

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL: FEMINISM AND FEMINIST NUDITY FROM VISUAL PERCEPTIONS AND CONCEPTIONS OF ARTISTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which visual elements have aided the development of feminism and feminist art, and investigated how nude body of female gender is portrayed in artistic productions. Also, it identified major Nigerian women activists such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Laila Dogonyaro and Bolanle Awe and mentioned various strategies they adopted in achieving their social, political and cultural objectives. The study examined artworks produced by Nigerian artists, which are characterized essentially by feminists' innovations, feminists' protests, and power of womanhood and societal perception of public breastfeeding. Bruce Onobrakpeya stands out in this direction in view of his analyses of Nigeria's socio-political problems through his innovative and creative portrayal of Niger Delta women protesting in nude to fight the government against the degradation of their cultural environment. The study revealed that this effort is not peculiar to Onobrakpeya, but the deprivation of women in socio-political activities and protests against inequality of gender species which emanated from feminism and its struggles world-wide have also been demonstrated in the artworks of other Nigerian artists precisely Sokari Douglas-Camp, Kaltume Gana, Lilian Pilaku, Peju Layiwola, Tola Wewe, Muri Adejimi and Femi Akande. This protest art tradition has become a significant device in that it grants visual artists the freedom to fight for human rights creatively.

KEYWORDS: Visual Elements, Nude Body of Female Gender, Nigerian Women Activists, Nigerian Artists, Protest Art Tradition

INTRODUCTION

The first task in this study is to explain what is meant by "nudity in Art". As understood in art parlance, depiction of nudity refers inter alia to "nudity in all the artistic endeavours". Nudity in the peculiar circumstances of artistic creation has generally reflected, with some exceptions, social standards of aesthetics and modesty or morality, and normalcy of the time the artists' spent in painting, sculpting and photographing. To be more specific, in artistic training, theory and practice, the naked human figure has served as a significant subject for artistic production.

Most importantly, human body has been represented on pre-historic paintings, engravings and statues and nude human figures were more prominently represented in antiquities, most especially in ancient Greece when artists showed sinews and bones swelling and moving under soft skin and they gave impression of a living body in all its grace and beauty. They took care to show the hinges of the body, to make connoisseurs understand its importance in artistic production, as clearly as possible. The ancient Greek artists achieved the visual imagery of the nude through their innate knowledge of human body. Gombrich (1972) has observed the above submission when he said that:

There is no living body quite as symmetrical, well-built and beautiful as those of the Greek statues. People often think that what the artists did was to look at many naked models and to leave out any feature detested: that they started by carefully copying the appearance of human, and then beautified it by omitting any irregularities or traits which did not conform to their idea of a perfect beauty.

Commenting on the significance of nudity in the ancient Greek art, he noted:

Nudity was a sign of civilization, not a sign of shame; only barbarians (foreigners) wore pants. In Greek thought, human was measure of all things, the focus of the universe, and the only subject truly worthy of study by the artists.

In this contemporary age, the nude has also served as a unique genre and subject of representation in the arts, especially pictorial, plastic and photographic works. The modern artists are encouraged by their trainers at the tertiary levels to study and depict human beings without clothes in order to develop their drawing skills and artistic prowess and to increase their knowledge of human anatomy, usually with the creative apparatus and studio conventions that distinguish the artistic elements of being nude from the more provocative state of being naked in the full glare of public. A nude figure represented in respect of art training is one for whom the lack of clothing is its usual condition, so that there is no sexual suggestiveness presumed. A naked figure presented in the public view presupposes sexuality within the purview of high moral standard society. A social worker or prostitute, for an instance, usually wears clothing to cover her nakedness in the public, but the lack of it in the moral sense implies sexual activity or sexual suggestiveness.

While explaining the difference between the artists' studio convention, ethnographic nudity and the public nakedness, Bernatzik (2011) reiterated that "unlike public nakedness that is suggestive of sexual activity, ethnographic nudity occurs in a spontaneous setting". According to him, "the ethnographic nudity provides an exceptional framework for artists to depict peoples whose nudity was or still is, acceptable within the mores or certain specific settings of their traditional culture". He clarified his claim with an example that "the artworks of some ethnographic painters have received world-wide recognition for preserving what is perceived as a documentation of the dying mores of 'paradises' subject to the onslaught of average modernity".

It is worthy of mention at this juncture that Nudity in visual arts is rather common and more acceptable than public nudity of real people. For an example, a statue or painting of a nude person can be erected or displayed in the public square whereas actual nudity will be frowned at by any sane society. Today, the nude figure of females has served as a source of inspiration for many budding Nigerian artists that adopted painting, etching or sculpture techniques and most of their nude image of females have been openly displayed or surreptitiously exhibited, on account of social norms operating in their immediate milieu.

It is equally worthy of saying that in advertising practise female models are mostly rated high and rewarded

financially more than their male counterparts; this is because the images of the female body have played more significant role in selling great variety of products and services since the advent of this marketing genre in Nigeria.

In many cultures world over, nudity in art is accepted even when they shun physical nudity this is why an art gallery that exhibits nude paintings will typically not accept nudity of a visitor to any art show. Suffice to say that the changing social attitudes about artistic nudity have sometimes generated conflict over art that does not conform to functional and spiritual standards of what is acceptable to some religious faith. For an example, “some members of the Roman Catholic Church vehemently opposed the act of erecting or displaying an art object that is embarrassing or disagreeable to their belief system by starting the *fig-leaf campaign*, which focused on the project of covering the nudists’ aspect of art”¹.

