow. From the right hand side of the painting, a tree is seen on the foreground with rocks beside it toward the left. The tree depicted in curvilinear lines branches off to the right and left, the left branches leads the eyes to the figures. The background which serves as support to the tree is painted in Prussian blue and brown. The background is
basically blue with speckles of green and yellow. The figures from the right to the left show a form of rigid movement. The figures are rendered in cubistic forms with some carrying loads on their heads. The figures were painted with dubs of warm and cool colours like orange, yellow ochre, reds, blues and greens. The background of the painting towards the upper part to the left shows an orange patch signifying sunset, with yellows painted around the orange in circular formation.

In this painting, Udubrae records the plight of refugees after the Jos crisis of 2001, with an exodus of people towards an unknown destination and lost hopes. The sunset effect shows the terminal part of a day which is symbolic of the end of the people’s hopes and aspiration. Who can tell? There might be a new dawn after all. The record by the artist helps the society to understand the plights of refugees in crises situations and the need to address reoccurrence of wars and advocate for peaceful co-existence.

No Peace II (Plate IV) is a semi-abstract expressionistic painting produced by Sani Mu’azu Mohammed in 1999. The work is an enamel on canvas presented in a vertical position and is presently with the National Gallery of Art, Abuja- Nigeria. The background is dominated with red and splashes of few colours like orange, blue, black and white dots spread scarcely across the surface of the work. The dominant red atmosphere captured vividly the intensity of hostilities and lack of
peace within these regions. Blue and white symbolize the small relative measures of peace and ceasefire treaties at the mercies of warlords who dishonour them at any given opportunity. Some of these warlords recruit young innocent children to prosecute their selfish vendetta and other nefarious activities against the ruling governments of their countries. Black signifies the death tolls and other deadly diseases caused by the prolong hostilities and deprival of essential health facilities/services to vulnerable people—mostly women, children and elderly people in such war torn countries.

Plate IV: No Peace II, Enamel on Canvas, 77cm × 109cm, 1999, Collection of the National Gallery of Art- Abuja

This work is a political commentary that recalls the ordeals of innocent children and women caught in war zones ranging from old events in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia and most recently activities of the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria. As evidently portrayed in the work, the dominant red splashes of colour, succinctly captured the hostilities and restlessness of displaced children within these troubled regions. Children are separated forcefully from their parents due to disruptions caused by fighting and killing of hapless civilians within these societies. Incidentally, this is the scenario created in several IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps scattered across safe heavens catering for the displaced persons. The red also symbolize the huge psychological trauma suffered by these victims, thus the need for assistance from agencies concerned. ‘No Peace II’ highlighted similar scenario to a work titled “Guernica” painted by Picasso in 1913. It depicted the horror of Nazi's atrocities on innocent Spanish civilians’ massacre by Hitler's war planes in the Spanish city of Guernica. The
work is presently with the United Nations inside bullet proof glass.

Plate V: The Beauty of Jos-Plateau, Oil on Canvas, 80cm 100cm, 1999, Collection of Renate Albertsen-Marton, Former Director of Goethe Institute-Lagos

Another painting entitled *The beauty of Jos- Plateau* (Plate V) is an expressionistic work produced in 1999 by Sani. The painting captures the beautiful sceneries that abound in the Jos-Plateau and other geographical features of the region. The painting shows a wide expanse of landscape with low mountain formations beneath a faintly coloured horizon. The sky is covered in light blue, while the foreground is filled with several depressed features of land and rock formations arranged side by side. At the centre, are smudges of light blue and grey colours in a whirlwind form rising from the ground to the sky, indicating the former explosive nature of the town due to the various ethnic/religious crises, experienced before. The orange coloured ground is sparsely filled with blue dots, while the sky is coloured in navy-blue. The horizon is covered with Prussian blue mountains indicating some relative distance and illusion from the nearby formations in light colours.

The work is a social commentary and seeks to analyze the beautiful scenery that abounds the Jos-Plateau region. These breath-taking sceneries are tourist delights, but the government has failed to articulate this product to the world. Rather, the recent ethnic and religious disturbances that seized the region have heightened tensions unnecessarily across these areas. Thus, these lovely sceneries are not
well packaged to tourists who wish to engage in adventures around places of delights.

Conflict (Plate VI), a work produced in 2000 shows Oshinowo predominantly expressing himself in tints and shades of red hues which are relevant to his theme.

