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ARTICLE NINE

DANCING IN BULLETS AND IN BROKENNESS: METAPHOR IN TERRACOTTA ON CANVAS

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Abstract

Socio-economic occurrences and developments in any society is usually a thing of concern especially when this is being jeopardised. There are numerous channels through which such issues are brought to the fore for attention. Among these channels are the art media and more precisely the ceramic art media. Renowned ceramic artists in Nigeria have taken to the medium of expression (clay) to contribute to succinct issues as they affect the society. This study takes advantage of a unique form of ceramic press moulding termed *clay palm press.* This uncommon production technique has been developed to interrogate socio-economic insecurity in the form of ceramic art work. The art work was made possible through a ceramic medium that has been termed *terracotta on canvas.* Extensive studio practice was carried out to generate the terracotta forms for this study. Findings from this study indicate that the medium and mode of execution of the art work shows a unique side of working with clay that negates tactile or three dimensionality of inured ceramic practice. Additionally, the process of clay palm press in this study indicates that it could be therapeutical against medical conditions of muscles of the palm. This is because the process tightens and develops the muscles of the palm further. *Dancing in bullets and in brokenness* has portrayed through the medium of terracotta on canvas that social and security challenges are not limiting factors to a resolute Nigerian. Despite all odds, the strong will of Nigerians keeps persisting and overcoming challenges.

Keywords: Dancing in bullets and in brokenness, metaphor, palm press, terracotta, canvas

Introduction

Ojo etal. (2014) reveal that "socio-economic development, in terms of improvement in the living standards of the citizenry, is perhaps the basic expectation and reward for the citizens in the social contract agreement between the governors and the governed". The socio-economic insecurity of our immediate society is one that has got people pondering and searching for possible ways to bring to the fore this quagmire for possible attention from stakeholders in the society. In this study, the term socio-economic insecurity has been coined and used as "Dancing in Bullets and in Brokenness". Artists and ceramic artists over the years have also joined in the crusade and are being creative in their different media of expression in attempts to draw attention to the nation's challenges. Ozioma Onuzulike is one of such Nigeria's vibrant ceramic artists that are working and experimenting on clay for its social relevance. In a recent exhibition held in Lagos Nigeriain 2019, which he tagged "Seed Yams of our Land", Ozioma points out succinct messages of vices in the society and more particularly as it has to do with the youths, which was symbolically referred to as seed yams, to draw attention to their desecration by vicious forces from within and outside Africa. According to Okafor (2019), Onuzulike draws the attention of the audience to the consequences of things like unwholesome politics, hunger, unemployment, banditry and armed conflicts in Africa on the 'seed yams' (the youth). From the vibrancy of interrogations emanating from Ceramic art practice on social sphere, one can conclude that the specialisation has come to be seen as valuable and effective in artistic expression for issue-based societal discourse via metaphoric expression of art media. According to Peterson and Peterson (2013), ceramics as a science or an art has almost no limitations.

Brandi (2019) opinesthat "a visual metaphor is an image that suggests a particular association, similarity or analogy between two (or more) generally unconnected visual elements". Art is

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predominantly shrouded in metaphor especially when an art piece is executed in conceptual style. Over time, artists and more precisely contemporary ceramic artists have taken to metaphors icing through ceramic art or conceptual ceramics through different modes of ceramics production.

The field of Ceramics has diverse modes of production which range from hand building to throwing on the potter's wheel followed by casting and press moulding. Right from inception of ceramics as a specialisation, there have been different modes of hand building. The most common ones include pinching, slabbing, and coiling methods. Recent practices by ceramic artists that favour hand building technique to form ceramic art products are either an adoption of one of the four already mentioned or a slight modification of them to achieve their aim. Press moulding as the name implies entailsusing an already made Plaster of Paris (POP) mould with patterns and pressing semi solid clay against the mould to accept the patterns. According to Jordan (2019), "The most satisfying aspect about using plaster press moulds is the ability to capture and preserve every detail that is put into a clay form." Though press mould is synonymous with plaster mould as is the accustomed practice, out of consistent studio experimentation, it has been discovered that the human palm is able to generate intricate and interesting patterns on clay. This discovery has been taken advantage of in this study to metaphorically portray socio-economic travails in terracotta on canvas. Put in a more specialised language, this study explored an unusual kind of ceramic art to reflect and interrogate the plight of a nation struggling to find her way out oftwilight. It took extensive studio practice to arrive at the art piece for this study which we would like to refer to as studio experience.

