

## **A Critical Appraisal of Kunle Osundina's Paintings**

**Tolulope O. Sobowale, Nanashaitu A Umoru-Oke, Olojo-Kosoko,  
K. K., Akinsoji, F. Oni, & Olusoji, O. Oshi Sada**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State  
Department of Art and Industrial Design, Lagos State Polytechnic, Ikorodu, Lagos State.

### **Abstract**

This study examines the works of a contemporary Nigerian artist, Kunle Osundina, with the aim to documenting his contributions to art, especially underlying Yoruba philosophical idiomatic expressions encoded in his works. In achieving this, the researchers visited his studio, taking photograph undertaking physical evaluations of his works. Information relevant to the study was sourced from exiting literature relating to the life and work of the artist. Though Kunle has joined his ancestors, it is worthy to note that the research was done years before his departure and this gave the benefit of having first-hand information about his artistic development and his contribution to contemporary Nigerian art while alive.

**Key Words:** Yoruba, Visual art, Idiomatic expression, Kunle Osundina, Onaism.

### **Introduction**

In the developmental studies of African art, early scholars who ventured into the study of African art come into erroneous conclusion in their criticism and evaluation of works of art in Africa. This is because what they see in visual art outside their western clime does not comply with their assumption of what an ideal visual works should be. On this note, they misunderstood the art works from other regions and labeled them with negative terms such as childlike, naïve, crude, object of curiosity, among others as observed by Adrain (1904:14).

Later in 1910, Leo Frobenous discovered an equal finesse of western works made of bronze from Africa soil, particularly the Benin and Ife. The astonishing quality in the bronze cast from the said places actually contributed to changing their bias mind and therefore reason that if such great quality cast could come out of Africa, then there must be reasons why African artist do represent their works in their abstraction mannerism in which lies the essence of the works. Trowell (1953: 20 & 60) asserted that the only way to appreciate works of art from Africa is by first understanding the cultural backgrounds of the people that produced it as this will provide the reasons for the forms and meaning embedded in the art works. This therefore makes it imperative to further interrogate the socio-cultural background of the people along with their artistic productions for proper appreciation of the artist effort and understanding of the works.

Kunle Osundina (see plate 1), produced works that fall under the representational canon of traditional African art in terms of forms loaded with insightful philosophical meanings, in line with the essence and the expressive content embedded notwithstanding his exploration of foreign materials and tools. In other to do justice to Kunle's works, his use of iconographic symbols and their expressive connotations is

looked into to reveal the artist's interaction and understanding of his socio-cultural (Yoruba) background thereby, placing his art in proper perspective and understanding. Thus cultural background with the artist, making an appraisal of his works selected for this study is necessary as it helps to bring to the limelight the message and meanings embedded in the iconographic motifs used as a means of communication in the paintings.

A critical appraisal of Kunle's work for this study is geared towards revealing hidden underlying interpretations in the paintings. This is necessary, particularly in a situation where the works were rendered in a semi-abstract manner typical of ancient African art, such that requires logic to comprehend their link in relations to the people and happenings in the built environments. Lack of critical appraisal by the early western scholars and art critic of traditional African with regard to the embedded meanings in their forms and symbols contributed immensely to their prejudice, erroneously in judging the works based solely on the physical form. Thus, their aesthetics appreciation was in reverse of the Yoruba saying that *inà lemà* (character is beauty). A good-looking person may have a bad character while someone considered ugly may pose a good character that will make such person preferable and acceptable in the society. A critical analysis of a work will help in appreciating and understanding the form, style, theme and message (expressive content) in a work of art, which is the chief goal of art criticism which is also the focal point in this study. Aside the aforementioned, the background and creative history of the artist is also germane.

### **The Artist's Background**

Kunle Osundina was born at Ibadan in July 27, 1971 and until his death in November 2, 2018, he was a strong and active member of Ona art movement. Married to Yemisi Osundina (nee Ajiboye) an artiste and first daughter of the famous painter and cartoonist Josy Ajiboye. Kunle attended Government College Ibadan, and went further to study Fine Arts at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife where he bagged his B.A. Ed and MFA (painting) in 1999 and 2014 respectively. Ever since graduation, he has succeeded in making his mark in contemporary Nigerian art scene, most especially within his contemporary and in the hub of Lagos market and art lovers. He has two solo shows to his credit and several group exhibitions. According to Ohiomokhare (2009:2), his love for culture makes his paintings to speak from the aegis of tradition.

