

Article

## Clay, Culture, and Creativity – the Ceramic Art of Echeta, Onuzulike, and Omeje of the Nsukka School (2000-2010)

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### Abstract

Well known for vibrant ideological energy, Nsukka School is home to several renowned artists whose impacts are felt globally. Among them are artists of various specialties including painting, sculpture, graphics, and ceramics. This paper presents a review of the ceramic works of key ceramicists from Nsukka School – Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Ngozi Omeje. While these ceramicists have, in recent times, continued to soar on the international art scene, the background of their practices, particularly as artists from the Nsukka art school, needs to be reviewed. With a specific focus on the artists' ceramic installations, the works of these artists between 2000 and 2010 are, therefore, presented and analyzed. While the study is anchored in the background of Nsukka School and the persistent ideologies for which the school is known, the uniqueness of the artists' works is also foregrounded. The study relied on extant literature, in-depth interviews with each of the artists, and a personal observation of their works. The data analysis involved the narrative and comparative methods. By presenting a background to the current practices of the Nsukka ceramicists, this study provides a backdrop upon which their work and those of many more artists could be studied and understood.

**Keywords:** Creativity, ceramics, Echeta, Onuzulike, Omeje, Nsukka School

### Introduction

At the nascence of the 21st century when the installation genre fully blossomed particularly in Nigeria, it opened up a new area of exploration for creatives working in the ceramic medium. Ceramicists sought ways of rendering and using clay forms as never before. In doing so, some of them found their peculiar voices and deeper visual eloquence through creative explorations in ceramic installations. Well known for its vibrancy in terms of ideological energy, the Nsukka School, home to several renowned artists, also witnessed (and has continued to witness) a crop of these ceramicists exploring the installation genre. Ceramic explorations in the installation genre could be said to have now contributed to the remarkable global interest in exhibiting and collecting ceramic artworks, recently. This is much unlike in the past when works in clay were simply considered pottery and, therefore, relegated to the background as they were considered craft rather than art. Today, ceramics seems to have now claimed (or continue to claim) its rightful place among the 'high' arts. Significantly, the selected ceramicists in this study have continued to gain global visibility in recent times. This study, therefore, presents some background to their current practices.

Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Ngozi Omeje are the focus of this study. They are key ceramic artists from Nsukka School. The choice of this selection is also informed by the artists' years of practice, consistency in the installation genre, and continuous rise to global visibility. As a backdrop to their current practices, this study is focused on a selection of the artists' works between 2000 and 2010. The selection of the artworks that are discussed is based on their visual eloquence in



representing the creative styles of each artist. The study is anchored at the background of Nsukka School and the persistent ideologies for which the school is known while, also, foregrounding the uniqueness of the artists' works. In doing so, insights are provided into the personal and artistic backgrounds of the artists, their sources of inspiration, work processes, materials, forms, and styles involved in their practice.

Data for the study were gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected through informal interview sessions with each of the artists. The interviews were conducted in 2010 toward my Bachelors' thesis (Okafor 2010). Since then, I have continued to keep contact and interact with the artists in both formal and informal settings. In doing so, I have observed their works over the years. Personal observations of the artists' works enabled me to obtain important clues that furnished my interactions with the artists and helped in data analyses. I must acknowledge that my interactions with each of the artists and their oeuvre over the years enriched this study.

The artists each provided me with most of the images that I used in the study. I then resorted to exhibition catalogues and journals for images of some unavailable works. Exhibition catalogues, journals, newspapers, and internet posts further provided me with secondary data for the study. Together, these data were analyzed and interpreted using the narrative and comparative methods. These enabled me to navigate effectively through discussions of the artists' lives, inspirations, and the technical, stylistic, functional, and aesthetic aspects of their practices. The combination of these approaches provides a holistic view of the works presented and, therefore, offers a robust understanding of the artists and their practice.

The study hopes to contribute to the discourse of ceramics and the installation paradigm in contemporary Nigerian art. It hopes, specifically to contribute to a better understanding of contemporary exploratory ceramic practice from the Nsukka School. In this way, this paper will enhance the understanding of installation art not just in Nigeria but from Nsukka School as the practices of the artists continue to receive global recognition. This will then bring about a higher appreciation for the artists and their work.

### **The Nsukka School**

Having proven its unique passion for experimentation, Nsukka School has undoubtedly made itself outstanding in Nigeria and beyond. Nobert Aas, a German scholar who observed works and artists from the School referred to them as "intellectual artists," emphasizing that they are notably engaged in "message-oriented art..., the art that talks to the viewer" (Ottenberg 1997, 259). In the study, Ottenberg (1997) further observed that three factors typically influenced the creative spirits of artists of the Nsukka School. These are personal life experiences, the Igbo cultural background, and the immediate social and political events in Nigeria.

