

## Visual Metaphor: Ekene Anikpe's Sculptural Essays

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### Abstract

Anikpe's works do not only stand as sculpted testimonies, they also interrogate the new order which man has imposed on the environment. Interestingly, man has discovered that the environment is increasingly being threatened by his unchecked construction activities and waste mismanagement. As a result, he has been seeking for ways of dealing with the problem. Governments and individuals from all works of life try to proffer solutions in different capacities. Ekene Anikpe is a young artist who has been attempting to engage the problem with his studio explorations. He has created a body of work that makes direct reference to man and his environment. This paper, therefore, examines the artistic and ecological significance of his recent body of work. It specifically considers the materials, processes and techniques that were harmonized into a sculptural whole that is metaphorical in context.

**Keywords:** Sculpture Exploration; Straw; Ekene Anikpe; Layering; Cultural Synthesis

### Introduction

Art practice at the present may be described as a human activity that has gradually developed into a game of 'search-out'. Ekene Anikpe is one of the inquisitive artists in this game. He explores materials, forms, techniques and ideas, often slamming conventions and embracing inspired revelations, in his attempt at constructing and reconstructing realities from different standpoints. In fact he investigates the materiality of life in a variety of contexts and rejuvenates it in manners that reveal realism inside-out. His creative processes and products suggest that he agrees with Knobler<sup>1</sup> whose view is that visual art has largely fallen into a category of art of conceptual representation where the artist represents what he knows about reality. Queuing in to this understanding is perhaps the reason different art institutions around the world continue to update their curricula, developing them to the point where they believe their graduates will be better equipped to make sense out of what they see or feel. For instance, Nsukka art school strives to situate art practice within the frontiers of unrestrained explorative activities where the artist makes deep inquires and also exercises his creative skill with every freedom he requires to function.

Being one of the crops of young artists trained under El Anatsui and Chijioke Onuora at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Anikpe's works show some evidence of

Anatsui's experimentalist's contemplations and explorative spirit. His quest for clear visual metaphor that is referential to man's environmental and social conditions is propelled by the theory and spirit of 'Cultural Synthesis'<sup>2</sup> introduced and propagated at Nsukka in the 1970s by Uche Okeke (a graduate of Zaria Art School and leader of the Zaria Art Society), Chike Aniakor, Vincent Amaefuna and El Anatsui who were among the initial scholars in the department. These proponents of cultural synthesis advanced a creative approach in which good traditional artistic ideas and techniques were blended with good practices from foreign cultures; and in trying to institutionalizing it they encouraged their art students to pick materials and themes from their immediate environment<sup>3</sup>. This approach was a welcome development to the students who saw it as a way of repositioning art practice for a better opportunity to research on, and practically explore, the indigenous African art materials, ideas, forms and techniques. In discussing Anikpe's works, however, contextual analyses of samples of the body of work which resulted from the artist's studio explorations were made. Historical and formal approaches were also adopted in looking at his creativity development and the strength of his visual imageries.

### **Creative Orientation**

Anikpe's artistic orientation owes much to his father who, after discovering his artistic leanings, encouraged him in developing his talent with the belief that young Ekene is a reincarnation of his father known in his days as *omenka* (artist). In fact, Ekene Anikpe's grandfather was a traditional craftsman who specialized in carving art forms used for religious purposes, and his father saw him as a continuum of the artistic heritage of his own father. This was particularly the major reason he gave the young lad every support he needed to develop his creative skills. This encouragement helped Anikpe in deciding very early making art a career. After his secondary education, he got admitted into the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka where he eventually specialized in sculpture and graduated in 2001. Anikpe returned to the department in 2004 and enrolled in an MFA programme which he completed under El Anatsui in 2007, bagging Sandor Peri Best Portfolio Artist Award.

*Strata* series was a product of Anikpe's MFA studio explorations. In 2007, one of this series won a prize in a competition/exhibition sponsored by the Heineken group at the Goethe Institut, Lagos, and in the next two years, Anikpe exhibited the work at the Royal Oversea League in Scotland and at the Oxo Gallery, London – exhibitions that lunched him into the visibility of international art scene. With these two major outings, his voice started getting louder. Influences from the outside permeated him, fusing with those from within and then evolving deeply synthesized visual narratives. The strength of confidence that runs through his works afterwards indicates that he has a purpose that merely requires fulfillment with the creative energy he has already acquired.