The arguments of this group were based on the Biblical Book of Genesis in which references are made to Adam and Eve who used the *fig leaves* to cover their nakedness after eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They started their campaign by first of all removing the nudies’ artworks produced by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) the second great Florentine whose visual works made Italian art of the sixteenth century (*Cinquecento*) so famous. The Church has since intervened and removed the insignia of *fig leaves* on the affected artworks while restoring them to their natural state. Bibby (2008) has also given an example of a related secular incident that occurred in Sidney, Australia, where police raided an exhibition of photographs by Bill Henson featuring images of naked children on an alleged account of promoting child pornography. He reported that “the police have no basis to prosecute Henson over his photographs of naked teenagers” His report came after the photographs were declared “mild and justified” and given a parental guidance rating by the Australian Classification Board.

The major interest of this study is not on what these antagonizing groups or institutions did in trying to checkmate the practice of nudity in art, but rather on the development of feminism and feminist art, and the analyses of feminist nudity from visual perceptions and conceptions of artists as well as the explanation of social effects that feminist nakedness have on the psychic of the general public. Even here, we prefer to limit ourselves to iconographic descriptions of nude image of females in the art works produced by selected Nigerian artists whose creative ideas are sampled in this study. The researcher still discussed how visual art has been used as weapon of protest by feminist groups and he explained the basic idea behind women stripping naked to curse in modern times.

The particular contribution of the study to knowledge consists of the fact that though other writers on the story of art have glossed over issues relating to nudity in art, feminist art and feminism, they all skipped a concrete discussion on many different forms that nudity and protests can take from artistic representation and individual statements to mass demonstration. In his publication, Buser (2006) tried to present how western visual artists infrequently handle some subjects that are popular in other media such as *Boy meets Girl*, *Girl loses Boy*, and so forth. He referred to how the western artists seldom tell love stories, but focused on scenes of the loves of the gods, as in the artwork of Raphael (Italian, 1483-1520) titled: *Galatea*, a fresco produced in 1513 and now displayed at Palazzo della Farnesina in Rome, and of course in films. According to him, “the western artists often dwell on the sensuous appeal of the male and female body and for centuries these western artists have considered the unclothed human figure-the nude, as the prime example of how to do something beautiful”.

Kleiner (2009) tried a similar project, but his focus is on *Stratification Object Series* in which he presented

Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) who used her own nude body as her artistic material. He discussed how in 1974-1982 creative series, "Wilke's used images of herself to trigger events that are simultaneously metaphorical and real, stereotypical and unique, erotic and disconcerting, and that deal with both pleasure and pain". He showed the graphic illustration of how Wilke appeared topless in a myriad of poses, some seductive and others more confrontational. In each pose, as portrayed in the illustrations, pieces of chewed gum shaped into small vulvas decorate her body. It is observed that these 'tiny vaginal' chewed gums on Wilke's body alluded to female pleasure as well as appeared as scars that suggested pains. The whole scenario has been interpreted by Geldzahler (1969) as: "A hope that women would take control of and have pride in the sensuality of their own bodies and create sexuality in their own terms, without deferring to concepts degenerated by culture".

It is observed that the discourse of these two western scholars on nudity in art has a tint of western coloration and they are full of examples that betray their social and cultural background. It is so unfortunate that African art scholars have not deemed it fit to complement what their compeers from other parts of the world are projecting on visual perceptions and conceptions of the nude by developing idea that will reflect patterns, which can represent normative culture of Africa. This paper will clearly fill this gap by showing that African artists have equally done series of artworks that depicted the nude through the semiotic interpretations and iconographic descriptions of artworks made by selected Nigerian artists; Bruce Onobrakpeya, Tola Wewe, Muri Adejimi and Femi Akande. The works of these artists are sampled and the samples are representative of all artists in Nigeria.

The research design is based on conceptual framework, that is, the concept, assumption, exception, belief, and theories that support and inform the researcher's view about nudity in art. The conceptual framework is a visual or written product that explains either graphically or in narrative form the main issue to be discussed, that is, the factors, concepts, or variables in the title and the texts of the study, and the presumed relationships among them. The term: conceptual framework has been used in this study in a broader sense to include the actual ideas and beliefs that the researcher holds about the phenomena he studied, whether they are in written or visual form. For the purpose of this study the term is called the *theoretical framework*.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to put this study in the right narrative and graphical perspective, feminist theory and psychological theories of art were adopted as the basic ideational structure for explaining the facts and figures collected during the field investigation. The feminist theory had emerged as early as 1792 and it flourished in the 1920s to support the struggle of feminists' movements that fought against gender inequality through various discourse on women's social roles and life experiences. The theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourses that aim to make the nature of gender inequality comprehensible. Feminism focuses mainly on women issues, but because it seeks gender equality some feminists have begun to argue that men's liberation is a necessary part of feminism, and that men are equally harmed by sexism and gender roles.

A good example of a struggle by women in support of feminists' movement could be derived from Echols' (1989) article titled: *Ain't I a Woman* published in the magazine *Sojourner Truth*. She addressed the issue surrounding limited rights to women based on the flawed perception that men held of women and discussed the plight of a woman who was allegedly arrested for illegal voting in 1872.

She argued that “if a woman of colour can perform tasks that were supposedly limited to men, then any woman of any colour could perform those same tasks”. The questions of why women should be punished under electoral law, but could not use the same law for their own protections were raised and the authoritative principles of the constitutions that forbid rights of women were queried in the texts of the article.

