POSTMODERNISM AND BOUNDARY-BREAKING: RETHINKING THE CERAMIC-NESS OF CONTEMPORARY CERAMIC SCULPTURES

ASOGWA I.[1] **& EMODI A.**[2]
1. Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
Umar Suleiman College of Education,
Gashua, Yobe State
email: ifeanyichiukwuasogwa@gmail.com
Department of Fine Arts,
Yaba College of Technology,
Yaba, Lagos

Abstract
Under the contemporary or postmodernist art practice, standard rules are neglected as new grounds are tested and boundaries broken. Consequently, defining factors seem to be mixed up, to the extent that it is becoming difficult to differentiate between independent subjects in art. Specifically, separating line between ceramics and sculpture, especially with regards to structure and functionality of form, has been prominent and clear in the Western educational orientation, even though they are related in many ways and share ideologies in ceramic-sculpture. With the development of conceptual art, including installation, however, this separating line is getting blurred; making it difficult for the two areas of the art to be distinguished. Concerns are beginning to grow around this development, especially the ceramic qualification of some art pieces tagged as ceramic-sculptures. This paper reflected on the ceramic-ness of some ceramic-sculpture pieces produced by some eminent artists. Comparative analyses, proved some of them as sculptures, possessing no significant features or characteristics of ceramics. The paper, therefore, calls for proper re-evaluation of ceramic-sculpture in the contemporary art institutions for proper development of art.

Introduction
Ceramic art is one of the earliest forms of art and has consistently served as the 'black-box' of human civilization. It has developed with societies and most times, its elements (remains) are looked upon as epistemology of vanished cultures and civilizations. Right from the pre-historic, through traditional, to modernistic art periods, ceramic art has endured and metamorphosed in structure and function. In the present post modernistic period, ceramic art is still evolving alongside the general artistic order in which inter-disciplinary connectedness and traditional or tribal value revival, in exploration with the contemporary ones, are the favoured approaches. According to Stokstad (2008) postmodernist approaches to art, have to do with experimentation, breaking standard rules and testing new grounds and relating past experiences to the present.

Recent developments in ceramic art show that, this three dimensional art type is engrossed in postmodernism. Ceramic art suddenly transformed and started wearing attributes of sculpture; most times, placing aesthetic appeal over functionality in its forms. As Okpe (2005) notes, the strict tradition of practice, of sculpture for sculptors and pottery for ceramicists, began to decline considerably in the late 1970s. according to him, sculptors began experimenting with ceramic methods of hand-built forms, while

their ceramic counterparts, took an interest in producing figurative work, outside of the pure dictates of sculpture.

These products of interdisciplinary romance between ceramic art and sculpture became known as ceramic-sculptures. In such pieces, ceramic elements or identity are clearly visible in their structures, even though they function aesthetically as sculptures. Ceramic-sculpture is widely seen as bearing good characteristics of postmodernist art, which borrows from past tribal experiences. This is so because in ancient cultures, especially in the traditional African society, evident in Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, and Nok cultures, ceramics are not separated from sculptures; irrespective of the material and process of production. According to Onuzulike (2008), ceramic-sculpture gives rise to intriguingly expressive forms, appreciated by most people.

Due to its good acceptance, many prominent sculptors, including El Anatsui of Ghana but based in Nigeria and ceramic artists like Eddie Kent (British), took to ceramic-sculpture, in their earlier artistic practices; as it provides opportunity for greater creativity and self-expression in an area usually known for mechanical and stereotype production, Ceramic Art Institutions and Departments, started giving special attention to ceramic-sculpture in their academic programmes. Ceramic Art Departments in most art schools in Europe and America became popular with ceramic-sculpture. In Nigeria, Ceramic Art Departments in Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, University of Nigeria Nsukka and the then University of Ife, led the way in embracing and institutionalizing ceramic-sculpture. From these places, it spread like wild fire, and by the 1980s, ceramic-sculpture had entered every ceramic institution in Nigeria. Onuzulike (2010) describes the kind of experimentations going on in ceramic art via ceramic-sculpture as, "Pushing the Boundaries of Ceramic Art …"

