



àsìkò

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CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART LAGOS

INSTITUT
FRANÇAIS

kelaniabass studios

àsìkò

evoking personal narratives and collective history

kelani abass

October 26th - December 21st, 2013

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àsikò

evoking personal narratives and collective history

An exhibition of paintings and installation by
Kelani Abass

Curator: Bisi Silva

Co-Curator: Jude Anogwih

October 26th - December 21st, 2013

Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos
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Design: Kelani Abass

Cover: Family Portrait 2, 2013, Acrylic and Oil on canvas 122x122x6cm

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Introduction

In 2009, I visited MyDrim Gallery where an exhibition entitled 'Paradigm Shift' was taking place. It was the first solo exhibition of artist, Kelani Abass whose work I was unfamiliar with at that time. On display were over twenty paintings mostly in the naturalistic representational style characteristic of the Yaba School of Art, Lagos. The images were of children playing, market women and other depictions of everyday life. Whilst his draughtsmanship and technical proficiency were evident, the claim of a 'paradigm shift' seemed more aspirational than real for a young artist barely out of art school. Two years later when he presented his second solo exhibition, 'Man and Machine' (2011) at Omenka Gallery, Lagos in which he explored man's relationship with technology, the new direction in his work was visible. Taking as his starting point an interest borne out of his formative years working by the side of his late father in the family design and printing business, his fascination with the power of technology is presented visually and contextually in the exhibition. On that occasion the centrality of the figure was dispersed to the background and the use of bold colours had dissipated into soft hues of green and brown. In addition some of the paintings included the depiction and inclusion of objects such as fragments of metal salvaged from obsolete or non functioning printing presses as well as other media such as photography for the first time. The presentation was completed with a sound piece – a cacophony of different printing presses in operation. The 'shift', which was nascent in the first exhibition, had now become apparent in his artistic process and production as well as contextually.

The Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos is pleased to present the third solo exhibition by Kelani Abass, 'Asiko: Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History'. In this body of new works, a paradigmatic shift becomes noticeable as he explores the possibilities inherent in painting, photography and printing, issues already suggested in 'Man and Machine'. In 'Asiko', he highlights personal stories against the background of social and political events built around three interrelated bodies of work which also engage time and memory. The first and most symbolic is the 'Family Portrait' series. However this series does not include the image of a person, instead objects such as the first typewriter which included in the exhibition will be used as part of an interactive installation by the artist's mother and the audience. The typewriter, the first purchase to start the printing business is used to begin the story of the family's trajectory. In the three paintings, the printing press is positioned full frontal and centrally and except for the 'decorative' framing no other element is included in the picture reinforcing the importance of the object, positioning it as a timeless reference. However with each painting, time is inextricably implicated through technological developments and its symbolic entanglement with the family history.

The second body of paintings the 'Calendar series' he appropriates the template of the 'Bomode Oku' an engaging way of telling stories and remembering events that have happened in a community. As a child, Kelani recalls clients coming to the family printing press with images of a loved one (usually deceased) and asking for a 'Bomode Oku' calendar that highlights the story of their town and community. Kelani pays homage to this form of archiving and remembering and uses it for his own purposes in the 'Calendar Series' by using images of his late father, maternal grandfather and grandmother to create family calendars. In addition he acknowledges the history of the family background in Abeokuta by creating calendars of two important Yoruba Kings Oba Gbadebo I and Oba Ademola II whose reign in the late 19th and early 20th Century had an impact on the south West region of Nigeria.

The last series of paintings 'Family Album' are large paintings embedded with photographs that place the nuclear family within the group at social gatherings and important events, extending a personal narrative to include the extended family and friends. By making a private narrative part of a social collective, he comments on the universal reality of his experience. In these paintings the images of the past and present, analogue and digital, painting and photograph coalesce seamlessly, conflating space, time, and medium. 'Asiko' meaning time in Yoruba is a nostalgic as well as a cathartic tribute to a father who despite the passage of time, his memories remains embedded in the fabric of the present. This is most visible with the inclusion of a book of 'knowledge'; a material witness to the thoughts, ideas, encounters of Alhaji Sumola Ajani Kelani.

The arrival of Kelani Abass at this personal and professional juncture can be better understood through the local context and the environment in which the works are created. 'Asiko' is a critical and artistic milestone that has accumulated over the past four years through a search for a personal visual language borne out of lived experiences. He looked for and took advantage of opportunities that involved exploring, experimenting, collaboration, research and critical thinking. These included international workshops such as Triangle Workshop (2009), a 12week mentorship programme that focused on developing one's research and critical thinking and applying to it one's creative process (2011), he prioritised attending exhibitions including visiting his first international exhibition the Benin Biennale in Cotonou (2012), he took part in the month long intensive art school programme organised by CCA, Lagos (2012) as well as several other workshops, seminars and lectures. In commenting on artists whose works have interested him recently the name of John Baldesarri is prominent and other artists whose work he admires include Wilhem Sasnal, Luc Tuymans, Marlene Dumas among others. Coming from an educational art background in which painting sits at the top of the artistic hierarchy, this intensive continuous informal learning process has contributed to his critical and artistic development.

As with many painters Kelani uses photography as a preparatory tool for his work but very few artists in Nigeria have placed it on the same level as painting reinforcing hierarchical barriers

between the 'art' of painting and mechanical procedure of photography. Could the breaking down of these barriers, which is evidenced in this body of work signal a new departure in the relationship between painting and photography in Nigeria? Whilst this might seem like a new trend for many for Kelani it is a natural progression that began with printing, followed by painting and in the last few years with photography. It also places him within the nascent experimental drive locally by artists such as Lucy Azubuike, Ndidi Dike, Kainebe Osahenye, Mudi Yahaya, and Victor Ehikamenor who continue to push the boundaries especially in terms of their art and the use of traditional medium. On this occasion painting is presented with photography, printing and even the performative not as a support but as part of the expanded field of contemporary art practice. Kelani is dissolving the boundaries and constraints of his educational background allowing him to weave a complex narrative of fact, fiction, mediums and materials that comment on the family, technology, time history and politics.

I would like to thank Kelani Abass for his dedication in pursuing his artistic journey without constraint. My appreciation to Prof. Jerry Buhari and Dr Kunle Filani for their insightful essays as well as to Jude Anogwih for his tireless contribution to making this exhibition successful. We appreciate the support of the Institute Français for their support of this exhibition and in particular this publication.

Bisi Silva
Curator
Director, CCA, Lagos

Àsikò, archival book documenting family philosophy, old customs and tradition.



