ASUU JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES
A Journal of Research and Development
Vol 3, No. 3, December, 2016; pp. 105-123

Faces and Figures in the Drawings of Chijioke Onuora

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Abstract
With hard and soft lines, Chijioke Onuora makes his thoughts and feelings concrete on paper as he visually narrates his subjects. He uses graphite and charcoal to create figurative drawings on paper which, in their variety of forms and imageries, constitute creative inquiries into the mood and character of people. Many of his drawings consist of faces and figures that are not just metaphors for human conditions but are also the visual representations of some Igbo folktales, idioms, and proverbs. Examining these figurative drawings, we come to the supposition that the forms Onuora createsreferencesthe Igbo traditional and contemporary life, and are aptly illustrative of their themes and titles. The technique the artist employs in these visual narratives on paper invariably translate into visual patterns in as much as they are metaphorical.

Introduction

Critics define Chijioke Onuora as a versatile artist who works in different mediums. This definition aptly describes him. When he is not involved in painting, sculpting or dying fabrics, he cracks jokes and tells stories. He has a habit of telling stories which he also physically demonstrates as he narrates them to any available audience, or communicates them visually on paper or fabric with

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an accurate evocation of the physical demonstrations that would have accompanied the stories if told verbally. Nnenna Okore describes him as an art teacher who frequently injects storytelling and well-crafted imageries into his mode of instruction as a way of firing up his students' "visual sensibilities and expressiveness" in drawing classes.[1] She also notes that his pencil, pastel and charcoal lines, in themselves, translate to acts of performance, which in a way is the purpose of drawing. Could the performance be seen as gestures of highly charged energetic feelings composed along different story lines such as "Di anyi I tulu m anu? (My friend, did you spray me with meat?)" - a story recounted and attributed to the artist by George Odoh who calls him "master narrator."[2]

Onuora trained as a sculptor; he received his BA (1986) and MFA (1990) respectively from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka under Uko Akpaide, El Anatsui and Seth Anku, after completing an NCE programme (1982) at Anambra College of Education, Awka. But much of his acclaim rests on his draughtsmanship. Seeing his drawings offers a spectacular experience in a variety of ways. It was Seth Anku, regarded as one of the foremost draughtsmen at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1970s and 1980s, who introduced him to the use of charcoal indrawing. As a freshman, his encounter with one of Anku's charcoal drawing at Nsukka in 1984 inspired him so much so that he dashed off immediately to the nearby local art store, purchased a square stick of artist's charcoal and returned to practice. Many of his early works demonstrate how he solved problems defined by the medium.

For his very many naturalistic drawings which mostly date as far back as the 1980s and 1990s, his choicest techniques in defining forms were blurring, hatching and cross-hatching using graphite. However, more recent drawings by him reveal a well-developed personal approach to drawing regarding rendition and forms. With his fond material, charcoal, the artist uses sweeps of strokes to define his thoughts on paper. Such sweeps could be soft, fierce, sharp, swirling or jerky and rendered in bold statements over bright surfaces of thebrown, gray or white paper. As typical of Nsukka School, curvilinear movements are also found to enrich his drawings either as part of the background or as bold strokes, which help to define

facial features and figural postures. His strokes come in single bold sweeps with charcoal shafts. These charcoal shafts could vary in length with the longer ones creating bolder strokes.

