

Conversation with a sculptor

Olu Amoda



Fences & Windows

O F D R E A M S

GR: Obviously our discussion would attempt to span the various phases of your work as an artist. And I hope that somehow we will be able to tuck in a little bit of your biographical data and how they interact with what you are doing at the moment.



For starters I want to

ask how you got yourself into the business of metal sculpture.

Amoda: Metal sculpture for me dates back to 1981 in Auchi Polytechnic where I studied. That was the time when we started specialising.

GR: Before that time you were not really into it.

Amoda: No, before then nothing on metal. I just had the feeling that I was gifted in art, like any other kid who had one gift or the other.

GR: It wasn't something you had running in the family?

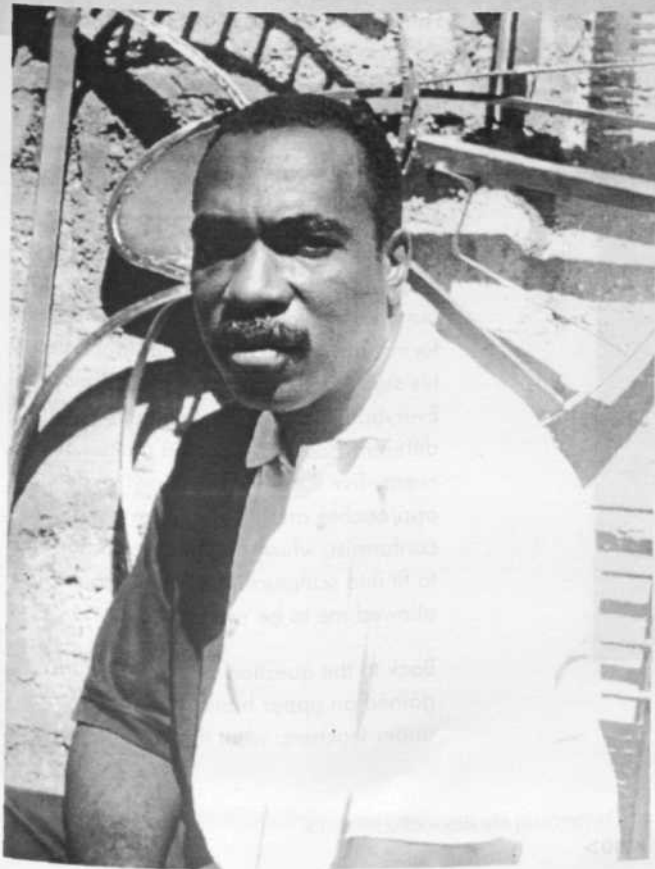
Amoda: Well after graduation, after a series of exhibitions, people started to put bits and pieces together, tried to link my sculpture to my Dad who was a goldsmith. My Dad has told most people who have tried to link it to him, I never met him practise; but I knew his former apprentices who became master goldsmiths and on my way from school I was always attracted to their anvils, the sound they made with their anvils, you know those drum-like... I enjoyed that, and I just went there from our primary school to drum on the anvil, that's all that I can put together.

GR: So you wouldn't agree that your ultimate election of metal sculpture over other aspects of fine art where you



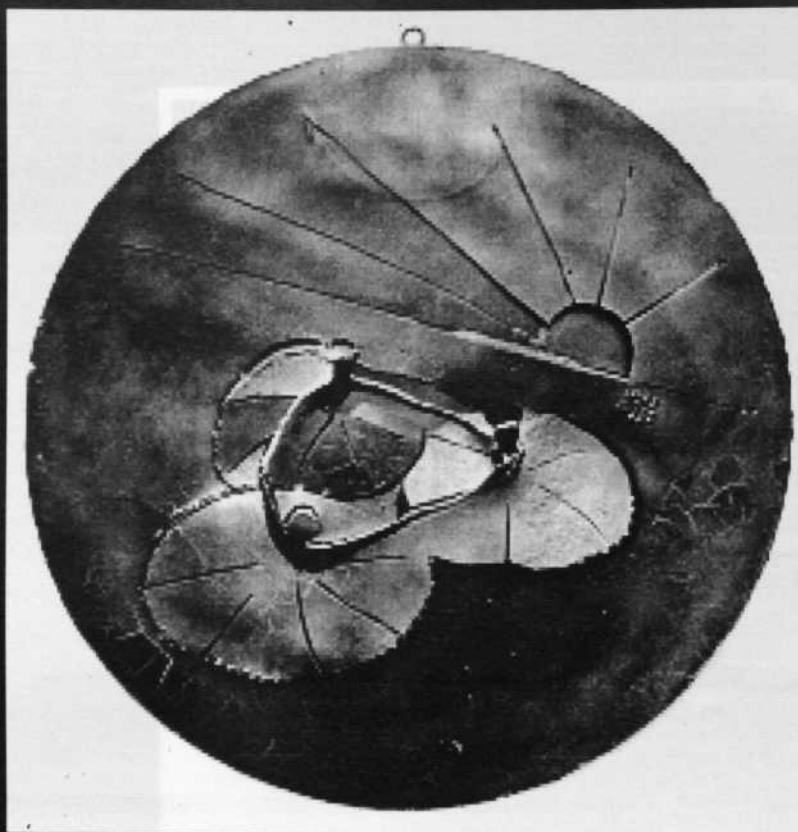
Peasant (1999) steel & wood 62cm diameter

