

BEYOND OBSCENITY AND BANALITY: NUDE IMAGERIES AS POTENT AND EXPRESSIVE CREATIVE METAPHOR

ODOH, GEORGE C.

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
e-mail: odohgeorgechuka@yahoo.com

ANIKPE, EKENE A.

Department of Fine and Applied Arts,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
nazinazz@yahoo.com

Abstract

The nude figure as a creative metaphor features prominently in art creation. From the earliest civilizations to the present, its expressiveness has been acknowledged, appropriated and exploited by generations of artists in diverse ways. Response to it is equally diverse and is strongly indicative of the numerous factors that circumscribe its creation and appreciation within and across cultures and societies. This essay, examines the representation of the nude figure in art against the backdrop of criticisms and contestations that usually surround the subject. Visual and textual materials were also used to show how some modern Nigerian artists have appropriated the nude figure as a creative tool that addresses existential issues. The resilience of the nude figure attests to its potency as a highly expressive pictorial element.

Introduction

The resilience of the nude figure in the history and practice of art underscores its importance as a potent and expressive subject matter. This is clearly evident in the art historical discourse of western and African civilizations. In its earliest form, it was not only highly abstract and simplified, but was also imbued with inner meanings that were relevant to the central myths and belief systems of early human societies. The sculpted piece, *The Nude Woman*, or *Venus of Willendorf* as it is often referred to, dates to around 28,000-25,000 BC and is regarded as “one of the oldest and the most famous of the prehistoric female figures” (Klein, 2009, p.17).

Over time, nude figures have evolved, witnessing remarkable changes along formalistic, stylistic and thematic lines. These modifications are clearly evident in the art history of ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece. In fact, the humanistic worldview of the Greeks during the 5th century BC, which proclaimed “a sound mind and a healthy body”, led to significant contributions in the fields of arts, sports, literature and science. The exaltation of man as the measure of all things led

Greek artists to elevate the human form to the level of serious subject matter. Ikwuemesi (1996) is of the view that “Greek paradigms in nudity became canons of later periods in art especially from the Renaissance in the 15th century through the birth of modernism during the dying years of the last century” (p.1). The resilience of nude imageries in art creation affirms its seamless possibilities as a viable elocutionary pictorial tool. The renowned Renaissance artist, Michelangelo, has been quoted as saying, “What spirit is so empty and blind, that it cannot recognize the fact that the foot is more noble than the shoe, and skin more beautiful than the garment with which it is clothed?” (as cited in Yoder, 2012, n.pg) In recognizing the highly expressive nature of the nude figure, numerous artists have represented it in diverse modes reflecting different styles, media, technique, formalism and thematic predilection. The art movements that mark western art cultures as well as the historical narrative of classical and modern African art clearly show the creative potency of the nude figure.

However, in spite of its flexibility and resourcefulness as a potent creative resource, the nude figure is also the subject of controversy especially when viewed with the critical gaze of morality. Along the morality clause, certain works of art that feature nude imageries are viewed as being obscene and not suitable for public consumption. This is understandable, considering differences in personal and collective viewpoints arising from the multiplicity of organized societies that conform to peculiar societal values along with diverse socio-political, cultural and religious affiliations. When exposed to these modulating filters, works of art, especially those that contain nude imageries generate criticism and contestations that raise questions. These questions, for example, seek to investigate the notion of a generally acceptable criterion for identifying works of art containing nude imageries as belonging to either high art or obscene art. It also raises the question of what the prime signifiers of obscenity in works of art are. Are they functions of its formalism or its thematic content? Also, regardless of the context in which they are viewed, do nude imageries possess expressive qualities which make them potent creative metaphors? If the answer to the latter is in the affirmative, which the writers believe, in what ways have artists exploited these qualities in the creation of works of art that address existential issues? The answers to these questions lie at the heart of this essay.

The nude figure and the contested terrain

Whether as the glorification of the human body or as a tool for addressing existential situations, the nude figure bestrides all genres of the visual arts. In the discourse and practice of art, the preponderance of female nudes over male nudes, highlights its preference as a subject matter of choice among artists. Nead (1992) writes:

Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes ‘Art’. The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it

is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment (p.2).

Rationalizing reasons for this prevalence has been the source of controversies and intense debates depending on peculiar viewpoints. Emotional considerations have been explored to rationalize this dominance. Ikwuemesi (1996) notes:

It has been posited that since art is a highly emotional thing, women, being paragons of human emotionalism can be more expressive, as subjects in art, of the emotional stirrings of the artists mind. If the first of the above reason appear spurious, the second becomes more convincing, not only for the above special position of the woman in different societies and cultures, first as symbols of regeneration, then as embodiments of moral chastity and recently as man's undaunted rival, but also for the fact that the woman in her physical make up, is almost always a pleasant sight to behold (p.4).