![Conflict, 2000, Oil/Acrylic/Canvas, 130 by 92cm, Artist’s Collection.](image)

Conflict shown in plate VI, is a composition that is based on the carnage that took place in Kaduna in 2000. Oshinowo (2009) noted that ‘we never had religious war in Kaduna until the year 2000.’ The message that the artist tries to pass is that no religion encourages violence. This prompted the incorporation of the cross sign and the moon/star sign in the foreground of the composition, implying that when people fight, they forget about the essence of religion. The tyre that is portrayed in the composition symbolises violence, as it is being frequently used by protesters or trouble makers through burning on high ways.

The painting is characterised by sketchy images that suggest people at war. The uses of white pigment in the sky, suggests a peaceful scenerio before the war, while the predominantly dominating brilliant hue of red, symbolises danger associated with war. The brilliant, striking red hue captures the eyes of his audience at a glance. The
conflict that occurs and reoccurs, in many parts of the country is the reason behind the execution of the work (Plate IV). Such happenings therefore, call for prayers to God to intervene. Also, this probably could have resulted into the artist executing other similar paintings with themes, “Divine Attention” (2006) and “We Pray” (2006). At moments like this, people get closer to God to seek assistance. Prayer at this time is paramount, so as to check against the uncertainties of the future, such as woes that may befall the nation.

The painting is one among Oshinowo’s works on religious intolerance. In such works, he portrays the end results of incompatibility of opinions of the two religious faiths (Christianity and Islam). Also, the end result of a conflict is usually disastrous. The success of the composition is the relevance of the use of red hue that symbolizes danger, and the white pigment above that suggests the yearning for peace.

The artist keeps to bright colours which, on board can accommodate the seven colours of the rainbow. At a point he was interested in using gray, but now he uses bright yellow along side other brilliant colours. His attention is placed mostly to surface textures. Most of his paintings are acrylic based, some of which are heavily textured. He likes to animate the surface of his paintings, paying attention to the value of several layers. His colour scheme has always been some thing that is personal to him. He has mastered the use of earth colours, the rich tints and shades of hues such as brown, cadmium yellow, ochre, red, burnt sienna, and lemon yellow. Though he uses some blues and greens, the artist is seen as a master in using arbitrary colours that he personalizes. Before the year 2000, Oshinowo painted in semi monochromatic and full monochromatic colours. In some of his works, the dominant colour could be red, in some cases it could be blue and some brown. He uses these colours to paint works that are either abstract or of cultural, political or economic themes among other concepts.

Rofo Rofo Fight I & II: Rofo Rofo fight is onomatopoeic, and it refers to a fight where all available tactics are used irrespective of rules. Rofo Rofo fight exists in filling stations, at bus stops, during elections, in the office, in churches, in mosques, in any place and at any time. Rofo Rofo fight might not only be a physical fight, but may indeed become spiritual, thus there may be Rofo Rofo encounter with
the devil, binding, casting and banishing. It is a show of desperation and impatience.

Plate VII: Rofo Rofo Fight 1, 2006, Acrylic/ Canvas 100 by 87cm, Private Collection.

“Rofo Rofo Fight 1”, rendered in subtle colours, is an impressionistic depiction of two figures interlocked in a fight in an open place. Rofo Rofo is a Yoruba word meaning mud which plays well in the strokes of Oshinowo. Rofo Rofo, in the context of this works shown in (Plate VII), according to the artist, is more of a political tussle which prevails in the country, Nigeria, since the inception of her independence. Such is common in the Senate, and House of Representatives. “Rofo rofo 1” relates to the misunderstandings between Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji
Abubakar Atiku, the then president and vice-president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria respectively.

Plate VIII, Rofo Rofo Fight II”, 2006, mixed media, 65 by 65cm, Private Collection.

“Rofo Rofo Fight II”, is a collage which shows a vague representation of human forms interlocked in a conflict. The fight in this context differs from the fight in “Rofo Rofo I”. Here, the viewer can hardly differentiate between mud and colour and the artist’s mixture of colours for the piece. Rofo Rofo fight is a habit that is typical of Lagos, where the artist resides. It is hardly a civilized way to settle any disagreement. In this particular painting, Oshinowo uniquely interlocks two images using intricate lines. The painting is simply an interpretation of the act of lawlessness in Nigeria. The work is characterized by interwoven intricate lines that are rhythmic, and predominantly dominated by a background of thick grey hues.