Olu Amoda



obviously had some interest and talent also had something to do with the family, I'm referring to painting, to textile, pottery, wood carving. How then did metal sculpture gain a kind of upper hand? Was it the subconscious...?

Amoda: Yes you used the right word, subconscious. Which means that consciously I wasn't a part of that decision. Apart from that, in the art school you had those you admired, mentors, some were your teachers, some friends in higher classes. I remember one of the class projects they gave me, that was not even the specialising year, I was in my second year and I used metal to execute the project. One of the things about sculpture as against other forms of art is



Dancing in the sun
(1993) steel 118
diameter

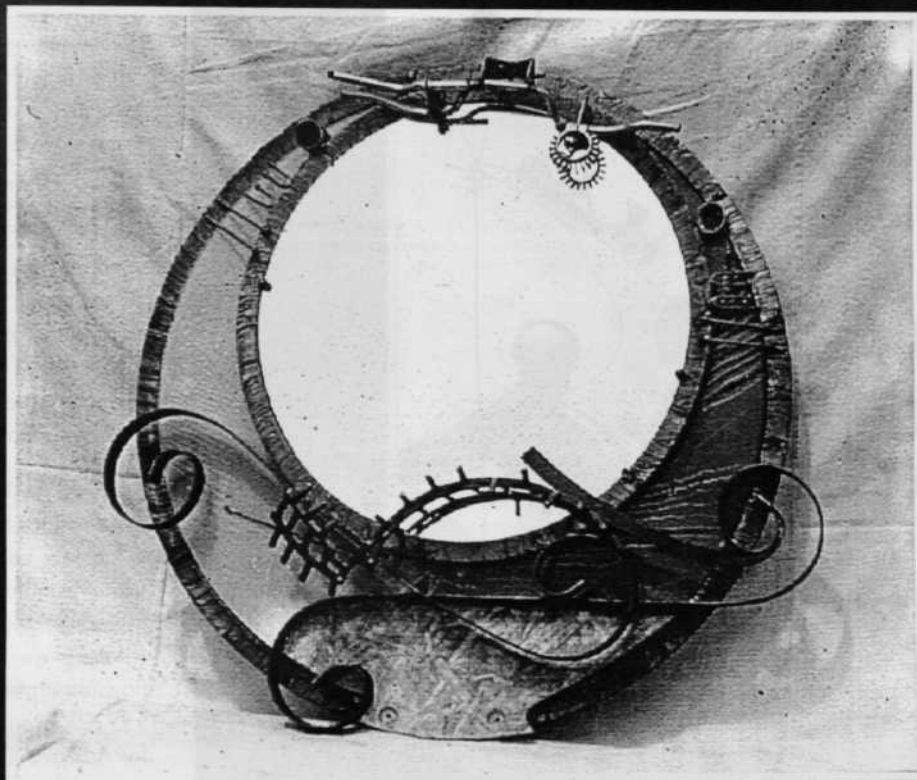


mirror 'hawk & lizard' (1999) mirror & steel
149cm by 103cm

that students always felt free to express themselves. The thrust of sculpture even from the beginning was self-realisation. The assignment was such that we could do something from our locality, a masquerade from your place. Now you can imagine a teacher who had no idea whatsoever what a masquerade from your place looked like. It could open you to fraud. Well this time good because he doesn't know, and what he is going to judge is not based on what he has seen but on what you had on the ground, the forms, the proportions; if you appealed to his sight he considered it a good piece. Everybody came out with something different. You found that in a class of twenty-five there were twenty-five different approaches and I for one am not a conformist, which makes it easier for me to fit into sculpture. And it is because it allowed me to be myself.