In 1999, Onuora exhibited a body of work he executed on clothes in a show he titled *Ulukububa* (butterfly). The works were a collection of drawings ostentatiously simulated with regular and sweeping bold lines that became activated on the models as they wore them and became simulations of the lines and shapes that the artist has created on the fabrics. Here, the drawings become animated in their colourfully dyed backgrounds where they act out their aesthetic values for the audience. On the models, the drawings are transformed into art forms in the round, requiring the viewer to look at each piece from different angles. The lines are usually simple, lyrical, bold and occasionally light as they meander and define spaces and boundaries. These attributes, in fact, pervade all his drawings, particularly his graphite and charcoal works, which yield unending streams of thoughts with broad cultural interpretations. His 2014 exhibition of drawings, *Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi*,attracted several renowned critics and art historians, including Chike Aniakor, who made insightful remarks about his work. The exhibition showcased 48 drawings executed on paper with charcoal, chalk and graphite. The varied subjects focused on social issues popping up around him. According to Aniakor, Onuora's lyrical lines sometimes inspire pulsing sounds, arising from the transformation of uli (the art of fine line) into a code of innovation that reflects human feelings in all their endless possibilities and transmutations.[3]Recourse to the forms and thematic subject matter of Chijioke Onuora's drawings has inspired this paper. Hence, we engage a brief reading of the narratives he has created with graphite and charcoal on paper. Our supposition is that Chijioke Onuora, in spite of the antecedents of history his cultural background has animmense influence on the body of work from his atelier.

Orchestration of Drawings from Tales

The various tools of Igbo cultural pedagogy are evident in Onuora's drawings, especially in their didactics. The artist employs the folklores, proverbs and idioms that form part of his rich Igbo tradition

in capturing his themes and artistic thoughts, which are focused mainly on human relationships, social responsibilities and morality. Some of his drawings familiarize more directly with his cultural background in their titles. These compositions bear their titles in the Igbo dialect, which Onuora believes makes their meanings clearer and original. He argues that translations could sometimes contaminate essential aspects of an idea; hence, some ideas are best left in their natural and novel state as conceived originally in the artist's mind. The proverbs, folklore, and idioms that inspire the titles of his work usually draw his works into direct interaction or relationship with the viewer's imagination, especially if the audience shares the same cultural experiences with the artist. Such titles are usually very suggestive and could start story lines, which the works may bring to conclusive ends. For instance, titles such as*I Puta Ututu Okuko Chuba Gi Oso, Gbaba Maka na I maghina O Puru Eze N'abali*, 2011 (If you wake up in the morning and see a chicken chasing you, run because you do not know if it had grown teeth over the night) as an Igbo adage,invites the audience to think alongside the imagery.

Lore as inspiration recurs in Onuora's drawings such as *If Only Ikemefuna is My Son,* 2009, *Ajo Ofia*, 2009 and *Three Halos for Nwoye*, 2008 (see Figs 1 - 3). The works are inspired by stories from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. While the subject matter of *If Only Ikemefuna is My Son* is based on the struggle between fantasy and reality, as exemplified in Okonkwo's wishful thinking that Ikemefuna, whom he loves, would have been his biological son rather than a slave in his house, the theme of *Ajo Ofia* depends on the account of the evil forest in the novel,where suspected victims of strange illnesses (such as swollen stomach) in Umuofia are cast away in order not to die within the community and defile the land. *Three Halos for Nwoye,* 2008 and *Exile,* 2011 are also themes that are inspired by *Things Fall Apart*. While *Three Halos for Nwoye* is a demonstration of the solemnity of the conversion of Nwoye to the Christian faith which came newly to his village, *Exile* is an allegorical visual account of Okonkwo's flight to his mother's village after he committed "female" murder.[4] The work (*Exile*) embodies the experiences displaced people go through, as well as the lofty dreams they usually have.

Onuora's drawings do not demand so much stamina from the viewer to hack his way into their formal or contextual reservoir. The artist's visual and material choices guide the eyes through the composition to the conclusion. Each component of every drawing has its own story as a physical object in a work's evocation. Apart from provoking a physical response to a rattling wooden gong, *Ekwe Kuo Ama Agbaa,* 2009 (Fig. 4) represents a stretch of an unfolded folklore. Using a broad brown paper, Onuora constructed an arena in which he incorporated an*Ikoro* (wooden gong), dancing figures, trees and melody, and then projected them onto what appears to be the mind of a storyteller whose facial image was captured in a sweeping charcoal line. Juxtaposing the facial character in the composition with the various figures and objects it harbours, *Ekwe Kuo Ama Agbaa* formed a unique composite narration of an interesting folklore that ended with "this is the end of my story."