The Nsukka School is about a stylistic identity, a creative consciousness, an ideological synergy, and a philosophical principle or positioning for which the Fine

and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria has been known over the years. Their vibrancy remarkably began in the 1970's shortly after the end of the Biafran war which probably instilled some national consciousness in them. At the time, they were also found to start borrowing ideas from the immediate Igbo cultural background of the art department. That was particularly when their experiments with the 'uli' patterns and motifs became prominent. Okeke (1999) argued, however, that the success of 'uli' as a creative phenomenon and artistic style for the Nsukka School is related to the aftermath of the successful advancement of some preaching from the Zaria Art Society. He further observed that in the search for eloquent visual direction with 'uli', there were also traces of 'nsibidi', which he defined as "the pictographic script of the Efik and North-Eastern Igbo area" (Okeke 1999, 155). Okeke sought an essence that the artists of Nsukka School together sought but concluded that they are like multiple facets which seem very dynamic.

The Nsukka School is also known for its high interest in intermingling art, critical writing, and poetry. Oftentimes, the artists do not only create art but write about their art. It is little surprising then that the three artists in this study are researcher-artists who publish personal writings on their art (for instance, *see* Echeta 2013; Onuzulike 2009; Omeje & Ezema 2015). For poetry, Ene-Orji (2016) specifically noted that it began with Uche Okeke, one of the pioneer artists of the School. With prominent artist-poets like Chike Aniakor, Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguiibe, Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike, and lots of other younger Nsukka artists, one finds that like their writing, the concept of infusing art with poetry has become trans-generational. Beyond the literary aspect of poetry, Ene-Orji (2016) further observed that artworks from some of the Nsukka artists are visually poetic. Particularly, he analyzed the works of Chris Echeta and Ozioma Onuzulike in that regard.

In addition, the relatively recent interest of the Nsukka artists in postmodernism has contributed to their prominence over the years (Okoro 2023; Ene-Orji 2003). Postmodernism embraces both conceptual art and installation which, unsurprisingly, are common in the School. Installation art deals with the putting together of pieces of art elements to form a work. Ene-Orji (2003, 13) defined it as "the aggregation of disparate, usually independent units of elements in space to form a composite artwork; this artwork is usually a metaphor that has to be read for associative meanings(s) deducible from the component units." Thus, installation is the composition of pieces of art elements in a given space at a given period.

Okoro (2023) noted that it was since the radical departure from modernist approaches to studio artworks that installation started in Nsukka School putting the date to the mid-90s. Before then, the tendencies of the departure were visible but not full-blown. According to him, that radicalization was also affected by the creative experiments of El Anatsui, the foremost African artist to date (also, *see* Anikpe et. al. 2024). Anatsui's ceramic experiments in the late 1970s in which he

created his *Broken Pot Series* using potsherds are considered significant in influencing younger artists, especially ceramicists (Agwu & Okafor 2021). Being a part of the Nsukka School in which he (El Anatsui) taught for several years before retirement in 2012, El is known to have influenced many artists from the school. Very many of them explore the installation genre (Anikpe et. al. 2024; Onuora et. al. 2021). Like El Anatsui, many of the artists source their creative materials from their immediate environment exploring them in countless possible ways.

In a study, Ene-Orji (2007) analyzed the works of some Nigerian artists who use the clay medium to produce ceramic pieces of the postmodern paradigm. He discussed the works of Chris Echeta, Samson Uchendu, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Tony Umunna. He grouped their practices into three categories – vessels, installation, and mixed media. Ene-Orji's specific interest in the installation works of Chris Echeta and Ozioma Onuzulike closely relates to this study. Similarly, Okoro (2023) the works of ceramic artists from Nsukka while acknowledging their visual richness and eclectic stylistic diversity.

Most ceramicists who have laid their specialties in the installation concept have successfully sought ways of rendering and using clay forms as never before. Some of them have found their peculiar voices in the ceramics scene and that of the arts at large. Particularly, the selected artists in this study are continuously becoming global brands in studio ceramics. Acknowledging this, Okoro (2023, 1) described them as adventurous Nsukka artists and noted that their installation works exude “visual richness and eclectic stylistic diversity” that command patronage and media attention from the international scene. These, together, spurred my interest in this study as a means of presenting a historical background of the artists' lives and current practices.