Back to the question of why sculpture gained an upper hand. When you study under teachers, what they say to you can

mirror 'Okada'
(1999) mirror &
steel & wood
99cm by 99cm



become very important. Apart from the grades they gave to you, there are certain remarks certain teachers who you have respect for might pass and a sensitive student would take seriously. I remember one of my teachers, Muffy Ajayi, who was in charge of that particular project, he was looking at everyone's work, and there were about one hundred and five students approaching the same thing and he later said that in that class there were a hundred and five possibilities. He picked my work and said, 'I don't know anything about you but if you do consider majoring in sculpture do not hesitate to move towards metal.'

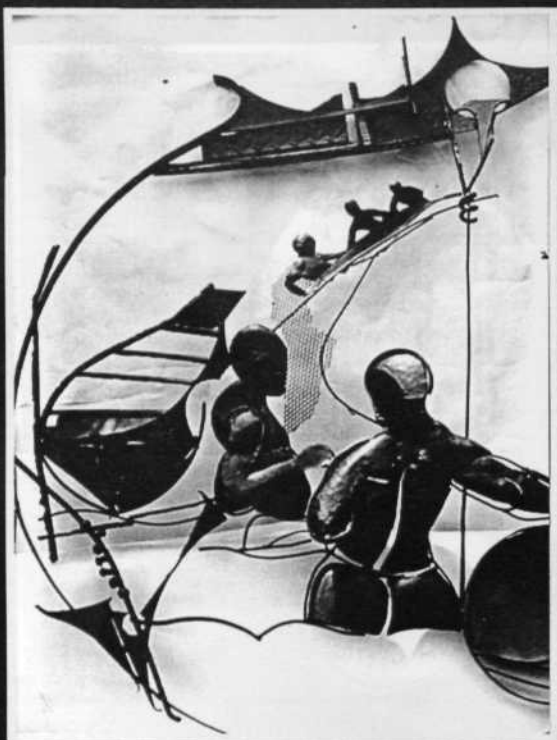
And then when I left school in 1983, in 1984 there was a group show, a two-man show at the national council, myself and Wale Ajayi.

GR: That's the National Council for Arts and Culture?

Amoda: Yes, then with Imoukhuede as

the director. There I exhibited almost everything that I had learnt in school, in the media which you already enumerated: wood, stone, metal, plaster-of-Paris, fibre-glass, all you know, name it. Because I was fresh from school and I had the energy, then also because you wanted to prove that you were very versatile. But then something very interesting happened during that exhibition, all the works that I sold there were the the metal pieces. Everybody called and said to me, 'I love your metal work, I love your metal work'. And I was resisting because I didn't want to be boxed in by anybody who will say, 'go and do this, go and do that.' And because I was nonconformist, people saying I love your metal was good reason for me not to like them.

Then also the power in metal, the challenges in metal I just could not resist. That was one area I couldn't remain myself, and I had to give in to the attraction to metal and people's en-



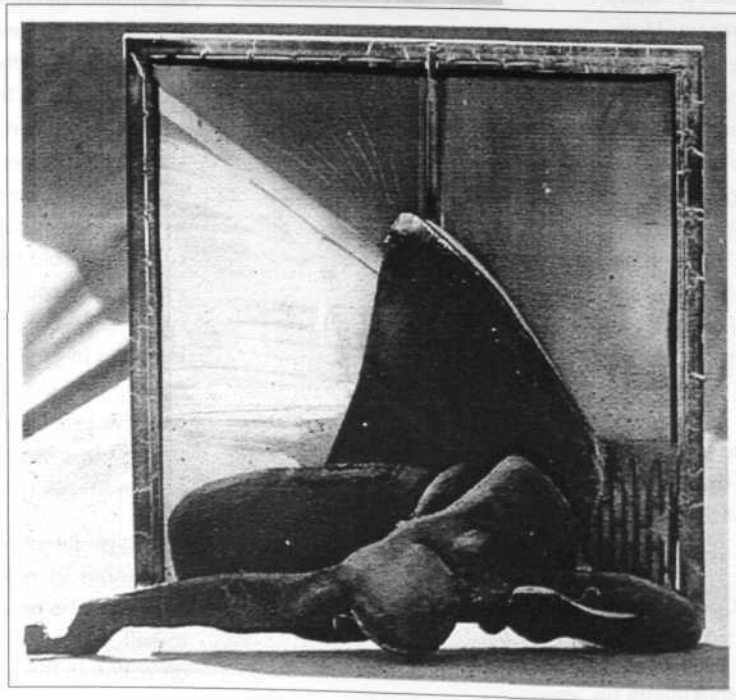
taking the fish by the fins (1999) steel 170cm by 144cm

dorsement and people's getting freaked out by anything I did in metal. So I said, 'why give yourself the stress this man. You are a slave to metal' and that's where I am.