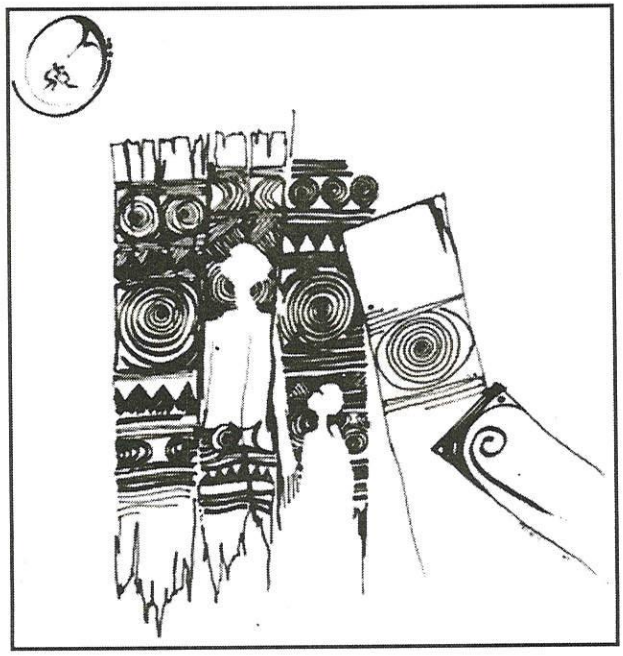

Fig. 1.*If Only Ikemefuna is My Son,* 2009

Fig. 2. *Ajo Ofia*, 2009

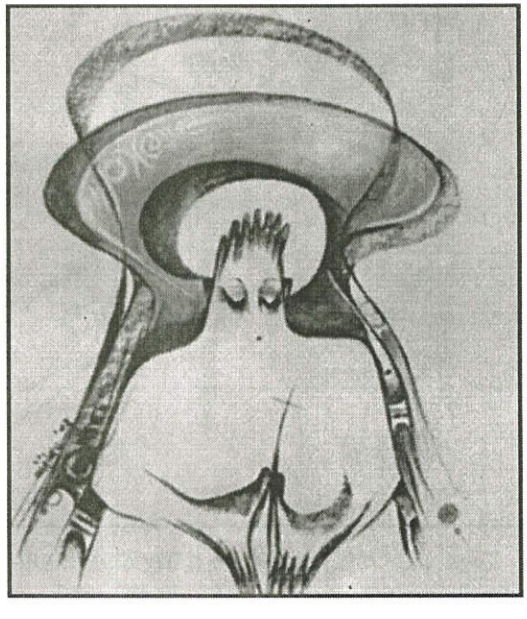

Fig. 3. *Three Halos for Nwoye*, 2008

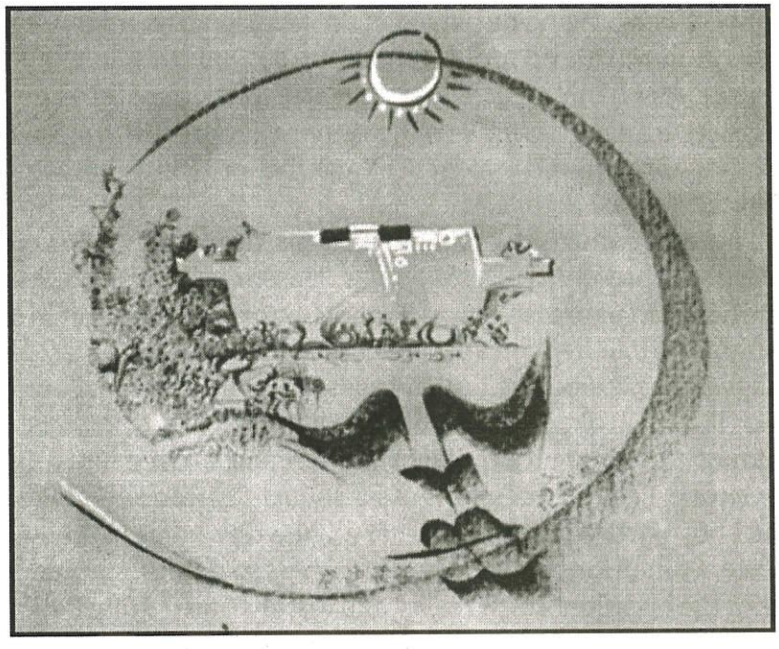

Fig. 4. *Ekwe Kuo Ama Agbaa*, 2009

Faces and Impressions

The ancient Egyptian philosopher Plotinus (205-2700) defines the eyes as "sun-like. Window of the soul, it bespeaks the presence in the body of that radiant emanation which sustains matterin being."[5]The eyes are involved in a dualism of process in which our experiences are copied and saved in the memory, and also in the revelation of the non-verbalised feelings harboured in the soul. They are planted right in the face where they illuminate the soul and the physical body. With their interactive relationships with the other facial features, they generate visible statements, which sometimes are so ambiguous that they become difficult to read accurately. Thus, they hold impenetrable uncertainty that makes us hesitate as we attempt todraw conclusions about someone's intent or feelings.Although facial expressions may be quite definite sometimes, unexpressed feelings are usually obfuscated in the defining contours of the face. In other words,an individual's mood, which can be visualised, based on the strength and subtlety of the facial contours and lines that

are at play, is worn and displayed in the face. Realising this, Onuora utilises the specialised tools of drawing and painting in exploring different facial moods in relating non-verbalised stories. He configuresdrawing forms for figurative exercises in fragmented narratives shot around experiences and folklores and characterises his subjects as life actors.

There is something that defines his drawings as a kind of condensed representations of feelings. The strokes and patterns that form them are expressively vivid and contextually saturated with meanings. While he typically leaves his background usually plain, facial features, especially lips and eyes, are sharply picked out with dense, liquid