The feminist theorists have also developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender. Two of such theories are the psychoanalytical feminism theory and feminist art theory. The former is based on Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalysis theories. Freud argued that gender is not biological, but is based on the psycho-sexual development of the individual. Chodorow (1989), in his own case, opined that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences that lead men to believe themselves to be masculine, and women to see themselves as feminine. Another psychoanalytical feminist theorist, Lerman (1990), further maintained that gender leads to a social system that is dominated by males, which in turn influences the individual psycho-sexual development.

“The feminist art theory”, according to Lazzari and Schlesier (2008), “presents a philosophical art criticism that is concerned with the oppression of women in a given society along with the oppression of their belief systems”. The arguments of the duo support the reasons why advocates of feminism fight for equal social, political, and economic rights for all women and men. The feminist art theorists borrow myriads of ideas from methodologies of ideological criticism, structuralists-based criticism, and psychoanalytical criticism and a specific area of their theoretical postulation deals with the representation of gender in visual art and how this representation can be used to fight feminists’ battles in a male dominated social environment.

In his feminist criticism, Nochlin, (1988:2) used a 1986 poster, produced by “The Guerrilla Girls”, titled: *Do Women Have to be Naked* (see the visuals in the book: *Exploring Art* by Lazzari and Schlesier, 2008) and exhibited at the New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, to illustrate an art work that functions within the context of feminist art criticism. The poster was posted by the Guerrilla Girls to ask the museum the reason why it was keeping in its collections a small quantity of artworks produced by female artists and a large number of feminist nude images done by men. The major argument of this feminist group is that while images of women in nude are given prominence by most museums, artworks produced by women are still marginalized by social and cultural structures.

While discussing the psychological theories of art, Boser (2006) divided professional artists into two broad groups. He calls those who tend to depict what they see before them *perceptual artists* and those who tend to depict what they have stored in their imagination *conceptual artists*. According to him, perceptual artists have trained their hand to obey the mind’s eye so that the hand can form the strokes to mimic what they see “out there” on the other hand conceptual artists depict what is in their mind; they describe an observed behaviour.

While analysing the term *conceptual art*, Boser stated that “creating images by first visualizing the concepts is a quite natural way of drawing inferences from the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, that is, something previously seen”. For an example if artists are asked to draw a nude figure, majority of them may draw the concept of human body in a more-or-less symmetrical shape while few would draw the human body in profile or frontal position, or from the way they have typically seen one in the past.

He propounded that “artists mostly combine perceptually and conceptually derived images”. However, it is observed that artists either imitate nature, or they make things up or adjust, improve and transform what they see through

power of vivid imagination. Boser also opined that distinguishing perception and conception may not solve the problem of how to depict the beautiful human body. But practical distinction between the two has certainly confirmed that most artists carry Plato's ideal forms in their minds. Plato's developed idea is that whether the forms are drawn instinctively or through learning, the most important thing is to arrive at a desired result.

For an example, if an artist carves an image or paints a picture of what a nude woman would look like, the visual concepts that he has developed through years of experience would help in shaping his final result. Observably, most African artists have been creating their arts within the context of traditions operating in their immediate milieu; the European artists operate within the purview of the norms and values of their society while American artists have been producing artworks within a contextual tradition that conditioned them to create movies and advertising. Above all, the feminist issues and the aspect of gender representation in visual arts, which have been discussed in the light of feminist theory and psychological theories of art, need to be critically examined in the study of feminists' nudity from visual conceptions and perceptions of artists.

METHODS

Data were collected through two principal sources: primary and secondary. The primary data were collected through interviews with four artists namely: Bruce Onobrakpeya in Lagos, Tola Wewe in Akure, Muri Adejimi in Lagos and Femi Akande in Ibadan, and photographs of their artworks were taken for semiotic interpretations and iconographic analyses. The secondary data were existing information collected from books, journals, magazines and the Internet. The data were subjected to scrutiny in order to ascertain their veracity and validity. After verifying and validating the genuineness of these materials, they were then synthesized and interpreted.

DATA ANALYSIS

An Appraisal of Feminism and Feminist Art

The study revealed that feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. According to Gilligan (1977), feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment, and a feminist is a person whose beliefs and behaviour are based on feminism. In his own discourse of the term feminism, Butler (1992) stressed that "feminist campaigns have changed societies, particularly in this contemporary world where women's suffrage, gender neutrality, equal pay for women, reproductive rights for women and the right to enter into contracts and own properties had been achieved".

Cornell (1998) supported Butler's view by stating that "feminist movements have worked to protect women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and sexual assault they have advocated for workplace rights, including maternity leave, and against forms of discrimination against women". Kirkpatrick (1983), however, described the term as "an advocacy of women's rights, through the movement for the advancement and emancipation of women". From these various definitions and analogies it can be concluded that women have been endowed with natural grace, affection and strong will, which have made them a nexus connecting patterns of social, economic and political interrelationships.

While making cursory appraisals of the activities of African women in the past and present, Babawale (2012) said "they were relegated to mere drudges configured only for procreation, but objective research works as well as empirical

knowledge have established that despite the retarding impact of slavery, colonisation, negative cultural beliefs, practices and legislation, today some African women have distinguished themselves as major driving force for advancement and pivot upon which the society is hinged". The African women he cited as having outstanding accomplishments in all facets of human endeavours include our own Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Margaret Ekpo, Laila Dogonyaro and Bolanle Awe.