## **The Artists' Backgrounds and Creative Influences**

### *Chris Echeta*

Chris Echeta is a highly experimental ceramicist who “has enjoyed a remarkable professional visibility in the contemporary Nigerian artistic circuit” (Onuzulike 2007, 7). Born in 1953, he hails from Ezinifite in Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State. He was born in the renowned town of Igbo-Ukwu, a neighboring town of Ezinifite, where his parents resided. His father was a painter and an art teacher. He made lots of drawings on his sketchpad. Echeta's mother practiced tailoring which brought her fame in her local community.

Just after his secondary school studies, he enrolled in his first-degree programme from 1974-1979 at the Nsukka art department. He specialized in ceramics and studied under Benjo Igwilo, J.D.J. Onyereri, and El Anatsui. After many years of ceramic adventure, Echeta returned to his Alma mater for an MFA degree programme (1998-2001) where he met with Ozioma Onuzulike who also enrolled in the same degree programme. In the school, they both studied under Okpan Oyeoku. In 1980, Chris Echeta earned a lectureship appointment at Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi Edo State (former Bendel State). After five years of service,

however, he chose to resign preferring to establish a private studio at Oji River (in the then Anambra State) which he named Century Ceramics Ltd. In the studio, he continued with his never-ending experiments with materials, tools, and equipment.

In 1986, Echeta and twelve other reputable artists in Nigeria – Chike Aniakor, El Anatsui, Obiora Anidi, Nsikak Essien, Chris Afuba, Boniface Okafor, Tayo Adenaike, Bona Ezeudu, Samson Uchendu, Ifedioramma Dike, and Chike Ebebe – came together and formed the AKA circle of Exhibiting Artists. That brought him to the limelight for this group held annual exhibitions which, according to Ola Oloidi as noted by Onuzulike (2007, 95) “made an enduring impact on the Nigerian artistic landscape.” Echeta loves the language of clay in jute-textured slabs and that has been his primal style since his undergraduate days. In an interview with me in the artist’s undergraduate studio, he recalled that an assignment given to him in his fourth year with the title ‘the politician’, defined his style. The work was a ceramic installation and, in his terms, a “congregational art.” According to him, that was the first of its kind in the country. He said:

Ceramic installations and depth of thought actually started this place, in 1978 in this room. I dare to say it. It started with ‘the politicians’. That was when the seed of installation was sown. I stand to be challenged anywhere. (Also) the jute bag thing, I started it and it’s reigning in the country now. It started in the 1970’s just after my graduation.

Acknowledging the artist’s innovative approach to ceramic practice, Onuzulike (2005, 70) noted that “he (Echeta) invented sculptural ceramic using clay slab” as an undergraduate student in 1978. Soon after graduation, his works formed part of the permanent collection at the National Gallery of Art and as of 2007, he was noted to be the “the only well-represented modern Nigerian ceramic artist in the collection” of the gallery (Onuzulike 2016, 103). Echeta’s favorite materials are clay, engobe, and glaze. He is a typical artist of the Nsukka School and he ceaselessly experiments with new techniques and media. He has participated in many group exhibitions and has held some solo exhibitions in different parts of Nigeria. His works are in both national and international collections.

#### *Ozioma Onuzulike*

Ozioma Onuzulike is a ceramicist, writer, poet, art historian, and critic. Born in 1972, he hails from Achi in the Oji River Local Government Area of Enugu State. His father was a successful photographer popularly known by the name Fancy Photos. His mother, a tailor. His creative abilities were noticed by his parents at an early age and they gave him lots of encouragement. Most of his art lessons at the time were by his mother.

In 1992, Onuzulike enrolled in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka for a first-degree programme. He specialized in ceramics and graduated with First Class Honours in 1996. By 2001, he had his Masters degree which ran under the supervision of Professor Okpan Oyeoku, an experimental artist

of Nsukka School. Just after his Masters' degree programme, he got a lectureship appointment in the same department as a ceramicist and an art historian. Later on in 2007, Onuzulike completed his doctoral programme in the same department. He is noted to have been fascinated by the works of Chris Echeta whom he had a good rapport during their MFA studies together at Nsukka. He admits to having had an "overwhelming influence" from El Anatsui and Chris Echeta in particular (Ene-Orji 2016, 93; also, see Onuzulike, Nwigwe & Okafor 2013).

Onuzulike's concern with the vulnerability of man in society is reflected in virtually all the themes of his works. In terms of material and work processes, he uses any possible medium (combining both conventional and non-conventional ones) to express his creative ideas. In the writing tradition of Nsukka, Onuzulike has also played a significant role. His poems and writings have been widely published. To date, Onuzulike has had several solo and participated in various major exhibitions around the world. Following a recent exhibition in Munich (July 21 to October 3, 2023), his work entitled *Embroidered Agbada with Golden Shine-Shine* (2022) has now been acquired for the permanent collection of Die Neue Sammlung Munich, considered the world's oldest design museum (Nwigwe, Asogwa & Okafor *in print*).