strokes. The facesrepresent avariety of expressions including horror, beauty, timidity, indifference, excitement, anxiety, and victory. These expressions are also usually infused on the rest of the body parts which all together align withwhat is expressed on the face. Sometimes the face of his figure is so dominant that other parts of the body lose corporeality and dissolve into psychedelic feel. This way the artist achieves a blend of abstract and naturalistic drawings of jocular imageries that are engaged in a formal investigation into the quasi-ethereal and mundane frameworks.His process is one of arrangement and construction involving lines, curves and contours, whichhe has perceived as embodiments of the feelingsand expressions that the human face harbours.

The facial dispositions of all his figural drawings are usually interpretative, and the themes of such drawings are easily understood through the mood they express. Dominant moods expressed by the actions and gestures of these drawings cut across the different countenances and emotive feelings displayed by people whenever they are faced with particular situations. While some of his faces reflect beauty, joy and tenderness, many of them depict sobriety, pity, despair, terror, timidity, dejection and confusion. For instance, the cubist forms on the face of *Oku Ekwe* (Fig. 5) and the general mannerisms of the portrait typically demonstrate not only the robustness of a vibrant music player but also the joy and pride a skilled man enjoys whenever he displays his abilities to an audience. On the other hand, *Faces of Despair* (Fig. 6) also shows hopelessness and uncertainty. The three faces in this drawing are all moody,

apparently consumed in a dark background by an impenetrable darkness and uncertainty that appear to have enveloped them. If their gazes, downcast and seemingly longing for help, represent anexistential crisis, they do so precisely in a way that allows the viewer to connect, in an ambiance of introspective contemplation, to different challenging situations in the real world.