ÀSÌKÒ

evoking personal narratives and collective history

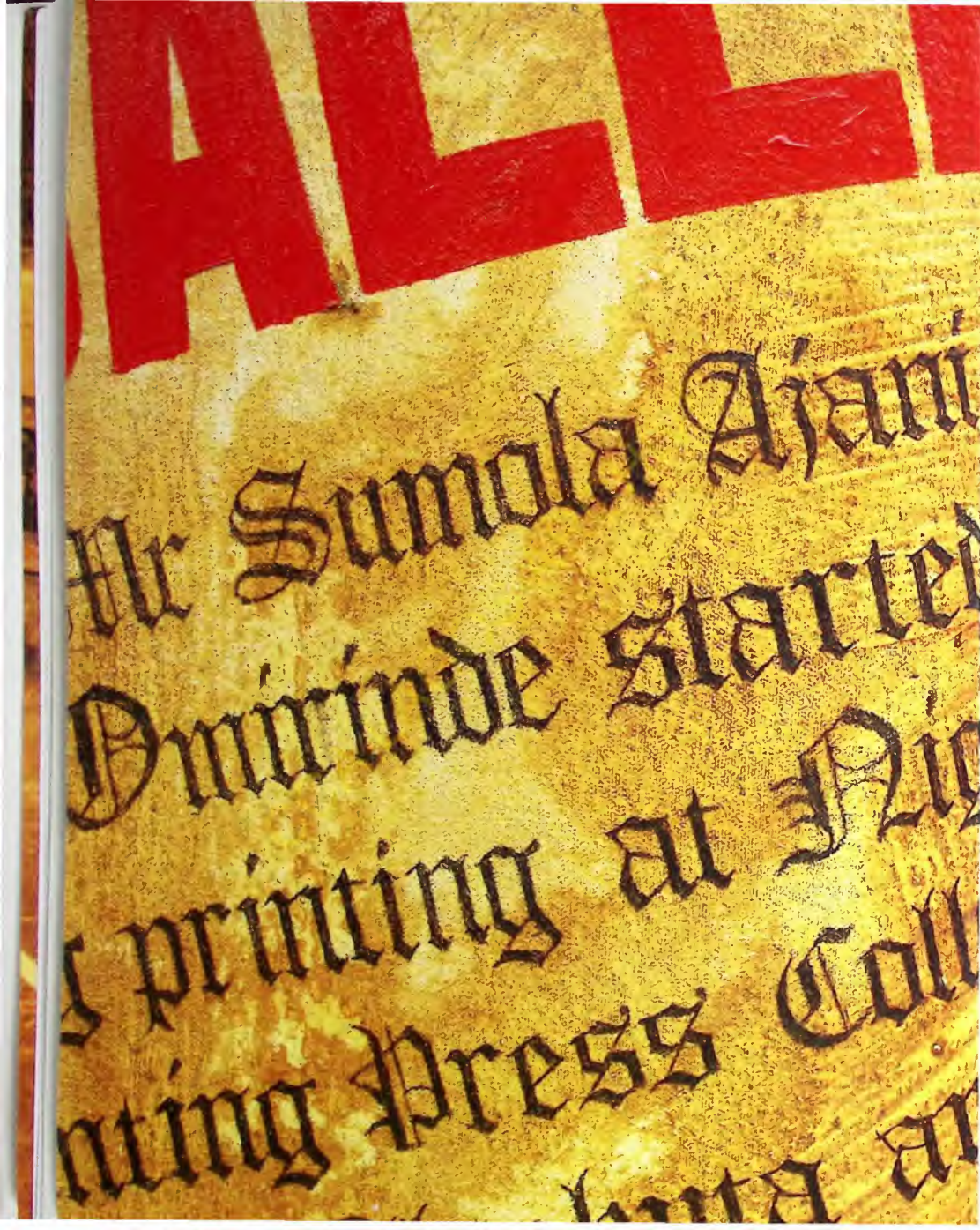
"I was using photography almost exclusively in my work. But it wasn't photography that I was interested in, but what art might be, and how photography could give me a quick way to implement my ideas." - John Baldessari

My new body of work is a research on my family's autobiography in relation to socio-cultural realities of my community using archival resources that I gathered from my family collections in Abeokuta. These include family photographs, posters, calendars and most importantly a hand written journal which dates as far back as 60 years. My aim is to highlight and generate discussions on family heritage and history; cultural identity and national belonging; traditional and religious conflicts; fashion and social prominence; and again the impact of digital technology and photography on painting.

Material usage is critical in executing my idea. Photographs are objects that place people historically and socially, they move us to affect and to be affected by shifting our mind from one intense experiential state to another. They can arrest us in ways that diminish our capacity to respond and the attachments forged through our encounters with a photograph is often personal and emotional.

This oeuvre began after a month intensive workshop at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos, in 2012. 'History/Matter' which focused on technique and methodology, critical thinking and implementation of conceptual idea. This moved me away from studio work for almost 4 months into research work that resulted in my recent body of works. It is targeted to challenge the boundaries and limitations of experimentation and critical thinking in artistic practice, opening up possibilities in conceptual ideas and materials exploration in relation to time, space and history.

Kelani Abass,
July 2013



Memoirs and Memories:

Kelani Abass in the Crucible of Conceptual Creativity

Kunle Filani

Kelani Abass's proficiency in verisimilitude typifies the continuing tradition of professional skill acquisition characteristic of the best graduates of Yaba School of Art, Lagos. In the last four decades, many graduates of the School of Art and Design, Yaba College of Technology have demonstrated tremendous talent in painting, especially in the area of photographic naturalism. Significant among the artists that engendered sub styles of naturalism are Abiodun Olaku whose penchant for soft and tender brushwork creates moody and compelling realities – be it figurative or scenic compositions. Edosa Oguigo also fashioned a peculiar sub style by using rapid brushstrokes to generate schematic paintings that are coded in proficient draughtsmanship.

As soon as he graduated – with distinction – from art school, he immediately set himself a personal target; to become more exploratory and experimental. Kelani's first solo exhibition titled 'Paradigm Shift' (2009) at MyDrim Gallery, Lagos marked the beginning of the search for an expanded visual grammar. He perfected the use of pencil, pen and ink, charcoal, pastel and watercolour. He makes manifest the inherent qualities that each material offers in artistry. He also pays substantial attention to details in the rendition of objects, scenes and figurative images. He validates naturalism with its varying stylistic possibilities as an evergreen aesthetic reference in the annals of human history.

A proficient colourist, Kelani poetises his paintings with compelling chromatism, simulating a patina of hues, thereby bequeathing them with a respectability that comes with age on what are in fact recent paintings. He applies multiple tonalities of analogous and complementary colours in such a manner that symphonic harmony is orchestrated. He creates diverse emotions with the manipulation of earthy hues of ochre, brown and grey without making the palette dirty. Some of his paintings display complex visual appropriations, such as foreshortening, aerial perspective, acrobatic mobility and structural vitality, with seeming ease. Painterly grace dominates his pictorial compositions and spatial dimensions. He depicts objects with tactile and textural fidelity. He suspends forms in space using effective tonal manipulations to create atmospheric illusion. He uses what can be described as neo-photorealism to depict lucid transparency and translucency.

Kelani does not want to be fixed, rather he constantly opts out of the box, searching for alternative tenors of creativity. He started burgeoning in the first decade of the new millennium when African artists became more aware of the possibility of new media in visual arts. Nigerian artists joined the

global trend in the exploration of more vigorous conceptual art presentation experimenting with mixed media, installation, video and performance. Photography, for example, in spite of its long history in Nigeria, began to gain more currency as a integral component of the visual art field just over a decade ago. These factors aggregate to create new impressions in the minds of a younger generation of artists seeking relevance in the visual art sector. Whilst Kelani gradually abandoned naturalism he nonetheless retained his skillful rendition of objects that he sparingly uses as a structural balance in his new conceptual compositions.