Funmilayo Ransome Kuti (d.1978) was a female political activist in Egba land who has been described as the "Doyen of Female Rights in Nigeria", "Mother of Africa" and "Lioness of Lisabi". Her feminist struggle against arbitrary taxation of women led to the abdication of Oba Ademola, the Alake of Egba land in the year 1949. She has been acknowledged as the first woman to drive a car and to ride a motorcycle in Nigeria. Margaret Ekpo (d. 2006) was a women's rights activist and social mobilizer who led member of a class of traditional Nigerian women activists. In the 1940s, she organized a Market Women Association in order to unionize market women in Aba and she successfully used the association to promote women solidarity front as a platform to fight for economic rights of women, economic protections and expansionary political rights of Nigerian women.

Laila Dogonyaro (d.2011) was a women's rights activist based in the Northern Nigeria. She was the president of the National Council for Women Society (NCWS) and an associate of Northern Women's Organization called Jam'iyyar Matan Arewa (JMA). She used the JMA to sensitize rural women and empowering them economically, and this gave birth to a vibrant Women Development Centre in her community. She associated with many feminist movements and was highly vocal on feminine political issues. She agitated for social reformation of women who were neglected by relative for having vascular diseases that are ravaging the lives of young girls in the Northern Nigeria.

Bolanle Awe (b.1933) is an accomplished teacher, educationist, scholar of great repute, woman activist and administrator. She was the first female commissioner in the old Western and Oyo States of Nigeria and the first female Director of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. With a keen interest in women representation that the feminist movements introduced in fighting the cause of womanhood, Awe began to embrace the intellectual apparatus to communicate with a wide audience. In recent time, she has encouraged more insistently the investigation into dynamics of women power and privilege, especially in relation to issues of gender and sexual orientation through Women Research and Documentation Centre; a non profit organization she chaired and co-founded at the University of Ibadan.

The study also revealed that production of feminist art has served as a creative approach adopted by women artists to achieve the same status as their male counterparts in the art practice and their feminist artworks have been used as weapons in the struggle for women liberation in a male dominated society. In the light of development of feminist art theory since about 1970, the women artists started to use the power of visual aesthetics and artistic imageries to communicate with a large, heterogeneous and anonymous art lovers and to investigate "the dynamics of power and privilege, especially in matters relating to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, economic and political parity, and sexism" (Kleiner, 2009). The central place of the female nude as a universal artistic modelling tradition became an issue of discourse for women artists in academic circle while the feminist movements persistently asked the questions: "why do men and women represented so differently in artistic creations". The answer was provided by Kleiner (2009:309) while quoting John Berger (1972) from the book titled: *Ways of seeing*, in which the latter concluded that 'men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at'.

This latter statement buttressed the fact that the early visual representation of nude figures, as is already embedded

in humans' social and cultural structures, is gender specific. This is evident in the activities of early women artists who followed the artistic transposition called 'First Wave Feminist Art' in which they focused mainly on feminine experience; examining thoroughly virginal imagery, posing nude as goddess figures and using the medium of embroidery that has been associated with women folk for ages.

Nigerian feminist artists such as Sokari Douglas-Camp, Kaltume Gana, Lilian Pilaku and Peju Layiwola have rejected the idea of giving attention to nude female figures by focusing on more challenging themes such as *ladies' fashion appeal* and *power of womanhood*. In order to realise this dream they embarked on developmental artistic projects by introducing into their art creation cultural and indigenous ideas, styles and techniques as well as forms that depict aesthetics and Africanness in black women.

Sokari Douglas-Camp (b.1958) is a female Nigerian artist in the Diaspora. She is one of Britain's most prolific and acclaimed sculptors. Trained at Central School and the Royal College of Arts with honorary fellowship award from the University of London, Douglas-Camp works with steel and her large scale artworks are characterized by her romance with feminist art clichés and themes; her works also fuse contemporary subject-matters with African structures.

In her work titled: *Red Head tie*-an abstracted coloured metal in mixed media technique (Plate 1), she tried to educate the viewers about women's role in fashion world and socio-cultural endeavours. She aimed at establishing a respect for feminist art, to forge a new technique of art that describes Nigerian women's attitude towards fashion, and to make her feminist artistic concepts accessible to a large audience.

The lone female head in plate 1, however, displays an alluring beauty of a young African maiden that betrays Douglas-Camp's memory of an ideal dressing style for an average African woman, perhaps echoing her own personal experience in life. The Western and African aesthetic traditions have found common place in her artwork, proving that the divide between disparate cultures can be bridged. The influence she derived from these two traditions arose from philosophies that praise cross-cultural creativity. Douglas-Camp's interpretation of these influences has transformed and broadened her definition of contemporary feminist art.

Her works sometimes deal with political themes, commenting on non-inclusion of woman folks in Nigerian politics, corruption in Nigeria and violence in Britain. "She was one of the artists shortlisted for the Fourth Plinth Art Show in 2003 with her proposal 'NO-O-War No-O-War-R" (Ike, 2008). She won an award dedicated as the living memorial to the writer and environmental activist; Ken Saro Wiwa and currently she is working on a commission to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of Transatlantic Slave trade for Southwark Council in London.