Fig. 5. *Oku Ekwe*

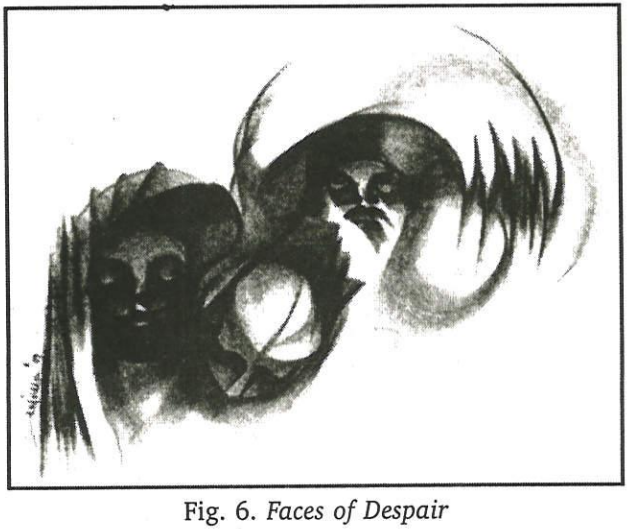

Fig. 6. *Faces of Despair*

Onuora has developed a means of manipulating the eye sockets, especially to stir emotions. *Biko nu*and *Bikozie nu* (Figs 7 and 8) indicate a situation where one is begging for forgiveness orperhaps, help but obviously not for alms, considering that the palms are not positioned in a way to have alms or gifts dropped in them.As if designed to be placed and viewed side by side, the two drawings seem to represent the same person in a somewhat different but identical pose. And while they remain independent, they entirely yield to expressive imperatives, revealing themselves as highly suggestive of situations where one's challenges increase without measure, in spite of one's plea for mercy. Interestingly, the titles of the works are interpretative of this idea too.

In *Biko nu* (please, oh), a figure is shown in a beggarly pose looking straight into the viewer's eyes with outstretched palms. She displays total confidence that she would receive a positive response. Even as the overall pose appears quite passive, the countenance is strong and the extended hands active. But in *Bikozie nu*(oh, please now - a plea stretched to the superlative degree), one notices that the figure is attenuated andseems to be swallowed up in a heap of many needs which are beyond her means. Here, Onuora has combined, in concrete form, earnestness, frailty and hopelessness to play on our emotion. He visualised stressed *biko* (please) so much so that it is seen and felt to the extent of its meanings. This approach increased the density of the work,butwhat is most striking is the character of the figurewhich, while making an insistent plea, wrests a pitying response from the viewer. The eyes, dim, depressedand deeply set in sunken eye sockets, express anguish and the extremes of poverty. In fact, both characters in *Biko nu* and *Bikozie nu* depict a pitiful state of emptiness, abandonment, and helplessness expressed by delicate and bold, concave and convex linear elements, which are punctuated with effortlessly sweeping straight lines. Although Onuora's representations generally provoke different emotional feelings, a wide range of his human faces suggests anguish, horror, and pity.

