

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

OSA Dennis Egonwa's Painting: Interpretation and a Critical Analysis of Three Compositions

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Abstract:

One of the foremost Nigerian artists that came into limelight in the mid 1980's is Osa Dennis Egonwa, a professor of Art and Art History. He has contributed to development of modern art in Nigeria since the past three decades. However his paintings are transformational re-interpreting visual techniques and styles that are mythical and folkloric. This paper introduces Egonwa as an artist, his biographical profile, discussion and analysis of his three compositions; One Lonely Traveller 2014, Grandfather's Tale 199 and Oil Has Trapped My George 2007.

Keywords: Cultural, paintings art history art practice

1. Introduction

Osa Dennis Egonwa a painter and art historian, emerged as one of the champions and innovators in art practice in the development of modern art in Nigeria since the 1980's His artistic impute was first recognized and noticed as a student in the Department of Fine and Applied Art, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and University of Benin between 1983 to 1985 where he made tremendous impact using his style, techniques and show of skill in his major area painting during his quest for Masters of Fine Art (MFA).

Painting is Egonwa's primary field, and he has proficiency and knowledge in the use of materials and method in painting. His impact in the artistic revolution integrates quality art practice in exploration of art forms which are created in most of his paintings. The admiration of traveling and site seeming in the course of his sabbatical experience, in Northern Nigeria shows holistically a total transformation of re-interpreting development in a visual technique and style that address myth, folklore, cultural symbolism and the use motifs generated from themes base on cultural iconography. Egonwa's works are based on culture and social commentaries, impressionistic ideals especially on figures and forms that are interwoven. He is highly influenced by creative works of great masters such as Vincent Van Gogh. Egonwa understands Van Gogh style and techniques, which I noticed in his recent painting titled *One Lonely Traveller 2014* acrylic on canvas 60 x 74cm. Nevertheless, the *Grandfather's tale* is another work that address folktale, and its one of the prominent works created by the artist in 1999 that fall into his early painting style since 1980 the artist attributed this to what is known as "Substyle of the Nsukka Manner" which the artist has been experimenting on for over three decades. The painting style also address issues in pictorial composition to distil artistic idioms that are associated with native and has some foreign influence on native representative identity in contemporary Nigerian art. However, this is synonymous with some of the artist works namely, *Romance of the Bicycle Load (1985)* *What I saw at the Emir's Place (1984)* and *Down the Road We Go 1980*, Egonwa (2011 p 133).

Egonwa graduated from the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria Nsukka where he showed very little interest in Uli Art forms but developed a new identity in rendering his pictorial composition to depict his artistic message.

The artist style of work is complicated but stylized naturalism and pure abstraction, that fall into social engagement that is an interpretation of the Anioma Ibo Culture of Delta State and a blend of the Urhobo Culture. This probably literally account for the artist as a native of Delta Ibo and work in Urhobo Land – Abraka. The artist draws his theme from his wealth of experience from social activities and his cultural background, his native home where he schooled, and where he lived and worked. His paintings are characterized and based on the theory of formalism, project pictorial composition. The structure possesses congested space within the frame work of most of his compositions. Egonwa creative works revolve around culture, social and political activities within his immediate environment, according to Wassily Randinsky translated by M.TH Sadler, asserted (1977):

- Every work of art is the child of its age and in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated. (p1)

The above statement confirms the importance and the role of culture in the development of modern art in Nigeria and to the rest of the world. Most of Egonwa work of art discussed the use of colours, lines and volumes that are also associated with enumeration of motifs and symbols that will help in a pre iconographical description of the artist work of art.

A stratification of Primary and Secondary composition is seen in the artist work. The primary sources address images such human, animals, landscape with natural phenomenal plant, houses and manmade objects. However, forms and images from these sources are perceived in the artist visual expression in his artistic works. The secondary stratification in Egonwa works deals with a lot of its

conventional subject matters of recognition in perceiving motifs and symbols in his creative works. In the artist work you can recognize images, and combination of images and symbols that can easily tell the meaning, description and interpretation of his painting holistically. The Egonwa artistic work address the ancient theorist of art called invenzion; because the artist works are based on myths and folktale that are full of stories and allegories which art forms and images can be referred to as iconography.

