OZIOMA ONUZULIKE'S SUYASCAPE PROJECT: A SCULPTOR'S REVIEW

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Abstract
Clay, from the early times remains a material that has been shared between sculpture and ceramics. This is based on its plastic and malleable material properties and characteristics which suits the nature of both professionals. Sculpture is a three dimensional art that is most of the times produced with pure aesthetic considerations with no intent for utilitarian purposes. This nature is what differentiates it from ceramics. Ceramics' major character is embedded in its utilitarianism and multiple productions. The practice of sculpture and ceramics could have shared the same practitioners in the past. However, the compartmentalisation of modern learning has separated them classifying ceramics as an industrial art while sculpture is confined to the place of the fine arts. Today, some Nigerian Ceramists have developed sculptural ambitions which have resulted in products that can be called ceramic sculptures. Ozioma Onuzulike stands out among this crop of Ceramists in his technique of combining ceramics and sculptural elements. This paper attempts to trace the history of ceramic sculptures from some world cultures and narrows it down to the contemporary scene. It is here that the Suyascape ceramic sculptures of Ozioma Onuzulike is analysed and projected as the sculptural ambition of a ceramist in addressing societal and political issues.

Introduction

Clay is a fine-grained mineral or rock that includes ceramic clays, mudstones, clay shale, glacial clays and deep-sea clays, with traces of metal oxides and organic matter. Clay is plastic and malleable when wet and hardens when dried or fired in a kiln. It has been the primary material in pottery since prehistoric times (Collins, 2008). This extremely malleable material has always been linked to the materiality of the flesh thereby making it incredibly sensitive to touch. This has made clay a choice material for potters and sculptors of old. There appears to be no clear demarcating line between the sculptor and the potter in the earliest times. While sculpture is the art of making three dimensional forms with intent to represent or abstract existing forms, ceramics is characterised by utilitarian objects and other articles made from clay hardened by heat. The two areas seemed to merge in the prehistoric era, making some scholars to address them as fine art ceramics.

The Venus of Dolni Vestonice, a statuette of a nude female figure found in the present day Czech Republic whose dating is estimated at 25,000 BCE is a clear example of the earliest ceramics sculpture. Similarly, the earliest pottery vessels that were discovered in China are believed to date from approximately 33,000 BCE.

Inasmuch as varying dates have been put forward on the discovery of the earliest wares, a specific dating has not yet been established, this certifies that sculpture and ceramics had existed side by side since the prehistoric times. It could have been possible that they shared the same practitioners. From the Greek statue of Nike of the late 5th century B.C., clay had expressed the classical idea of purity, even to the Renaissance that terracotta ascended to a golden peculiarity with Michelangelo Bunarroti's human figures reign (Benjamin, 2010). The Nok Culture of Northern Nigeria has also displayed how clay can be stretched beyond its aesthetic functional limits.

Today, rigid demarcations appear to exist between sculpture and ceramics. However, it will be pertinent to note that unique objects created for their visual or aesthetic appeal are now consigned to the fine arts, while objects no matter how visually decorative they are, but usually functional and intended for mass productions fall into the ceramic arts. The above definitions might not be exhaustive but it projects the nature of the fine arts as compared to the applied arts. Of significance, it is not only the three-dimensionality that relates sculpture to ceramics, but their materiality which rests on the commonness of clay. There have been times when the nomenclature in both areas has appeared ridiculous. When sculptors stray into the use of clay, which is fired to bisque level, it is called Terra Cotta under the broad umbrella called Ceramic Sculpture. Interestingly, when a ceramist leaves pottery and produces hand built sculptures, it is called Sculpture Ceramics. Having established the linkage made possible by the common use of clay existing between the two areas, one can authoritatively assert that the boundaries between the two are blurred. Consequently, materiality has become a strong factor in both areas. Modern Nigerian artists have to a large extent created a Post-Nok era in ceramic sculptures.