GR: Interesting. You appear to have been in serious professional practice for ten, eleven years. Is it possible to describe beyond that early induction how you got to where you are now? Eventually we are coming to the more utilitarian expression through metal.

Amoda: The best way to place what you are saying is to go back to that very exhibition, because exhibitions, especially group exhibitions, are supposed to be testing grounds for the acceptability of whatever medium you are doing. I don't now remember whether it was 1992 or 1993 or even '94, the National Council for Arts and Culture again decided to put up an all-sculpture exhibition for the OAU (Organisation of African Unity) summit in Abuja and they had a test-run in Lagos here and all the artists that were invited to participate in that exhibition were people who were trained in Auchi. We had the hall segmented to the artists so, being in Lagos, my work arrived late. You

mabel (1999) glass & steel 90cm by 76cm



know, mine was closer to the Church...
(laughter)

It was not my own making. The organisers decided, 'let us go for the difficult terrain first' and then they can take the others, because they came to collect the works themselves. So the arrangement was such that those based outside Lagos got the space allocation first, their works arrived first and they had set up. And I came in and my works were further inside. We all trained in the same school and we all represented different generations.

GR: How many sculptors?

Amoda: We were three metal sculptors at that very outing and some stone sculptors also. Obviously from people's remarks and also from my observation, some of the sculptors were not just near to each other, you could not tell them apart. But as for me, after graduation I didn't go back to Auchi. I didn't remember what the school was like and what was the tradition. As I told you, I am nonconformist, I don't believe that I should go back to the school. And in any case I was too busy in Lagos to want to travel back there.

So, my work came into the venue and of course there was a transition. There was a sharp transition. My approach and their approaches were quite different. Now to come to when it started to depart from the school, I cannot really put a time to it, but even in the school my approach was beginning to be different from what the others were doing.

GR: Before I go to my next question, I am tempted to ask how that essential Amoda began to evolve beyond the walls of school, where you got your vibrations from? What circumstances or situations or even persons and practitioners gave the concrete stimuli in terms of style, how did it come or were they all just within you?

Amoda: Well you must try very hard not to push that. I am not sensitive to that point where it started manifesting. As I