Egonwa allegorical ideals apply method of Iconology in his paintings by painting subject matter that can be interpreted as a matter that arose from his paintings such as Grandfather's tale created by him in 1999. It possessed synthesis rather than analysis. The artist work has a formalist approach in rendering his themes and subjects especially his paintings on illusion such as *Oil Has Trapped my George* address on images, stories and allegories base of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region.

This article will therefore focus on three compositions of Osa Egonwa Paintings, *Grandfather's Tale 1999*, acrylic on board, *One Lonely Traveller 2014* acrylic on canvas 60x74cm and *Oil Has Trapped My George*. It will address and discuss traditional interpretation, description cultural meaning and evaluation on the three compositions. Patrick Frank (2004) rightly noted;

- Iconography is the symbolic meaning of signs, subjects and images. Not all works of art contain iconography. In those that do, it is the symbolism (rather than the obvious subject matter) that carries the deepest level of meaning. The identification and specific significance of subjects, motifs, form, colour and position are the central concern of iconographic interpretation. (p35)

The above statement account for how the Egonwa Painting will be discussed and fall in line with Patrick Frank submission on iconographical approach that can be adopted on subject matters and images in Egonwa works of art.

2. Biographical Profile: Osa Dennis Egonwa

Osanweokwu Dennis Egonwa a renowned and foremost Painter, Critic, Art Historian was born July 4 1955 at his home town Idumuje-Uno, in Aniocha North Local Government Area of Delta State, Nigeria. Probably his Elementary School would have been in Benin City where he stayed as a child. He then attended Pilgrim Baptist Grammar School, Isesele-Uku. Egonwa holds a Bachelor of Art B.A (Hons) Fine and Applied Arts from University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1980, Master of Fine Art in Painting from University of Benin in 1985 and a Ph. D in Art History, University of Nigeria. Egonwa who has devoted his life to his works as an art educator, is a Professor of Art and Art History at the Delta State University, Abraka Delta State Nigeria.

He has impacted knowledge and mentored young up coming contemporary artists, students at all levels through conferences, workshops, industrial training, sabbatical and seminars where he skillfully demonstrates his artistic proficiency. He has taught painting, drawing, Art History and Art Criticism for over three decades. As a lecturer he pioneered and structured the post-graduate programme at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, which include the Master of Fine Arts (MFA), Ph. D in Art History and Ph. D in Studios Art. Egonwa championed Ph. D in Studio Art, as the first of its kind in Nigeria. He developed the growth of academic programmes and expanded its scope from Ph. D in Art History to practice lead Ph. D in Studio Art. Egonwa's artistic consciousness has given rise to individuals who acquire the practice lead Ph. D and are now professionals in various areas of art discipline upon graduation and this eventually rejuvenated the growth of modern Art in Nigeria and beyond. Egonwa has written a lot of journal articles, books and book chapter towards enhancing the development of theoretical art both in Nigeria and internationally. The articles address issues on misconceptions and false conceptualizations of African art, the distinctiveness in African Art and world Art and an over view of the challenges facing African Art and understanding the content and context of visual images in African art. His television discussion programmes address issues on enlightenment campaign to projects his views and awareness on our visually illiterate populace to be acquainted with art development in Nigeria and the rest of the world. Egonwa has exhibited within Nigeria and internationally. To his credit are numerous commissions among them are the *Okada Twin Town Hall mural painting, Bini Noble Dance and Innovation of the Gods* (1987-88) but assisted in conjunction with Onyema Emeni. (Egonwa 2011:133) Egonwa rightly mentioned:

- He has a strong affection for painting and illustrations. This early childhood experience in Benin-City of the roadside artist artists and Igun Street bronze casters had a telling impression on him. He had earlier benefited from the trainings of his two brothers Benjamin and Sunday. (p133)

The above statement account for the early interest and passion the artist developed for art that necessitated him to choose Fine Art as career which he has exceled as an accomplished artist and has contributed to the growth of modern art in Nigeria.