Materials and Methods

Clay that was used in this practice was well prepared and all sharp objects sieved out. Because of the manner of forming, it became very necessary to remove all impurities and sharp objects so that injuries are not sustained as a result of pressing clay in between the palms. A well prepared and plastic clay is suitable for this process. Also it was necessary to use a good plastic clay so that the patterns on the palms can be well transferred unto the clay. The softness of clay was also put into consideration for stress free pressing in between the palms. If the clay is too hard, it becomes too stressful to press and results in muscle strain. As seen in figure 1 below, the process was started by pinching of wet clay and putting in between palms of both hands while it is rolled into slim clay as seen in figure 4 to allow all the fingers of the palm to have their imprint on the clay. This was followed by a tightly closed fists on the wet clay to be sure that all fingers could actually deposit their imprint on the clay as seen in figure 5. The pressed clay was released and kept on a flat surface for drying see figure 6. It is necessary that the pressed clay be kept on flat a surface to forestall bending or warping while drying. The drying process needed no special care to drying. It can be left in the open or in an enclosed space for drying. This method of production is capable of drying in any condition without cracking because individual clay form is already light weight by default and could conveniently get dried irrespective of atmospheric condition.

Terracotta Firing

For logical and even firing of the clay forms, it was necessary to arrange the clay forms carefully across each other on shelves in the kiln to allow for free flow of heat in between the clay forms for even dispersal of heat. See figure 8 below. Firing was carried to high bisque temperature (1200°C) to elicit good terracotta colour variation. The heat atmosphere in the kiln produced three different terracotta colour variations which include light tone, middle tone and dark tone. This is so because the kiln temperature usually varies from the top to the bottom. The topmost part of the kiln which is the ark is usually the hottest part of the kiln followed by the middle part and then the lowest (floor) part of the kiln. To attain a very dark tone terracotta, some of the kiln fired clay forms were subjected to open air reduction firing with the use of saw dust and this gave the desired result.

Thumb nail Sketch

There was a preliminary drawing on idea to express on canvas with terracotta palm press. The sketch served only as guide as there were slight deviation as

inspiration improves going into the work. The sketch shows a bale dancing woman. See figure 9 below.

Exploration on Canvas

The fired terracotta clay palm presses were explored on canvas with the aid of top bond glue. This was started by cutting the stretcher of the canvas from plywood into the desired dimension. The reason for using plywood for the stretcher is because it is strong and has light weight to not contribute to the overall weight of the end product. Depending on the colour of cloth background needed, the material that has reasonable teeth for adhesive to penetrate and grab was used to stretch on the plywood stretcher. For the art work in this study, black material background was used and this results in a sharp contrast background. Top bond glue was first of all used to prime the surface of the canvas to give a good platform on which the terracotta forms were glued onto with the same adhesive. An initial sketch to guide on how to place the terracotta forms was carried out on the canvas. One after the other, terracotta palm press forms were glued on the canvas until the sketch or design was covered. Not only was terracotta palm press used, but broken sheds of pot also in varied terracotta colour was used and this serves as breaking the monopoly of forms.