With the coming on board of installation or conceptual art, in which idea is placed over physical material, in artistic production, ceramic art tends to have "pushed the boundaries" to a stage where ceramic identity is not visible or noticeable in ceramic-sculptures. Presently, any three dimensional arts object, especially those in clay medium and produced by a person who undertook lesson in ceramics, is simply referred to as ceramic-sculpture. Drawing public attention to the widening scope of ceramic-sculpture, Harnetty (2013) rather commands: "Explore the virtually limitless world of ceramic sculpture. … From the diminutive to the monumental, the figurative to the abstract, there are endless possibilities for expression in the form of ceramic sculpture". These limitless possibilities of expression include structure, material, and technique of work. In 2003, Ozioma Onuzulike of Ceramic Art, University of Nigeria Nsukka, installed flattened and metal-grilled terra-cotta (clay) on decorated log, in his "Suya" stories (see Figure 15), and called it ceramic-sculpture. Similarly, in 2008, Tamara Coleman of ceramic studies, Scripps College, California, produced a ceramic-sculpture titled Memento Mori (see Figure 14), in which mutilated dead animal was simply modeled, baked and displayed. The number of ceramic artists who produce such ceramic-less ceramic-sculptures is on increase and Ceramic Art Departments are gradually going mainly sculptural, in their ceramic-sculpture programmes. Outlining its academic programme, the Ceramic Section of the Art Department at Scripps College (2013), states:

> The Ceramics major at Scripps College provides students with a firm grounding in ceramic history and technology while exposing them to the broader vistas of the contemporary fine art world. … Emphasis is placed upon conceptual development, material exploration, experimentation, and craftsmanship. Students are expected to be intellectually curious, self-motivated, and open to advice and criticism. They are encouraged to take risks and challenge themselves at every level. Medium exclusivity is discouraged in favor of an artistic methodology in which concept comes first and determines the choice of materials. Operating within the larger context of the student's liberal arts education, the ceramics area and Art Department at large encourage interdisciplinary approaches to thinking and working.

> The ceramics area at Scripps is headed by multidisciplinary artist and Professor Adam Davis. In addition to teaching the ceramic curriculum - Beginning Ceramic Sculpture, Beginning Wheel Throwing, and Intermediate and Advanced Ceramics - Professor Davis also teaches Sculpture, Fundamentals of Art, and Representations of the Male Body in Contemporary Art and Culture, a course that is offered as part of the Scripps Core programming.

Describing the content of her academic programme too, Ceramic Section of College of Liberal and Fine Arts, The University of Texas(2013) notes:

> The studio environment and ceramic facility are intended to provide students the opportunity for research and exploration of the medium for artistic expression. No particular style, aesthetic or theoretical approach is stressed over any other. While command of the material, and knowledge of its history and tradition are fundamental, students are encouraged to experience other disciplines and integrate those practices into their ceramic work.

The major worry and concern about this development is that the gap between ceramics and sculpture is being bridged. People are getting confused over what ceramic art is, exactly and how it differs from sculpture. According to Wilson (2013) the role of a pottery instructor in an art school in England was an uncertain one, as regards relations both with fine art and with industrial design. The author interrogates: "What was the point of learning ceramics in an art school?" pointing out that "Ceramics now stood for everything that was joyful and accessible" .Reporting the confusion brought about by this development, Cruise (2012) informs:

> In South Africa, a juried competition, The Corobrik National Ceramics Exhibition, is held every second year under the auspices of Ceramics Southern Africa (formerly the Association of Potters of Southern Africa). Members of the association submit objects made from fired clay for selection. …The juxtaposition of vessels and sculptures raises uncomfortable questions, forcing R. Lapping Sellars to question the nature of pots and sculptures. She in effect asked when is a pot not a pot and when is it a sculpture…. does it matter that a pot is sometimes not a pot and a sculpture is sometimes a pot?…what on earth are life-size sculptures doing in the middle of the room? ... The first and most obvious division would be to divorce the potters from the sculptors, the latter being a splinter group of artists who really should not be stealing the thunder from the makes of finely glazed casserole dishes.

