

LETTER

Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onabrakpeya, Kolade Oshinowo, Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Enwonwu, David Dale and the list goes on and on. Each year, we are bewildered by a variety of exhibitions and retrospectives from these Nigerian artists. The galleries that sponsor these exhibitions always go to town and label these exhibitions contemporary African art. Pray! What do we really refer to as contemporary?

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines contemporary as 'of the time or period being referred to.' Are we to believe that this art being practised by these gurus of the brush and pen is really contemporary and of the time? These masters have been practising for perhaps up to thirty years and even much more. In my humble opinion, these our masters have been at their easels for decades satisfying our yearnings for art. I can also bet that the tag contemporary has always been added to classify these our proud masters. Are these works really contemporary or is the Nigerian art scene evolving towards a loci that we can really call contemporary?

We are daily inundated by our so called critics everyday with this bastardised cliché 'contemporary African art'. The galleries do not spare us either. The artists also have developed fads and do not stop rushing for exhibitions that are constantly being offered if not embarrassingly to a populace that is constantly being fawned over by exorbitant and glossily printed catalogues. The question really is who determines contemporary African art? The artists themselves, the critics or the populace that knows no better. I think that the Nigerian artist has a case to answer concerning this. The art world is in a constant state of revolution. Important landmarks are being created world-wide in contemporary art, Africa and indeed Nigeria must find its own

footing in this epoch. Yet the repercussions of this world-wide scheme of things is still being felt too slowly in these regions. Are we really still primitive and tribal in our artistic offerings? Do we really have contemporary art in Nigeria? Embarrassingly, we still find that the offering of the yesteryears still reigns supreme today.

Not that this observation is meant to support a group of Nigerian artists and run the others down. The Zaria school, the Ife school, the Osogbo school and the Yaba purveyors all herald and constantly strive for ideals. One cannot but be easily swayed by their offerings. The question is, are these leanings so different and are they really contemporary? The market scenes, the Fulani milkmaid, Durbar, mother and child and drummers are so typical of recent offerings. Is this what we can

really call contemporary? Don't we really need to shut down our exhibitions and our schools for some time to give our artists time to repossess thoughts and really evolve contemporary art? On the other hand, are we to call the art of the 1940s being practised by our still living masters as contemporary? Have they really evolved in what they are doing to occupy that niche we can present and juxtapose with our western contemporaries? Or are we to present our new practitioners with their overflogged themes? Try as much as we can, we cannot run away from the fact that there is a problem that needs addressing, if Nigeria is to evolve a truly contemporary art scene. The problem is 'has Nigerian Art evolved at all?' and where is the longevity, the strength and continuing vitality?

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