Plate 1: Red Head Tie by Douglas Camp



Plate 2: Fulani Milk Maid by Kaltume Gana

Kaltume Gana (b. 1971) is a female artist from Northern Nigeria who holds a master degree in fine arts from the Ahmadu Bello University Zaria and she has equally done extensive studies in Islamic Arts from the Mimar Sinan University Istanbul, Turkey. She is an artist who derives inspiration from the experiences of the society and culture in which she lives and she has been one of the major organizers of mobilization programmes for non-educated women in the North through her artworks. She says “it is not difficult for me to paint the picture of how life is lived among the women of Northern Nigeria, because the act of putting together the imagery of their daily genre is an indicator of real life experience observed in the past”.

Her work titled: *Fulani Milk Maid* (Plate 2) produced as a marble painting in the year 2001 addresses the way much of women artists in Africa present female beauty for the enjoyment of the ‘male gaze’, a primary focus of contemporary feminist theory. The painting of Fulani maids, carrying *Fura de Nunu* (the natural milk extracted from cow breast), conveys a feeling of hard work and determination and the viewer is energized by the vibrant and harmonious mixture of hues and textures and the spontaneity and sense of movement. The latter impression perhaps reflects the state of flux created by the dynamic blending of struggle and hard work that marks contemporary feminist art practice in Nigeria.

Lilian Pilaku (b. 1977) is another female Nigerian artist who has examined the female plights and the culturally constructed notion of gender in her artworks. Although gender issues concerned this graduate of fine arts from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Pilaku’s arts also deal with issues of family and African cultural heritage. Her most fascinating feminist art piece titled: *Shoulder to cry on* (Plate 3)-an acrylic on canvas produced in 2007- is an attempt made to create a creative dialogue between the female body and the physical landscape.

Beyond its aesthetic, environmental appeal, Pilaku’s female figures in the work: *Shoulder to cry on*, also generate a palpable sensuality. In longing for her cultural identity, Pilaku sought for the aesthetic comprehension and acceptability of the power of womanhood inherent in feminist struggle that contemporary societies often tend to reject in favour of the male dominating power. The work is lyrical and passionate and operates at the intersection of cultural, beauty, emotional, physical and feminist concerns.

The colours that are prominent in the pristine primordial African arts dominate Pilaku’s palette. For her, the red earth, the yellow sun and sand, and the green of vegetation and the blue in celestial sky are sources of inspiration. Motifs of ancient Igbo culture: *Uli* give a subtler meaning to the artwork. She incorporated figural and geometric forms to depict the infinite variety of women’s experience and the figural forms first appear to be abstract, but it is only after concentrated meditative viewing that the images are clearly discerned.



Plate 3: Shoulder to Cry on by Lilian Pilaku



Plate 4: Sisi Eko by Peju Layiwola

Peju Layiwola (b. 1967) is a feminist artist of the Edo royal blood who was born into the Olowu family. Although, a Yoruba, she was born and bred in the ancient city of Benin, Nigeria. Her career in the arts started earlier in her youth days when she was sculpting and posing for her mother who is also a sculptor. She studied metal design and construction at the University of Benin and bagged master and doctoral degrees in Visual Art History (African Studies) at the University of Ibadan. Her medium and method of artistic expressions: Metal and *cire perdue*-brass casting, are, observably, rarely used by women even in contemporary Nigeria.

Layiwola's work *Sisi Eko* (Plate 4)-a brass sculpture measuring 25cmx20cm produced in 2001- explores the strategies and techniques of contemporary mass media and draws on her early training as a metal designer. The sculptural piece contains aspects of innovation and self expression, at the same time as she is re-creating the human image in abstract form. Reflecting her identity and background, Layiwola has used her art to address social and cultural issues associated with Yoruba women living in Lagos. Inspired by feminist movement, she has also produced myriads of artworks that provided incisive commentary on the menace of male chauvinism.

Layiwola has, through her non-profit organization: *Women and Youth Art Foundation* continued to reveal a history of collective and participatory art; using workshop apprenticeship system. She increasingly incorporated references to gender in paintings, pottery and etched works produced in her workshop experiments. Recently, she turned to bead and fabric as predominant materials in her workshop practice. Using the two aforementioned materials enabled her to make more pointed reference to domestic chores, traditionally associated with women, and she has been collaborating with her mother, Elizabeth Olowu, a sculptor of international repute in the attempt to promote feminist movement and oppose male chauvinistic tendencies; using art as a vehicle of communication.

Visual Perceptions and Conceptions of Feminist Nudity by Four Male Artists from Nigeria

Visual perception is the basis of artistic creation. It relates to human or environmental behaviours observed by the

artists. It deals with an experience which becomes an intermediary between the idea of the artists and their understanding of the subject-matter. Visual perception is not only what the artists see nor what they understand to see, but it is the balance of seeing and comprehending simultaneously. The perception of an idea in artwork constitutes the most important element of the artistic representation, because the artistic creation is the representation of an idea as much as it is of an image.

In its own case, visual conception is what the artists are able to see, that is, the information that they are able to discern from the outside world. It deals with the descriptions of human or environmental behaviours observed by the artists. The Visual conception comes into birth in the sudden sensation of the artists when their deepest hearts contact with the creation. Simply put, it is a process of understanding in which artists become aware or conscious of activities in their immediate milieu. This process of comprehension becomes a mediated experience, because the use of innate tendencies and optical senses are required in order to process the information. The artists must comprehend the messages, the contents and the forms of objects in the mind through the interplay of sight, taste and touch for them to be processed.