The emotionality of the female personae is also re-echoed by Odoh (2005) who proffers that "The average female is a fountain of emotions" (p.18). Feminist groups have also reacted to the preponderance of female nudes in art. The trajectory of some of the arguments raised by these feminist groups, hint to the gratification of the sensual desires of men, as one of the major reasons for the representation of the female nude in patriarchal culture (Ikwuemesi, 1996, p.4). Determining the morality of the female nude in art is a difficult task given the range of variables that circumscribes its creation within specific cultures. This difficulty is reaffirmed by Nead (1992) who notes that the absence of a critical framework that addresses feminist art history makes it somewhat difficult to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the meanings, values and assumptions that characterize the female nude within patriarchal culture (n.pg). She however professes that "the representation of the female body within the forms and frames of high art is a metaphor for the value and significance of art generally" (Nead, 1992, n.pg).

As a pictorial element, the sensitivity surrounding the nude figure arises from its ability to trigger spontaneous and unconscious responses to notions of sexuality even when erotic emissions may not be central to the content of the image. The import of this assertion is that responses to nude imageries in art can sometimes stimulate varying degrees of sexuality in the minds of viewers and as such, initiate different responses. Misinterpreting the concept of nudity in art can also initiate zones of conflict and contestation. This can arise from the inability to differentiate between nudity and nakedness. In clarifying the difference between the two, Kenneth Clarke, as cited in Ikwuemesi (1996: 5) notes:

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies the embarrassment which most of us feel in the condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries in educative usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed. In fact... where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art.

Apart from the clarification given by Kenneth Clarke, psychological responses to concepts of nudity and nakedness can also be found in the Holy Bible. According to the *Good News Bible* (Today's English version), the book of Genesis, chapter 2, verse 25 states, "The man and his woman were both naked, but they were not embarrassed"(p.6). This statement not only validates Clarke's physiological and psychological views of the state of being nude, it also projects nudity as a divine and positive consciousness of the human spirit which reflects purity of the mind and body, perfection and innocence. However, after the sin of disobedience was committed in the Garden of Eden, Genesis, chapter 3, verses 8 to 10 narrates the negative psychological perception of nakedness. The verses read:

That evening they heard the Lord God walking in the garden, and they hid from him among the trees. But the Lord God called out to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you, because I was naked."(p.6).

The perception of nudity and nakedness within the psychological context of the above examples can also be applied to the critique of works of art. Depending on usage, it can either embody the positive aspects of the human spirit or submerge itself in the murky waters of the vulgar and the obscene. Deriving from this, one may be tempted to ask, what constitutes high art or obscene art in the appreciation of works of art containing nude imageries?

Determining the answer to this question involves the consideration of a whole lot of variables which circumscribe the dynamics of art creation, art criticism and art appreciation. When these variables are carefully analyzed, it becomes obvious that arriving at clear cut criteria for labeling works of art with nude imageries as falling within the boundaries of what may be considered high art or obscene art is problematic and almost impracticable. Most of these variables are components of the environment which to a large extent, moderate the relationship between art and the environment. They include socio-political, economic, religious, ethnic, cultural, physiological and psychological components. Subsumed within the internal structures of some of these

components, are such concepts like colonization, post-colonization, acculturation and globalization. These concepts strongly influence the character and nature of some of these environmental components that modulate the creation, perception, appreciation and understanding of art.

Examination of these filters shows that they are never constant, but vary across societies and cultures and as such, initiate different rules of engagement. Amongst the parameters listed above, religion, perhaps, exerts the most significant and profound impact on the perception of nudity in art. Different world religions exhibit different levels of tolerance to nude imageries and this also predetermines responses to them. The sheer volume of nude imageries found in Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church, in relation to most other religions, is a typical example. Restrictions placed by religion on the representation of the nude figure can also generate contestations at social and cultural levels. For example, a work of art containing nude imageries, viewed as conforming to high art in most western cultures, will be regarded as being obscene and in bad taste in a Muslim environment.

Apart from religion-induced impositions, social and cultural differences can also influence encounters and responses to nude imageries. These differences do not exist across cultures and societies alone, but can also occur within specific cultures and societies as well depending on personal and collective idiosyncrasies. In his analysis of homosexuality in American avant-garde paintings, Weinberg (1993) is of the view that “such a discussion necessarily involves analysis of how the dominant culture marks out the boundaries of acceptable behavior” (p.xiii). Relating this to the perception of the works of the American modernist painter and homosexual, Charles Demuth, Weinberg relates how Marcel Duchamp, in rising to the artist’s defense observes that “the work of art was undermined by too-close scrutiny of the sexual identity of its creator”, insisting that Demuth’s sexual preference had nothing to do with the quality of his work and his art in general (Weinberg, 1993, p. xiii). Duchamp’s assertions establish a bias which references the domineering influence of a dominant culture over a sub culture. Rationalized along certain contexts, Duchamp’s views may score valuable points but the fact remains that it would be highly illogical to alienate an artist’s peculiar sexual preference in the discussion of his works when this peculiar sexual preference informs to a large extent, the content of his subject matter.