One can see clearly in Osundina's painting what Sharon Pruitt (1999:76) observed in her study on Onobrakpeya, that in "contemporary art, the individual freedom of expression in pursuit of a personal or national identity led to the emergence of a variety of styles". Kunle consciously rejected stylistic borrowing from the Western academic traditions and embraced an approach which addressed the issues of the visual language of his Yoruba and in particular, in association *Ona*<sup>1</sup> art philosophy.

During his time, Kunle lived and used a section of his apartment as studio at Akute, in Ifo local Government in Ogun State, which is a border town to Lagos State, his paintings, revealed stylistic renderings influenced by the *Ona* art movement to whom he

---

<sup>1</sup> Ona art movement was form by 5 Ife art school graduate with the aim of using their creative works to project and propagate Yoruba artistic philosophy and make it relevance in contemporary Nigerian art and beyond.

was exposed while at the university. His exposure was because most of his lecturers at Ife were Ona artists and have consciously instilled in their students to emulate their footsteps. Hence, Kunle's paintings revealed high interest in Yoruba traditional style of spatial relationships involving flattened shapes, frontal presentation, and stylized forms—elements traceable to traditional Yoruba works in nature.

However, another explanatory concept that influenced Kunle Osundina paintings can be found in *àdìrè éléko* (tie and dye) textile design, one of the artistic heritages of the Yoruba people of western Nigeria. This is evidenced in his painting as the entire scene plays out against a background based on an *àdìrè éléko* fabric design, a traditional Yoruba indigo resist-dyed technique. The motifs in 'diplomatist' (Plate 4), and "wasted Libation" (plate 3) show a typical geometric forms and pattern synonymous with the Yoruba indigo textile design as the figure/s are enclosed in a circular compartment, surrounded by a border with shapes made from stenciled, animal, plants and geometric design. His passionately appeal, that traditions are the bulwark of one's identity, personal strength, and means for survival made him unhappy with artists who jettison the reflection of their cultural elements in their art works (Kunle, 2014). He further expressed his disheartening on artist that jettison borrowing from their cultural background as, such artists are not proud of their cultural identity and forms that could enrich their creativity.

### Analysis of Works

For proper and objective appraisal of the selected paintings in this study, Feldman (1967) assertion on critical performance needs to be considered. These include, description, formal analysis, interpretation and judgment. The critical performance is a systematic approach to investigating the meanings of works of art with a view to understanding the themes, including social and cultural context of the art works. The basis of critical performance is to arrive at the point of aesthetic or critical judgment, in which context, thematic thrust and stylistic direction(s) of the selected works are analyzed.

Description in criticism draw attention to the elements of art used, and doing this requires *sùúrù* (patience) to painstakingly make proper observation, identification and understanding the element found in the work for descriptive purpose. Formal Analysis focuses on the principles of design. That is, emphasis is on the arrangement and qualities of the elements of art (such as line, shape, colour among others). This answers the question on the quality that is how they all looked individually and the interpretation which could be taking for what is the meaning of the work and its essence. While Judgment (same as evaluation) is aimed at assessing and judging the merit, significance or value of works of art.

The three works selected for analysis in this study are unique with distinct elements that constitute their total form. The work in plate 2, is title "Question Mark" was rendered using different contrasting hues, such as red, yellow, blue, green, and violet. Basic shapes such as square, rectangle, and triangles are represented at the lower left and upper right of the painting. In addition, present in the work are people standing by the side of the long queue of kegs and buckets to fetch water. While some people in the painting were with bucket on their heads.

The tap at the focal point in the painting is running inside a bowl, while the colours are harmoniously complementary in nature. The upper part of the painting to the right is rendered in a delicate mixture of indigo/Prussian blue, violet and midnight blue

with touch of orange and red; while the lower left side contains hues of green, red-orange and yellow. At the middle of the painting are shades of yellow that accentuate radiating glow that fuse the entire painting together. These, thus, give the work a warm touch with the crisp cross strokes of lines associated with cubist style of painting also added to the harmonization of all the elements use in the work.