Demas Nwoko, Chris Echeta, Abashiya Ahuwan, Chike Ebebe, Baba Ibigbami, Ozioma Onuzulike and a host of others have all carried on this practice in their own unique approaches of handling the same material. The above named artists are all ceramists except Nwoko who is a sculptor. Clay has worked for them while they continue to use fired clay as their medium of expression. Ozioma Onuzulike has in his own inimitable manner used ceramic sculpture to eulogise *Suya* (a local kebab) a delicacy of Hausa origin that is consumed widely in Nigeria and a significant portion of West Africa.

The Artist

Ozioma Onuzulike trained as a ceramist at the renowned Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka a.k.a. Nsukka School, under the tutelage of the celebrated ceramist, Benjo Igwilo. In a fraught to move beyond the teacup-saucer-vase-and-mug ceramics, the artist found in terracotta/baked clay a medium to stretch ceramics to meet its sculpture kin. This can be seen as the sculptural ambition of a ceramist, which is always welcome. Works from his Suyascape Project started showing in exhibitions from 2003 at the French cultural Centre in Lagos and reached its peak in 2008, when it showed at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine USA. Having shown the products of Suyascape Project at exhibitions and also acquiring a PhD in Art History, the artist decided to produce an essay on the series of sculpture which he chooses to call installations. The reason behind this essay as Onuzulike (2009) states,

> Although a few articles have been written on my work as an emerging contemporary Nigerian ceramic artist, seeking to broaden his practice to include the use of non-ceramic components, there is still no

> detailed art historical context provided so as to situate my vision, technical approaches and contextual strategies in the stream of contemporary Nigerian Art. The objective of this paper therefore is to critically review the totality of the Suyascape Project from a sculptor's perspective while also probing the essay.

The Essay

The author started with a historiographic approach, and in trying to locate his artistry in its proper Nigerian practice, started with the Nok culture and its historical ambience. While observing the long period of inactivity after the Nok era, he catapulted to the Aina Onabolu era, placing Kenneth Murray as the first bringer of local content into the modern art of Nigeria. Onuzulike in his novelty brought to the fore the Pottery studio of D. Roberts in Ibadan, that had suffered a uncertain history before introducing the Abuja Pottery under Michael Cardew, that Ladi Kwali became its foremost exponent. The Department of Fine Arts of the Nigerian College of Science, Arts and Technology, Zaria, was introduced with its graduates that established other art schools in Nigeria. Demas Nwoko was projected as the foremost graduate of the school to venture into ceramic sculpture. His works according to Onuzulike was a blend of the traditional and modern, based on Nok culture and Yoruba sculptures. The author introduced the ceramist, Benjo Igwilo and his advent in the Nssuka School as significant; Igwilo according to him applied a mix of components of the Igbo traditional body and wall decoration (called *Uli*), thereby creating an amalgam of the traditional and the modern. Onuzulike proudly states that he was mentored by Igwilo. Mention was also made of the renowned international sculptor El Anatsui that employed earthenware for his broken pot series. The author did not leave out Abbas Ahuwan of the Zaria Art School, who after undergoing western education, apprenticed and collaborated with Idi Hunkuyi, a traditional potter to produce pot-looking sculptures.

Admirable is Onuzulike's tracing of his artistic pedigree back to the Nok culture. I nod in agreement to his claim of *bringing* a departure to the hitherto closed boundaries of clay working in Nigeria. Nevertheless, one sees Onuzulike as contributing in his own unique approach, but not in absolute terms, as he had stated above. I however shake my head in disagreement when he claimed that "It shows that there had been no radical departure from the use of clay and glaze for utilitarian, decorative or political expression." This would be doing disservice to the maverick ceramist Chris Echeta whom Onuzulike himself had claimed that:

> Over the last two decades, Nigerian Chris Echeta has produced a large corpus of works, most of them pursuing social themes and satirizing poor leadership and the consequent suffering of the common man. Echeta's thematic concerns can be traced to his experiences of the brutal Civil War (and which brought his early education to a halt from 1967 to 1970 (Onuzulike, 2008).