Confused about the difference between ceramics and sculpture, one Debonair (2009) calls for worldwide assistance:

> I have the option of signing up for sculpture or ceramics, but there is no description given. I was wondering what I could generally expect to see in these kinds of classes. Does sculpture mean you are trying to model something else and ceramics are more free form? I'm clueless so please help! thanks!

About 40 art students and instructors, most of them in ceramics, responded to the statement and attempted providing the needed clue. Over 90% of these respondents demonstrated the great difficulties in distinguishing clearly between contemporary ceramic pieces from sculptures. They tended to see ceramics as restricted to clay medium and sculpture as involving wider range of materials including clay. They pointed out that any art form made with clay, especially when it is fired, could be regarded as ceramics. Specifically, one of the respondents (name withheld) notes that "Ceramics is ceramic art or pottery; it can be anything made from any kind of fire-able clay. Pottery is making pots, ceramics is not limited to making pots as some would believe. There is plenty of art and sculpture made from clay".

The questions that this research seeks to address, therefore, include: is the ceramic-

ness of a work of art about the use of clay medium, firing and surface glazing? What particular characteristic feature(s) give(s) ceramic art identity? Where rests the ceramic-ness of some emerging ceramic-sculptures, being referred to as, ceramic installations? Answers to these questions, no doubt, will help diffuse the tension and confusion presently surrounding ceramic art, in its boundary-breaking approaches and interdisciplinary relationship derives. Addressing sufficiently, the issues raised in the above questions, would require close reflection on what I would call, ceramic-sculptures with ceramic identity, and ceramic-sculptures without ceramic identity; but not without first looking at the feature(s) which give(s) ceramics identity.

Feature(s) of Ceramic Art

Ceramic art is generally function-specific in its structure. Presenting a historical account of ceramics, Washington Education.com (2013) notes:

> Ceramics are classified as inorganic and nonmetallic materials that are essential to our daily lifestyle. Ceramic and materials engineers are the people who design the processes in which these products can be made, create new types of ceramic products, and find different uses for ceramic products in everyday life.
>
> Ceramics are all around us. This category of materials includes things like tile, bricks, plates, glass, and toilets. Ceramics can be found in products like watches (quartz tuning forks-the time keeping devices in watches), snow skies (piezoelectric-ceramics that stress when a voltage is applied to them), automobiles (sparkplugs and ceramic engine parts found in racecars), and phone lines. They can also be found on space shuttles, appliances (enamel coatings), and airplanes (nose cones). Depending on their method of formation, ceramics can be dense or lightweight. Typically, they will demonstrate excellent strength and hardness properties; however, they are often brittle in nature. Ceramics can also be formed to serve as electrically conductive materials, objects allowing electricity to pass through their mass, or insulators, materials preventing the flow of electricity. Some ceramics, like superconductors, also display magnetic properties.

Going more specific, Ceramic Arts Daily (2013) points out that "in art history, ceramics and ceramic art mean art objects such as figures, tiles, and tableware made from clay and other raw materials by the process of pottery"; adding that "the word 'ceramics' comes from the Greek *keramikos* (κεραμικος), meaning 'pottery', which in turn comes from *keramos* (κεραμος), meaning 'potter's clay'." What is outstanding and which provides specific identity to ceramics in the descriptions above, is shape. Ceramic is shaped or structured to serve a functional purpose. Ceramic Arts Daily (2013) captures this view thus: "Elements of ceramic art, upon which different degrees of emphasis have been placed at different times, are the shape of the object…". One of the respondents to the question about the differences between ceramics and sculpture, who in my mind is closer to the truth of the matter, Tigrille (answers.yahoo.com 2013) describes the two as follows:

> Sculpture refers to any 3D artwork, no matter what it is made from. Sculpture classes will expect from you that you produce art works instead of functional items. The materials and techniques you will be exposed to depend on the facilities and the teacher. Ceramics classes restrict what you work with to clay. A ceramics class might be more restricted to making functional items and learning to use a pottery wheel, but it really depends on the teacher. They could do hand building and let you do clay sculpture.