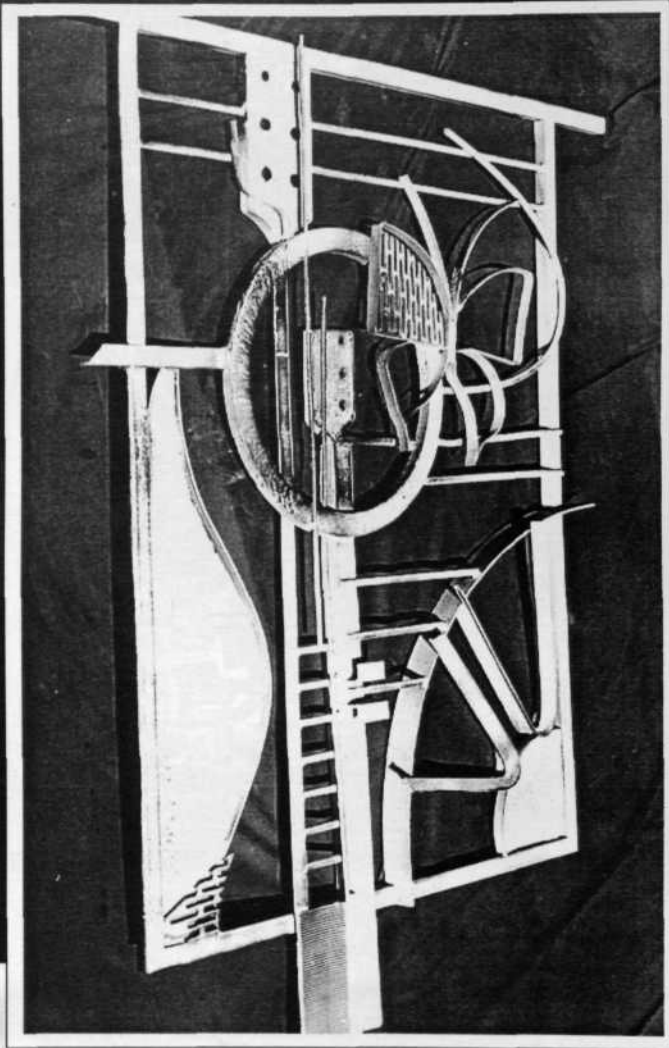


*fabric of
ancient
civilization
(1998) wood
& steel 61cm
by 120cm*

said, I am nonconformist and the fact that people are doing things in a particular way is enough reason for me not to want to do it that way. That reduces or eliminates the factor of influence from somebody or anyone, but there are books, some books which are so serious; in fact what really trips me when I look at people's works is the standards of the artists...

GR: And not the specificity of form.

Amoda: Yes, it is the standard of a work. When you see a complete work, when you see a work that is an embodiment of everything, it is difficult for you to start saying you want to dissect it. It is a whole piece and if you remove anything, it



windows of dreams 'B-FLY' (1999) steel 89cm by 134cm

takes away from it.

The holistic point of it must be there and that is my approach to it. I am a fan of a host of the early European constructivists: German, Russian, etc. I say it is the height of the finish of a work, the standards, not the form, not anything. I am experimentalist, the technique is what we all have in common, the form is what you try to create.

Most essentially for me as a Nigerian, the environment itself is one of the greatest challenges...

GR: The environment in what sense?

Amoda: Well, for welding to take place there must be electricity. And as they say NEPA (the National Electric Power Authority) is like the proverbial bird that has learnt to fly without perching and we

the consumers we have to be the hunter that would shoot without missing. Therefore, if it is one hour of electricity they give to you you must utilise it to the fullest. This puts you on your toes, it keeps you on your guards. As soon as the light comes you start work, it triggers you and as the light goes you take a break. In that kind of situation you have to be very spontaneous, so what I do is to prepare for NEPA piles and piles of studies and sketches that I do, in anticipation and even mentally create the work.

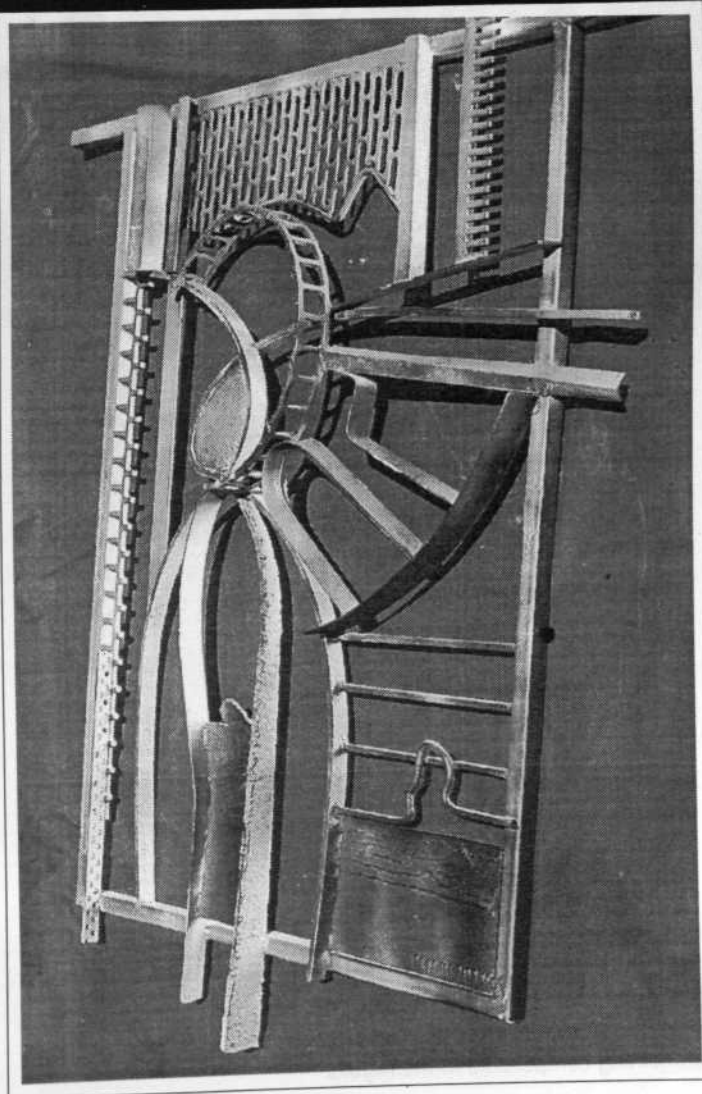
GR: There is a certain kind of contestation for prominence between the utilitarian and the non-utilitarian forms in your work. My observation after reviewing these Windows of Dreams and also the fences is that the utilitarian seems to have completely overpowered and overwhelmed the non-utilitarian form of expression. How did you begin to find your leaning? Was it deliberate?