In his second solo exhibition 'Man and Machine' (2011) at Omenka Gallery, Lagos, Kelani displayed a significant turning point in his artistic evolution. He seemed to be more interested in metaphorical allusions, using metal and machine, in effect technology, as the repository of memories. He interrogated humanity within the context of printing technology and highlighted his personal experience as a universal phenomenon. His artistic process became more experimental with the use of a wider array of media such as printed magazine and newsprint cutouts, corrugated cardboards, modeling paste, metal, as well as oil and acrylic on board. His formal structure changed from representational to embrace more abstract forms. His colouration changed from brilliant primary colour to brownish earthiness. However the occasional simulated rendition of metallic machine parts, such as wheels, gears, spools and rods, still echoed his ability to paint naturalistically. Spatial relationship became oblivious with his ambivalent use of volume and void; fading textual background was achieved in some of the triptych and diptych panels. Order seemed often restored with the blurring dots of raw red, blue and green sparingly spotted on the picture plane.

In 'Man and Machine', Kelani creatively spiced the visual experience with audio recordings of the sound generated by working machines including a variety of printing presses. The simple sound installation – a first attempt on his part – characterises his desire to push the boundaries of his painterly practice in combination with other media. It is apparent that the new body of works in 'Asiko' have derived their inspiration from 'Man and Machine' not only in structural format, but also in their conceptual and thematic exploration of self. A self defined within the nostalgic framework of photographic memories.

Nothing better captures the theme of this current exhibition than when the artist states that "another body of work evolves from my experiences gathered from another machine, the camera. Photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, can capture images which escape natural vision. It captures an illusion; the intermingling of two inseparable elements, time and space, and the overlap of the past and the future." 'Asiko' indeed predominantly concerns man and the camera. Kelani investigates the photograph and the idea of the portrait, the manipulation of the photographic image, and nuances of representation of people and the self. Three series of works namely 'Family Portrait', 'Calendar Series', and 'Family

Album' – all from 2012 - 2013 – consider the concept of the portrait from an intimate space to the public arena, offering contrasting approaches that play off one another and challenge our perceptions. Integral in this new body of work is a conceptual and thematic exploration of self, an investigation not only of identity but also of the ways, means and the manners or styles of representing that identity. Growing up, Kelani was ensconced in the trades of his parents. His mother was a secretary who dealt with letters, typing and keeping records, and his father owned a printing company. The young child's environment was filled with the mechanical reproduction of texts, images and meanings. The printing processes certainly fascinated Kelani as a teenager. He joined the workers in drawing, setting letter types and possibly assisted in the actual printing of graphic materials. The smell of ink and paper that dominated the pressrooms became an aroma of nostalgia arousing childhood memories. Impressions of machines and machine parts, printed texts and photo reproductions were engraved permanently in his young mind.

Contextually, certain experiences fuel creative contemplations. Sometimes, the more bitter the experience, the better the imagination. Kelani's childhood memories turned obtrusive with the interplay of the loss of his father and the feudal acrimonies that often traumatise polygamous households. When trial enfeebls the heart, the nostalgic aroma of ink turns fetid. Art then becomes therapeutic, and the creative processes serve as both physical and spiritual sanctification. Kelani Abass found solace in the visual and conceptual documentation of his personal challenges. Parental memoirs such as old photographs, hand written texts and graphic images become reference points for the enlargement of his creativity.

The narrative which begins with 'Family Portrait' 2013 comprises three paintings of printing presses. Each one is a compelling photo-realistic representation of a different type of printing press, painted verisimilitude in acrylic and oil on canvas. They are without doubt working machines, but here, there are no smudges of ink or grease, no crumpled paper or offcuts, no spare machine parts or reference to the workplace. They are clean, shining almost perfect, with their pristine surfaces glimmering and glinting with delicate metallic colouration. Like the old-fashioned studio shot, the backdrop has been carefully chosen, in this case to be plain and in soft muted colours. Everything has been prepared for this important recorded moment. Each 'character' is formally posed, suspended, still in space, captured in a 'portrait'. And each is poignantly surrounded and set off by a delicate, golden metal frame, intertwined and embossed at specific points with decorative and bejewelled floral medallions – all painstakingly painted. Kelani is not just painting machines, but giving expression to objects that symbolise family. But where else could Kelani begin the narrative if not from the machines that were central to his childhood experiences?

Whilst 'Family Portrait' 2013 represents inanimate objects, the story continues with the animate in 'Calendar Series' 2013 which also highlights a transition from the personal to the collective. Starting with a portrait of his father, his maternal grandmother and father, it finishes with portraits of two

royal majesties of Egbaland, the Alake of Egbaland, Oba Gbadebo I and Oba Ademola II, imbuing the work with a political and historical context. Of more historical relevance are the printed texts on the background of the paintings highlighting remarkable events in Abeokuta from the early 19th to the middle of the 20th century. The series are in single panels and the pictorial surfaces are creatively rendered with a transparent patina of earthy colours.

In the final series, 'Family Album' (Asiko) 2012-2013, Kelani uses laminated printed photographs, mainly of groups and family gatherings, that he recovered from the collection of his parents. He has restored, re-photographed and enlarged many of the old photos in black and white prints. Working with multiple layers invoking time and change, he textures and collages the picture plane and pastes the photos, either singly or in multiple pictorial arrangements, onto the canvases, with each composition made up of single, diptych or triptych panels. Carefully and repeatedly applied layers of thin paint achieve desired transparencies and ambience. The top layer is composed of printers' markings, strips of colour chart, and the time and date of the original photographs in bright digital typeface, which of course had not been invented then, thus neatly contextualising the narrative within the trajectory of technology. In 'Asiko 2', 2013 the final layer is lively sketchlines, demonstrating the artist's renowned mastery of draughtsmanship and naturalistic representation, and adding an extra personal touch.

For Kelani, art is a profession that has sequential processes and eventual output. He diligently respects workshop practice, is meticulous, neat and very organised, and his home-studio speaks volumes about his systematic approach to materials, methods, techniques, storage, restoration and preservation of art and related matters. He often attends exhibitions and participates in creative workshops, and he is an avid reader. All this contributes to the growth and development of the faculty for exploration of fresh possibilities. Kelani stands out among his peers in his critical engagement of concepts, and the successful articulation and translation of these ideas into visual artworks is founded on his mastery over methods and materials. The skilful naturalism of his early work remains apparent and is cleverly combined with the results of his more recent experimentation with a variety of media and techniques. To echo Kelani's 2011 statement quoted earlier, the provocative gathering and intermingling of content, media and techniques in 'Asiko: Evoking Personal Narratives and Collective History', successfully echoes and interrogates the overlap of human identity of the past and of the future.