#### *Ngozi Omeje*

Ngozi Omeje was born in 1979 in the town of Nsukka. She acknowledges that art has been in her lineage. Her grandfather was a drum constructor while her father practiced metal welding and fabrication. Omeje's mother traded aluminum kitchen wares and utensils, which were always required to be displayed every morning in attractive arrangements to catch the fancies of passers-by. Although Omeje was not particularly interested in art during her childhood, these occupations together must have enabled her to keep abreast of the basic principles of art. She made drawings just like every other child but never offered it as a school subject until her senior secondary school. According to her, she had always loved practical things and tactility. Based on these, she was endeared toward studying art and later on specialized in ceramics.

It was in the year 2000 that Omeje enrolled in the Nsukka art department where she also studied under Okpan Oyeoku, Vincent Ali, and Ozioma Onuzulike. She also had an Industrial Training under Benjo Igwilo. In 2006 after her National Youth Service Programme, Omeje returned for a Masters Degree in the same department and graduated in 2008. She is particularly noted to have been largely influenced by the conceptual works of El Anatsui and Ozioma Onuzulike (Omeje & Ezema 2015; Onuzulike & Obodo 2012). Her themes range from socio-political issues to climate and environmental discourses which, together, she addresses with the concept of 'life-line' as will be discussed later in the text.

The artist's works have proven her love for intricacy and details which may be related to a sub-conscious expression of feminism. Today, Omeje has participated in several exhibitions and residencies in and outside Nigeria. These include the 2019

Korea Ceramics Biennale and Cheongju Craft Biennale in South Korea, Connecting Deep 10<sup>th</sup>-anniversary exhibition of CCA Lagos in 2018, the Standing Out all-female artist group exhibition at the Wheatbaker in 2017, and the inaugural ArtXLagos Art Fair in 2016, among others. Today, Omeje is described as “one of Africa’s finest ceramic installation artists” (SMO Contemporary Art 2023).

## Materials and Studio Processes

While clay and glazes, the two most common ceramic materials, unify the works of the three artists, distinct materials, processes, and styles define their studio explorations. For Echeta, a third material is an engobe, which he considers a decorative medium, particularly for non-table wares. In this, his colour choices are mostly white and forest green of various shades (see Fig. 1). In terms of work processes, Echeta is popularly known for his slab folds. These folds appear in various structures such as cylindrical, architectural, floral, concave, or convex forms. He also engraves some intricate linear designs on the forms. Significantly, Echeta enjoys creating textures in his works and he achieves them by using jute effects/impressions. According to him, the jute effects and impressions mark his signature. Describing his studio processes, Okoro (2023, 11) observed that Echeta engages in “massive experimentation” of textures.

Onuzulike’s materials range from clay to found objects. Similar to what Meecham and Wood (1996, 3) wrote on the radicalization in modern art, Onuzulike’s works are found to “incorporate photographs or imagery from advertising and the mass media. Other works incorporate real objects from the world of consumer goods or sometimes from the debris and rubbish of that world.” He could integrate in his works, twigs, sticks, ropes, mesh, waste cans, padlocks, iron slacks, wore gauze, cassava grater, and discarded electronic gadgets (for instance, see Fig. 2).

For Onuzulike, there is no limitation to his materials and studio processes. In addition to picking any material that suits his purpose for each project, he could involve beating, cutting, hitting, heating, and stabbing his clay and found objects as part of the material processes for his works. In Obodo (2009, 108), Ozioma Onuzulike further attests that he “hammers, kneads, wedges, mangles, crushes, stabs, cuts, hangs, heads, bundles, scourges, scorches, crumples, ruptures, locks, burns, rams... clay in the processes of ‘winning, working and firing’ it.” In these, it is clear that the artist has no particular style of working with the clay but simply employs any technique that could enable him to precisely convey his message to the viewer. He sees himself not just as a ceramicist but broadly as an artist with no restriction to his creative medium.

Like Onuzulike, Omeje combines non-conventional art materials with clay, but not as widely as himself. In the work, *Jonah Swallowed the Fish* (Fig. 3), her materials include twines, ringed clay coils, floater paper, and random shapes cut from common bathroom slippers. Again, in one of the works in her mushroom series, colourful rubber plates were turned upside down into cylindrical rolls of cardboard sheets that stood vertically up. Chunks of clay sat on these turned plates, probably,



to increase their weight against the wind. Sometimes, Omeje also decorates with oxide. She often explores them in colours of black, red, and yellow ochre. Interestingly, those are also basic colours used in 'uli' mural paintings. In some cases, instead of painting with oxides, Omeje explores clay itself by placing clays of naturally different colours side by side and thereby achieving similar contrast that painting would (see Fig. 5).