The sculpture titled *Politician I* (see plate 3) produced by Echeta in 1979 which antedates Onuzulike's Suyascape Project is a pointer that much thought was not given to the above statement. In 2002, Echeta produced *Sacking of a Generation* which Onuzulike also refers to in the same treatise.

Inasmuch as he claimed to have explored the possibilities for installation with ceramic elements along with other media, one wonders where ceramic stops and where sculpture starts. One sees a mixed

media sculpture and still ponders to find the appropriate definition for installation.

The Sculptures of Ozioma Onuzulike

The artist used majorly three materials for the production of the four sculptures that made up the series, which are namely: fired clay, mild steel rods and wood. However, acrylic is coyly used in *Suyascape III* (See Plate 7), while newspaper cuttings are added in *Suyascape IV* (See Plate 8). With these five materials, only one shares a commonality that can be found between sculpture and ceramics; Onuzulike has been able to establish a corpus of work whose three-dimensionality is unquestionable. He has used clay in this series to challenge sculptors to a bout through this successful combination of materials. One of the outstanding qualities of his achievement is the exceptional natural colouration that he achieved on the hue of the *suya* and tree trunk.

The colour of the *suya* was achieved with an admixture of laterite stone which he used to stimulate the spices that are sprinkled on the real thing. The wood that represents the barbeque stand is given an aging effect via a scorching process. Resemblance to reality is another feat that the artist has achieved in *Suyascape I* (Plate 5), *Suyascape II* (See Plate 6) *and Suyascape III* (Plate 7) before the addition of newspaper cut-outs in *Suyascape IV.* Thematically speaking, there is a high temptation to postulate that the socio-political issues that the works attempt to address were an afterthought. One takes this position because it appears that the issues are evident only in *Suyascape IV.* This postulation now places the rest of the work on purely a representational position, given the actuality that an artist reserves the right to use his licence for the titling of his products.

The inclusion of newspaper cut-outs in *Suyascape IV* veers this discourse to a critical point since it appears to be the only work in the series that addresses the artist's main thrust in the project. So, after all said and sculpted, Onuzulike was not exactly able to locate the forms with its set out thematic intentions. It is pertinent also to state that *suya* which is the driving force of the project was not given its right details as regards typology and his supposed recipe for the grilling of *suya* that is not exactly correct. *Suya* can also be made from chicken, fish and mutton while the ingredients vary from one locality to the other. Nonetheless, Onuzulike has to a large extent reiterated the inseparable link between sculpture and ceramics, though leaning more to sculpture.



Plate 1: Untitled. Abbas Ahuwan, 1989, Terra cotta



Plate 2: Egwu Enu Ani, Demas Nwoko Terra cotta



Plate 3: Politician I; Chris Echeta 1979, Terraccota

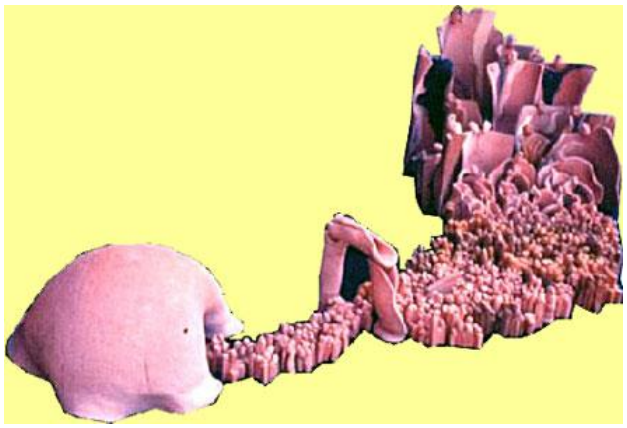

Plate 4: Sacking of a Generation; Chris Echeta 2002, Terraccota with engobe



Plate 5: Suyascape I
2001, Terraccota, metal and wood



Plate 6: Suyascape II
2001, Terraccota, metal and wood



Plate 7: Suyascape III
2003, Terraccota, metal and wood



Plate 8: Suyascape IV
2003, Terraccota, metal and wood
143 x 127 x 89 cm

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