In Classical African art, societal views on sexuality have been known to moderate the representation of nude images. This, to a certain extent, accounts for the profuse abstraction and stylization that characterize most Classical African sculptures. In spite of colonization, acculturation and globalization, Africa’s traditional creative philosophy still exerts considerable influence on the creative dynamics of modern African art. Ikwuemesi (1996) acknowledges this when he notes:

The shadow of Africa’s tradition remains so tall and intimidating that both fun-loving youngsters and married people always save most of their intimate acts for the

bedroom, or at least, away from public glare. It is for the same reason that an average African artist may not often celebrate nudity merely to raise in the spectator ideas or desires appropriate to the material subject or to satisfy the demands of concealed libido (pp. 4-5).

The first example cited above introduces a bias between the artist and the audience. It exposes the sensitive nature of the psychological and physiological relationship between the artist and his audience. In the contemplation of an image, it is quite logical to assume that the content of the image coupled with the intent of the designer or artist, equals the effect it will have on the viewer. When there is an apparent disconnect between the artist's creative intent and the viewer's perception of the created output, conflicts and contestations are bound to occur. A clear understanding of the factors that define this equation may not completely eliminate areas of conflict in art criticism, but it will to a great extent, provide the necessary handle for engaging issues and contestations that such works of art may provoke.

Having highlighted the different filters which modulate the portrayal and perception of the nude image in art, it is also noteworthy that certain usages of nude imageries in art actually allude to sexually explicit imageries. Again, the question of intent arises. Is it merely to satisfy prurient interests or is the artist making a direct allusion to a sexually depraved society? Against this backdrop, it becomes expedient to define pornography so as to establish the difference between the occurrence of the nude figure in high art and its existence in pornographic materials. Pornography involves the use of explicit images of sexuality. The underlying idea is to show naked people or sexual acts with the intention of making people feel sexually excited. Interestingly, against conventional practice of associating art with beauty, Huer (1987) suggests a rethink of this perception. He notes:

Art and pornography ostensibly stand on opposite ends of a traditional dichotomy: art is considered beautiful, while pornography is viewed by many to be ugly: art is moral, while pornography is often thought of as immoral, and so on. In this traditional model, beauty of course stands on the side of art. The connection between art and beauty has been so strong in our traditional cultural assumptions that philosophers consider both under one classification, "aesthetics", which means both "the study of art" and "the beautiful". In fact, we frequently assume art and beauty to be two sides of one coin; if not exactly identical, both are necessary to make up the whole. But is this really true? Is there actually a link between art and beauty or is our traditional view mistaken? (p.12).

Concepts of art, beauty and pornography, as distilled from Huer's analytical reasoning, reveal a closer relationship between pornography and beauty rather than art and beauty.

However, from whatever viewpoint that one subscribes to, the expressiveness of the nude within the framework of these three concepts cannot be denied.

A common mistake that most people make is to associate nudity exclusively with sexual activity. When this notion is transposed unto the imagery of the nude figure in art, it is often viewed as inherently wrong or obscene. This, yet again, highlights some of the ambiguities surrounding the interrogation of the nude figure in art. In the United States of America, *Miller vs. California*, a 1973 Supreme Court case, provided the framework for the United States Congress application of the legal definition of obscenity. The Miller ruling provided a narrow definition of obscenity and made it clear that only a small portion of sexually explicit material would fall within its boundary. Relying on what has come to be known as the “three prongs” of the Miller standard; works can be termed obscene only when it satisfies all three of the following criteria stated in the ruling. First, the average person applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest or sexual arousal. Secondly, the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specified by the statute and thirdly, the work taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. (<http://www.jahsonic.com/Miller.html>). An important aspect of this ruling is, the application of community standard instead of a national standard on issues relating to prurient interests or sexual arousal. This clearly acknowledges and accommodates divergent views while highlighting the frailty of a consensus agreement on what constitutes obscenity.

In spite of the controversies surrounding the nude figure, its expressiveness as a pictorial element cannot be denied. As an elocutionary tool, it speaks in various ways that not only agitate the human consciousness, but also addresses issues relating to humanity. Even if it elicits in the viewer ideas or desires that have sexual undertones, this in itself does not overshadow its capacity to function as a potent creative metaphor. As a visual language, it has inspired the creative sensibilities of generations of artists.