Figure 1: Chris Echeta. *Untitled*. Terracotta with engobe. ©The artist.

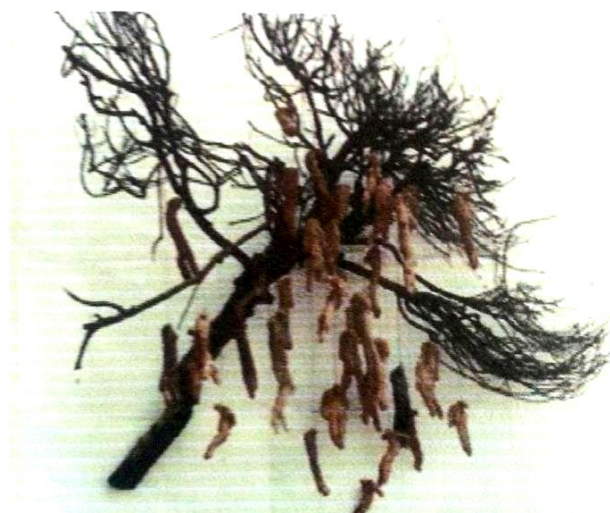


Figure 2: Ozioma Onuzulike. *Mass Suicide*. Tree branch, Twine and terracotta. ©The artist.

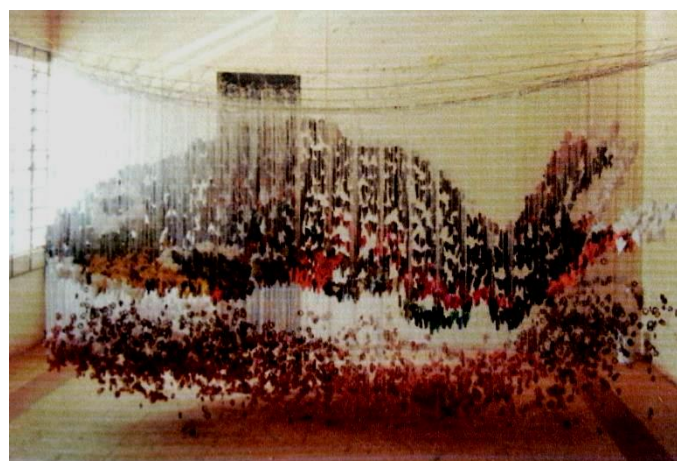


Figure 3: Ngozi Omeje. *Jonah Swallowed the Fish*. 2010. Clay, polythene twine, cuts from bathroom slippers. ©The artist.



While the three artists share some similarities in terms of basic studio materials, it is remarkable that they each developed distinct processes for their materials. The formal features of their works, therefore, vary significantly. This is also based on their sources of inspiration. While all of the three artists hail from southeast Nigeria and therefore share core ethnicity, their approaches to social issues vary as will be seen in the following paragraph. The artists each draw inspiration from aspects of the societal issues that fascinate or trouble them most. This also accounts for the variations in the forms or outcomes of their works.

## Inspirations and Forms

Omeje's works typically revolve around putting small pieces of forms together to create a large work in an expanse of space. Sometimes, this process could involve simply placing items on top of one another (like in *Mushroom*, Fig. 4) clustering forms together (see Fig. 5), or tying and suspending the items with twines. In the study, I found that her idea of tying and suspending bits of items with twines was part of her creations and she was particularly fascinated by them. Collectively, Omeje's works revealed a steadily developing style that involved precision, patience, a permanent style of ornamentation, and intricacy. Her installation pieces possess a highly technical outlook that could make one wonder how she may have started the work processes.

In my interview with Omeje, she noted that she is concerned about the "lifeline." She described a lifeline as some sort of string on which life or any being exists. According to her, there is some lifeline to every existence. She notes that for a candlelight, for instance, the wick is its lifeline. Once the wick is terminated, then the light would be gone. She explained that was her interest in linearity for most of her works, particularly the stringed pieces. When the lines of the forms are terminated or destroyed, then the 'life' of the works would be gone.

Sometimes, Omeje would not pass her clays through the conventional kiln firing involved in ceramic production but smoke them, thereby allowing nature to determine the tonal differences and varied coloured patches. In terms of design, she hardly creates designs on the individual units that make up her work. Rather, she allows the placement or organization of the installations to determine her designs and forms. This is much unlike Chris Echeta who texturizes each unit of his installation as part of aesthetics.



Figure 4: Ngozi Omeje. *Mushroom*. 2009, Clay, cardboard paper and plastic plates. ©The artist.