3. One Lonely Traveller 2014

This composition has a lot of visual elements in the artistic works of art created by Osa Egonwa based on abstraction. His observation symbolizing ideas and feeling recorded while traveling to and fro, Abraka to Lafia where he was doing sabbatical in Federal University, Lafia, Nasarawa State, of Nigeria. The composition *One Lonely Traveller 2014*, mixed media painting in two-dimensional picture surface, created by the artist covered with wavy lines, forms, shapes, heavy textures, congested space of movement of lines, and other expressive possibilities in visual element are also prominent, such as light, colour, showing movement, dynamics and formative structure of expression of brush strokes and colour movement. The painting, *One Lonely Traveller* will be interpreted showing characteristics of lines that can indicate directions of a moving car from the southern to Northern Nigeria in a lonely passage as the artist move up north during his sabbatical experience depicted in mixed media painting. This simply means that the artwork has definite direction in terms of the wavy lines that are associated with shapes, the car is seen in the painting towards the right hand side spotted in green, white and brown colour and the car lined with black. The painting possessed characteristics of lines, with shape and spaces, this work indicates volumes or solid masses by the artist. The artist expressed his emotion of deep feelings, pains, and

excitement on journeys made by the artist several times for about 10 hours from Abraka where he lived and work at the Delta State University to Lafia. The mixed media abstract painting created by the artist depicts strong light and shadow, lines, forms, patterns and textures. The movement of the car on the picture surface shows that the car is speeding during the journey through what looks like the savannah region of Northern Nigeria. At the bottom right hand side of the painting are grass painted in hues of Prussian blue, with black lines, also indicate movement of some hues of brown and white. The mixed media effects have line qualities of colours and lines variations. Most of the objects in the painting are silhouetted probably against the background and the artist free hand brush strokes made an interesting impact on forms however and this could be referred to as *spatial arts*. However, the horizontal movement of the car journey toward a focal point spotted in orange dotted colour with emitting light around the point created with white hues indicate and implied as Lafia township which can also be referred to as Lafia a *Vanishing Point* showing characteristic of linear perspective or what Lafia position could be know as Vantage point or view point. The painting could be re-interpreted that the lonely journey to Lafia in Nasarawa State (Federal University Lafia) will be referred to as place of milk and honey hence the artist made several journeys through a lonely road to a land of opportunities.

This painting has no atmospheric perspective, the style and techniques used by the artist is impressionistic fall into the era of neo-postimpressionism. Ross King (2010) rightly noted;

- The terms Neo-Impressionism and post-Impressionism refer to a 30-year period of extensive artistic innovation between 1880-1910 rather than to single group of artists. Although this new generation of Painter had started on the fringes impressionism, many of them began to react against its preoccupation with surface appearances. (p360)

The above statement clearly addresses the group of young impressionist artists in 19th century among them namely Georges Seurat (1856-1891) Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) Paul Gauguin (b11848-1903) Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) and Henri Edmond Cross (1856-1910). Nevertheless, their artistic style and techniques are classified as impressionism. Their style and techniques have the same resemblance however Egonwa artistic creative painting of *One Lonely Traveller 2014* which is an impressionistic painting fall among the works of these group of great masters.

The *One Lonely Traveller* has the resemblance of Vincent Van Gogh Painting called the *Starry Night* 1889. Oil on Canvas 29x36cm. Egonwa style and techniques are not different from Van Gogh style and techniques. Egonwa shows sensibility and stability in rendering the artwork adopting Van Gogh style and techniques no more less expression of element of the Japanese Woodcut which is perceived in the work of Egonwa painting. Herbert Read (1985-p28) asserted "As in Van Gogh's adoption of flat colour washes and other elements of the Japanese woodcut, the *expressive* function of the work of art was recognized and preserved. Egonwa, wave-like stroke of lines and shows twisted silhouette of grass showing the north landscape could be easily observed towards the bottom right side of the painting which is similar to the *Starry Night* composition of Van Gogh. The road arrangement created by the artist, the composition has lines of dotted strokes over the picture of the painting and has simplicity but has strong impact on layer of acrylic paintings used by the artist in term of space on the foreground. The horizontal mixed media painting has colour graduation of dark blue hues of blue colours at the bottom of the work. While at the top most part of the painting is counterbalanced by an impressive brilliantly luminous whitish light blue on the top left around the orange spot which is presumed to be Lafia town. The characteristic of this painting is not in anyway different from Van Gogh painting, they both share common visual elements. However, *One Lonely Traveller* has characteristics of the techniques with impressive vigor. The artist created the artwork using impasto techniques, overlapping of forms and lines which means thickly layered colours with dash-like lines brush strokes, emerging from the canvas, stylized swirls forms rendered in lines on the road created for the vehicle traveling on the lone way showing powerful use of blue and whitish brown colours on the highway. However, this was the artist state of mind and reflection. However, the painting is a credit to Osa Egonwa toward emulating the style of a great master Vincent Van Gogh. Other upcoming artists use Egonwa works to jumpstart their creative endeavours in the development of modern art in Nigeria.