All the elements used to achieve the outcome in this piece (Question Mark) have a reason and message emanating from it. A view of the work at a glance invokes curiosity in one's mind which leads to self-enquired on why the arrangement of the objects (kegs and buckets) in a form that depict a question mark icon. This is because; the symbol (question mark) is usually placed at the end of an interrogating statement. Thus, looking at the work, it will arouse a question as to why symbol which could lead to rubbing mind with the people around particularly in a situation as depicted in the painting. This situation as shown in this piece, could likened to the poor situation in Nigeria where crude oil is being mined in large quantity on daily basis and yet, people were not getting it to use as expected.

Kunle used this work as a metaphor in making a cogent comment about the way our leaders are handling our resources in which only few have access to its benefit at the expense of the majority. It is only in Nigeria that will have fuel in abundance and yet we suffer to get it as at when due. Also it is only in Nigeria that few in governance were constantly mismanaging and embezzling the nation treasury at the expense of the general populace. Just as the minority in the society anticipate better thing to come and watching helplessly from a distance how their political leaders are selfishly enjoying alone what ought to have being enjoyed by everyone, is the manner kunle depicted the people at the head/top of the question mark icon in this composition.

In "Wasted Libation" (plate 3), the composition is centered on a gourd (*kèrìgbè*) and the content coming out of it, a calabash (*ìgbà*) is placed closed by the gourd, also represented in the painting are palm leaf at the upper right of the work while at the lower side of the left close to the calabash base is a lizard. A geometric shape of intermittent triangle is depicted as well as square and rectangle. Line is used numerously to create a rhythmic flow on the surface of the work as well as creating an inter link which prevented the composition from being disjointed and thereby given the hues (yellow, orange, red, blue, violet and green) a vivid appearance in the work.

Again, Kunle in this particular composition "Wasted Libation" brought to mind the ancient customs and tradition of Yoruba people of western Nigeria. Traditionally, guard is a domestic object meant to serve many purposes; it could be used for sacred and secular purpose depending on the essence it is use for. But generally, it serve as a means of storing herbs, grains, water and palm wine as it is in the case in this piece of work. Function as it applies to the guard is also applicable to calabash placed beside the falling guard. Calabash (*ìgbà*) served as plate for eating at home or at public functions in traditional Yoruba settings. While traditional, people accord their ancestors due respect by purring little of the drink on the floor before taking it. This act is referred to as libation. Hence, making libation is not a waste as it serve a purpose when it is done in a Yoruba community.

Therefore, considering the positioning of the gourd, it does not suggest a positive situation as there is no trace of anyone making an attempt to lift it up or saving the content (palm wine) from total waste. Again, going by the round shape base of the guard, it cannot stay on its own without support. On this note, it probably means that the

people around it chose not to manage it properly, which could be likened to the mannerism of our political office holder in their careless and nonchalant attitude of handling the country's resource by not channeling it in the right way. This poor attitude therefore cost the citizen a lot of suffering in the mist of plenty.

The calabash in the piece of painting by Kunle Osundina is used to symbolize the situation of the common people who were helpless and in abject poverty caused by the wasteful character in the sense that what should have been their portion of the country resources are being lavishly wasted. This is so because the calabash is yet to get a full portion of the content, and it is being poured in the direction (ground) where it will serve no use. The green and fresh looking palm leaf in this work was used by the artist to symbolize the richness of God's blessing on the country vegetation. The ornamentation used in filling the surrounding background in variant shapes and degrees are also used to represent other mineral resources that abound in Nigeria that were not properly channelled to the right manner. While the radiant colours used in the painting is used to suggest hope of a better rewarding future for the country when things are done properly. The lizard was used iconographically to represent the few people enjoying the wealth of the country wrongly as seen in its robust look.