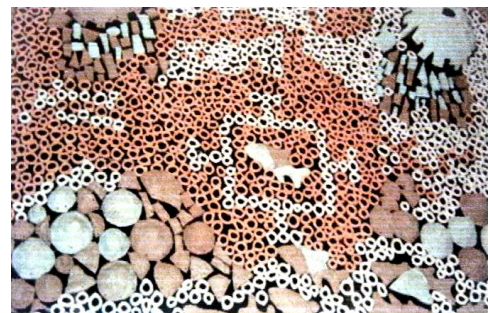


Figure 5: Ngozi Omeje. *Untitled*. 2008. Fired clay. ©The artist.

Aesthetics are intricate to art. But Onuzulike considers them secondary in his works. He is usually more interested in passing his message across to his audience than in entertaining their viewership. His approach to ceramic installations could be viewed as tending toward the extremities of informality. Looking at Onuzulike's works, however, it is evident that he prefers simplifying his designs. There is often little or no design or beautification in his works. Rather, he prefers to leave them as raw as they have been handled during formation. That also applies to his creative approach to table wares.

To produce table wares, Onuzulike often explores impressing clay with carved wooden roulette. Sometimes, he also explores the subtraction method of creating textures (*also see* Okafor & Agwu 2017, 3). He does that by gouging into the body of the clay at its leather-hard stage. These approaches create bold and definite patterns that reveal the pressure with which the artist forced the forms or designs out. Such 'force,' even on table wares, further attests to the artist's holistic approach to contemplating his clay processes as parallels to the vulnerability of man in society.

In addition, Onuzulike's display patterns for table wares further suggest accidents. The forms are sometimes placed in a lying position rather than sitting as typical of table wares (*see* Fig. 6). In light of these, I consider the artist's table wares as installations of some sort (*also see* Nwigwe et. al 2012, 134). Following the texturing processes on the wares, however, Onuzulike typically smoothens out the sharp edges with wet foam to make them user-friendly. It is worthy of note, also, that in spite of Onuzulike's creative approaches to forming and/or installing his table wares, each of the pieces typically fits nicely into the palm when held, retains intended content, sits balanced on a flat surface and feel good to the skin.



Figure 6: Ozioma Onuzulike. *Tea Set*. Glazed ceramics (with a cane handle for the kettle). Also, notice that some of the cups look like they have been stabbed and pierced into with some tools which then form handles and stoppers. ©The artist.

Echeta loves the congregational approach to presenting his installations. He typically creates various sizes of massive humanoid forms which he presents in processional graduating order. This provides the viewer with a sense of depth and

illusion, making the already massive forms appear larger in number. The artist's presentation of installation pieces in large numbers, and his ability to create different impressions with varied placements allow him to juggle with titles. He attributed this to social permissiveness and dynamism whereby the society keeps creating room for belief in something else. This also applies to his architectural pieces which he creates using slabs that make them multi-faceted.

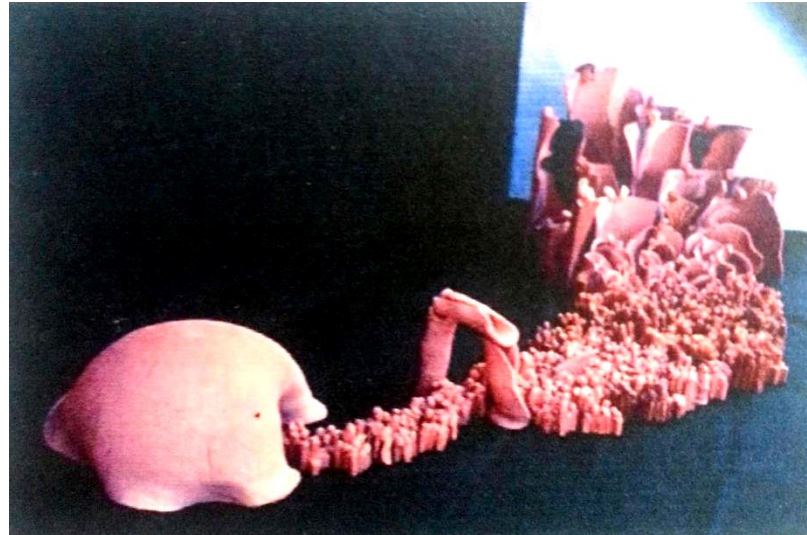


Figure 7: Chris Echeta. *The Sacking of a Generation*. 2002. Terracotta with engobe. Variable dimensions. ©The artist.