His creative faculty was undoubtedly influenced by Anatsui, an acclaimed international sculptor whose style of work has always impacted on students around him. But even as there are traces of influence registered on his works, one can see an obvious cast of his personality on the works, thus dousing the question of identity usually crucial in art discourses<sup>4</sup> especially when attempting to locate works, or the artist himself, to space and timelines. During the graduate programme, he tremendously explored artificial straw creating variegated geometric shapes, which sometimes became elements for large installations of similar shapes. In some way, he developed the strategy for appropriating discarded materials or found objects in conjuring formal texts which often invite the

viewer for comments. And having studied in an environment replete with experimental artists such as Teju Oranrewaju, Ozioma Onuzulike, Uche Onyish and Ngozi Omeje, he became a more critical artist who could address topical issues exploring diverse indigenous materials and techniques.

Ekene Anikpe adopted a new creative approach and it appears he is developing a unique style of formal representation and coding of ideas. Although a range of influences may be observed from the streak of ideas he pushes around, it is expected, however, considering his interest in the celebrated works of Anatsui especially. Prompted by the increasing new perspectives opened up by his contemporaries particularly from the Nsukka art school, he has consistently and vigorously explored the universal phenomenon of life, form and space. His recent works acquiesced in a synchronization of ideology, material and process, which emits two and three dimensional visual effects. Engaging the works critically, one is tempted to think of them within the context of David Cohen and Scott Anderson's perception of the environment: 'we can approach nature and build structures with a keener visual sensibility and recognize the elements present...' <sup>5</sup> (p.10). But in addition, his works draws attention to man's attitude to life.

### **Thought and Expression**

Anikpe's works are sometimes marked by visual ambiguities. The thinking that erupts in the viewer's mind at the sight of the artist's explorations raises premises of questions that require a probe into the artist's creative character. Although the works are intended for contemplative consumption, they also appear as a strategically positioned wall that inspires the reading and daubing of graffiti. The audience contemplates them and responds in individual ways as affected. This reflective approach appears to agree with Cildo Meireles' belief that an art piece is a statement that 'should raise questions and answers for someone...' <sup>6</sup>. Several other artists hold this view. For instance, defining the function of the artist, Jerry Peart notes that an artist should not only come up with the answer but must also ask the question <sup>7</sup>. When posed as a question, the observer is expected to react to it by deciphering and supplying the tacit language (from the visual imagery posed before him) that runs with it in order to make it a consummate visual reality. Nathan Knobler affirms Peart's idea pointing out that the artist creates a visual statement that in turn happens to be a subject matter for a response from the observer <sup>8</sup>. This implies that the viewer is a remote partner of the artist in creation, particularly when he furnishes the implicit initiative, as he reads the work, which helps it assume the appropriate meaning it deserves. Moreover, Urs Fischer believes that the artist should go beyond engaging viewers in a stunning direct way to opening up a range of metaphorical connection, which of course vibrates the thinking process. In fact exploiting this possibility enhances contemplative richness and exposes us to wider aesthetic experience.

The post-impressionist artists believed that visual reality is not as essential as the symbolic or expressive function of the object depicted. This is clearly evident in the manner Van Gogh and Gauguin painted - employing saturated colors just to convey directly an aspect of the meaning of a painting by manipulating the intensity and interrelation of the colors. <sup>9</sup> The post-impressionist generation had an artistic purpose which Maurice Dennis articulated and illustrated in the following words: 'It is well to remember that a picture - before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote - is essentially a plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order' <sup>10</sup>. The basic concern here is colors, and then their interrelations which is based on careful application of the principles of design. These give weight to the illusionary effects of the

post-impressionist works and determine to a very large extent the depth of the feelings they arouse in the viewer. Although Anikpe may not be a post-impressionist artist, his work, especially *Strata* series, can be read on a similar platform with the works of artists of that generation.