The nude as a creative metaphor in modern Nigerian art

The preponderance of nude figures throughout the history and practice of art underscores the amazing range of narratives that this creative tool offers in telling untold stories locked within stories of life experiences. Yoder (2012) notes:

The human body can be a beautiful thing to contemplate and this can be a useful artistic tool in and of itself, just as flowers, sunsets and mountains are similarly useful in the artist's toolkit. And if the point of art is primarily to express ideas about the nature of humanity, man's role in the world then it would be natural to expect the unadorned human form to be among the most powerful of those expressive tools and indeed it is (n.pg)

As an elocutionary device, the nude figure has been used to address a wide variety of themes such as love, hatred,

disillusionment, misery, oppression, fertility, innocence, spirituality, transcendental issues and morality, among others. The multiple modes of representing the nude figure in terms of style and technical delivery account for its versatility and flexibility as an expressive pictorial tool. These unique modes of representation sometimes serve as visual markers in the classification of various art epochs in western art cultures. In Classical African art, the representation of nude figures in sculptural form was central to the belief systems of the different cultures that created them. In modern African art, the nude figure has found eclectic usage, reflecting the influences of Classical African sculptures, colonization, acculturation and globalization.

Within the context of modern Nigerian art, numerous artists have appropriated the nude figure in various ways, not only to satisfy the yearnings of the creative spirit, but also to address existential issues. Its presence can be seen and felt in the different genres of the visual arts. It is therefore pertinent to observe how the works of some modern Nigerian artists appropriate the nude figure as an expressive pictorial device.

Odalisque (Plate 1), a pastel painting by Onyema Ofoedu-Okeke, is reminiscent of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, painted in 1814. Related in both form and content, Ofoedu's painting represents the artist's personal interpretation of the reclining nude, a subject that has enjoyed extensive representation in art. The painting interrogates feminine space, identifying its importance as a "sphere of influence and seat of hegemony crucial for even the man's prestige in the society" (Ofoedu-Okeke, 2009, p.4). It also presents a visual template through which images of black womanhood can be viewed, constructed and deconstructed. Apart from the formalistic and thematic concern, the painting also highlights the artist's peculiar technical predilection in terms of coloration and drawing ability.



Plate 1:
Onyema Ofoedu Okeke
Odalisque, 1993, pastel on paper
Source: *Boudoir Terracotta* (Exhibition catalogue)

Ere II (Plate 2) and *Ere I* (Plate 3) by Diseye Tantua also deal on issues of womanhood. The artist provides a snapshot of feminine space, one which attracts sensually at the physical level but erects a barrier at the psychological level. The glorification of feminine beauty is creatively woven around the concepts of introspection and contemplation. Obi Ekwenchi's *Emergence of a Virgin* (Plate 4) and *Maiden Dance* (Plate 5) viewed from the artist's indigenous cultural standpoint, invite dialogue with concepts of womanhood. Idealized beauty is woven around concepts relating to innocence, purity and rites of passage. *Maternity* (Plate 6), a sculptural piece by the same artist, shows the influence of Classical African sculptures in the use of abstraction and stylization. The theme revolves around the concept of motherhood. *Ripe Banana* (Plate 7), by Osvald Uruakpa, depicts the dance of maidens, a socio-cultural activity practiced in various traditional African societies when young maidens cross the puberty threshold into womanhood. Reminiscent of Ekwenchi's painting, *Maiden Dance*, in its thematic posturing, the style of technical delivery is different. In Uruakpa's painting, sweeping and energetic brushwork describes the forms of the dancing nude female figures seen from a back view. The attention of the dancers is drawn to an unknown source.



Plate 2:
Diseye Tantua
Ere II, oil on canvas
Source: *48 Hours with the Children of the Turtle* (Exhibition catalogue)

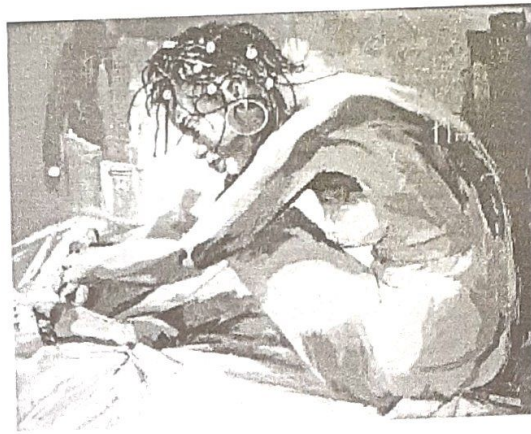


Plate 3:
Diseye Tantua
Ere I, oil on canvas
Source: *48 Hours with the Children of the Turtle* (Exhibition catalogue)



Plate 4:
Obi Ekwenchi
Emergence of a Virgin,
oil on canvas
Source: *Pinhole* (Exhibition catalogue)