Kunle Filani, PhD is a Lagos based artist and art historian.
September, 2013



CCA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Family Portrait 1
2013, Acrylics and Oil on Canvas, 91x122x6cm



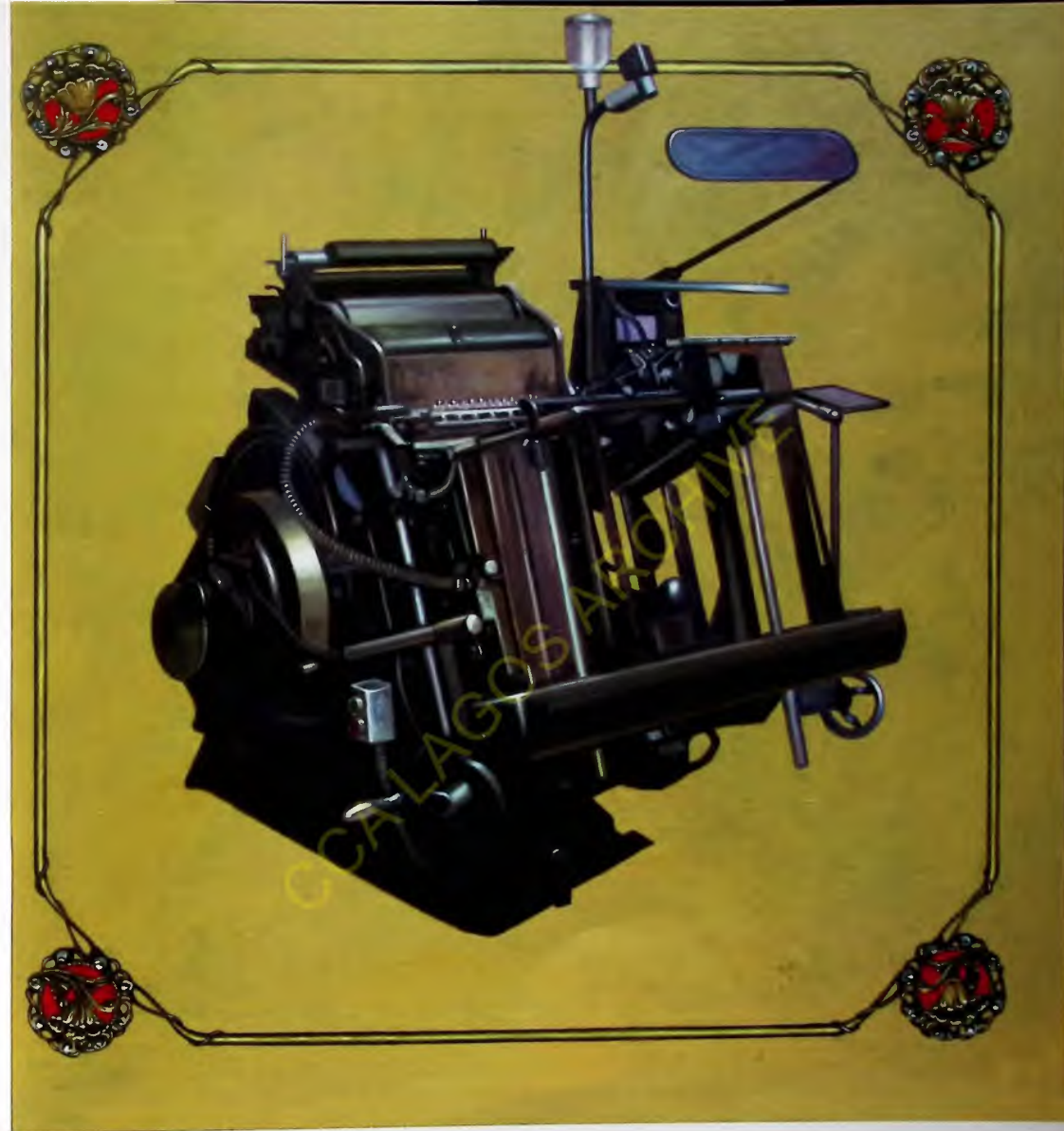
CCA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Family Portrait 2
2013, Acrylics and Oil on Canvas, 122x122x6cm



CCA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Family Portrait 3
2013, Acrylics and Oil on Canvas, 122x122x6cm





Typewriter 1 (Family portrait series)

In Conversation

Kelani Abass and Jude Anogwih

Painting as an art form is witnessing an interesting transformation in contemporary Nigeria art. In 2009, Kainebe Osahenyen, presented at CCA Lagos a new body of work 'Trash-ing' which was seen as a new beginning in contemporary Nigerian painting. In *Man & Machine* (2011), you showed a new body of work that comprised of painting, photography and sound. Do you see yourself as that agent of change, sustaining the change in our very notion of art?

Change is a constant aspect of life. As a person who is interested in the ideal of transformation, I always look for ways to communicate my deepest thought and impression.

Chinese artist Wang Quingsong up until 1996 was making paintings and treating them like a diary, but with China changing so quickly, he decided to express his feelings about the rapid change with a faster medium and he chose photograph.

Art is multifaceted hence it cannot be limited to one form. In the midst of an accelerated global change, every development and innovation is an added advantage for me as a contemporary Nigerian artist. I have always believed that my boundaries are inexhaustible. I am always ready to explore new forms and concepts that are beyond the scope of my immediate imagination. The themes I wish to explore and the materials I am using.

Sound is a physical phenomenon that stimulates the sense of hearing, it is an element that completes visual experience, I grew up with the heavy noise of printing machines and tapping sound of typewriters around me so I wanted my audience to experience the same feelings I had growing up, in the exhibition 'Man and Machine'.

Painting, photography and printing are artistic processes with well-defined history of engagement. *Àsikò* is the new body of work that brings to a shared premise through painting and installation the past and present, intermingling forms: geometry, time, people, machine, smudging non-gestural brushstrokes and colour. How did you come about the concept of incorporating these processes in your work?

An artist shows influence from the society in which he lives, the materials available to him, as well as the technological advancements of his time. Painting, printing and photography are intricate aspects of my life and development. I am bringing forward my past as a printer into the present as a painter and I am excited about the future. In this body of work I hope you will be able to catch a glimpse of the past, the present and the progressions ahead.

Where do you get the photo images in your paintings?

Most of the images I use are gotten from my family archive such as the photo albums and calendars.

The pictures in *Àsikò* indicate an interesting moment of social circumstances (Owambe) and the presence of the sitters in the family album series reference culture and history. Why the fascination and emphasis on family history and portrait?

Many of the images used were taken around the time Nigeria gained independence, changes occurred at that period that were recorded one way or the other, people were trying to imbibe western cultures in the way they dressed and the kind of food they ate, but they still preserved their cultures through social functions and gatherings. People were more stable financially due to the availability of jobs and there were lots of vernacular photographers around which made it easy for people to hire them for functions.

Contrary to the general opinion on "Owambe" as merely a social party or as being ostentatious, it brings people together and affords youth the opportunity to learn and know more about their culture. In recent times it has become more like a co-operative society where people gather to support themselves one way or the other to achieve common goals. This reminds me of "Egbe Aroo"-the traditional mutual aid farmers, known for supporting one another in clearing and cultivating farmlands which later led to the liberation of Egba people of Abeokuta between 1775 and 1780 from Oyo kingdom.

However the body of work *'Àsikò* is inspired by the relationship I had with my father. He introduced me early to the world of design. Though I lost him when I was twelve, every photograph of him reminds me of the momentous time I shared with him.

I also incorporate images of events that happened before I was born as a way of learning about and trying to understand the extent of family gatherings and community interactions such as naming ceremonies, traditional weddings, house warming etc.

How would you describe the new direction your work is taking?

I will say it is in progress, the more research I do while developing an artwork, the more satisfying is the outcome. So, for me, the process is more important than the finished work. The concept or idea involved in my work takes precedence over traditional aesthetics.

Could you explain the steps leading to a single painting in the *Àsikò* exhibition?