Amoda: First I would not agree with you that the utilitarian has overpowered the non-utilitarian. It is subjective, because when I am creating I don't see these distinctions. One is an extension of the other. Because of its nature, because of the presentation, one tends to be more effective or more compelling so, the fence, the windows, they are things that you see when you come to a house and as your eyes wander around you see, they rest on those. The others, the non-utilitarian works, maybe you don't have enough of them within the set-up to give that command. Maybe that is what's responsible but to go back to the question, how did I get drawn to that? Again as I said, the environment, the social needs compels one to try to address problems arising from the environment. When I was growing in Warri, there were no fences. What demarcated a plot from the other was just a shallow drain. So you cross a shallow drain and you are in the other man's premises; you cross again and you're in a house. It was only after I came to Lagos, after the civil war, that fences started growing. First they grew to

maiden dance
'omoko' glass &
steel 12cm by
128cm

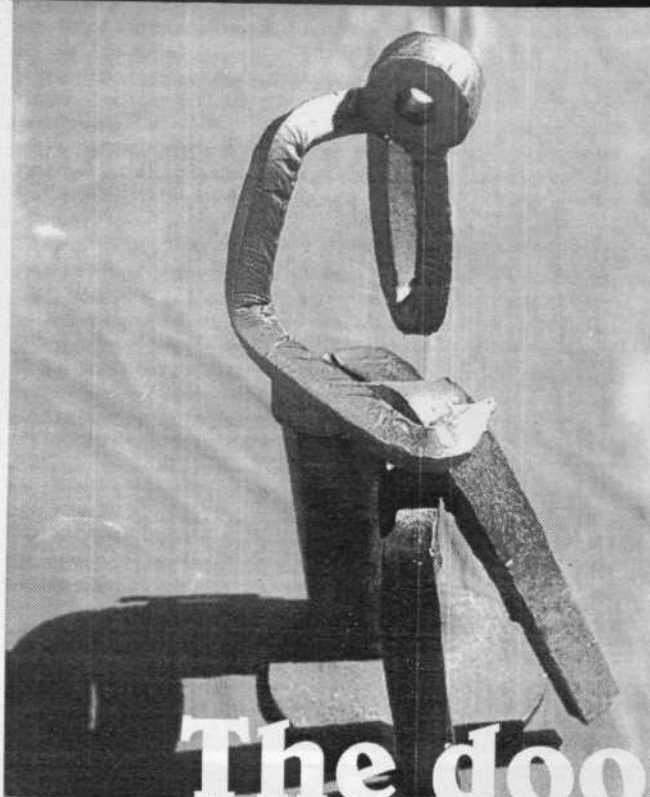


windows of dream 'FLORA' steel 89cm by 134cm



the point where you could scale the fence, then it grew to where you needed a pole to scale over. And all of a sudden we found ourselves in prison. We say we want to shut the armed robbers or the hoodlums out of the house so you have bars. Now the truth of the matter is that they are the ones who are free, you in the house are the one who is in prison, who is restricted, and it's supposed to be the other way round. And I decided to come up with this concept of windows of dreams where I wouldn't feel restricted and still shut out them all the same, so there is a balance. When I'm looking at the window it's now without the view that I am shut in or I am shutting them off, instead there's a screen which serves a dual purpose. We carry it also to the Doors of Paradise and we carry it also to the gate, and now its spreading to the fence. Coming back into the house we have the tables, we have the kitchen cabinets, the wardrobes and what have you?

Again it is the environment. In the beginning I called carpenters to make tables for me, tables that are strong and the tables gave way in no time. The same thing with the bed until I had to do everything myself, my steel bed, everything through steel. And because I can do it, because I want to be involved with



Sage (1999)
steel 43cm by
19cm by
21cm.