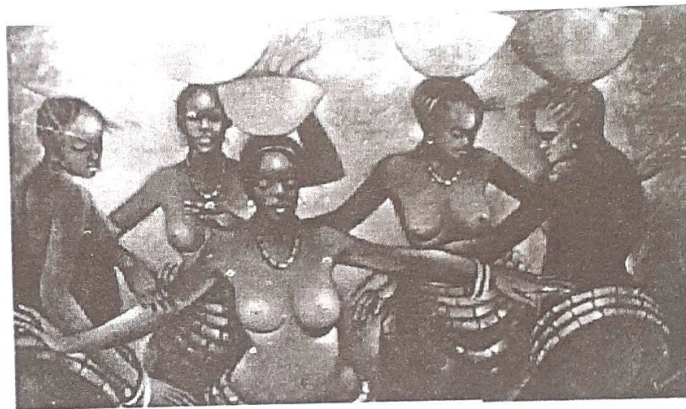


Plate 5:
Obi Ekwenchi
Maiden Dance, oil on canvas
Source: *Pinhole* (Exhibition catalogue)



Plate 6:
Obi Ekwenchi
Maternity, wood
Source: *Pinhole* (Exhibition catalogue)



Plate 7:
Osvald Uruakpa
Ripe Banana, oil on canvas, 2008
Source: *A Celebration of Modern Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists*

Female genital mutilation is the focus of Wande George's painting, *Ugly Hand that Maims* (Plate 8). The visual impact that the imagery evokes is quite intense. The pain and brutality of the intended action is all too obvious. *Beautifully Created* (Plate 9) by Anthony Nwahupwe celebrates the sensuality of the nude female figure. The fluidity of curves and contours that describe the figure evokes feelings of gracefulness and perfection. Gbenga Offo's *Reclining Nude* (Plate 10) represents the time-honored imagery of the female nude figure. The nudity of the voluptuous female is strongly subsumed under the artist's peculiar handling of pictorial surface. The colour orchestration is quite expressive and involves the breaking down of the pictorial surface into different planes of shifting color nuances. *Okonkwo* (Plate 11), the 15ft colossal sculpture by Cyril Okonkwo, represents one of the various representations of the male nude in the round in modern Nigeria art. Depicting the killing of Ikemefuna, it is a visual adaptation of a scene taken from Chinua Achebe's classical African novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The broad chest, bulging arms and massive legs as well as the carefully and delicately rendered veins on the figure's hands and arms are highly expressive of unabashed masculinity and savage power. *Spectators 2* (Plate 12), a painting by Bob Nosa Uwagboe presents disturbing and offensive images of a male and female nude figures. The genitalia of the figures are highly conspicuous but in spite of this, the painting does not conjure in the mind, feelings of sexual arousal but rather points to something sinister and depraved. If the two figures are merely spectators as the title suggests, it is left to the imagination to picture the spectacle they are beholding. The rough textured quality of the pictorial surface and the color scheme, as well as the rendition of facial features and genitalia heightens the feelings of sexual depravity and moral decadence.



Plate 8:
Wande George
Ugly Hands that Maims,
oil on canvas, 1999
Source: *A Celebration of Modern
Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists*

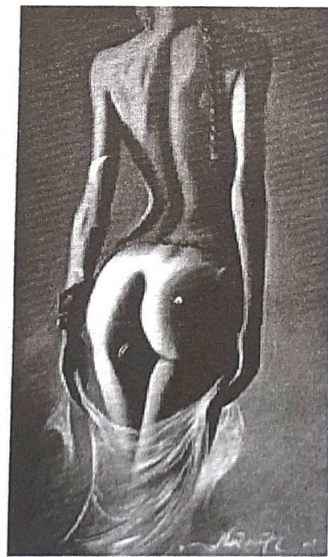


Plate 9:
Anthony Nwahupwe
Beautifully Created,
oil on canvas, 2009
Source: *A Celebration of Modern
Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists*

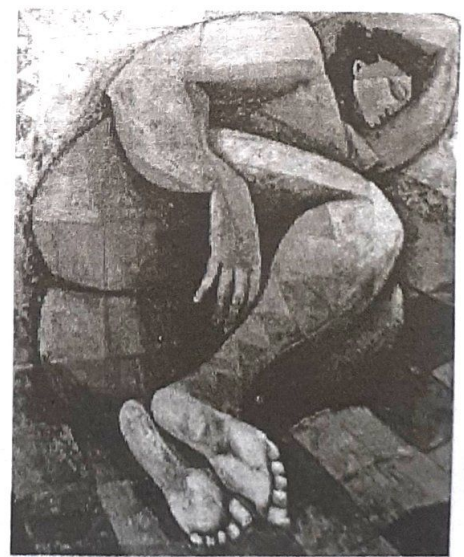


Plate 10:
Gbenga Offo
Reclining Woman, acrylics on canvas, 2009
Source: *A Celebration of Modern Nigerian
Art: 101 Nigerian Artists*