'Baale Nlado' (2012) from 'Calendar Series' is informed by early designs of "BOMODE OKU" Calendars, in the 70s printed by my father's printing press. The image I use in this particular piece is derived from an old metal plate used in reproducing photograph in letterpress printing, created with silver-coated plates and treated with acid to make them sensitive to light, which is the same technique used in daguerreotype (the first photographic process suitable for widespread use).

This work is inspired by the idea of letter setting in letterpress printing and greatly influenced by the history, culture and monarchy of Abeokuta. It shows that documentation is highly important when rotating power and should not be taken lightly. February 1975 as illustrated in the work marked a significant period in the life of the Baale and Nlado people of Egba during the reign of Oba Oyeade Lipede.

The pose of Baale Nlado can be compare to J. A. Green's photographs of the Ijaw Chiefs that generated discussions at one of the Art-iculate Lecture series at Centre for Contemporary Art Lagos by Lisa Aronson, Associate Professor of Art History at Skidmore College, New York. It raised an engaging debate about the way Ijaw Chiefs posed, asking if it was an indication that they were subjugated by the West or it was just their natural way of posing for photography.

The creative process of the work started with the enlargement of a pixelated 8x10cm photograph to fit into 90x120 cm, with a professional camera. This is followed by the editing of the text I got from my family archive, then a large direct imaging printing of the text and image on paper, I carefully pasted them on canvas like old cut and paste artwork for offset printing and laminated with glue and applied modeling paste. I allowed the work to dry before applying thin layers of acrylic repeatedly to achieve desired mood and transparency.

What are the related effects of working with images from your family album?

Photographs generally convey authority because of their indexical quality. They have the effect of bringing distant memory to fore, and this applies to images from my family album.

These photographs enunciate a particular moment in the history of my family and that of my country. Working with the images gives me the opportunity to see the forgotten, remember the familiar and experience new creative thoughts and vision. Most of the images captures memorable moments of celebration, and also function as cultural memory.

Àsikò offers a thematic exploration of culture, history and artistic representation. Do you think painters and visual artists in Nigeria are engaging enough with critical processes in their works? What is your view on workshops and articulated art programmes in artistic research and production?

These programmes afford the artist the opportunity to know what goes on in the global arena, through close and at times intensive discussions. In addition they promote creative workshops and thoughtful reasoning among artists. The outcome of this will automatically affect artists positively and reflect on the work they create.

On the impact of these workshops and programmes on my practice, I will say they are inestimable. Looking at it from the background I was coming from, as an artist that studied painting, and once painted realistic subject using photographs as references, with less critical and intellectual depth,

I was discontent with the resulting quality of my effort and felt that my painting was not all that art should be. I wanted to do more.

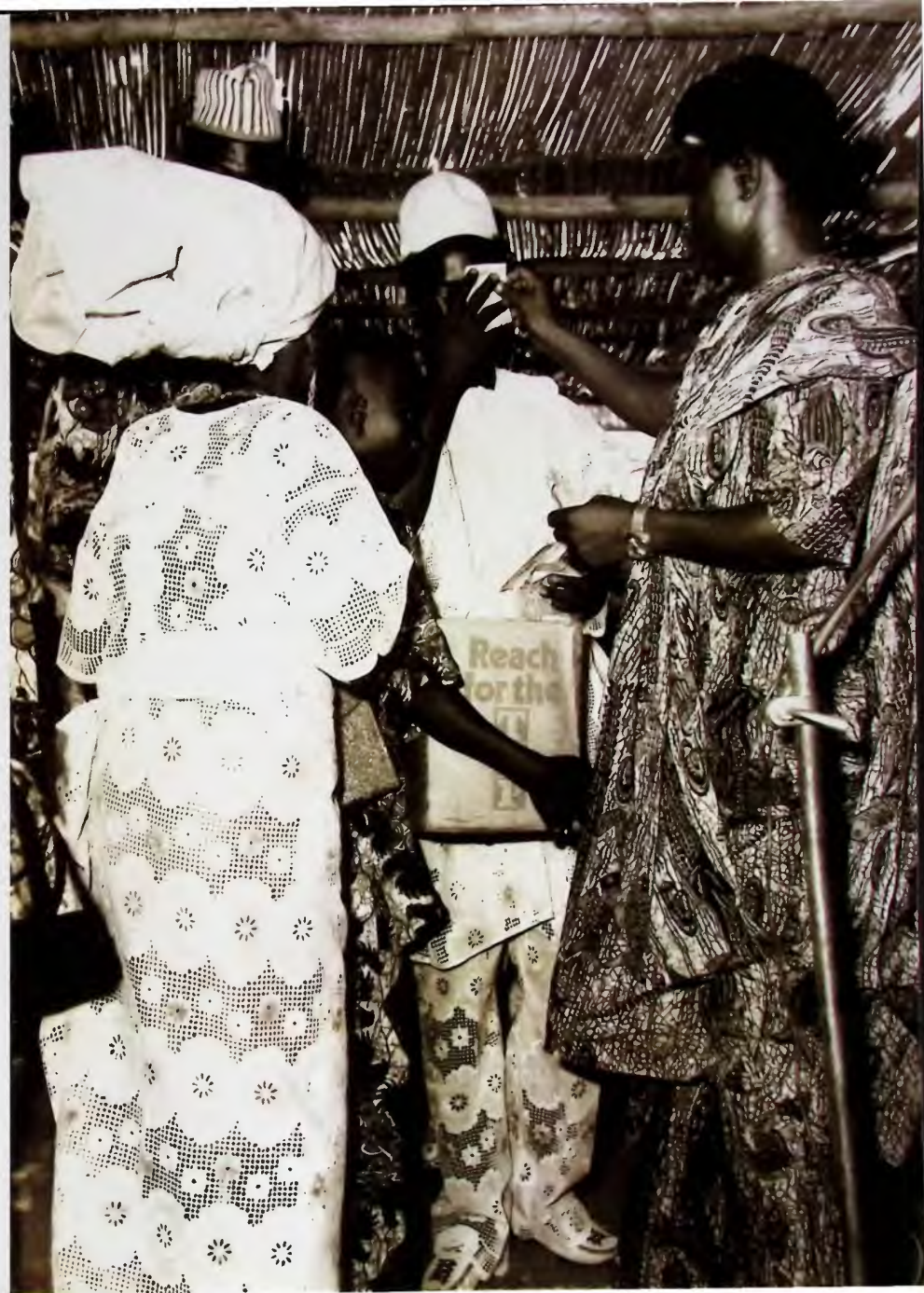
Around this time, I responded to a call that I can confidently describe now as a changing factor. It was the CCA, Lagos and Triangle Art workshop in October 2010. This workshop was held at location outside of Lagos called the Stone House, Alakuko, Ogun State and facilitated by Anawana Hobol and Romeo Gongora.

I was selected among other artist from every area of practice, and more than seven different countries. This workshop was not centered around production of work, but rather on the process of creating work; the importance of artist collaboration in artistic practice as well as artist presentation and portfolio review. At the end of the two weeks duration of the workshop we had a public presentation that showed my first collaborative installation and mural with the graphic artist Karo Akpokiye.

Shortly after this, I attended a 12-week mentorship meetings spread across a year by Bisi Silva that focused on "beauty", and the influences your readings had on your presentation in relation to beauty. These were enlightening developments processes and are fundamental to shaping my career.

Can you explain the reason behind your choice of Àsikò as the exhibition title?

