

Obiora ^{at 50}



Editor's Note

REMEMBER Obiora Udechukwu's Nsukka Campus home well. Situated on the crest of ubiquitous hills that cast their giant glances down on compounds in the senior sections of the university staff quarters, Udechukwu's home - not untypically - was submerged by tall trees, fruity shrubs and crowds of green creepers that hung overhead, wet, we were informed, from the steady rain-drops that continued all day, but only just subsided, prior to our own arrival.

And what passed for a door alarm were two miniature bells, suspended on ropes, stoked by tiny scrotums just as soon as the visitor's hand disturbed the rope! The sitting room could have passed for a modest exhibition hall with drawings in conspicuous display; the artist's own paintings, we observed, were scarcely to be encountered in the procession of works, connected in the most by archetypal uli masterstrokes. Younger painter, Chika Okeke, was here represented among the exhibits also, in addition to his being present in our company in flesh and blood; he acted as our chaperon, having driven us beforehand to see the poet and literary critic, Ossie Enekwe and then around the lush greenish universe of Nsukka - past recently deceased Nnamdi Azikiwe's home beyond the school's gates, but also Chinua Achebe's currently uninhabited campus quarters. The day was 15th June, 1996.

Udechukwu was his alltime youthful and zestful self. The sole betrayers of his fifty years (which he attained only ten days previous) were the observable strands of grey hair fast extending their reaches beyond his temples. Our chats covered the state of the arts in the nation and the subject of exile and publishing. In spite of the fact that there were no students around on the campus and that the once luxuriant literary and cultural life of the community had been scuttled by the severe drain of talented artists and writers from the university staff, art survived behind the doors of the few that remained: El Anatsui (who was temporarily out of town); Onuora Ossie Enekwe (with whom we would later commune far into the night); Tayo Adenaike, Mrs. Ada Udechukwu the poetess and Greg Mbajorgu the itinerant theatre artist (who gave us a solo one-act that same evening out in Chika's flat).

None of these Nsukka talks was however endowed with such structure as attends a separate conversation between Udechukwu and Chika Okeke recorded to discuss the Second International Symposium of Contemporary Nigerian Art. The symposium was steered by leading members of the Nsukka School to mark the 60th birthday of the first generation artist and scholar, Uche Okeke.

The interview follows the same train of thought as our informal mid-June exchanges in Nsukka, differing perhaps only in terms of detail. What is lacked in detail is however more than made up for in coherence through succinctness.