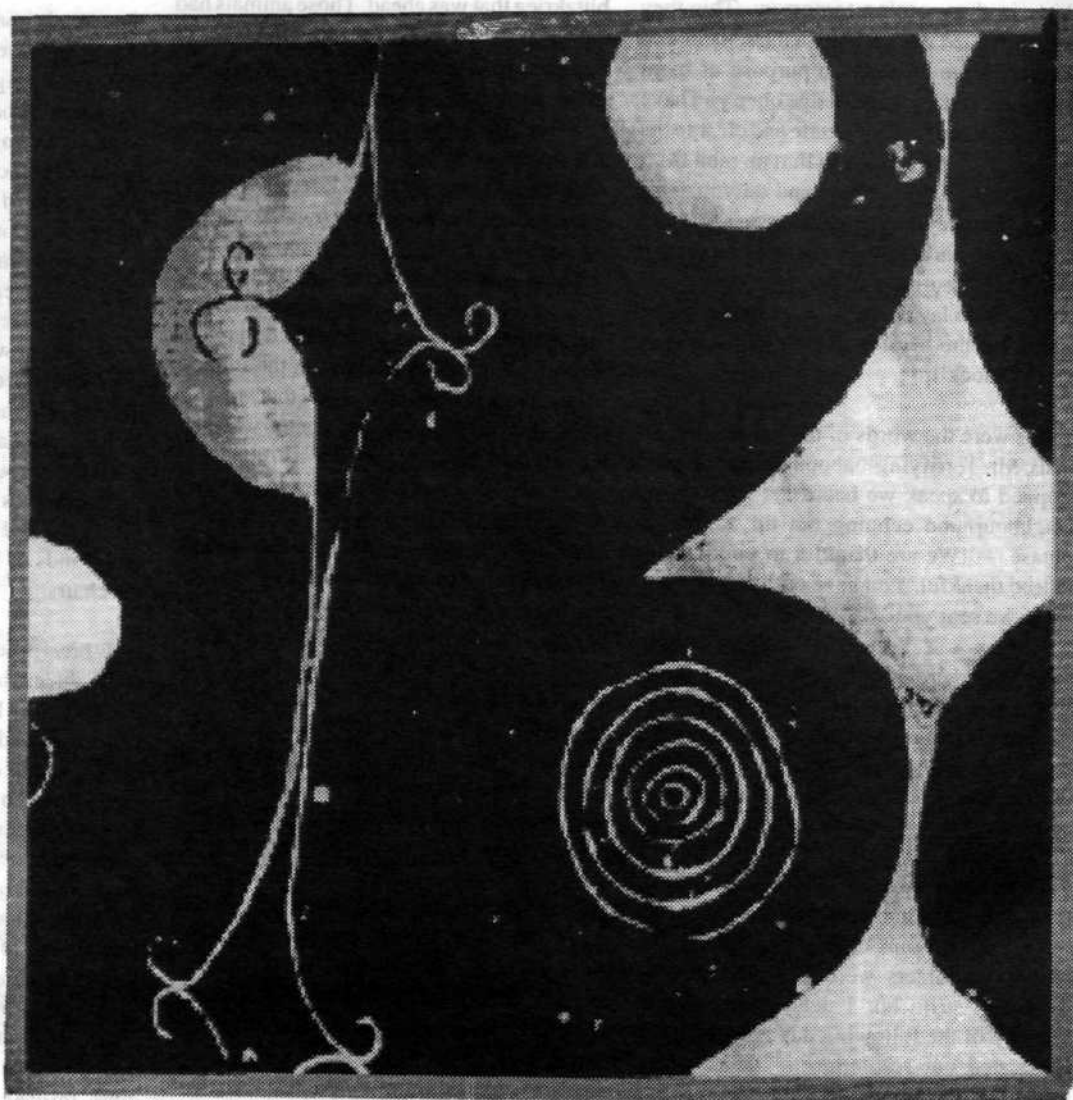


in an era where artistic tropes find their validation in a frenzied elision of aesthetic precedents, stylistic continuity becomes a suspect endeavour. Not that our ceaseless investigations of artistic traditions aren't fruitful in yielding heretofore unelaborated distinctions. But too often we are left with a clearer view of the concepts and an all too unclear sense of the work itself and its ability to inform the world



Kaego Uche-Okeke: *Night*, etching, 12" X 11", 1974.

