



## **Art Staff Exhibition 2016: A Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Art exhibition is the showing of art pieces for public view, appreciation and critique. Art Staff, the exhibition of the works by the staff of the Fine Arts department of the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, opened to the public on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 2016. The exhibits range from drawings, paintings and sculptures. A total of fifty art works were exhibited, these works carry the imprints of masters in the field, displaying great artistic and aesthetic qualities. This paper is an attempt to review the exhibition, and give a critique of the works. Twenty six paintings, fifteen sculptural pieces and nine drawings, all carefully and professionally mounted adorn the exhibition space. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the need for periodic Art Staff Exhibitions and other art exhibitions to boost creativity in the institution.

**Key words:** Art, Staff, exhibition, aesthetics, painting, sculpture, drawing.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Art exhibition dates back to prehistoric man, who created art in the cave of his abode and other surfaces. These arts, which were produced on the various rock surfaces and cave walls, are on display today as exhibits of the period. Modern art and contemporary art practice thrive on art exhibition for the public to engage with the works. Art exhibitions have various themes and thrust of display, and through criticism, works are better presented for academic dialogues. Art criticism is much more than just commenting on a work of art or pointing out what is wrong with it. No wonder Sporre (2006) asserts that, criticism implies many things to many people and that, it does not necessarily mean passing or saying negative comments about a work of art.

Artists start their works based on reactions to certain societal ills or a need to express some deep seated emotions; these can only come to the fore through exhibitions and other art related shows. According to

Dictionary of Quotations (2002:141), “Art must be parochial in the beginning to be cosmopolitan in the end”. The cosmopolitan end, is the exhibition which is seen by the public. The creation of art works is a thought provoking process, and usually, the only way such thoughts can be expressed for public opinions is through the instrumentality of exhibition, of which the Art Staff is a welcomed idea, and thriving again after some years of inactivity.

### **The Exhibition**

The Art Staff exhibition started on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, 2016 with a lecture series. The panel was chaired by Professor Jacob Jari. The discussants were, Professor Tony Okpe, a Professor of sculpture and Professor Jerry Buhari, a Professor of Painting. The discussants gave a panoramic view of the department from inception to date, exhibitions held, and the need to reenact the current exhibition. The discussions centred on art practices in the studio based areas, and the attendant challenges of dealing with art collectors, critics and connoisseurs. The interactive forum set the pace for the opening ceremony of the exhibition later the same evening.

The exhibition was declared open to the university committee and public viewing by Professor Maiwada of the Industrial Design department. Staff, students and other visitors thronged the exhibition space of the Fine Arts department gallery to take a closer look at the works with eager interest. The various staff that produced the works were on ground to give explanations on the working processes of the art on display, media of expression, inspirations and statement of intents.

The richness of the exhibition is spiced with production of the catalogue titled, “ART STAFF Exhibition 2016”. An 87 paged catalogue which contains curatorial statement, articles, artists’ profiles and various works by the staff exhibiting. In a preface, Jari (2016:2) states that, “it is a privilege to view this rare collection of works by our staff within the same space”. In an article, Duniya (2016:3), recommends the catalogue to scholars and interested stakeholders. He also promises that, the exhibition efforts will be sustained.

### **Drawings**

Drawing is foundational and fundamental to all art forms creation. According to Fine Arts Drawing (n.d):  
...drawing is in reality the basis of all visual arts. For example, an architectural drawing is the basis for all building construction; markings drawn on a raw stone block are the basis for the sculpture that emerges; initially most paintings grow out of preliminary sketches - only as the works proceed are they consolidated into coloured surfaces. Besides, a growing number of investigations demonstrate that drawings form the material basis of mural, panel, and book paintings, statues, etchings, engravings, mosaics, stained glass, and many other forms of decorative art.

A total number of 9 drawings showing different themes and styles of drawings were exhibited. The Artists who exhibited drawings are: Giles Gambo Duniya, Jerry Buhari, Aliyu Muhammad. And Rabiun Badamasi. Below are details of the artists and their exhibited works. However, for discussion, only one drawing each has been selected from each of the artist’s drawings.

#### **Duniya’s Drawing**

Duniya is an astute Art Historian and critic. He also engages in drawing when time permits. Duniya is also passionate about the theatre, as he has been involved in dramatic performances since his undergraduate days, up to the present. Some of his exhibited drawings are the ones he titled 21 C. *Naija Omoge* and *Oga Naija*.