**What the
paper says
(1999) steel**
30cm by
23cm by
34cm

The door in most homes
is also the weakest. You have to lock the door
leave it open it is very easy for the breeze to

it, there is this aspect of injecting your spirit, your person into what you use and your character you know,... it becomes a way of life for me. That is one of the things that necessitated my moving in that direction. And of course if you look in my house you find many things that I did myself with steel, that again is because Nigerians are doubting Thomases, they have to see it before they believe it. I have to use myself as a guinea pig, they come in and they like it and it's easier to say, 'This is what I'm talking about'.

GR: The way these windows come across to me is that you are trying to maximise the possibility for space. When I look at the attention to detail and the seriousness that goes into the production I see something comparable to the regular

hangings except that with the Windows of Dreams there are no fillings. So I actually thought you were trying to maximise space by moving the regular hanging away from the solid wall to the open space of the window.

Amoda: Well you see that's the beauty about it. You start off from one point, you never can tell where... art is very powerful, very compelling but you see the bottomline of this thing is that the artist himself, the manufacturer of these artifacts, must be honest, once you're honest to the material, honest to your call, you cannot hold back the direction and the possibilities of these things. So I agree with you, yes; again that's why I said I didn't see it as too separate because one is essentially an extension of the other. The detail that you saw, yes, we



*I got a letter
3 (1999)
steel 22cm
by 22cm by
20cm*



is the strongest part of the structure and
for it to be the strongest part and if you
pass through in.



T. West (1999) steel 38cm by 26 cm by 20cm

try to. Again the architects in this country are very critical, you are dealing with a lot of people who assume a position of authority, you can't let your guards down at all. Once you find yourself in that kind of position you start to push and push and push. I am experimenting, I really don't know where it will end.

GR: Is it possible to view your work in this idiom as a kind of response to the more common or the more regular, simple window filigrees?

Amoda: You are right to some extent there. When I moved from windows to doors my intention was to question the rationale behind Critall-Hope doors. Year in year out it is the same type of metal-glass doors and it's not serving the purpose, people still have to put

When I was growing in Warri.

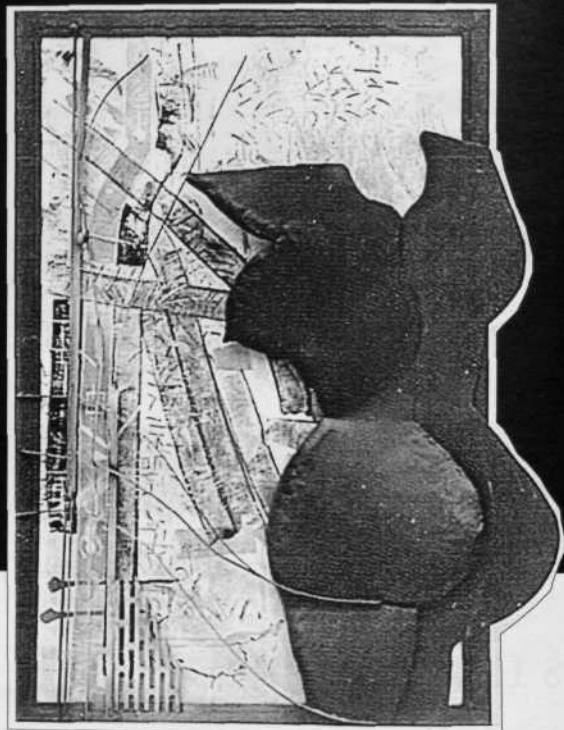
plot from the other was just a shallow drain. So the other man's premises; you cross again and to Lagos, after the civil war, that fences started

burglar-proof behind the doors. I felt I could put all the functions into one frame - beauty, security, operation. Yes I was reacting to what we've been living with year in year out. These people have been in business for forty-something years and yet what they offer us is the same profile. They say things really must be as they were forty-seven years ago, and I say no. First I wasn't born then, second, I'm exposed, third I studied the art of creating forms. So, if my predecessors allow it to go, I don't want to be a part of that, forty-seven years after, when the dynamics of the situation has changed.

GR: How about the economics of producing these works? Was that why you actually began to adopt found objects?