ULI AT THE SKOTO

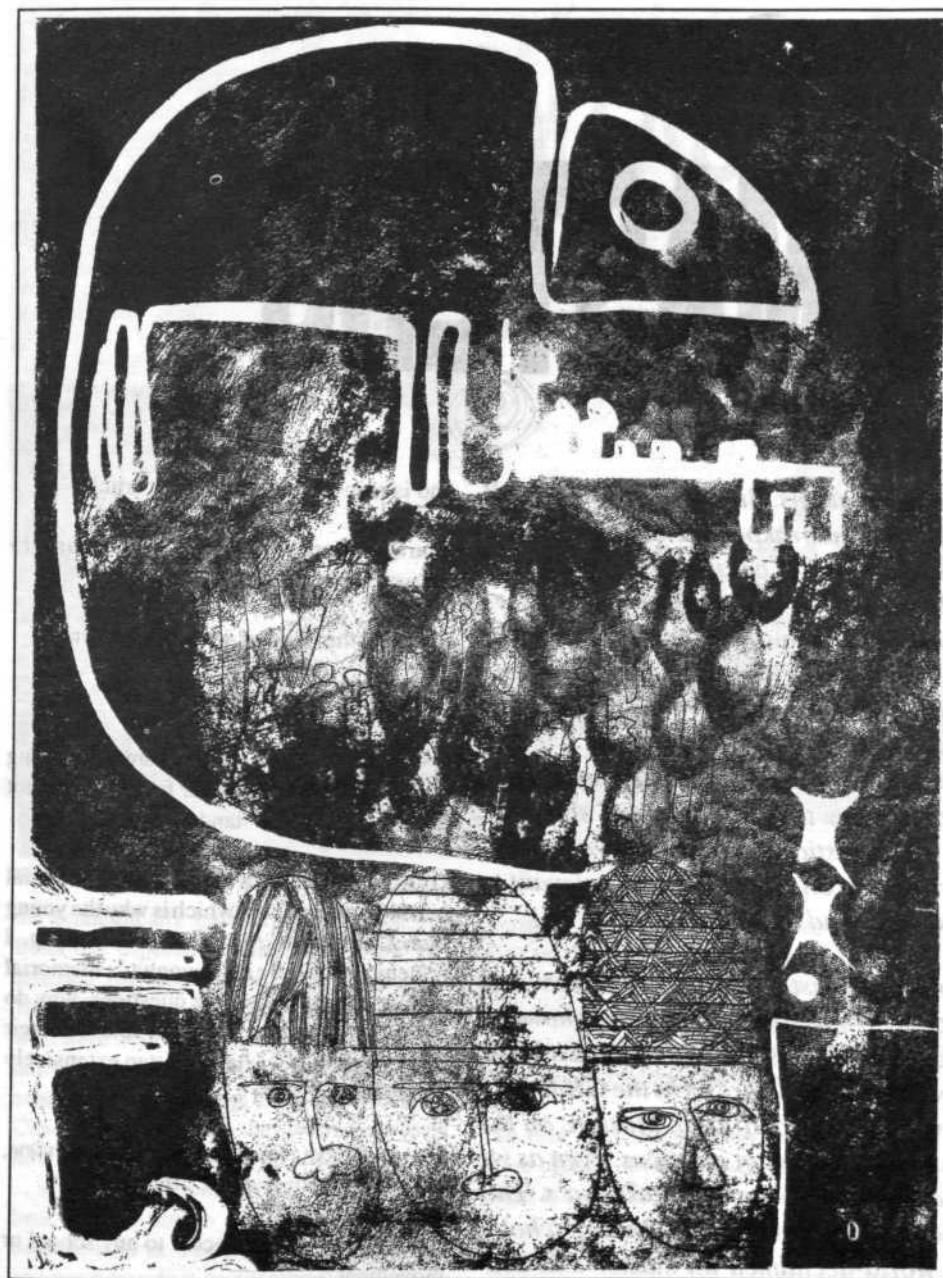
OKWUI ENWEZOR

around us. Artistic tradition does not always necessitate an oppositional approach. For some it remains a wellspring of aesthetic and cultural expression still worthy of exploration by today's artists.

Uli has its basis in innovation. Each successive practitioner of its forms brings a new development to its visual language while paying homage to its traditional forms. Originally the enclave of Igbo women in Nigeria, it was a style employed in a complex system of body painting and the creation of wall murals using a vast catalogue of signs, symbols, and patterns to form a distinctive representation of the Igbo universe.