21st Century *Naija Omoge*, executed in pencil on paper, 38cm x 50cm in size, done in 2015, is a figure drawing of a young and vibrant lady full of life, and showcasing modernity and its cosmetics. (See Plate I)



Plate I. 21st Century Naija Omoge, 2015, 38 x 50cm.

The stylish posture as shown in the legs at astride pose and the slightly suspended left hand with the fingers tapering down is a reflection of attitudinal pattern of “akatarian” girls who perhaps appear to be very sociable and of higher education background. The pointed breasts which is a means of social attractiveness shows that the lady is an *omoge* translated as a happening girl slinging on a bag which perhaps contains some cosmetics. The fashion characterized with punk hair style and a high-heel foot wear is a reflection of a girl who has seen the four walls of a city. The dark shaded concave glass, worn on the face, corroborates the stylish appearance of the *omoge*. The dressing apparel exposing the body of the lady, appearing to be partially in the nude is typical of the western culture that has influenced the pattern of dressing of modern Nigerian ladies. Nudity is alien to Nigerians because it negates her traditional cultures. The professional touch of well gradated tones and the detailed female anatomical body form and the heightened drapery of dress worn by the figure is a reflection of academic formalism. This is obviously an x-ray of fashion and attitude of some ladies in contemporary time.

#### **Buhari’s Drawings**

Jerry Buhari is a Professor of painting with a resume that is intimidating. He is an astute scholar of scholars, and still into active studio practice. For this Exhibition, he exhibited two drawings titled “Man with Walking Stick” and “Young Man Sitting on a Wheel Barrow”. The latter has been chosen for study and documentation.

#### **Young Man Sitting on a Wheel Barrow**

The artwork is predicated on the spirit of hard work, typical of some youth in Nigeria that is less-privilege, yet, struggling to earn their living. In the artwork, is a vibrant youth full of strength and vigour as reflected in the pose, a wheel barrow and a shovel (Plate II). The sitting posture is a reflection of a resting mood, yet, gingering and looking forward to rise for the continuity and realization of the task ahead. As showcased in the art piece, the labourer is staying focus and while resting is not detached from his targeted goal. This is an obvious vanguard and advocacy for hard work. Consequent upon this, “no food for a lazy man” and labourers are worthy of their wages.



**Plate II. Young Man Sitting on a Wheel Barrow, 2015, Pencil on Paper, 26 x 36cm.**

The skillful use of lines in its simplest form has made this artwork appear to have a professional impression in tandem with those of pencil strokes of masters of art like; Jackson Pollock and Claude Manneret. The relationships that exist between the tri-subject compositions are proportionally balanced. Despite its linear representations, there is a synthesis of all the related parts becoming holistic as the message is crested in the minds of viewers. In a nut-shell, the artwork is an acid comment on the dignity of labour.

#### **Muhammad Drawings**

In this Exhibition, he exhibited two drawings titled “Oppressor” and “Lantern”. Lantern is the drawing of a hurricane lantern, it reminds us of electricity substitute that has survived over several decades in Nigeria and it is gradually fading away as a result of the introduction of led light that has flooded Nigeria market. The artwork executed in pencil, measures 38cm x 50cm and was done in 2009 has some elements of realism and solidity depicted in two-dimensional appearance.

The artist deviated from the conventional approach to depicting light and shade by employing and using some shading techniques gotten from textural imprints of some found objects. This experimental touch on the artwork is in consonant with the theory and practice of nogh-nogh art movement which advocates that nothing is really a waste to the artist. The fascinating thing about the art piece is the technical approach to depicting the effect of light and shade in varying textural design from different objects.

#### **Badamasi’s Drawings**

Badamasi’s drawing titled “Black-Kan-Blu” in the Art Staff Exhibition 2016 stands out. The art piece “Black-Kan-Blu” is a composition of trees distributed around the fore and middle grounds with some other trees receding into the back ground that are represented with some radiating lines and a round hut appearing to be a resting place. The trees on the fore and middle grounds are characterized with stems that have horn-like structure and shape of the Sokoto *Gudalis* cow that are commonly found in northern Nigeria. The design on the bodies of the trees is an adaptation and use of the Hausa body decoration type-motif to depict light and shade. The ground is characterized with horizontal and radial pole-like structures. On the lower part of the back ground, are, what look like horns arranged asymmetrically. The skillful use of well gradated tones to showcase the corrugated metal roofing sheets canopied on four poles shooting out of an elevated concrete wall has captivating touch of chiaroscuro. In a nut-shell, the art is characterized with traditional motifs which make it have cultural effects.