Nonso Nwosu's painting, *And the Trouble Began* (Plate 13), draws analogy to the biblical narrative of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The eating of the forbidden fruit which represents man's fall from grace is depicted using Africanized images of a nude male and female locked in a sexual embrace. The artist's interpretation of the sin of disobedience is two-pronged, the literal and the conceptual. The former is shown as the actual eating of the apple, the forbidden fruit while the latter is configured as indulgence in unholy sexual activity, an act perceived by the artist to be at the root of the problems plaguing mankind. *Chronicles from the Garden I* (Plate 14), a four-paneled painting by George Odoh, also exploits the imagery of paradise lost. The painting is a socio-political commentary on the leadership challenges in Nigeria. Themes such as corruption, oppression, deceit and disillusionment are addressed using imageries of nude males and females.

Exploitation and expectation are the central themes in another painting by George Odoh titled *As I Wait Silently for You* (Plate 15). The quest for good and credible leadership is symbolized using the imagery of a seated nude female figure waiting endlessly for true love. Obiora Udechukwu's ink drawings, *Man of Giant Testicles* (Figure 1) and *Woman of Giant Breasts* (Figure 2), do not incite sexual fantasies in spite of direct reference to erogenous zones of the human anatomy. The stylized nude figures reflect the artist's sensitivity to the poetic qualities of the *uli* idiom, a traditional art form, essentially practiced by Igbo women of southeastern Nigeria. Udechukwu's modern synthesis of this creative idiom, exploits its unique qualities such as linearity, two dimensionality, directness of execution, interplay of positive and negative spaces and rhythmic movement of lines, to create drawings that are highly expressive. Another ink drawing that relies on the design qualities of the *uli* idiom is Krydz Ikwuemesi's *Poverty and Apathy Driving the Children of Violence* (Figure 3). Using nude imageries, the drawing alludes to the socio-political and economic landscape of Nigeria where violence, oppression, poverty and apathy, have become common place.

The examples discussed above, represent a microcosm of the representation of the nude in modern Nigerian art. The bigger picture shows the resilience of the nude as a highly expressive creative resource that traverses time and space, weaving interesting narratives that interrogate, deconstructs and reconstructs humanity.

Conclusion

In this essay, the concept of the nude as a subject matter in art was examined. Historical references of its representation in world art history were also briefly discussed along with controversies and contestations that usually surround its depiction. In addressing some of the controversies and debates that trail the nude figure, modulating filters that significantly impact on the portrayal and appreciation of the nude imagery were looked at within the context of its perception as either belonging to high art or obscene art. Most of these filters are integral components of the environment which

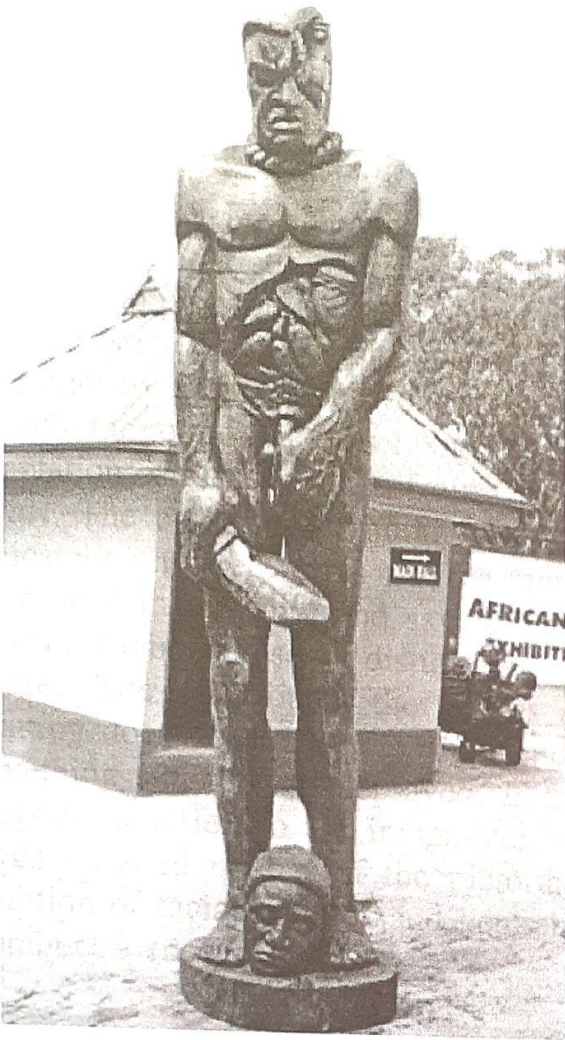


Plate 11:
Cyril Nwokoli
Okonkwo, wood, 2009
Source: A Celebration of Modern Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists

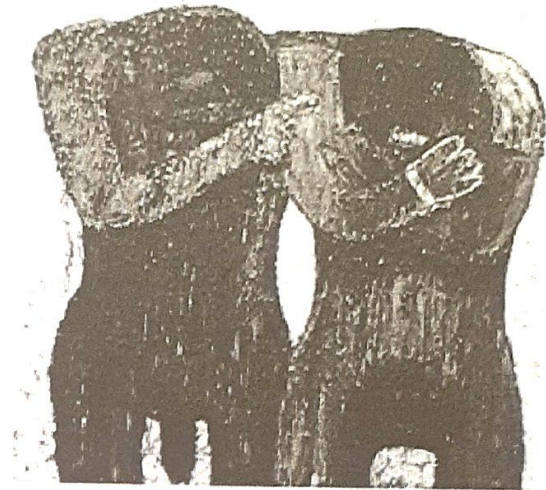


Plate 12:
Bob Nosa Uwagboe
Spectators 2, mixed media, 2010
Source: A Celebration of Modern Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists

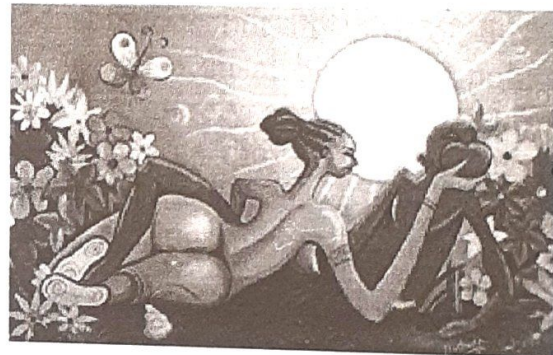


Plate 13:
Betrand Nonso Nwosu
And the Trouble Began, oil on canvas, 2009
Source: A Celebration of Modern Nigerian Art: 101 Nigerian Artists

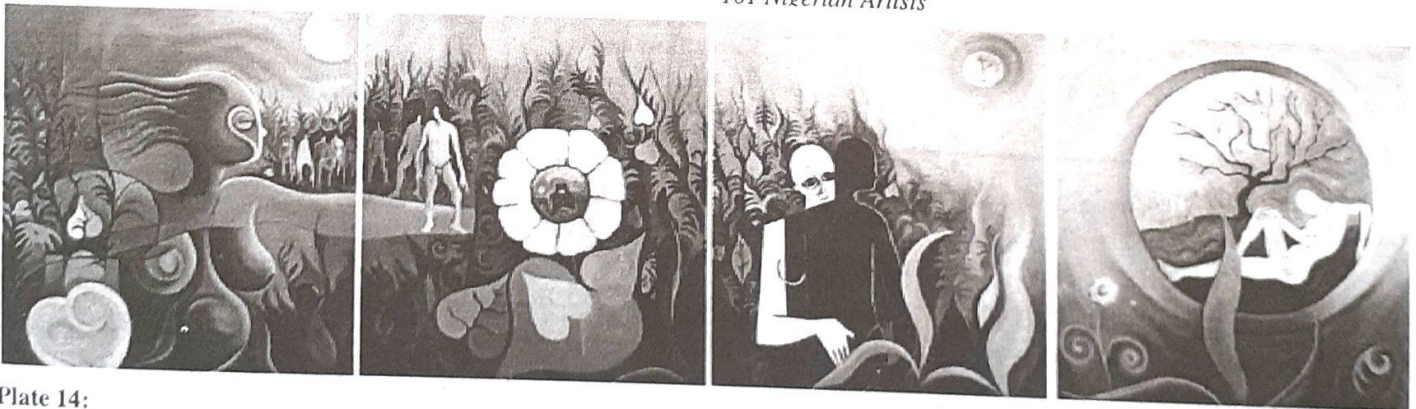


Plate 14:
George Odoh
Chronicles from the Garden, oil on canvas, 2005
Photo by: George Odoh

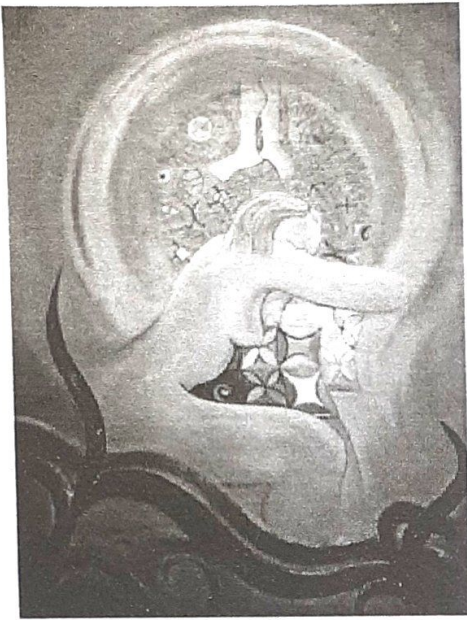


Plate 15:
George Odoh
As I Wait Silently for You, oil on canvas, 2005
Source: George Odoh