Figure 1: pinching the plastic clay

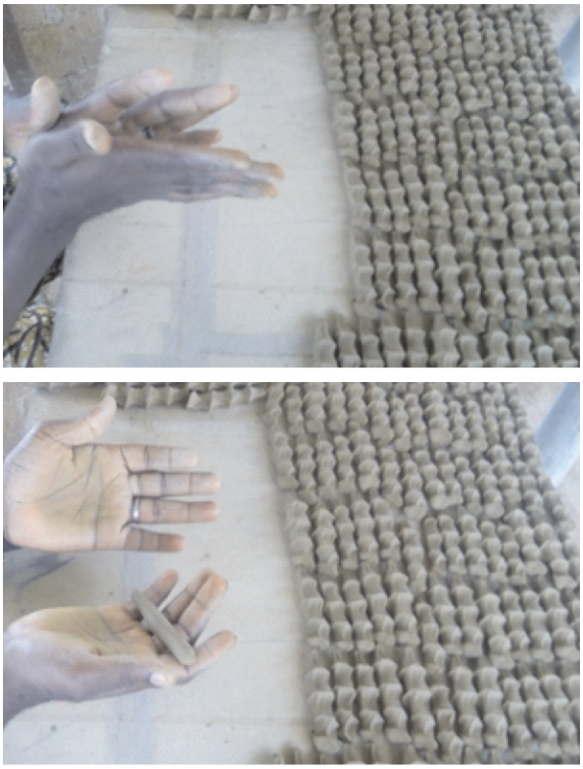

Figure 4:clay positioned at the root of the fingers

Figure 6: Clay takes on the patterns of the palm

Figure 8:carefully arranged on shelves in the kiln for firing

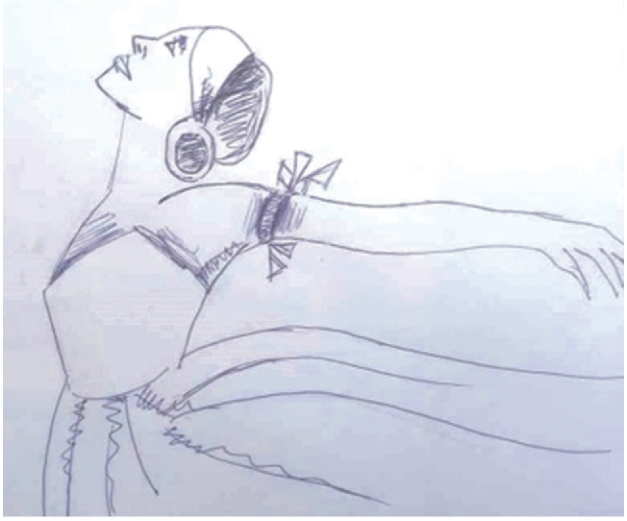

Figure 9: Bale dancing woman

Figure 10: "Dancing in bullets and in brokenness" 2018, terracotta on canvas, 150cm/120cm

Formalistic and contextual Analyses

In figure 10, the art work "Dancing in Bullets and in Brokenness" shows bullet-like terracotta clay forms in different earthy colour value arranged systematically on a black, flat canvas surface. Broken sheds of pots could also be seen at a segment of the art work. In the midst of the terracotta forms, the figure of a dancing woman could be seen. The woman figure is seen facing upwards with her chest out facing the left direction. Her hands are stretched backwards while her gown flows backwards also. This suggests a bale dancing woman. Interpretatively, "dancing" as used in this study is an allegory for struggle and survival while "bullets and brokenness" denotes societal challenges as a result of insecurity of all sorts which the Nigerian society presents to the common man. It is only a strong willed person that could still be dancing in the face of flying bullets and disasters all round him. This is a typical ironical state of the resolute nature of struggles in Nigeria to make ends meet and be happy despite the numerous instances of insecurity and sad economic situations that have ravaged our contemporary society.

Health Benefit of the Process of Clay Palm Press

Apart from the creative, artistic and social intervention of this venture, the process of arriving at the art work has much to do with physical activities of some part of the human body. The human palm which is directly involved in the process is affected in some ways by muscle development and flexibility of the fingers. This is considered in this study to be therapeutical to some medical conditions. These findings are supported by *Harvard Men's Health Watch* (2016), which among other things mentioned that playing with clay has healing effects on the muscles of the palms:

> ***the ability to grab, hold, twist, and squeeze is essential for many everyday functions.*** **M**en's health begins to depreciate with age and this also affects the strength of their muscles which have to do with holding, griping and squeezing. Three physical activities have been recommended here for maintenance of hand muscles for everyday activities. The following exercises work on strengthening your fingers and thumb, improving hand strength, and increasing wrist flexibility and range of motion. They can be performed in just a few minutes. Do them two to three times a week with at least a day or two of rest in between.

- Squeeze a soft stress ball between the fingers and thumb of one hand. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds. Repeat with the other hand.
- **Cloth wringing.** Wet a small towel or cloth. Then use both hands to wring out the water. Repeat several times.
- **Play with clay.** Squish clay into a ball. Use your palms to roll long "snakes."

Findings

- The medium and mode of execution of the art work shows a unique side of working with clay that negates tactile or three dimensionality of inured ceramic practice.
- The POP press mould method of ceramics production is not absolute as this study has discovered that the human palm is an interesting "press mould" for generating unique clay forms for artistic exploration.
- The process of rolling, pressing hard and releasing clay forms from the palm could be therapeutic. This enables further development of the muscles in the palm due to constant practice. This could aid in repairing or strengthening weak or feeble muscle of the hand/palms under medical conditions.
- Terracotta on canvas as carried in this study further shows that ceramic art piece could come in any form without restrictions. This practice gives unending allowance to be able to express whatever topic or composition as could be thought out.

Conclusion

Ceramic art is a strong medium of interrogating social issues. Through a unique expression in ceramic art that has been referred to in this study as clay palm press on canvas, it has been portrayed through this medium that social and security challenges are not limiting factors to a resolute Nigerian. Despite all odds, the strong will of Nigerians keeps persisting and overcoming challenges.

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