Àsikò is a Yoruba word meaning time, a limited period during which an action, process, or condition exists. The body of work I am showing is a research on my family autobiography highlighting a particular period in my existence in relation to socio-cultural realities of my community. The philosophy underlying the title of this exhibition led me into believing that though the old customs and traditions, religion and beliefs, heritage and history are all disappearing, I will always be inspired by its richness, reflect on its components and recreate its mortality through my art.



CCA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Memoirs (Calendar series)
2012, corrugated cardboard, laminated print, charcoal and acrylics on Canvas, 122x122x6cm





Baale Nlodo (Calendar series)
2012, corrugated cardboard, laminated print, and acrylics on Canvas, 91x122x6cm

COA LAGOS ARCHIVE

Olori Nlado (Calendar series)
2012, corrugated cardboard, laminated print, and acrylics on Canvas, 91x122x6cm









The Humanisation of Machines in Kelani Abass's Recent Works

Jerry Buhari

In 2011 Kelani Abass' solo show 'Man and Machine' drew our attention to the relationship between humans and machines. The works tickled our sensibilities about the energies and interactions of material as an inanimate object and matter as a living being. Using visual strategies that evoked memory, dream and illusion, Kelani explored the three and two dimensional worlds with expert draughtsmanship. Among the drawings in the show was a series titled 'Illusion 2011', which seemed to situate the figures in a dream world yet they still connected us with his realistic studies of machines and machine parts. Aesthetic nuances of modern Nigerian artists Onabolu and Lasekan were shrewdly and imaginatively incorporated in the works.

Writing on the exhibition, artist and art historian Frank Ugiomoh observed, "We are thus presented with a seamless transformation in an installation of diverse subjects that is central to humanity's native obsession to create prime objects..." In Kelani's new compositions, he persuades us to see the intertwining relationship that man establishes with the machine. In one work it seems as if man is chained by the machine, whilst in another we see the superiority of man over the machine symbolised by the manipulative presence of the human hand. We are left to wonder if the machine controls the man or if man is in charge.

Kelani explained that he created the works in "Man and Machine" from his experience in his father's printing press where he worked for several years as a machine operator before gaining admission into art school. In pursuance of this autobiographical voyage, he now presents us with a body of works in which the machine has been given a soul. These new works are so realistically painted that they could be regarded as the whole of the parts that was witnessed in "Man and Machine". Here, Kelani has named some of the new works as 'Family' and in so doing gives them a human spirit. The machines of his father's printing house have become family. Among these is 'Family Portrait' 1 (2013), a realistic rendition of an old printing machine. This work could be considered as Kelani's way of reflecting on the role the machines have played in his life and indeed the life of his entire family and all of us. The 'Precious' machine is family because through it the source of the family's livelihood is found. To see these machines as family also tells us about the intimacy and relational dialogue that the artist has established with them over the years. Today, for many people, the smart phone and similar electronic gadgets are "more family" and closer social relations than other human beings. This is evidenced by how little communication takes place in a gathering where many sink into their smart phones or ipads.

Perhaps this was not the way Kelani first encountered these machines. I want to imagine that his early encounters with them may have been frightening, like confronting a monster, especially with their strange noises, grotesque movements, and dark colours. And it is possible that as he visited the printing house frequently the sounds may have become musical, even conversational. With time, therefore, the printing house may have become an extension of his home and by implication, his family.

In 'Family Portrait' (2013), Kelani seems to take on a romantic dialogue with this machine. First the view he chooses is strongly suggestive of the outline of a female form. The upper white-ish disk part on the top left related to the rectangular one at the bottom right of the machine evokes a girl standing by a mirror. As in others of the 'Family' Series, I am able to see this female form because Kelani – through his representational rendition of these images (no longer machines) and in the way he frames each one of them with delicate intertwining lines reflective of the old inner picture frames – visually persuades me to see them as an extension of his family pictures. This is a refreshing treatment of a favourite subject of artists, "Girl by the mirror".

The 20th century saw artistic freedom stretched to the limits. It was the period when the very meaning of art and what it stood for was questioned. It was the period when artists became obsessed with manufactured objects. Mundane and ordinary objects were taken as they are and given artistic status. Suddenly a bicycle wheel, a urinal and a wash-hand basin found their way into the gallery. Marcel Duchamp called them "ready-mades". Andre Breton (in "Dada and the Fantastic", Croix & Tansey, 1980) declared that what art is, or what is considered an art object, is the decision of the artist. The artist redefines the meaning and perception of what art is. Here, in Africa, when it became difficult for African and Nigerian artists to purchase imported art materials, they turned to the rich stockpile of discarded objects characteristic of our consumerist lifestyle generating work reminiscent of the Dadaist spirit. I dare say that Kelani's work combines all these aspects in his personal and authentic artistic creation. This visual vocabulary is not limited or restrained by time, space or geo-cultural identity.

Kelani Abass can be said to belong to the group of artists in Nigeria who have worked with disparate materials with specific reference to machines (or machine parts) as a motif. These include Ayo Aina's installation 'Jolly Ride' (2008) or Richardson Ovbiebo's two dimensional relief 'Frozen Dreams II' (2010). Outside the country Abu Bakarr Mansaray's drawing 'Beyond Creation' (2004) comes to mind as does another artist fascinated with machine Uzo Egonu's screen print 'Music Machine' (1981). Each of them approach the object and subject in unique ways. Ayo and Ovbiebo's work can be said to address issues of social commentary whilst Egonu's work reflects on the founders of the art of assemblage. Kelani's work can be regarded like Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg, if we recall, was one of the leading assemblage artists known to intuitively juxtapose objects and images indiscriminately on a picture plane. Rauschenberg and his colleagues took their realistic images literally and placed them on the picture plane with little

compositional consideration or visual rationality. Kelani's works on the other hand restrict the usage of objects to those with which he has an intimate connection. His compositions are less of an intuitive collection of objects on the picture plane; and more of a careful, almost geometric arrangements intended to bring each part together in the harmony of a "functional" life. The family must be stable, organised and harmonious.

Kelani's works tease the extent to which an object can be regarded as real or unreal. Reality does not reside in matter only, neither in material objects alone. In his world these two fields engage one another in a counter discovery. In them the artist creates, for us to share, a reality that is a constant dialogue of seemingly opposing energies. But, we may pose the question, why is man obsessed with the object of his/her creation? Consider again, for a moment, our relationship with the cell phone, computer or our modern electronic gadget...

Kelani has included his Calendar Series 'Baale Nlado' (2012), 'Olori Nlado' (2012) in this exhibition. One is compelled to draw a historical connection between our ancestral origin and the intrusion of western culture in Kelani's Family and Calendar series. This elicits a meditation on the paradox of development and modernity, and raises connections between the foreign machines/agents (tools) of colonial exploitation and the "calendar" which timed it. The works in the Calendar Series suggest a photo-documentary of Africa's ensnarement with the mirror, camera and other colonial trappings. The familiar posture we see in Calendar Series "Baale Nlado" is typical of colonial photographs, a posture acquired and perfected at the advent of colonialism. The consistency of this posture, irrespective of the political or social status of the people who posed appears staged-managed to present the African as dead, frozen and unable to accommodate the European picture machine. And what is the significance of 1975 in this work? For me, it references the end (death) of Nigeria's civil service and ushers in the period of the militarisation of Nigeria.