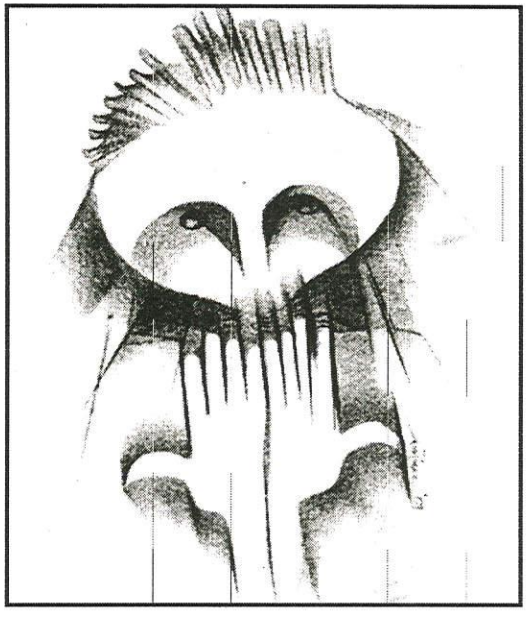

Fig. 7. *Biko nu*

Fig. 8. *Bikozie nu*

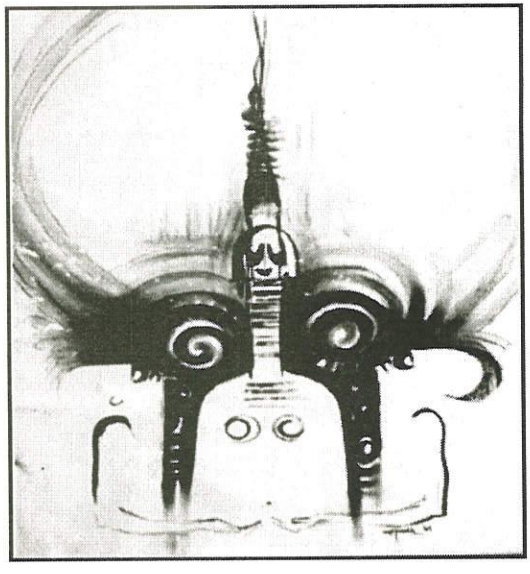

Fig. 9. Devotees, 1995

Onuora goes completely spiritual both in concept and approach in *Devotees,* 1995 (Fig. 9), which is an attempt to really think about the question of piety and deity. In the work, he features two supplicants at both sides of a tall deity, which has an elongated neck with a small head that emits smoke. This deity at the centreof the composition appears like a mediator between the two worshippers by its sides and the roaring presence of "Chukwu" (the supreme God) whose facial features are partly captured in the background. The seemingly face of God is formed into an enormous circle, which spans from the centre of the background upwards and beyond the borders of the composition. The massive circle is defined with two thick black spirallingstrokes echoing down the circle from its base. While the spiralling strokes eventually constitute the eyes,theysuggest the spiritual and omniscient character of God. However,situating them in a gargantuan globular form behind the figures, they remind us that our actions behind the scenes are uncovered before God. With the faces of the petitioners totally flung up in adoration and awe, and their hands stretched out in prayer, they make silent incantations. In a way, *Devotees* draw attention to the artist's religious

background. Onuora has always followed his parents to church services during his childhood days, and at some time later, he became the choirmaster of his local church. This position afforded him the opportunity of confronting different faces regularly as he conducted the choir facing both the choristers and congregation.

The accumulated experiences of viewing collections of facesgained over time from the local church services, where people with different spiritual problems written all over their faces converge for worship, have apparently influenced several of his drawings of crowded faces. including *Who Protects the Protector,* 2011, *They Came... not in a Single File,* 2009, *Ajo Ofia I,* 2008, *Exile,* 2011, *Iru MbadambaIru Mbadamba I & II,* 2014, *K'anyi Muo Uli,* 2013, *Faces of Despair,* 2009, *Four Faces Same Mood,* 2014 are all crowds of faces. Usually, they all cast their gazes at a common direction, which perhaps is a strategy Onuora employs to arouse a speculative opinion in the viewer. The faces are usually cool and pensive in demeanour as if they are paying attention to a common speaker, and no drawing has one face with a different expression from others in the samé drawing. Such spiritual stance is also portrayed in *Bad Belle Ancestor,* 1990,*Third Generation II,* 2014 and *So Be It,* 2014. In most of these works, it is interesting to observe that the faces appear in clusters with one of them standing out prominently among others. For instance, in *Who Protects the Protector,* a crowd of heads isorganised to form part of the features of a larger head that fits into a very big face, which is generously equipped with two extraordinary huge eyes that invoke a strange phenomenon. And like Wangechi Mutu's *The Bride Who Married a Carmel's Head,* 2009, they also suggest a polysemy or multiplicity of interpretations.[6]