Echeta's expressions and concepts are such that can not be communicated through the production of mere aesthetic ceramic vases. He considers installation as an embodiment of the characteristics of the society which he believes is full of restlessness and inconsistency by always responding to change. The flexibility of installations such that they can easily be re-arranged in multiple ways is therefore an adaptive feature that simulates societal restlessness and lack of constance according to the artist. By observing the artist's works, one would ascertain that he has carved out a style with slab folds. Acknowledging Onuzulike (2005, 70), I noted earlier in this text that Chris Echeta "invented sculptural ceramic using clay slab." From the foregoing, it is therefore not only an invention by him but a niche that he has carved for himself. For Echeta, the forms and features of his works are enough for any type of society-oriented ceramic installation which is his major concern.

Most installation works of Echeta are, therefore, of striking formal features. They are characterized by slab folds, jute textures, and a juxtaposition of various sizes of forms in theatrical poses. *The Politician* (Fig. 8) for example, is a towering stylized figure created with folds of clay slab with jute textures. The figure dwarfs about a hundred humanoid forms also created with clay slabs but, unlike the towering figure in a theatrical pose, appears vertical and erect as if standing at attention or at the mercy of the towering figure. The towering figure is also seemingly dressed in a traditional attire known as 'agbada', with a fitting cap. The form easily throws one's mind to satirical politicians in the Nigerian art scene often depicted in large flamboyant robes. The huge figure seems dramatically confident as it faces the



crowd of dwarfed human forms. Looking at the work, the viewer gets the impression of a politician making 'political promises' to a crowd of miserable voters. The mouth is open and the two arms spread as if actually addressing a crowd. The upright position in which all the tiny forms pose as they look up to the towering structure suggests a state of absolute dependence or vulnerability. This further draws one's attention to the confident, buoyant, and wealthy appearances of typical politicians in Nigeria when they are at public outings making promises to the poor masses about a better life, one as high and flamboyant as their very appearances.

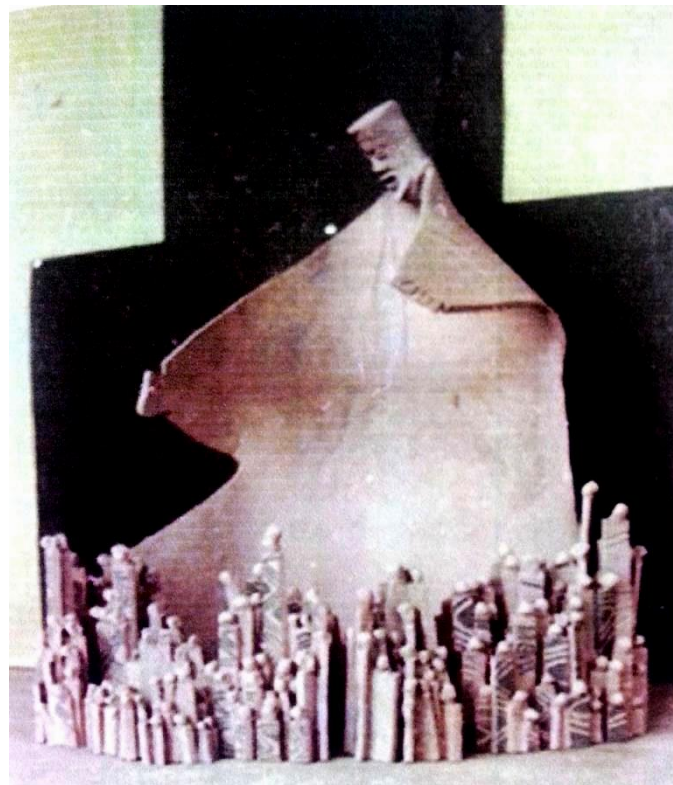


Figure 8: Chris Echeta. *The Politician*. Terracotta with engobe. ©The artist.

As in *The Politician*, Echeta explored another dramatic representation of gigantic human figures juxtaposed with tiny ones in *No Place to Hide* (Fig. 9). The gigantic figures also seem to be robed in the popular 'agbada' attire relatable with Nigerian politicians in public events. Despite their flamboyant look, nevertheless, they seem to bend down in some shame as if they are desperate to hide away in a hut just in front of them. Considering their gigantic looks, the hut appears small and can not possibly contain them all. Yet, they seem blinded by their shame and very eager to hide just anywhere. The dispositions of the juxtaposed tiny forms are a bit unclear. One may wonder if, like the large figures, they are eager to hide away as well; or they are simply gazing at the larger forms in disappointment or some mockery?



Figure 9: Chris Echeta. *No Place to Hide*. Terracotta with engobe. 2001. After Okoro (2023).