In "Diplomatist", Kunle again showed his strong affinity with Yoruba iconography symbols and images. At the focal point is figure of a man holding a flower and a female portrait beside it. On the upper part of the painting, to the right, are two silhouette figures with an umbrella and a figure depicting a goat (*emúré*). From the left side to the man are leaves, and below the leaves is a cracking wall while at the top is a lizard. Geometric shapes are represented as in the previous two paintings by Kunle also abound in *Diplomatist*. Colours such as yellow, red, orange, blue, green, indigo, and brown are shown in the work. All the colours were used in harmonious complementary ways of variant shades, which are in warm and cool manner that gives the work a pleasant look.

The silhouette of the figures that are almost fusing to the background is used to show the genesis of the conversation and relationship of the two opposite sexes represented in the work. This posture is suggestive of strong communication and acceptability between the two probably lovers. From the position the artist, it is obvious that there is a cordial and mutual agreement between the two that led to the man almost at the center holding flowers/gift in his hand as his evidence of his affection to the woman beside him. For a man in a relationship to be able to get into the heart of a woman requires a lot of convincing painstaking moves and this among others require giving gift. With due respect to the artist's inspiration on this work, I would like to chip in additional interpretations on the painting. After the man has succeeded in getting the woman convinced by getting what he wanted from her, the man felt relieved as his face becomes calm with little smile while that of the woman showed dejection and regret.

Getting access from any woman of dignity requires a lot of trust. Having achieved this and then followed by abuse will surely make such woman to wear a sad face as it is in this particular piece. The use of warm red and orange hues around the woman's head symbolises the level of the psychological trauma in the woman's mind as shown in her face. Icons such as a broken wall at the lower side of the man's right arm, the lizard at the upper part of the same side, flower, umbrella and the goat at the upper left of the

painting are all loaded with meaning and buttressed the message embedded in this piece of work by Kunle Osundina. The meaning of the aforementioned iconography thus goes as follows; the cracking wall suggest opening which reflected the Yoruba adage that says “*bó giri ò la nu, lánḡbá kò lè rá yè wo bē*” that is penetration is difficult for an outsider/enemy is difficult without an insiders’ help. This, thus means that if not that the woman in the painting choose not to listen and consent to the man’s request/pressure, the man would not have being able to achieve his goal. The Lizard in the work stands to represent the man’s interest and ability to penetrating into any opening when giving the opportunity. While the cracking wall was used to represent the woman weakness and consent to the man’s interest without considering what the outcome will be.

The goat at the upper left of the work also corroborates another Yoruba saying that *ohun tó bá di lè, le wúré ngbé*, and meaning that “when a thing is carelessly placed, it belongs to anybody (including animals)”. This saying is usually used to warn people never to be careless or care free as such might cause them a lot. This is reflected on the woman’s facial expression which is suggestive of regret. The umbrella in the painting suggests the instruction which might have being giving to the woman on how to guard herself from consenting to what will latter lead to a state of had I known. The moment she derailed from the instruction, she was actually no more covered and thereby exposed to influences that deprived her from being protected. The interpretation in this piece could be compare to how the electorates get deceived during electioneering by voting wrong people into position of leadership only to discover at the end of their poor decision when neglected by those they elected to serve.

From the moral point of view, the flower symbolizes the man having succeeded in making the woman to have canal knowledge with her, which led to her dull mood. Again, it could be compared to the way politicians do convince people to give them their mandate during electioneering campaigns, and latter derailed from their promises on getting to power. Such attitude will invariably sadden the mind of the eletorate as shown on the woman face. Either from the moral or from the political point of view, if the people stand with their good conscience, it is enough to give them expected shelter and protection which the umbrella in this painting iconographycaly stand for. The work reminds our leaders of how they are using the mandate giving to them by the people, is it good or bad? The answer to this will therefore reflect in the face and mood of the people around them.