Charcoal/Graphite Drawing as Metaphor for Social Life

Onuora's drawings echo inspirations fertilised by his rich cultural background; or perhaps, an ability and somewhat intention to revive and incorporate ideas from African cultural background. In their stylised forms balanced with a good sense of design, his faces are often mask-like in similitude with some traditional African sculpture. For instance, like the Ashanti dolls, *akua 'ba,* the figures in *Biko Nu* and *Bikozie nu*have pronounced foreheads and elongated, narrow

nasal ridges. And while elaborate hair-do defines many of his female figures like the Nok sculptures as evident in *Bridal Train*, 2014 (Fig. 10)and *Wait! Wait!!*, 2014 (Fig. 11), most faces are fitted withlowered eyelids resembling those of the Mende helmet masks of Sierra Leone. These are evidence that his study of African art, especially the research he made in Igbo shrine art during his formative days, has exposed him to a direct feel of African traditional sculptures and masks, which later influenced his practice. Cubic forms, broken lines, round heads, prominent eyeballs or lowered eyelids and cyclic lines that sometimescharacterise African traditional sculptures are noticeable in his works, particularly those ones that are rendered in stylised figurative mode.

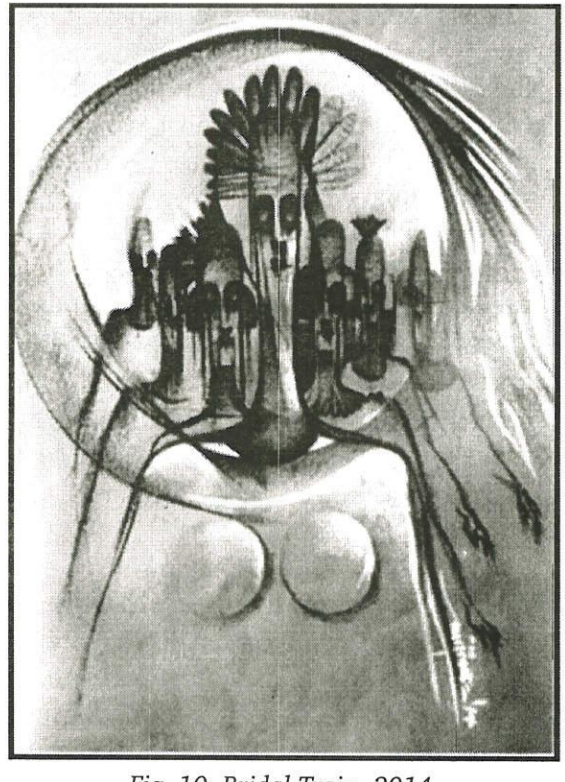

Fig. 10. Bridal Train. 2014

Fig. 11. Wait! Wait!!, 2014

However, there are some naturalistic drawings among his corpus and each one is saturated in its own way with a story about personal or social experience. The imageries he constructs through them often vacillate between reality, conjecture and fable. In the life drawing, *Ifee and Nnamdi,* 1984 (Fig. 12), Onuora presentedtwo lads, seemingly brothers, gazing at something the viewer is not privileged to see in the drawing. He introduced in the composition what Clement Greenberg refers to as "aesthetic surprise", which clings on forever.[7] With no intent of figural abstraction, he used soft lines to display the close affinity that exists between friends, allies and brothers. But what is it that the artist has revealed to the boys and hid from the viewer? This is a question he concretised and perhaps deliberately infused into the composition to warn us that reality is not as straightforward as we may think.

Onuora has always managed to think his way into his work. The cultural sphere and milieu that formed the artist are developed around extended family and social/human connection, which he works into his art. In *21st Century Neighbours,* 2014, the artist captures the unnecessary seclusion and disparity often found in

modern and urban settlements. The presentation is an opposite of what the African architectural settlements provide. In this drawing, the communal and interactive culture of association and neighbourhood is completely missing. Three different roof-like forms, alluding to ethnic and tribal divisions, are constructed above each individual head of the three figures. Columns of bold vertical charcoal lines supporting the roofs appear to clearly demarcate the figures from one another. Their facial expressions look somewhat mean and indifferent and their eyes appear closed, heightening a deliberate effort to dissociate one another.