Kelani's works are an exploration of reality. They are a refreshing presentation of what painting can be in contemporary Nigerian art. Here machines have been given a new visual reading. A reading connected to and with the artist's upbringing. A personal story of how/what an intimate relationship with machines can do. The detailed rendition and the deliberately plain backgrounds grant them multiple readings. We are confronted with old printing machines illustrating the biographical narrative of a life enriched by experience. Our reading calls for an ability to evoke our sense of history, our present, a frozen state in the development of post-colonial Nigeria, and perhaps, in a most uncomfortable way, a future that is blurred by our past. Kelani's 'Family Portraits' and 'Calendars' are journals of a people's pilgrimage, in each one of us grappling with/in hope or despair. Only those who practice contemplation and those who can dialogue with images in quiet patience are given entrance into the fascinating creative world of Kelani.

Jerry Buhari is an artist and lecturer in the Dept of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria September 2013.

Notes

- Abass, K. (2011). *Man & Machine*. Omenka Gallery Ikoyi, Lagos
- Aina, A. (2008). *Deadline: Installations & Paintings*. Goethe Institut Lagos
- ArtHouse Contemporary Limited. (2010) *Modern Ana Contemporary Art*, Lagos Nigeria
- Achebe, C. (2012). *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*. Allen Lane (Penguin Books)
- Croix H. D. & Tansey R.G. (1980). *Art Through the Ages*. Seventh Edition. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, San Diego
- Enwezor, O. & Okeke-Agulu, C. (2009). *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*. Grafche Damiani, Bologna
- Jones, L. E. (ed) (2006). *African Arts*. Volume XXXIX. Number 1. James S. Coleman African Studies Center. University of California, Los Angeles
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Asiko (Family album series)
2012, diptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on Canvas, 152x182x4cm each

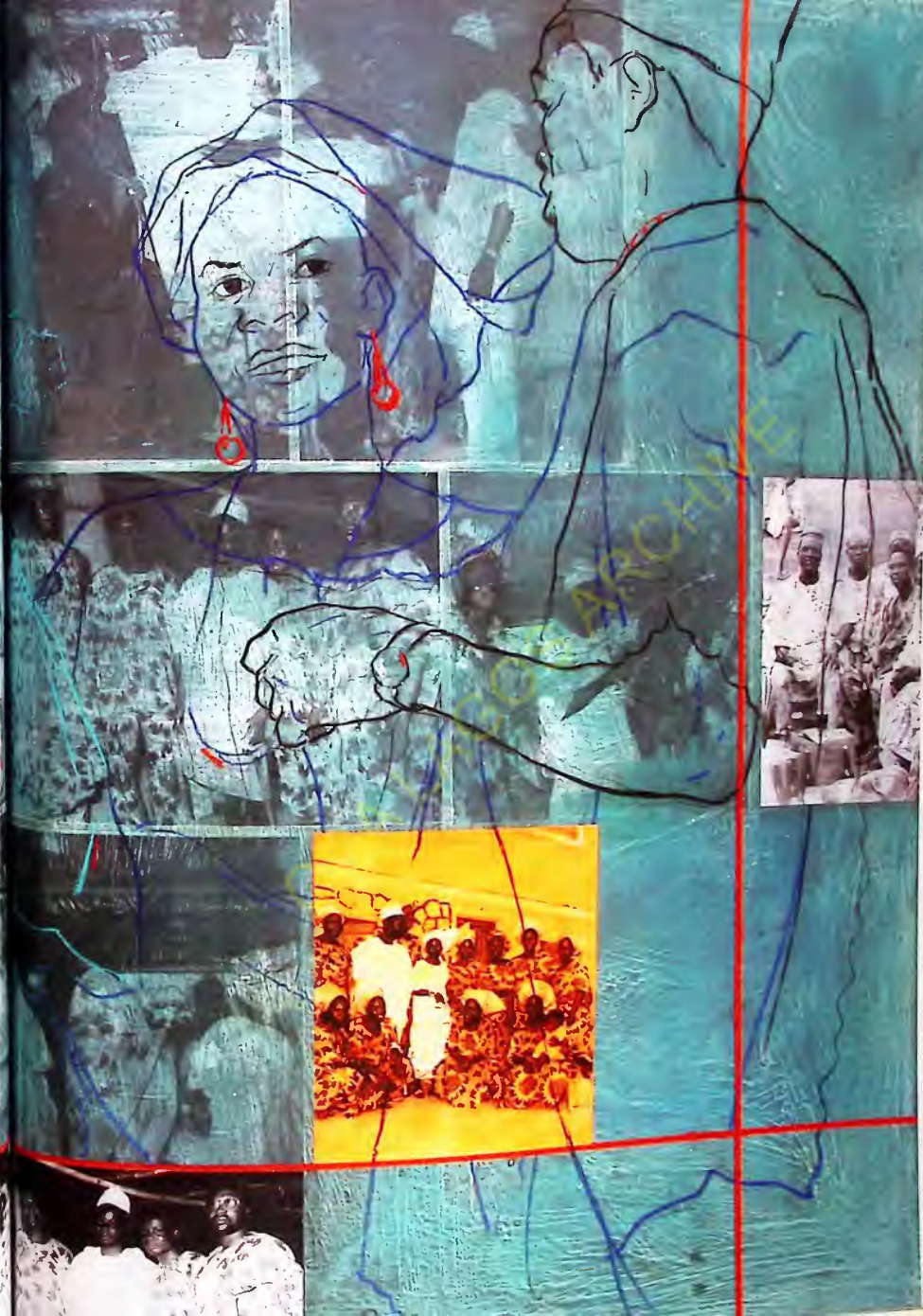
Asiko 2 (Family album series)
2013, diptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on Canvas, 91x122x6cm each

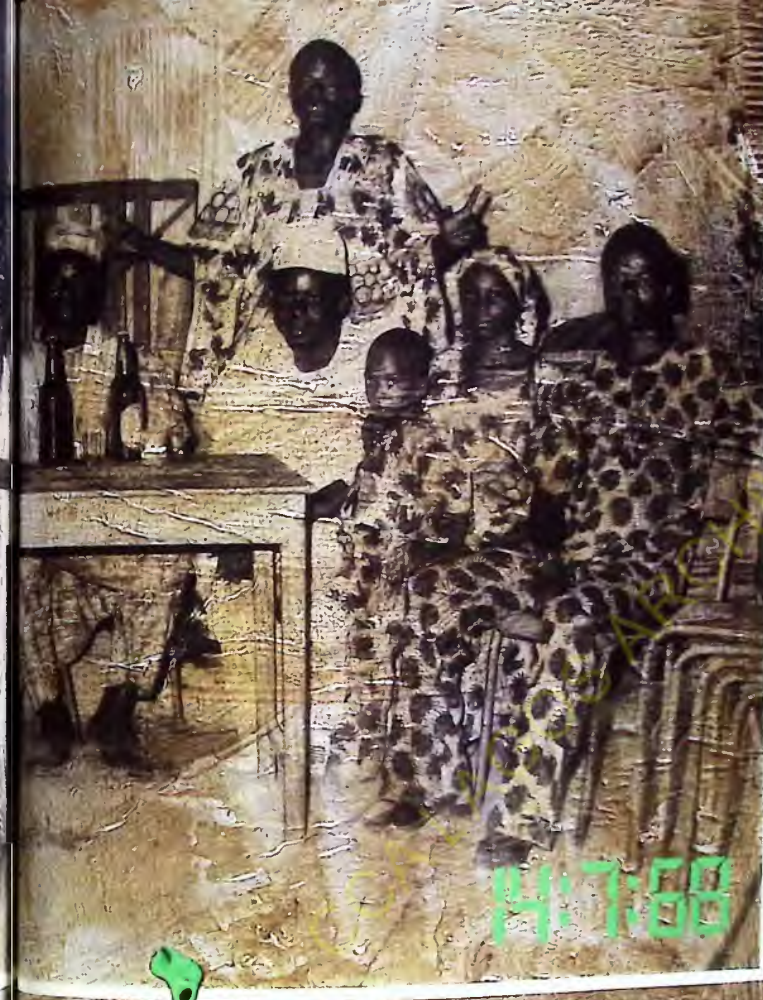
Ale (Family album series)
2013, diptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on Canvas, 91x122x6,106x122cm each