4. Grandfather's Tale 1999

The painting perception of the visual formation is circular artwork created by Osa Egonwa demonstrate art forms in subdivisions that embrace segment of compartment of stories emanated from tales of a Grandfather, that he his re-enacting tale's reflection on folktale, myth, folklore, proverbs, wise crack, synonymous with the culture of the Niger Delta people of Delta State. The painting is circular in nature on a scale of complexity and has images of kinesthetic value and within the circular art form. However, the painting visual element, of expression of harmony, variety, balance composition, proportion, dominance of circular forms. The art work shows movement, economy of space. The art work which was created by Egonwa in this respect according to Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, Cayton. (1998. p30). "Art that conforms to established tradition and approved conventions as practiced in art academies. An art that stresses standards and set procedures and rules". The above statement means that the painting has three visual components, subject matter, form and content and ability to investigate the meaning attributed to art work created by the artist. The work which possesses lines, shape, value, texture and colours can be seen in the circle of the art work. Within the circle there is another inner circle with a father figure like a Grandfather in the middle of the art work painted in red with a bluish, whitish background standing holding a circular form in another circle in hues of red and patches of white toward the topmost right of the painting. Within the main circle are movement of semi circular forms and oval shapes painted in yellowish greenish colours. The motifs created by the artist are in bold lines, circle, triangles, curve linear circles, to the bottom right hand of the painting, what looks like a leaf shape with stroke of lines, circles and semi circle and from the topmost left, a shape that is like catfish structure with different forms. The artwork created by the artist is abstract in nature except the human figure of the Grandfather that is stylized.

The Grandfather's Tale artwork created by Osa Egonwa depicted in the painting with vibrant colours, with various motifs within the picture surface, showing some geometric forms, ranging from square, circle, semi circle, and various distorted shapes and symbols. However, the artist executed the art work in vibrant colours that show colour harmonies and intensity. The work is a combination of primary and tertiary colours, showing their hues, tint and hue's of normal value which is created with shades of maroon colours used at different point within the circle around the Grandfather figure created also in maroon red.

However, the Grandfather's tales in the painting has to do with varieties of tradition narrative emanating from the Niger Delta region of Delta State. The artist presumed that Grandfather told quite a lot of stories under the moonlight, and probably that is why the artist created the composition in a circular form. The Grandfather tales might have told so many tales associated with tortoise, hunter, leopard as one time a King of animal, Oba and Magic drum, cat and the rats and so on. This tale or legend have to do with oral tradition of the people of the Niger Delta. In the Grandfather's tale, the artist created another segment probably to do with mythology of the Niger Delta people of Anioma or the Urhobos as the artist belief that Grandfather's tales is associated with myths such as *days that are sacred to divinities*, spirit and ancestors, most market days in the Nigeria Delta region the people do not go to farm or work on that day but keep to the rules of the land and the myth that are associated with the culture, food and traditional religious practices.

Another aspect the Grandfather's tale is involved is speaking proverbs such as "Don't let it die", remove the cutlass from fire, kola nut doesn't understand English and so on. And finally the artist belief that the Grandfather's tales in the picture represented in one of the sequenced depicted in abstraction has to do with the Wise Crack. Such as "unborn child will live till old age". Nics O. Ubogu (2015) rightly noted:

- Most of Buraimoh artworks are based on mythology, folktales, traditional dance ritual, masquerade festivals and local deities. His theme emanates from the rich indigenous culture and traditional religious of the Edos and Yorubas of Nigeria. (p2)

The above statement has shown that Egonwa among other Nigerian artists created artworks based on myth and folktales emanating from various cultures in Nigeria. However, Egonwa artwork on *Grandfather's Tales* we leave us with an understanding of our traditional root and culture of the people of the Niger Delta people in Unionism.