This study has established the fact that most human everyday visual experience is difficult to memorize. The artists are, therefore, standing in the gap, using their arts to carefully place colours and depict shapes, not to simply copy the human daily experience, but to arrest and engage people's attention, making them look and be aware of the act of looking, and potentially enriching their level of perception. This gift of engaged vision, in contrast to human everyday inattentiveness, is one of the greatest benefits the readers will derive from the artworks of four Contemporary Nigerian artists: Bruce Onobrakpeya, Tola Wewe, Miri Adejimi and Femi Akande. Their artworks are discussed in this study within the context of feminist nudity.

Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), the Nigeria's master print maker who studied art at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria) has used his etchings to protest the hypocrisy and materialistic decadence of those in power. In one of his prints, *Nude and Protest* (Plate 5) he draws attention of art connoisseurs to women from the South-South Region protesting against oppression and degradation of their land by the Nigerian government. The nude figures in the print symbolize dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the nation. The black lines and the ultramarine blue hue as well as the lemon yellow are used by Onobrakpeya to signify crisis, opposition and disappointment



Plate 5: Nude and Protest, by Bruce Onobrakpeya

In the print, Onobrakpeya etches women in the nude protesting against government's nonchalant attitude towards Niger Delta problems. He shows several elderly naked women raising their hands up towards heaven to appeal to divine authority and to express their grievances against autocracy and mismanagement of their natural resources.

The naked appearance of women in agitating for human rights has been a common phenomenon in the distant past, most especially in the Southern part of Nigeria. A good example is that of courageous women who used a mass action to combat injustices as at the time of the Aba Tax Riot in 1929. Another example is derivable from Yoruba culture where deliberate public exposure of the female body is a gesture of extreme gravity of eloquent abomination in the timeless rites of wrongs

Davidow (2002) noted that nudity has sometimes been used to attract attention to public protest for more than 100 years. She stated that the technique was used by the *Doukhobor* Social Movement as early as 1914 and by other groups later in the century, especially after 1960s. She discussed the moral justification of public nudity by looking into its cultural and legal acceptability from region to region. She also reiterated that public nudity is permitted in some countries at areas like nude beaches, either officially designated or socially tolerated. She cited some instances across the globe during which activists or models used nudity as a deliberate, often successful means to attract publicity from the media.

The instances she gave include: (1) the action of super models such as Christy Turlington and Naomi Campbell who posed naked on bill boards with the slogan *I will rather go naked than wear fur* emblazoned across their chest, (2) the group that used nudity in anti-war demonstration: *the Artists for Peace/Artists Against War*, which later became the Work Less Party of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC Canada (3) the case of Terri Sue Webb, an activist living in Bend Oregon in the United States, who was active in The Freedom to be Yourself TFTBY campaign. She was imprisoned and released multiple times for public nudity, (4) the issue of the protest group FEMEN that regularly stage topless protests against sexism and other social ills in Ukraine. The protest group that comprises some 20 topless activists got worldwide press coverage. The group justified its provocative methods of protest saying: "This is the only way to be heard in this country. If we staged simple protests with banners, then our claims would not have been noticed" and (5) the incident during the end of the second Liberian civil war in which women of Liberia staged mass action for peace threatening to strip their clothes in a protest.

Tola Wewe (b. 1959) a prolific Nigerian artist who studied visual arts at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife and the University of Ibadan has continued to draw inspiration from the *Ona*² dictum as well as relied heavily on folkloric images of the Yoruba. The issue of sexism is also prominent in his artworks and he has spent part of his creative endeavour producing paintings that explore feminist appearance and African traditional belief system to reveal and subvert conventional representations of gender. He dealt with issue of *womanhood*, trying to support the idea of a woman stripping naked to curse in African society. In his work titled *Strength of Womanhood* (Plate 6) a 60cmx120cm oil/acrylic painting, he focused on three black damsels exposing their body, which is often used to symbolize the quality, condition, or degree of strength in women; or the women power of action or resistance and the ability to withstand great pressure or force.



Plate 6: Strength of Womanhood by Tola Wewe

The belief in some cultures that “a menstruating woman who uncovers her body can scare away hailstorms, whirlwind and lighting and that anything she touches turns sour including wine and meat; and that seeds turn sterile and plants wither”³, can be used to authenticate the ingenuity of the social symbolism observed in Wewe’s artwork. It is also believed in some cultures across the world that “if a woman strips naked and walks around the field, caterpillars, worms and beetles will fall off the ears of corn and even when not menstruating, she can lull a storm out of sea by stripping”⁴.

In African society, there is also a belief that “a woman who stripped naked can “invoke a curse under the most extreme circumstances and men who are exposed to such situation are considered doomed, because no one will marry them or enter into any kind of contact with them” (Adekanla, 2011). It is worthy of mention that this threat of stripping naked has been used successfully in mass protest against the petroleum industry in Nigeria.

Tola Wewe’s womanhood series reflect emotional outburst that culminates into a simple painterly composition that is based on the use of forms that create a feminist scene on which patterns derived from geometric and organic shapes are placed. Wewe’s transposition from sparse use of *Ona* motifs in this painting assumes colourful representation of indigo blue⁵ traceable to the *adire* patterns in Yoruba art. His nudes artwork is a creative experiment in the use of vertical, horizontal and angular shapes to achieve visual harmony. Wewe’s experiment with the complimentary colours: Blue and Orange, has coalesced in a fusion of harmonious nude images. He achieved a complete harmony in the picture by means of perfect design and balanced arrangement.