What should be deduced from this position is that in describing any artwork as ceramic-sculpture, it must wear the specific characteristic feature of ceramics; which is function-specific structure. In the first place, it has to be a pot, cup, bowl, tile or insulator material; process of work not-with-standing. Normally, ceramic-sculpture is produced through two main ways:

1. By accidentally or deliberately, tampering with the functional structure of a ceramic ware, to enhance its aesthetic value.
2. By imposing a specific functional ceramic structure on part of a sculpture piece, through the same accidental or deliberate process.

So, ceramic-sculpture is either a sculpturally enhanced ceramic or a ceramic-ally enhanced sculpture. It is not, therefore, the use of clay as a medium or a piece being thrown on wheel; neither is it by firing nor glazing a work that makes it a ceramic. Clay medium and most of the working techniques used in the production of ceramic wares, are also employed in other disciplines, including sculpture and engineering. So, in evaluating the ceramic-ness of a ceramic-sculpture, it is the structure rather than clay medium, firing and glazing of a piece that matters.

Ceramic-Sculpture with Ceramic Identity

The following works are examples of ceramic-sculptures which possess both ceramic and sculpture qualities. Depressed Bowl (Figure1), as can be seen, was initially structured as a bowl but this original structure was later distorted by accidental or deliberate forces, which pressed-in some of its parts. This distortion, made the bowl loose the ability to serve its normal ceramic function adequately, but the inter-play of concave and convex forms, makes it highly interesting aesthetically. Perhaps, it was when the designer realized the strength of aesthetic appeal on what he/she might have initially thought to be a deformation of a ceramic ware, that he/she adapted it, for that purpose and went ahead to give it the present finishing. Structurally, it is a ceramic ware (bowl) but functionally, it is a sculpture (used for aesthetics).

Similarly, Pot (Figure 2) is structurally a pot but functionally, a sculpture; serving only aesthetic purpose. Head-Vessel and Grace (Figures 3 & 4) are structurally sculptures (Head and Torso) but functionally, they are ceramic wares, serving as dish and flower pot respectively.

Some ceramic-sculptures can also be complex; involving more rigorous manipulations than the simple depression of parts; in any case, however, ceramic features are still clearly visible on them. For instance, El Anatsui's Chambers of Memory (Figure 5) shows a profile (side-view of a human-head) cut or carved out of a local pot. Similarly, Chris Echeta's Politician I (Figure 6) is a composition of figures carved out of earthen-pots and his Evidence of Good Living (Figure7) shows a figure, also realized by adjustment of a local pot. Strikingly, Dawn Whitehand's Memorial (Figure 8) may look quite installation but it is a heap or assemblage of distorted pots; thus it is a ceramic-sculpture piece.

Ceramic-Sculpture without Ceramic Identity

The following ceramic-sculptures have no clear ceramic features in both their structures and functions. The reason why they are regarded as ceramic-sculptures is probably because they possess high aesthetic sculptural-values and were produced by trained ceramic artists. Order-wise, they are excellent sculpture pieces, free from ceramic connotations. For instance, Clay Cube Suspended by Nylon Line (Figure 9), is a work in fired clay, placed artistically on a wooden stand. It is not an outshoot of tile or intricate box and neither is it part of any particular ceramic ware. It is not also adapted to serve any ceramic purpose. By both the structure and function, Clay Cube Suspended by Nylon Line, is not a ceramic-sculpture; and so also Eddie Kent's Geometric Ceramic-Sculpture. They are rather beautiful sculpture pieces.

Although Mark Gordon used a specialty mortar to attach bone-dry clay pieces together, a process quite commonly used in ceramics, the outcome (Figure 10) is not a ceramic, both in structure and function. Similarly, Ozioma Onuzulike must have undergone strenuous ceramic processes of soaking, sieving, spreading, kneading, pinching and firing clay in his Suya-scape (Figure 15) and Casualties: Victims of Social Unrest I (Figure 18) but where are the ceramic features, either in the structure or function of the works?