5. Oil Has Trapped My George 2007 (Oil on Canvas)

Oil Has Trapped My George a painting created by Osa Egonwa in oil on Canvas in 2007, the work is very symbolic and address key Issues on crude oil and gas pollutions in the Niger Delta and how it affects the lives of the people living within the region. Psychological and physical mental balance of individuals in their state on how the crude oil and gas exploration and exploitation as regards oil pollution cause indebt hazard and affect the lives of the people in the region, and in the words of Godini Darah cited in Ubogu (2011);

- Physical space is damaged, ecological balance is destroyed and biodiversity is lost irretrievably, these activities have their negative impact making human beings more desperate in the search for basic needs and spiritual balance. (p71)

The above statement as regard the painting created by Egonwa has indebt meaning on environmental pollution by oil prospective and devastation by multinational oil companies in the Niger Delta region that also necessitated emergence of illegal refinery by oil thieves which has affects the lives of the people within the region. The situation has adverse effect on the ecosystem and negative loses of goods and services within the people in the region. The oil spillage down the rigs has caused unbearable and untold hardships and has impoverished the lives of people living within the environment and the entire region.

The literary meaning on this painting by Egonwa can be interpreted that the women within the oil communities as regards George wrapper is a distinct way of gorgeous way of dressing for occasions such as birthday ceremonies, festivals, church services, marriage ceremony, the Kalabari-Irria ceremony, social and political activities. Within the picture surface of the two dimensional art work by Egonwa two women in the painting are seen with textile wrappers while the woman on the left hand side of the painting has wrapper on her hand and head scrambling and crying for her George wrapper that show the importance of George and other young women standing beside her are likely to be the daughters, consoling their mother over the effects of oil pollution that ravage their domain and cause untold hardship that they were unable to purchase George wrapper that is highly valued within the region.

Tobenna Okwuosa (2015) asserted;

- "The women in the painting are either or their impoverishment as a result of oil spill. The gesture and stylistic character of the lamenting woman with both hands on her head is some what similar to some of the war victims found in Obiora Udechukwu's Biafran War images. Egonwa was Udechukwu's student [in University of Nigeria Nsukka] and his influence on him is natural. (p121)

This statement asserted depicts the danger of oil spillage and how it affects the poor standard of living and the hazards associated with it. The rigs possess and endanger the populace around towns and creeks. And Egonwa similarity of this painting compare to Obiora Udechukwu's work, the entire composition has an expressionistic approach of the work created by the artist *Oil Has Trapped my George*. The woman in this context was not able to purchase George wrapper because of poverty ravaging her due to oil pollution and exploration. The composition has dominance of blue, lemon, yellow and orange colours, also showing their hues of colours, forms and motifs depicted in geometric patterns created on the George Wrapper. The movement of wavy lines and the used of colours has the characteristic of Uli art form of the "Nsukka art school", University of Nigeria, introduced by one of the founding art teacher, Professor Uche Okeke in the 1970s. It is one of the prominent style and technique Egonwa adopted in this painting.

6. Conclusion

Osa Egonwa has contributed immensely to the development and upliftment of modern art in Nigeria. As a professor who is an art educator in various stratification Egonwa has taught and mentored people, first his students and individuals using his wealth of experience in art practice and emulated by up coming artists who have benefited from his style and techniques.

Egonwa as a Professor pioneered the designing of post graduate programmes for Ph. D art History and Ph. D in Studio lead practice. This is to his credit and plus in the development of education in modern Nigeria.

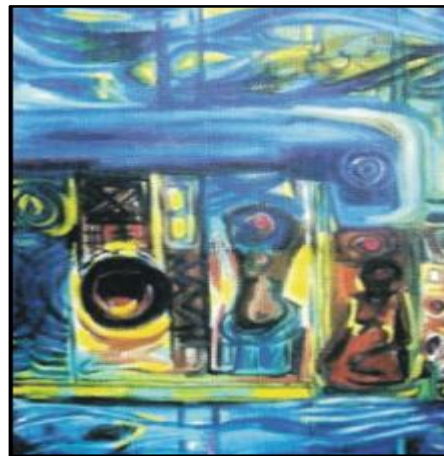
Egonwa used his art works and knowledge to promote vital role in the upliftment of education, social-cultural values in the cultures around the Niger Delta. He emulates the work of great master such as Vincent Van Gogh, in post impressionism and other works that address expressionism. Osa Egonwa will be remembered for his hard work toward the development of modern art in Nigeria.



*Figure 1: One Lonely Traveller 2014
Medium: Mixed Media on Canvas
Source: Artist's collection*



*Figure 2: Grandfather's Tale 1999
Acrylic on Board
Source: Artist's collection*



*Figure 3: Oil has Trapped My George, 2007
Oil on canvas.
Source: Artist's collection*

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