Ibo ÁN'iboKwulu, 2014, on the other hand, is a stylised portrait of a couple in which the social and cultural expectation of understanding, companionship, and marriage is demonstrated, especially in the African context. The drawing describes the Igbo adage: "*ifekwulu, ifeakwudebe ya*" (something standing has something else standing beside it). In other words, the proverbial expression connotes the popular saying that nothing exists in isolation, which underlines the African idea of duality in creation. In other words, *Ibo N'iboKwulu* is a reflection of an Igbo maxim that things are created in twos as complements: Male and female; hot and cold; up and down, good and bad. The linear fluidity, tranquillity and visual harmony radiating from the two figures appear to defy animosity, rancour and treachery. Their closed eyes seem to imply satisfaction, trust and faithfulness, which many couples lack today. On the upper right and lower left sides of the drawing are insibdi texts that seem to condense the meaning of the work and heighten our inquisitiveness to understand everything about it. But we do not need to stretch our imagination to glean from the work at a glance that the message centreson partnership and camaraderie. Also, *Okoko Osisi Maka Onye m HuruN'anya,* 2014 (Fig. 13) is a narrative based on a search for a companion. It is a visual demonstration of a courtship that is charged with unpredictability. In the drawing, a male figure is seen holding a flower gently and close to his chest as he looks for his beloved, hoping to win her heart and at the same time risking rejection and dejection. Onuora has used this piece to remind his audience that despite the

busy and engaging schedule in one's life, one should find time to show love and care to people.

Fig. 13. Okoko Osisi Maka Onye m Huru N'anya, 2014

Fig. 12. Ifee and Nnamdi, 1984

Conclusion

From the titles and themes that Onuora explored in his drawings, it is obvious that the foregrounding ideology that prompt his drawings are woven around his milieu. As a master storyteller who appreciates the metaphorical nature of tales and performances. Hence, his work straddles physical reality within a framework of an imaginary world. Even as he concentrates on issues around spiritual uplift and human relations, he never forgets the critical significance of style as an expression of self. In Onuora's oeuvre, tension and tranquillity are revealed in pleasing geometric forms that are presented with sweeping, meandering soft lines and bold cyclic contours. His deliberate contrasts where areas of thick charcoal marks pair with streaks of lighter, fading lines over white or coloured paper remain deft as they speak of his personality. On the other hand, his naturalistic and stylised drawings reveal good grasp of human anatomy in straightforward linear narratives, the orchestrated characters of his faces and figures send the audience through visual labyrinths. Onuora's work invariably constitutes formal exploits of interweaving of visual simulation and candour, which are polysemic.

Notes

1. Nnenna Okore (2014), "Dancing with Lines," in *Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi*, Exhibition Catalogue, p.29.
2. George Odoh (2014), "Riding on the Wings of Wit and Humour: The Drawings of Chijioke Onuora" in *Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi*, Exhibition Catalogue, p.31.
3. See Chike Aniakor's introduction to *Chijioke Onuora: Akala Unyi*, "Linear Harvests of the creative imagination: Drawings as Rhythms of Visual Sounds," (2014), iv - vi.
4. See Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (UK: William Heinemann Ltd, 1958)91.
5. Leo Steinberg, "The Eye as a Part of the Mind" (1953), in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art,* Leo Steinberg, London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 299.
6. Michael Wilson (2013), *How to Read contemporary Art: Experiencing the Art of the 21st Century*, Antwerp; New York: Ludion; ABRAMS, p.268.
7. Clement Greenberg as quoted by Klaus Ottmann, "Frank Stella's Prince of Ambiguity", in *Sculpture*, Vol.23, No. 5, (2004), p.38.

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