Acceptably, ceramic designers can model and use figures, in full or parts, to demonstrate ingenuity in their creative process, but such pieces are not ceramics,

until they are adapted into specific ceramic functions. One wonders, therefore, the very ceramic intentions in Drury Brandt's Monster (Figure 11), Wilma Cruise's There is No Father (Figure 13) and Head to Head (Figure 17), Tamara Coleman's Memento Mori (Figure 14), and Christopher Berban's Hand (Figure 16). Or does incompleteness of body-parts make a modeled figure ceramics?

Conclusion

From the analyses so far, it is obvious that the direction the postmodernist ceramists are taking ceramic-sculpture, both in the programme development of institutions and private academic practices, will strip it the ceramic aura and bridge the natural gap between two related but independent subjects. Ceramic content of ceramic-sculpture as an academic programme of many art institutions should, therefore, be reviewed to inculcate ceramic characteristics and when sculpture is produced by any person, whether or not a trained sculptor, it should be called sculpture. By both definition and scope, ceramic-sculpture does not connote a sculpture piece produced by a ceramic artist and the sculpture-ness of a sculpture piece does not lie on the artistic specialization of the producer but on the form and what it is dedicated to.

What is done in ceramics as a subject does not conflict with what is done in sculpture; so producing sculpture in the name of ceramics is a deliberate encroachment which endangers interdisciplinary studies. Ceramics and Sculpture have a lot in common and should continue to relate but when the two meet to share ideology, be it doctored from a monolithic frame, the signature of one should not be completely overshadowed by the other. By so doing, the present confusion surrounding what ceramics really is, in comparison with sculpture, will be cleared. Each field of art has sufficient ingredients and grounds on which 'endless possibilities' can be maintained; no matter the changes in civilization.



Figure 1: Modern Ceramic Sculpture, Depressed Bowl, zeospot.com



Figure 2: Pot, perforated and depressed clay pot, 2008; Rebecca Cross



Figure 3: Head-Vessel, painted clay, 2008, Alvin Starkman



Figure 4: Grace; Compressed earthen cups, Philip Lyons



Figure 5: Chambers of memory; Stoneware clay, 1977 El Anatsui



Figure 6: Politician I, Terra-cotta pieces, Chris Echeta



Figure 7: Evidence of Good living, Glazed Pot, Chris Echeta



Figure 8: Memorial, Heap (installation) of deformed pots; University of Ballarat, Australia, 2009, Dawn Whitehand

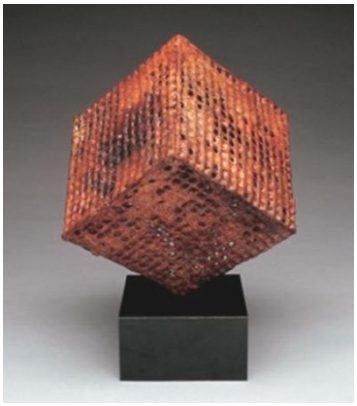

Figure 9: Clay cube suspended by nylon line, paper, clay and steel wire, 2009; Linda Mau



Figure 10: Ceramic sculpture; Bone-dry clay and mortar, 2008, Mark Gordon



Figure 11: Monster, Bust of a distorted figure, Ht width 68cm x depth 36cm, 2008, Drury Brandt



Figure 12: Geometric Ceramic-sculpture, copper based Raku; Glaze Technique, 2004 Eddie Kent



Figure 13: There is no father; ceramic figure with wire, metal stool and wooden base; University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1990, Wilma Cruise



Figure 14: Memento Mori, Ceramic-Sculpture (Terra-cotta) Scripps College, University of California, 2008, Tamara Coleman



Figure 15: Suya-scape III, Terra-cotta, metal, wood and acrylics, 2003, Ozioma Onuzulike



Figure 16: Hand (Ceramic-Sculpture), Terra-cotta, The University of Texas, Christopher Berban



Figure 17: Head to Head, Bronze and Ceramic clay on steel base; 360cm, 2007, Wilma Cruise



Figure 18: Casualties; Victims of social unrest I; Terracotta, copper wire, aluminum, binding rope, 2000; Ozioma Onuzulike

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