In more recent times however, with the growth of urbanisation and industrialisation, traditional Uli began to decline. The earthen-walled structures which served as their framework were abandoned in favour of brick and concrete constructions uncondusive to the soft-edged geometry and spiritual expressiveness of Uli style. For artists working in such an environment where change inevitably signals a reformulation of ideologies and methodologies, Uli comprises a bridge between artistic heritage and innovative style.

Skoto Gallery's **Uli Art: Master Works/Recent Works**, is a gathering of some of the major modern proponents of Uli style displaying the diversity inherent not only in the artists themselves but in the vitality of Uli as a creative expression. Nearly all the fourteen artists in the exhibition have their ties to the University of Nigeria at Nsukka either as students or teachers (in some cases both) which in 1971, with the addition of Uche Okeke to its staff became a focal point for artists interested in exploring classical African idioms in a contemporary environment. Okeke, having learned the fundamentals of Uli from his mother, incorporated them into the course work at the university by focusing on the classical elements of Uli as both the bedrock of its contemporary manifestation and a departure from anachronistic tendencies of referencing a glorious tradition. In Okeke's theorisation of Uli, he de-emphasised the literal quotation and aimed for the form to serve as a catalyst in the creation of



Obiora Udechukwu: *Chameleon*, soft etching, 11" X 8", 1985

new modes of expression.

What unites these practitioners of Uli art is the primacy of line; used not only to fill space but also to empty it out. The line moves the eye across the surface to create a wealth of contoured images and patterns which combine the more spontaneous elements of painting with the draughtsmanship of drawing.

Obiora Udechukwu's etching, *Chameleon*, contains a series of superimposed images executed in varying degrees of stylisation creating a visual narrative of displacement and uncertainty. Wrapped in the tail of a spectral chameleon, a crowd of people mill about on an uncertain path while below them three faces stare out dazed and speechless (they have no mouths), powerless to offer the

right direction out of the thickening storm. The artist, true to Uli style, textures this space by impressing the lines of his fingerprints onto the etching to create a milky haze that envelopes the landscape.

Elsewhere Udechukwu's use of line is minimal yet powerfully expressive. In *Season of Anomy*, refined delicate lines seem to burst open as they wash out into the whiteness of the paper. Highly calligraphic, the lines activate the empty space of the paper which envelops the figure at its centre. Stark and austere, Udechukwu's work seamlessly combines social commentary with the emotive power, of his formal elements.

Chika Okeke's *Fragments: The Landscape Within* seems reminiscent of a cubist land-

scape with its planes of green/blue earth and yellow sky. Spiral and square motifs contrast with dripped lines of paint giving abstract expressionism an Uli inflection.

Among the most impressive works in the exhibition were Marcia Kure's paintings. Ironically Kure represents one of the few female practitioners from the Nsukka School of Uli despite its beginnings as an exclusively women's art form. Her *Tiger Mask and Nude Spear* borders on pure abstraction but among the forest of linear patterns emerge the spears and tiger's eyes of the title. The title being taken from the poetry of the eminent Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo, another prominent figure at Nsukka whose work continues to play an influential role in modern Uli style. Obiora Udechukwu has described his work as an embodiment of the visual poetics of Uli (Udechukwu like many of the artists in the show is also an accomplished poet).

Kure's lines are at once assertive yet highly spontaneous creating an all-over composition where animal and plant forms merge only to dematerialise again into pure form. Her range of mark making is vast yet she intentionally restricts her methods to evoke the lyrical linear elements of Uli. Volumes are filled by a broadening of the compositional lines while tonal qualities are achieved through cross hatching and spiral patterns. Similarly, Edeogu's *Untitled* employs a fine web of curvilinear patterns to create a solid orange field from which his figures seem to emerge and descend.

Obiora Anidi and El Anatsui are representative of the sculptural possibilities of Uli style, its rhetoric into three dimensions while maintaining its careful balance of positive and negative space. Anatsui's multi-panelled *The Loadbearers*, uses line like a sculptor's tool to etch contours and patterns into wood so decisively that they slash away at their surface to reveal the wall beneath. Using his trademark chain-saw, Anatsui transforms its destructive power into a generative force and a metaphor for the social and cultural forces at play in the development of his aesthetic vocabulary.

Uli art continues to thrive in Nigeria today because like any other great cultural tradition, its values are timeless. Its lines represent a continuity with the artistic achievements of the past and the aspirations of a new generation of artists who work to incorporate this heritage into the wealth of other influences received from the rest of the world. **GR**