

UZO EGONU

In one of his essays American author James Baldwin summarized his life ambition in these words: to be a good writer and an honest man. If ever a man lived up to that ambition, that man was the artist Uzo Egonu, who died in his London home last month at age 64. Egonu was not only one of the finest painters and printmakers of his generation, he was also the epitome

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of simplicity, decency, and kindness, a thorough gentleman of the old school. In a forty-five year career that knew many heights and lows, and through nearly twenty years of ill-health, his strength of spirit, his mild humour, his gentleness and optimism held to the last.

a Gentleman

Born in Onitsha on Christmas day, 1931 to a government functionary who had trained at the reputed Fourah Bay College, Freetown, Egonu went to England at the end of the war in 1945 to study art. He was 13. After high school in Little Snoring, Norfolk, he moved to London and enrolled at the Camberwell School of Art and Design where he studied painting and typography under L. J. Daniels and Sir Gilbert Spencer. After graduation in 1951 he travelled in Europe studying the masters as well as collections of classical African art. Shortly after graduation he had been taken to the studio of the renowned sculptor, Sir Jacob Epstein, an encounter that would hold great meaning for him as an artist. In 1953 he settled in Paris painting watercolours for a living while continuing his private studies of great collections. In the years that followed he would travel through Denmark and Finland, also, as well as Italy, before returning to London to set up studio in 1959.

The early 1960s were crucial for Egonu's career as he tried to define a particular language for himself, a language that drew upon his childhood in

the royal city of Onitsha where he was born, his encounters with masterpieces of African art in Europe, and his studies of the great European masters. For a while his work shared the textuality of the work of the Kitchen Sink school, yet departed from the social realism that defined the aesthetic of that group. Instead he was inclined towards genre and nostalgic imagery. In 1963 he joined the Free Painters and Sculptors Group, to which he belonged till 1968. As his work progressed another influence would become evident, namely the growing dominance of the formalist school in African art scholarship. Egonu undertook a study of the ancient terra-cotta traditions of the Nok culture of West Africa, on which he wrote an unpublished treatise, and his discovery of what he considered the formalist proclivities of the ancient sculptors of Nok influenced his own dedication to form. In his words this discovery was his bridge to a new aesthetic away from the academicism of Camberwell.

In the late Sixties, however, a crucial historical moment would make great demands on his art and ultimately consolidate his election of an aesthetic different from that which prevailed around him in London. The outbreak of war in Nigeria, which began with the massacre of several thousand Igbo people in other parts of the country, affected Egonu tremendously, Egonu had left the country before independence and the escalation of national differences, and the collapse of what to many had held the promise of becoming Africa's greatest nation was a tragedy too heavy to bear. Not only was his attachments to Britain, the country of his adulthood, shaken, the secession of the Igbo and the founding of the Republic of Biafra further tore at his sense of identity. But even more importantly, like the young intellectu-



Above: Uzo Egonu in his studio, 1964.

Photo: Stewart Bale

Right: Addiction One, 1970 Lithograph 57 x 79 cm.





Above: Uzo and Hiltrud Egonu, 1971.

Right: Uzo in Paris, 1955. Far right: Uzo Egonu with Mr Bottomley, Minister for Overseas Development, and Mrs Bottomley at Upper Grosvenor Galleries during Egonu's one-person show, 1966.



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als of his homeland, Egonu dedicated himself and his art to bringing the human tragedy of Biafra to the attention of the world. With the encouragement of his patron, the Duchess of St. Albans, Egonu lent support to the humanitarian activities in Biafra. It is the belief of many also, that the agony of Nigeria's descent into chaos took a great emotional toll on him and ultimately ruined his health.

During the early 1970s Egonu's career reached a peak as he won medals and prizes in international competitions across Europe. He also ventured into printmaking, in which medium he would eventually create some of his most memorable works. In the late Seventies his exposure to acid fumes in his printmaking studio resulted in partial loss of sight. There followed a period during which he painted in his North London studio without sight. The work he produced during this period, the critic George Whittet would later describe as on a level rarely met in contemporary European styles since the death of Paul Klee. In 1983 he was named to the International Association of Art as a life counsellor, an honour he shared with such noted figures of 20th century art as Henry Moore, Joan Miro, and Louise Nevelson.

Egonu's recovery from his sight impairment was followed rather quickly by a heart failure in 1985, and

yet another in 1986, after which he was given less than a year to live. He lived another ten years during which he worked ceaselessly, travelled when he could, and continued to exhibit both in Britain and abroad.

Egonu's work is marked by a combination of powerful lyricism and a concern for human preoccupations. Whether it was the demise of nation states and the prevalence of war, or the difficulties and foibles of exiles and the stateless, Egonu brought to his subjects understanding and compassion that imbued his works with the inescapable

mark of deep philosophical contemplation. As a man, he was reserved, yet cheerful and receptive, and many will remember him not only for the power of his art, but also for his warmth.

In a moving obituary posted on the African art newsgroup server in the United States, Professor Dele Jegede of Indiana University described Egonu as personifying class, elegance and humility not only in his art but also in his lifestyle. 'The last time that I spoke with him, wrote Dele Jegede, was also alas! - the first ... in Germany in the winter of 1989. I was astonished at the modesty and humility of a man who has been preceded very prominently by his name and art; a man whom we - my generation in Nigeria - grew up to acclaim and identify with. For us, he stood tall and mighty, like the IROKO tree in the forest. He epitomized the height that we aspired to attain.'

Egonu was a titled man in Onitsha, and is survived by Hiltrud, his life-long companion and wife of twenty-five years. His funeral in London was attended by friends, some of whom knew him only briefly, but all of whom echo Professor Jegede's statement that we owe a debt of gratitude to him for the way he has touched our lives. **GR**