### Contemplating the Works

Taken together, the *Strata* series seems to be a mimetic description of the geological structure of the earth advertently and inadvertently redesigned by man with proliferated technologies. In the work, the use of materials is far from indiscriminate as every length of straw in its color is considered and planted in its place within the geometry of geographical representation that the artist made. Consistent to all the works in this series is an attention placed on our experience of landscape in which there is often a subtle flow of undulating hills and shades of flowery vegetation. Being a layered mute installation which could be rearranged severally, the work, at the point of appreciation, has the capacity of transporting the viewer from one level of feeling to another. Forms that appear at first glance as cut-out samples of paradise with trimmed blossoming lawn distinguish as, on a closer inspection, distorted strata of earth's crust under tensional forces. Different arrangements of colorful straws within a Perspex casing suggest different layers in the crust resulting in variegated planes.

The idea of exploring synthetic straw was developed from an experiment he carried out with perforated papers (see Fig. 1. *Sieving*). He selected paper as a material for the experiment primarily because of its recyclable attribute and for its expendability. The papers are perforated, and employing collage principle he assembled them against wide black strawboard and then glued them together. To charge it with some poetic tone, he introduced onto it opposites that usher in an interplay of positives and negatives - white of the perforated sheets and black of the composition ground; perforations and cut-out circles. Here, the artist has subjected his ideas to a purely abstract construction where cut-out circles (majorly in ochre and browns) are coordinated in clusters over the perforations. They suggest crowds. In the arrangement of the crowds, however, there are individuals who could not find association with any of the groups. They seem to wander in many directions making connections to different groups. Although Anikpe is not known to be very keen about politics, this piece may be translated as a political ground: politicians holding rallies, canvassing for votes, lobbying and defecting from their parties.

Pushing an idea around is a deliberate attempt of trying to see all of its sides as well as the possibilities each side holds. Anikpe usually toys with the key words of his material or theme as he works. For instance, he created a connection between *straw* (material) and *layering* (process). According to him, 'stratification has to do with passage - transient - which straw stands for'. Anikpe's *strata* series goes beyond merely illustrating the physical geography of the external landforms of the earth to presenting a metaphorical weather report, resultant effects of tensional forces, and mimetic forms of ideal landscape. The point the artist raises remains distinctly and thrillingly evident in *Defining the Space Within*, 2007 (Fig. 2). Set in an open field, the piece is composed with three triangular forms constructed with transparent Perspex and filled with uneven lengths of synthetic straw. The straws are of variegated colors which the artist appropriated for achieving a set of visual echoes. While two of the triangular forms are equal and kept upright side by side on the ground, the third is smaller, suspended and delicately balanced on the two larger ones in a manner that makes one recall a pendulum

in action. Anikpe bares the thinking behind this visual gesture: 'the world is balanced delicately due to man's day to day activities that culminate in pollution'.

Anikpe weaves a narrative around the interplay of color and form, art and environment. The compositional arrangements in his works are often quite simple but unique, and this evinces a personality that is increasingly distinguishable. Contemplating *'Restraining' the Earth I, II* and *Study for Strata I* (Figs. 3, 4 and 5), one sees a similarity between their visual character and Sarah Sze's *Tilting Planet*, 2006, which Michael Wilson describes as visually rich, particularly because it "intersects with sculpture in its reliance on texture and form, and with painting in its exploration of color and pattern"<sup>11</sup>. Of course Anikpe balances his formal invocation on form, space and color. He consciously works towards achieving colorful visual orchestra marked by deep concern for aesthetic relationships. Utilizing the natural colors of his straw, he employs layering process in arranging his design elements within the triangular transparent Perspex casing. Each of the triangular forms has a different color spectrum created by different organizational patterns arranged in flowing formations. The dynamics of the forms is enlivened by a procedural candor that brings into play the process of rearrangement and recombination of forms and colors in the display of *Strata* series. Following this process, *Strata* mutates variously both in character and form. Although the basic building blocks of three dimensional triangle-structures common to all pieces in this series remain unchangeable, the compositional configurations vary. This appears to makes the work a little more dynamic and interesting particularly when exploring relationships between form and subject. There is an urge to make a formally recreating piece, but the desire to discover the potential blends of visual narratives locked up in the piece seems much more overwhelming.