Muri Adejimi (b. 1958) is an artist that was fully nurtured at the Abayomi Barber’s School at the former Cultural Centre University of Lagos through informal method of master-apprentice tradition. Along with a conscious reappraisal of the processes of art historical validation, Adejimi has turned to assessing ritual ceremonies, such as initiation and rites of passage, and their impact on womanhood in validating African cultural heritage. In his work titled: *Baptism* (Plate 7) a naturalistic painting produced in 1987, Adejimi depicted a vivid image of a topless woman immersed in water for religious ceremony of initiation into a society or a cultic group. The Photo graphic representation shows the topless lady performing the first act or rite as she is being admitted into womanhood.



Plate 7: Baptism by Muri Adejimi

In this painting, Adejimi illustrated the connection between the realm of art and the real world of cultural and religious interest. Baptism in religious parlance refers to any ceremony, trial, or experience by which a person is initiated. This rite of passage has been used in different cultures to integrate biological events with spiritual experience. This particular work on baptism made by Adejimi is an exquisite example of a nude study at the height of an artist’s technical skill. This quality is revealed in the usage of beautiful colours on the skin, on the scarf worn to cover the head, on the beads adorning the neck and on the fluttering drapery.

The warmth of the lady’s facial expression and the soft fleshiness of the breast are typical examples of Adejimi’s

mastery of the pictorial expression of feminist character. Despite the exposure of the breast he tried as much as possible to avoid pornographic conduct; he shows the nude image without graphic focus on the genitals.

The painting depicts a water scene with effects of light on the forms and on the reflections of the beautiful figure inside a river. The naturalistic composition of a traditional African woman in nude going through modern biblical baptism, by Adejimi, clearly betrays an example of the eclecticism and the dialogue between traditional and modern elements found in the artworks of his mentor, Abayomi Barber. The overall observed behaviour in this painting is that women give life to men and they can as well take it away. In the baptism scene, Adejimi symbolizes the principle of ‘giving and taking of life’ by depicting an irresistibly attractive woman who can bring joy to men as well as disaster on them.

Femi Akande (b. 1976) obtained Higher National Diploma in ceramic technology from the Polytechnic, Ibadan. In his work titled: *Ile to n San fun Wara ati Oyin* meaning *Land Flowing with Milk and Honey*-plate 8 (an earthenware measuring 96cm in height produced in 2009), he attempted to deal with a feminist art issue that tended towards essentialism, emphasizing the universal role of mothers in feeding and nurturing their children. He has used the work to gravitate toward the notion of womanhood in a socially constructed art concept. He adopted a multifaceted and dynamic approach, making the discourse on feminist issues more artistic oriented and challenging. A consideration of many artistic variables in this creative production, however, results in a more complex understanding of women’s role in the society.



Plate 8: Ile to n San Fun Wara ati Oyin by Femi Akande

This ornamental vase that serves both utilitarian and aesthetic functions is a testament to the strength and flexibility of a universal belief system that is perpetually inventing, reinventing and modifying itself. Its embodying aesthetic reflects remarkable adherence to traditional styles and structures that concurrently celebrate conspicuous sign of change in African artistic heritage. In a creative negotiation between ideologies that are old and new and the artificial boundaries between traditional and modern, this ornamental vase is dissolved, merged and transcended. It is exactly the ever dynamic, all encompassing nature of ceramic technique that allows this transcendence.

Akande adopted the essentialist concept to educate the mothers all over the world in aspects of human behaviour desirable as a way to prepare them for their role as responsible, productive entity in the society. The theme of the artwork *The Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* is a metaphor for Nigerian nation, blessed with numerous resources. According to Akande (2011), the frontal view of the work illustrates the struggle, wasteful venture and the stampeding of the common citizen by unpatriotic leadership who is milking the abundant resources for selfish end, while the back view depicts the resources that are available for the use of all and sundry.

Judging from its large size, the image of this nursing mother also functioned as guardian figure flanking her

children to the point of sharing the milk from the breast. The peculiarity of the image is the exposure of the breast, probably in the public, to feed many babies, who are scrambling to have a suck. In some societies, exposure of breast in the public to feed babies is considered abnormal. Public breast feeding, since the exposure it involves is functional, should be looked upon more mildly, but still it is sometimes considered problematic.

Breast feeding in public deals with social attitudes that forbid nursing mothers from exposing their nipples in order to feed their babies in an open environment and with legal situation that either deprive mothers of the right to perform maternal role to their children or recognize their moral choice to do so. Some people are uncomfortable with seeing a mother breastfeeding babies and some communities consider breastfeeding in a public place to be indecent. Some nursing mothers may, however, feel reluctant to breastfeed in public either because of their upbringing or because of their attitude to exposing their breast in public to breast feed; or because of anticipated reaction of others. In Nigeria, for an instance, there is no law prohibiting breastfeeding in public place.

It is this social attitude that Akande tried to perceive and conceptualize within the context of Nigerian culture, using art as a medium. This figure that is breastfeeding the babies is identified by two hands being held by the sides, the head moulded in a gaze, amorphous ears, flared nostrils, and heavily lidded, wide-opened eyes. Decorative patterns are used to depict waist loins and other functional accessories that are fashionable among women. The artist acknowledged borrowing ideas, motifs, conventions and skills from traditional Yoruba arts.