Chris Echeta's concern for socio-political issues is visibly expressed in his works. His installation pieces keep reflecting man and social interactions/relations. To reiterate, the multiplicity of forms involved in installation works particularly gives him the opportunity to reflect on social concerns effectively. His creative approaches to table wares further evident his social consciousness and persistent slab approach to clay. In Figure 10, a large bowl (made from a slab) is seen having an irregularly flowing rim similar to the tips of flower petals. The large bowl sits at a strategic position, as six smaller ones gather around it and seemingly wait in expectation of some service. It is also interesting how the curvature of the large bowl appears to cause the smaller bows to be depressed inwards at the points of near-contact. This shares some similarities with *The Politician* (Fig. 8) in which the main character appearing large and flamboyant dwarfs the forms around it and with a presence that commands attention and influence.



Figure 10: Chris Echeta. *Tableware*. Glazed ceramics. © The artist.

Chris Echeta simply presents viewers with varied forms created with textured clay slabs that are characterized by different movements. Although his varied forms of several poses draw attention, the various formal arrangements which he gives his

works command greater attention. Such arrangements can lure one into a self-discussion as one tries to understand them. Generally, Echeta's works are mostly compositions of characters usually presented in dramatic formation.

Much unlike Echeta, Onuzulike does not have a specific technique and material with which he renders and creates his works. This also means that his works are not characterized by a particular set of formal features. Therefore, an attempt to describe his forms may pose some difficulty. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that the materials found in his works show shreds of evidence of having passed through lots of severe handling. The severity comes from either nature or by the artist. In terms of arrangement or organization, his pieces often appear pitiful. They are sometimes stacked, hanged, bonded, or ailing as he tries to portray the environmental and social effects on man. These together represent the vulnerability of man in his social space. In *Casualty Ward* (Fig. 11), for instance, some tuber-like forms lie in procession. At one end of the cue is an open door which gives an impression of either an entrance or exit for the procession. The tuber-like forms seem to have been badly injured due to some group mishandling, or misplacement of some sort (see Fig. 12 for details). Unlike normal tubers, they are all hollow, and at different parts chopped off. These could be likened to an analogy of a group of patients in a hospital ward waiting for turns at the theatre. They seem to have been involved in a severe accident.



Figure 11: Ozioma Onuzulike. *Casualty Ward*. 2008. Smoked ceramics. ©The artist.



Figure 12: Ozioma Onuzulike. *Casualty Ward* (detail). ©The artist.



Figure 13: Ozioma Onuzulike. *Group Photograph*. 2003. Terracotta, burnt metal, copper wire, rope and garri sieve. ©The artist.

From the foregoing, the Nsukka School has carved a niche in the Nigerian art scene making itself renowned even in the international circles. Ceramic artists from the school have also evidenced the remarkable styles for which Nsukka is known. They particularly explore both conventional and unconventional art materials to create works that are loaded with meaning. In terms of themes, their immediate socio-political environment has also been part of their individual and collective inspiration. These artists have, therefore, been visually outspoken in addressing various social and political issues. In support of Okoro (2023, 11) I assert that the installation works of these Nsukka ceramic artists are “capable of stirring the future direction of art production and bring about change in the creative consciousness of Nigerian artists.” Also, Morgan (2024, 64) rightly noted that creating visual metaphors is one of the ways that artists interrogate social, cultural, and political issues. The three artists in this study have, each, employed ceramic metaphors in their sociocultural and political explorations.

## Conclusion

Chris Echeta, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Ngozi Omeje have persistently pushed the boundaries of ceramics. As evident in this study which presents a background to their current practices, the creative prowess and ceaseless experimentation of these artists reveal influences from the Nsukka School. For instance, the School is known for intermingling art, critical writing, and poetry. Like their creative experiments and explorations which they approach more or less like research, the three artists are researcher-artists known for depth of thought in their studio practices and writings about their art. It is also remarkable that having all studied at the Nsukka art department, the three artists did not just experience the same tutelage from the art teachers at the school but, interestingly, had direct interactions with one another at Nsukka. While Echeta and Onuzulike met and enjoyed some good rapport during their MFA together at the department, Onuzulike taught Omeje some art courses at the department. In addition, Onuzulike specifically attests to some influences from Echeta and, similarly, Omeje acknowledges to have been conceptually challenged by the works of Onuzulike. Needless to say, the remarkable energy/vibrancy for which the Nsukka School is known is evident in each of their works. Specifically, they explore common day-to-day materials (of which clay is inclusive) in creating their works. For non-tablewares, the artists have limited use of glazes as most of the surfaces of their finished works are left bare revealing the raw clay body. However, while their works show some determined styles and approaches to work, their continuous explorations and experimentation have also caused their styles to tweak over the years. Today, their rise to international fame has continued to soar.

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