From the aforementioned descriptions, formal analysis and interpretation of Kunle’s paintings, one needs to evaluate the overall performance of his works in relations to the audience to ascertain whether the works are good or not. From the time immemorial, art in Africa has always been for an essence and that is the reason why it is clearly stated that there is no art for art sake among Africans (Willett, 1971). Thus, contemporary African artists in other for them not to lose their track of their progenitors (traditional African artist) have put in their efforts consciously to borrow ideas and mannerism of the old in the execution of their own present works of art. This is very evidence in Osundina’s paintings as he employed the use of motifs and iconography known with the traditional Africa art in his modern paintings. Osundina’s use of motif and symbols rooted in his tradition is a continued effort to make his work relevant in line with the philosophy of Ona art movement in which he belongs. In this regard, he was able through his visual ingenuity to propagate the act of natural synthesis in his contemporary works.

The thematic expression of the paintings in this study is highly expressive as they all communicate to the society in the best way the artist could, to contribute his own quota towards sanitizing the society's behavioral attitude as regard socio-cultural, economy and political matters. The works are very relevant as they communicate ideas on the present situation of the happenings of which it stands to correct; therefore, the selected paintings in this study serve a good essence it was meant for. Revealing the essence of the paintings through its contextual analysis also helps in projecting the value beyond aesthetics. Osundina's works in this study could be regarded as having dual purposes as they all poses physical beauty which is pleasing to the eyes and as well as adding to the fineness of the place they were being exhibited without losing its corrective communicability as observes by Adepegba (2009:6) and Ohiomokhare (2009:2).

In this regard, a work of art is like a literary work such as creative writing, and cinematography in which the reader or viewer respectively understand the plot independently of the author. Expressively, the reader or viewer can understand more than what the author intended, since there are many stories/concepts behind a work of art. In contrast, instrumentalism focuses on the ability of art to serve an end more important than itself. That is, an art work is excellent or meaningful if it fulfills its thematic thrust or is useful to the society.

Conclusively, Filani's word rightly comes to play when he expressed on Osundina's works that "I fancy the appraisal of such paintings using the warmest of words, not only because of the freshness of the colours but also because of the ebullience of the subject matter. However, as the Yoruba often opined that there are times when words abound but time constrains; while sometimes time abound but words are limited". The former is obviously the case now. From the above, it is much obvious that Osundina is not just an artist, but one with a strong root to his socio-cultural background as in the case of the progenitors' creative mind before him.



Plate 1. Kunle Osundina's portrait.



Plate 2. Kunle Osundina: *Question Mark*. Oil on canvas, 36 inches by 48 inches. Photograph: Tolulope Sobowale, 2007





Plate 3. Kunle Osundina: *Wasted Libation*. Oil on canvas, 40 inches by 48 inches. Photograph: Tolulope Sobowale, 2010



Plate 4. Kunle Osundina: *Diplomatist*. Oil on canvas, 48 inches by 48 inches. Photograph: Tolulope

### References

- Adepegba K. (2009). *Osundina's Symphony of Inspiration: Metaphors in Visual Eclecticism*. In "Symphony of Inspirations". An exhibition of Paintings by Kunle Osundina, Quintessence Gallery, Falomo Shopping Complex, Ikoyi, Lagos.
- Adrain, B. (1994). *The History of African Art Studies: State of The Discipline*, National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.
- Feldman, E. B. (1967). *Art as Image and Idea*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc.
- Ohiomokhare M (2009) *Gallery Statement*. In "Symphony of Inspirations". An exhibition of Paintings by Kunle Osundina, Quintessence Gallery, Falomo Shopping Complex, Ikoyi, Lagos.
- Pruitt, S. (1999). *Bruce Onobrakepeya: A Continuation of Cultural Synthesis*. In Nkiru Nzegwu (Ed) *Contemporary Textures Multidimensionality in Nigerian Art*. International Society For The Study Of Africa. New York: Binghamtom University, N. Y.
- Terra Kulture (2007) *Colours of Love*, in an exhibition catalogue of Paintings and Drawings by Kunle Osundina. Lagos
- Trowell M. (1953:20 &60) *Classical African Sculpture*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 24 Russell Square.
- Microsoft Encarta (2009) Microsoft Corporation, 2003-2008.
- Willett, F (1971) *African Artistic Criticism. The Traditional Artist in African Societies*, Warren L. d'Azevedo (ed.), Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

### Personal Communication

Kunle Osundina (age 43) Saturday, April 4, 2014. At his residence/studio, Akute, Ogun State.