SUMMARY, DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our major finding in this paper is that visual art has contributed, in no small measure, to the development of feminism and feminist art and to the promotion of protest art in addressing issues such as sexism and environmental crisis in contemporary Nigerian society. In fact, visual expressions of sexism have been tolerated since prehistoric period, when human beings were represented artistically in states of undress. In the ages past, the visual art was the only medium available to the general public to view a nude body, but today the opportunities abound in other visual media such as magazines, television, films and the internet. Nudity in all styles has been and continued to be found in visual arts. A good number of professionally trained visual artists have been using either realistic, naturalistic or stylized compositions to depict the nude body, most especially of women. The erotic aspect of nudity in visual arts has, therefore, been a significant factor in its attraction, and has come to be associated with certain states of emotions, such as innocence, playfulness, vulnerability, protest and other social behaviours.

Bruce Onobrakpeya's *Nude and Protest* (Plate 5) is a good example of visual art that has tangible effect on Nigeria's social behaviour. The work depicts a group of women protesting in nude to express their objections by actions to government policies. Such protests, most especially by women groups, have taken different forms in the past, from individual statements to mass protestation. This study revealed that women activists such as Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Mrs Laila Dogonyaro and Professor Bolanle Awe have also organized feminists groups as a way of publicly making their opinions heard in an attempt to influence public or government policies. The members of feminist art group such as Sokari Douglas-Camp, Kaltume Gana, Lilian Pilaku and Peju Layiwola have equally used their protest arts in an attempt to directly enact desired changes.

The protests by these various feminist groups are part of systematic and peaceful campaign to achieve social and

political objectives, and sometimes they involve the use of pressure as well as persuasion. These forms of self expression and protest were sometimes restricted by government policies, economic circumstances, religious orthodoxy, social structures or media monopoly. Where such restrictions occurred, the protests have assumed the form of civil disobedience as is in the case of Aba women tax riot in the year 1929.

Another example of artwork that has succeeded in having a powerful effect on humans' social behaviour is Akande's earthenware titled *Ile to n San fun Wara ati Oyin* meaning *Land flowing with Milk and Honey* (Plate 8). It was displayed for the first time in the year 2011 during a solo exhibition titled: *Clay in the Magic Hand of Man* at the Foyer of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan. The visual imagery of the work, which is the exposure of a woman's breast in the public to feed a child, is used as a basis to interpret the visual conception of how Nigeria's wealth is being appropriated by the government. The study revealed through the basic image of a mother breastfeeding her babies that Nigerian people have myriads of attitudes towards public utilities.

This image of a woman breastfeeding babies in a public place signifies that some women are relaxed when breastfeeding their babies in front of others, while others are uncomfortable or inhibited in that regard. It is worthy of mention that women breastfeed their babies in a variety of situations, and whether they are prepared to do the act in front of others depends on the social context in which the act arises. Many people have strong views on public breastfeeding, which to them can involve issues and standards of decency and morality while some people have a psychological aversion for it. The attitudes of women breastfeeding their babies are strongly dependent on the context in which it takes place, so that what may be considered inappropriate in one context (public breastfeeding) may be acceptable in another context (home breastfeeding). These are individual subjective standards.

Tola Wewe and Muri Adejimi's creative endeavours are typical of feminist nudity and they used their artworks to address ideas about the essence of humanity. Because the duo considered human nature so important, the feminist nude was conceivable in their artistic productions, and the concept of a naturalistic female body as beautiful and good was an emphasis in Adejimi's picture of a woman performing the rites of passage. The female bodies in Wewe's work were distorted to communicate his idea of feminism and feminist nudity. Thus, his naked female bodies are stunted; the bodies are elongated and serene, their anatomical distortions emphasizing the power of womanhood and the protection, and they are portrayed by him in idealized form while indicating their social status creatively. The expressions of the nude female figure in Adejimi's baptism is subdued and determined, while the nude bodies and human faces in Wewe's work are much more emotional.

The study established that the human social behaviour accepts the wearing of clothes as the social norm in most cultures. Some cultures, groups or individuals are more relaxed about nudity, though attitudes often depend on the social and cultural context. The presence of nude person in a public place can give rise to controversy, irrespective of the attitude of the person who is nude. In the world of artistic creation the portrayal of humans in nude is not seen as an aberration, because nude has become an enduring form, genre and subject-matter of representation in the visual art; especially in pictorial and plastic forms. The artworks produced by the four Nigerian male artists have shown examples of the female figures without clothes to provide pleasure and lesson for art connoisseurs; these artists' nudist approach is legitimized because it is "art".

NOTES

- During the Renaissance of art in Europe, the Catholic church sponsored arts with religious themes that included many states of nudity. The painters that were sponsored by the church included Raphael Sanzo, Caravaggio and Michelangelo, but many of their artworks were and continued to be displayed in churches for liturgy purposes. Some of the works were painted as murals and the most popular of them is done by Michelangelo at the Sistine chapel.
- The Ona motifs and forms are incorporated into almost South-western artistic expressions such as cultural and traditional cloth dyeing (adire), wood and calabash carvings and architectural designs.
- See the view of Fliny the Elder on “Naturalist and Natural Philosopher” in *Natural History* published by Encyclopaedia Britannica in AD 1977-1979. Vol. 7; pp. 79-88.
- Ibid; pp. 79-88.
- The craft of dyeing clothes in indigo hues is an ancient one among the Yoruba. The Portuguese travellers in 1445 reported hand spun indigo dyed garments worn by the West African farmers and in 1843 the Rev. Henry Townsend remarked that the products of the land in Abeokuta included indigo, because at that time, every compound in Abeokuta, the home of indigo dyeing had its own dyeing area.

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