Plate IX: Season of Siege, 1987, Oil on Board, 70 by 64cm. Artist’s Collection
“Season of Siege” is a painting about the negative activities embarked on by a notorious armed robber in the country in 1987. The Nigerian cities have become “Hell” by the nefarious activities of armed robbers. The message here precisely, is about “Anene de law”, a notorious armed robber who, the then president of the country, Ibrahim Babangida, gave a directive for the robber to be caught at all costs.

Anene was a robber who had the backing of a high ranking police officer in person of George Iyamu, who usually provided him with adequate information that could assist him in carrying out his negative activities. Anene delighted in killing Police Officers and people for the fun of it. He became so notorious that people became afraid of him. “Season of Siege” depicts a family behind bars, showing that they have to defend themselves. Fences and gates that sprang at that period were meant for purpose of security. The manner of representation by the artist gives an illusion of a family kept behind bars for an offence never committed, but caused by the fear of the unexpected robbers.

Plate X: Aftermath, 1995, Oil/Acrylic/Canvas, 108 by 102cm, Artist’s Collection.

“Aftermath” is an abstract composition that is predominantly rendered in tints and shades of red pigment. The predominant use of red hue by the artist, when viewed in a symbolic perspective, relates to the danger that prevailed in the country during the military era in Nigeria. This work, according to Oshinowo, is about the exit of Abacha, the then military Head of State, from Lagos. The uncertainties of the consequences of the unpleasant state of the nation that came
about as a result of the socio-political development in the country could have been a factor for Abacha’s escape.

The artist laments the descent into the depth of anarchy of the period, which drove many people to seek solution in places of worship. The splashes of white pigment at the bottom part of the composition probably suggest “purity” and God’s divine intervention that was sought for by the nation through prayers. The splash of other colours in bits and patches of ochre, and green added more in creating irregular shapes that contributed towards the abstract nature of the composition. Figures are depicted linearly in caricature manner, sleeping or in a restful manner.

The curvilinear lines being incorporated aided in achieving the illusion of movement. This helps in moving the beholder’s eyes within the entire picture plane. The aesthetics of this painting was achieved through the artist’s masterly manipulation of movement of lines and colours in various shapes within the composition.

Conclusion

The inability to recognize the purpose of visual arts in conflict and post-conflict time is a situation that is quite unfortunate. The role of art in such a situation is usually vibrant and important. It is seen as a way of looking beyond the pain that surrounds warring groups. It is a means of escaping the dissolution they are living in and also, a means to express the suffering, to remember what they have endured. The creative and expressive area of human activity can provide a vital source of peace building energy and passion that may not always be apparent in the formalized process of political conflict resolution. Also, creative conflict resolution nourishes and defines the emergence of a culture of peace, as defined by the United Nation(UN) as a set of values, attitude, modes of behavior and way of life that rejects violence and present conflicts by tackling the roots causes, to solve problems through dialogue and negotiations among individuals, groups and nations (United Nations 1998).

In Nigeria, bi-communal visual art activities can be an effective tool in peace building; for the activities can bring together communities by creating a safe arena where it is possible to share personal experiences and engage in open dialogue. This approach has been utilized by the republic of Cyprus, and was successful. The
approach aided Cyprus in stimulating much successful peace building initiative on the island.

Conflict resolution professionals should employ a similar mentality and focus on the process when trying to establish an agreement between warring groups. Funds should be made available; to sponsor bi-communal art activities. The establishment of friendly relationships and mutual understanding will be the basis of any lasting agreement. Help from international communities should be sought so as to support art based process for peace building, because this process has proven successful in places that adopted the theory.

Artists in Nigeria should join hands with the likes of Kolade Oshinowo, Sani Mohammed and Ezekiel Udubrae to become convinced, to use art for peace building through interactions with members from their communities. The paintings created by the three mention Nigerian artists, as an aspect of visual art can be used both as witness and resistance to conflicts and as imagery to express peace, vision and transformation. For instance, Goya’s series ”the disaster of war”, provided dramatic and disturbing images of Spanish resistance against the invasion of the nineteenth century. William Kelly in Gold (2006) eloquently put “it is my previously stated belief that although “a painting can never stop a bullet; a painting can stop a bullet from being fired”. This perfectly illustrates the valuable role that the arts can have in supporting peace- building initiatives. It is the message that the artist have chosen to present in their works that has power to build peace in a community.
Reference