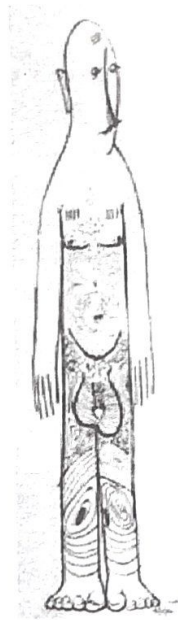


Figure 1:
Obiora Udechukwu
Man of Giant Testicles,
Pen and ink, 1966
Source: *So Far*,
(Exhibition catalogue)

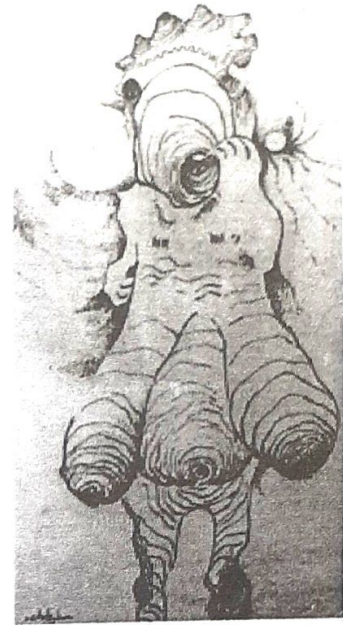


Figure 2:
Obiora Udechukwu
Woman of Giant Breasts,
Pen and ink, 1967
Source: *So Far*,
(Exhibition catalogue)



Figure 3:
Krydz Ikwemesi
Poverty and Apathy Driving the Children of violence,
Pen and ink
Source: *Songs of Gold 3* (Exhibition catalogue)

Conclusion

In this essay, the concept of the nude as a subject matter in art was examined. Historical references of its representation in world art history were also briefly discussed along with controversies and contestations that usually surround its depiction. In addressing some of the controversies and debates that trail the nude figure, modulating filters that significantly impact on the portrayal and appreciation of the nude imagery were looked at within the context of its perception as either belonging to high art or obscene art. Most of these filters are integral components of the environment which

mould personal and collective viewpoints and account for diverse responses to nude images in art. These differences also initiate multiple levels of engagement and perception which make a generalized or universal definition of obscenity in art quite problematic and almost impracticable.

Notwithstanding the grey areas, within the confines of high art and obscene art, the nude figure is highly expressive and carries a hefty potent dose of emotive qualities. Its resilience in art creation strongly affirms this. Yoder (2012) quotes Anna Lea Merritt, as saying:

Art, from the beginning endeavoured to express emotions and historical facts to be understood by all human souls of all nations, without need of written words. Art uses the gestures of human beings, the atmosphere of the universe to convey thought and emotions and to record events. Without thought and emotions, it has no reason for existence (n.pg).

What better way to convey thoughts, emotions and existential issues than the use of the human form as the symbolic summation of humanity. Its appropriation as a potent and expressive creative resource locates it at the centre of art practice where it has sharpened the creative sensibilities of generations of artists. The various ways in which modern Nigerian artists have responded to this pictorial resource as examined in this essay, also affirm its versatility and universality. In the words of William Blake, "Art can never exist without naked beauty displayed" (as cited in Yoder, 2012, n.pg).

References

- Good news bible*, Today's English version (1979) New York: American Bible Society.
- Huer, J. (1987) *Art, beauty and pornography: a journey through American culture*, New York: Prometheus Books. Accessed from www.questia.com, on January 10, 2013
- <http://www.jahsonic.com/Miller.html>. Accessed March 12, 2013
- Ikwuemesi, K. (1996) "Resilience of the nude in African art". In *The Nude Never Sleeps*, (exhibition catalogue). Enugu: Pearls and Gold.
- Kleiner, F. (2009) *Gardner's art through the ages: a global history*, (6th edition), Boston: Thompson Wadsworth.
- Nead, L. (1992) *The female nude: art, obscenity and sexuality*, London and New York: Routledge. Accessed from www.questia.com, on January 10, 2013

- Odoh, N. (2005) *Moods as potent signifiers of internal and external influences: the female perspective*, (unpublished B.A. Thesis), Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Offoedu-Okeke, O. (2009) "Prologue" in *Boudoir terracotta* (exhibition catalogue), Lagos: Pendulum Art Gallery.
- Yoder, B. (2012) "Nudity in Art: A Virtue or Vice?" Accessed from http://www.artrenewal.org/articles/2012/Nudity/Nudity_Virtue_Vice.php, on November 13, 2012
- Weinberg, J. (1993) *Speaking for vice: homosexuality in the art of Charles Demuth, Marsten Hartley and the first American avant-garde*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.