Irole (Family album series)
2013, diptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on Canvas, 106x122x6cm each



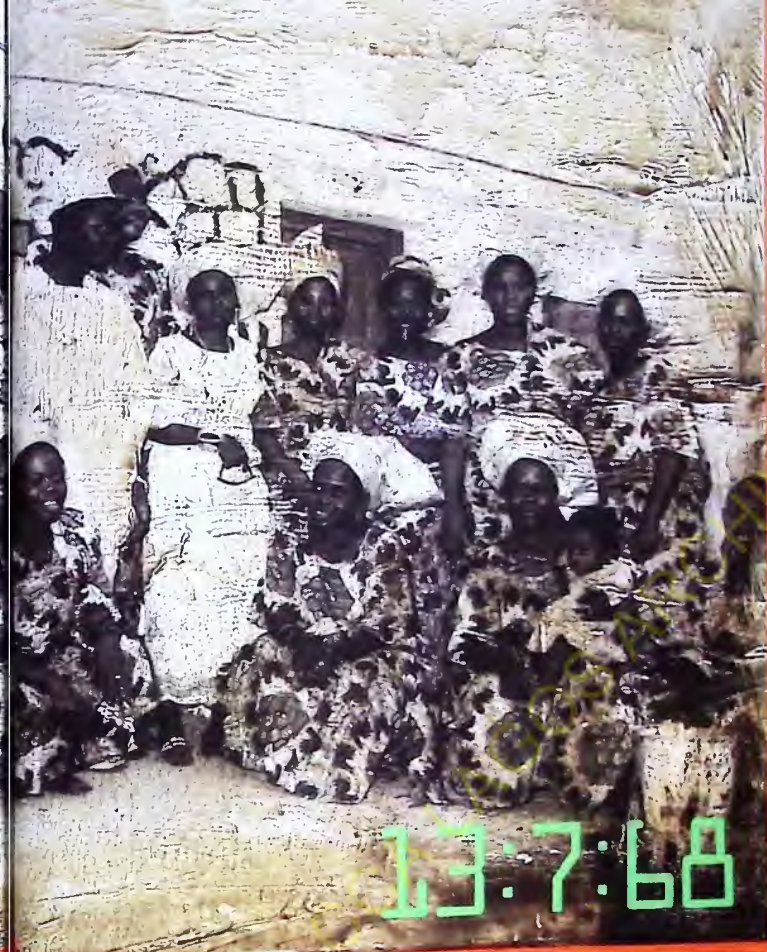
1964-68







4:00 PM



13:7:68



Oru (Family album series)

2013, triptych, corrugated cardboard, laminated print and acrylics on Canvas, 122x122x6cm each

Biography

Born January 3rd, 1979, Lives and works in Lagos

EDUCATION

- 2007 Yaba College of Technology
Higher National Diploma (Painting, Distinction)
- 2004 Yaba College of Technology
National Diploma (General Art, Distinction)

EXHIBITIONS

SOLO

- 2013 Asiko, Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos
- 2011 Man & Machine, Omenka Gallery, Lagos
- 2009 Paradigm Shift, Mydrim Gallery, Lagos

GROUP

- 2012 Live Constructions. Time Form. Daily, CCA, Lagos
- 2012 Joburg Art Fair, Sandton Convention Centre, South Africa.
- 2012 Convergence, Svengali Designs and Omenka Gallery Lagos
- 2012 Nothing but the truth, Mydrim Gallery, Lagos
- 2010 City of a Thousand Masks, Caterina de Medici/3rd Black Heritage Exhibition, Nike Art Gallery, Lagos
- 2010 Timeless, 10th Annual Pastel Exhibition Mydrim Gallery, Lagos
- 2010 October Rain, 12th Annual Juried Exhibition, Society of Nigerian Artist, Nike Art Gallery, Lagos
- 2010 Tides, Thought Pyramid gallery, Abuja
- 2010 Watercolour, Pastel and Drawing Exhibition (SNA), Omenka Gallery Lagos
- 2010 Art Expo, 4th International Art Expo Nigeria, National Museum, Lagos
- 2009 October Rain, 11th Annual Juried Exhibition, Society of Nigerian Artist, National Museum, Lagos
- 2009 More than Colours, Pastel, Mydrim Gallery
- 2009 VASON Open House, VASON, Mydrim Gallery
- 2009 Art on the Mainland
- 2008 October Rain 10th Annual Juried Exhibition, Society of Nigerian Artist, National Museum, Lagos
- 2008 Art Expo, 3th International Art Expo Nigeria, National Museum, Lagos
- 2007 Life in my city, Protea, Nike Lake Hotel, Enugu

- 2007 Beautiful Nigeria, National Museum, Lagos.
- Thought Pyramid Gallery, Wuse II Abuja
- 2007 Miniature Exhibition, Terra Kulture, Lagos
- 2007 Final Year Exhibition, Yaba College of Technology, Lagos
- 2007 WAPOGA Exhibition, SADP Gallery, Yabatech.
- 2006 WORK CHOP Exhibition, Goethe Institute, Lagos
- 2005 Within Our Grasp, National Museum, Lagos
- 2002 God of this age, Didi Museum, Lagos

PRIZE/AWARD

- 2010 First Prize winner, Caterina de Medici/3rd Black Heritage International Painting Competition
- 2008 1st Runners Up ARESUVA Logo Competition (NGA)
- 2007 Yusuff Grillo Award for the best Painting Student. Yabatech
- 2007 3rd prize winner Life in my City Art Competition
- 2006 Most Industrious Student, ADSA 2006
- 2003 Best overall performance school of Art, Design and Painting, Yabatech
- 2003 Jerome Elaiho Award for the best student, General Art

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

- Society of Nigerian Artist
- Visual Arts Society of Nigerian
- Art-Zero

RESIDENCY

- 2012 4 Weeks International art residency, History/Matter with CCA, Lagos
- 2010 2 Weeks Residency Programme by CCA and Triangle Workshop

WORKSHOPS

- 2013 Professional Development Workshop for artists, CCA, Lagos
- 2009 Artlaw Training -DIN
- 2008 In God We Trust facilitated by Emeka Udemba
- 2006 Work-Chop by Chidi Kwubiri
- 2004 Water Colour Workshop organised by ADSA
- 2004 Lagos Open by Emeka Udemba

Acknowledgements

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