*Hoods: Trailing Exigencies* (Fig. 6) is one of Anikpe's recent explorations with empty beverage drink cans. The work appears frail, yet it is cohesive and unyielding. It inspires contradictory sensations of opacity and transparency. This becomes more evident on a closer look as the observer attempts to appreciate the balance of power between different can cut-outs held together by short lengths of copper wire. *Hoods: Trailing Exigencies* is a 'hood-like' structure redolent of the chain-armored hoods worn by crusaders in the medieval period. According to Anikpe, the work, as a visual metaphor, symbolizes the simulated remedial approaches initiated by many countries in tackling the issues of global warming. The glittering reverse sides of the convex can cut-outs in their multiplicity seem to suggest refined artificiality that contributes to ecological violence. Thus, the artist sees the *Hood* series as a crusade against environmental degradation.

Also in another work, can tops and bottoms are carefully cut out and sewn together to create a monumental can that stimulates thoughts and feelings due to its size and the work processes involved. It tends to tame the observer until he is capable of guessing what remains unsaid about it. Contemplating the work, the appetite to drinking gives way to reasoning in which multiple of questions are raised about the drinking habits - what and how do we drink - in our contemporary societies. The strength of the work depends on the directness of medium on the narratives woven into the form. The material is a commonplace one and the technique a traditional one; but the internal logic is an innovation tensed by the artist's masterly of composition.

Like in *Strata* series, Anikpe aptly appropriates the natural colours of the cans in his explorations. His careful arrangement of glistening metallic can top and bottom cut-outs loosely followed formal sculpture fabrication rules. Like El Anatsui who recycles liquor bottle tops in making visual commentaries on African new order of consumer

culture, the artist employs synthetic straw and empty liquor cans in making visual articulations that simultaneously acknowledge the verve of consumer culture in Africa particularly, visual appeal of forms associated with it, and the marking of health and environmental effects extraneous to the culture. Sometimes the artist's creative approach creates more amusement than his finished work does. When looked at as part of the expression it somehow extends the thrilling experience the work offers. Procuring empty cans for work is like getting cut up in a drama where, on one hand, he acts a cleaner, and on the other, a little child accumulating cans for play. He picks his cans from trash bins and party halls cracking jokes along as people look askance at him.

### Conclusion

Anikpe explores synthetic straw and empty liquor cans to dramatize some environmental and human problems exacerbated by man. But while he addresses specific conditions, his work has a resonance in its appeal to feelings and meanings. He makes play with some technical conventions in ways that enables him bring implied spectacle of aesthetic experiment to bear on new media. His method and material granted him a voice that liberates the desire of his audience as well as instructs them. Thus, savoring his work merely from a purely aesthetic standpoint fails to do justice to it, as the observer could as well see it as an elegant act of reshaping our environment. For Anikpe, straw relates to 'grass', 'passage', 'transient' and 'suck' while beverage cans allude to 'consumerism'. Around these ideas rest his woven narratives which could be variously translated into different meanings depending on the observer's temperament.

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Fig. 1 - *Sieving*



Fig. 2 - *Defining the Space Within, 2007*



Fig. 5 - *Study for Strata*

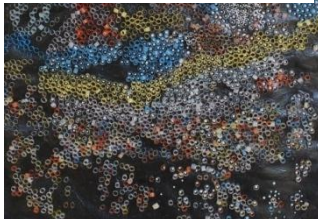


Fig. 6 - *Strata-Concord II*

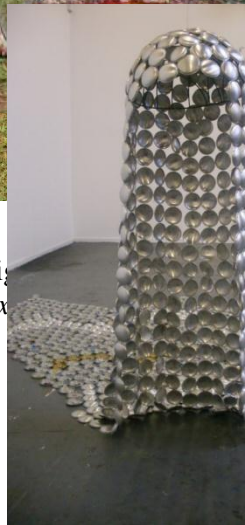


Fig. 6 - *Strata-Concord II*