Amoda: Oh no. The truth about it is this is my house and I have enjoyed considerable freedom in terms of the materials that I incorporate into the jobs represented here. But a lot of people cannot even deal with that, they are not so exposed as to accept them (found objects) as contributing to the form of the works. If you, let's say for argument's sake, ask for twenty thousand naira for a window piece, that twenty thousand could, in regular window bars, do five windows. So they would not understand if you ask for twenty thousand and you now put some found objects there. They believe that every bit of the money given to you must be spent buying the materials. They do not understand that an art work is not about the materials but about the spiritual commitments. And truly speaking, if you look at the metals that we use the cost of them is nowhere to be compared with the value that we as artists place on the works.

GR: The other thing is, do you have situations in which certain fences or

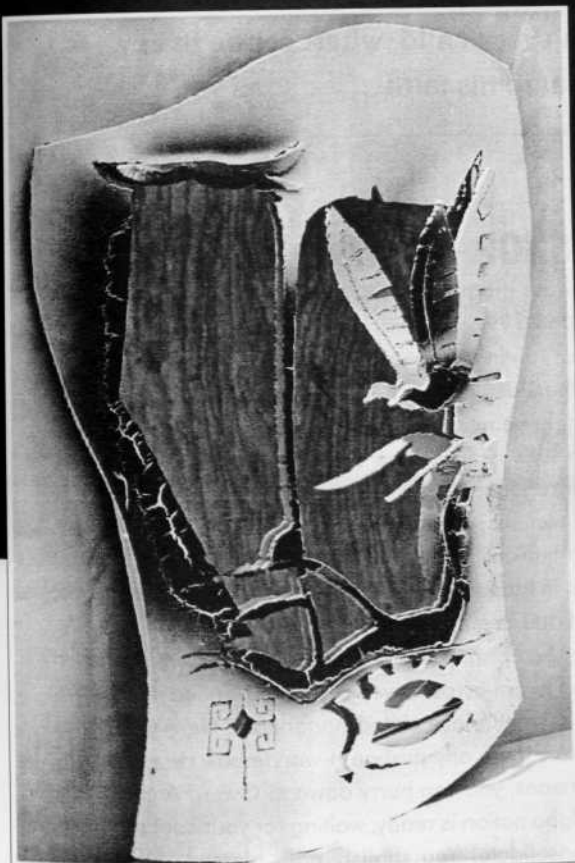


vanity series (1997)
glass & steel 61cm
by 92cm

windows have already been composed and then someone comes and says to you I like this concept or I don't like this one. Or you actually go on to produce specifically for someone, or maybe at other times the idea is determined by a specific architecture...?

Amoda: First the issue of people coming and saying I see and I want, is a regular occurrence. Everything that is achieved or actualised here are things that people want to have but I am always quick to tell them that there are no works that I want to repeat. We usually have to go to the architecture and see how it can introduce something, or even the lifestyle of the person concerned. A doctor for example who gives me a brief, because these things can have a therapeutic feeling; you

there were no fences. What demarcated a you cross a shallow drain and you are in you're in a house. It was only after I came growing.



mirror 'torso & birds' (1999)
mirror & steel
107cm by 78cm



moving part of this job, not the very lucrative part because the cost is enormous, unlike the doors, and the clients cannot understand that because of the relative price compared with the bullet-proof doors that the Lebanese bring in. And I always argue that we don't need bullet-proof doors here, we need burglar-proofs. The door in most

homes is the strongest part of the structure and it is also the weakest. You have to lock the door for it to be the strongest part and if you leave it open it is very easy for the breeze to pass through in. Therefore what to do is to look at the sophistication of crime here: we have people who are armed robbers, who want to break into a house. We have hired assassins. And if you have hired assassins, these doors cannot prevent them because they are out there waiting for you at your gate as soon as you get out.

GR: Do you consider artists working in the building industry, with architects and so on, as providing a kind of possibility for subsistence, for greater financial independence?

Amoda: Certainly, it is a money-spinning industry. Everyone who is building a house, wants to protect the property, wants to protect the lives and people also want to do it in style. GR

want something you look at and you can sleep or something you look at and you feel secure. So that yes, the architectural style or pattern affects the type of form that we create. Secondly I purposely resist any repetition. I'm a young man and I feel that I still have a lot to do, so why should I saddle myself with repeating what I have done?

Now what we are doing again is that a scheme can be translated into different forms. So you can see a work that continues, and a part of it disappears into the wall and reappears in the other windows. If you have enough space then you would be able to read the elements continuously.

But they (the windows) are not the very