#### **Sculptures**

There are fifteen (15) sculptural works on display stands. An attempt is made at critiquing five artists’ works namely: Kevin Samuel Damden, Lasisi Lamidi, Ken Okoli, Tonie Okpe and Ahmad DosoAliyu. All of these artists are among the members of staff of Fine Arts department, Ahmadu Bello University,

Zaria who participated in the Art Staff Exhibition 2016. In no particular order, the critique focuses on one work each from these artists, and this begins with Kevin Samuel Damden. Damden, whose area of specialization is life sculpture, has about three works on display to his credit. "Where there is no Peace" (see plate III) is a work on peace and conflict resolution. This work is rendered in a representational manner using terra-cotta as the medium of expression. The piece depicts two figures, a mother and child that appear famished. The mother is seated restlessly on a stool-like substance; with her overlapping scaly-like arms compacted together. The head is portrayed looking upward, with a distressed facial expression; her unkempt hair-do looks dreaded. The flabby breasts are hanging loosely on her chest, with pointed nipples. There appears to be a loose and worn-out wrapper around the waist, the two legs are spread partly to sustain its balance on the pedestal. Though, her child, who appears like a boy, contributes to the balance of the work. The skinny child seems sobbing, as if he is hungry, thereby looks as if he is seeking his mother's attention, with his hands round the mother's back and legs. Philosophically, the writer has no dissenting opinion regarding the title, as the piece depicts a pitiful expression that seemingly suggests impoverishment, which is a pointer to absence of peace.



**Plate III: "Where there is no Peace" 2008, Terra cotta (49cm)**

*The Web* by Ken Okoli is another sculpture of interest in this exhibition. It is rendered in an abstract form, portraying a shape that appears like a cob web (see Plate IV). This piece is executed in 2011, using rusted mild steel as a medium of expression.



**Plate IV: "The Web" 2011, Rusted Mild Steel (72 by 75 cm)**

The artist arranged the mild steel and metal plate in such a manner that evokes the feelings of a typical cob-web any one can think of, with touches of sky blue, grey and burnt ochre colours. The interesting thing, to note further, is the freedom with which the artist organized the elements and principles of design

to produce the work, in such a delicate manner that looks like a pattern of frost on a window. The use of both thick and flowing lines to produce different geometric and angular shapes, to express various parts of the work is attention-grabbing and fascinating, and these further sustain its balance. All of these, remind the writer of Jean Arp in Aina *et al* (1996) statement that ‘art should lose itself in nature, should even be mistaken for nature....only one must not try to achieve this by imitating, but by the very opposite of naturalistic imitation.’ The artist’s style of abstraction is effective in rendering his imaginative concepts.

The third work under this appraisal is the one titled “*Fulani Dance*” by the artist, Lasisi Lamidi. It is executed in 2010 with steel, found objects, clad with canvas and painted with oil colour (mixed media). It is also an abstract sculpture, portraying a female figure carrying a calabash-like container on her head (see Plate V). One could, obviously, see how the artist artistically and technically arranges the mild steel rods together, to give a dynamic posture to the work. Technical proficiency is exhibited here, by the artist, especially in the way he positioned the container at the top, with the dramatic movement of the body in a twisting manner, yet maintaining its balance. According to Sporre (2006), “free standing and three-dimensional sculptures force sculptors to concern themselves with the practicalities of engineering and gravity.” Sculptors cannot create a work with great mass at the top as seen in this work for example, unless they can find a way (within the bounds of acceptable composition) to keep the statue from falling over. Hence, Lasisi Lamidi has demonstrated a fair of this mechanics.

The skillful use of colours on the skirt also shows the artist’s mastery and freedom, on the choice of colours. The skirt is treated in a polychromatic manner with yellow and orange, and also with a touch of milky-white and dark grey in-between to portray the effects of light and shade.



**Plate V: “Fulani Dance” 2010, Mild steel, found objects and oil on canvas (mixed media), 168 cm high.**

Furthermore, a critical look at the artist’s use of lines, create movement that resulted into hands that are loosely spread around the body, the trunk tilted frontally and sideways, simultaneously, on a hip in a theatrical mode, the container is rested on the head without a support, and with supposed majestic dancing steps, in an exciting mood. Pairs of spring rods are used for its bangles. It is therefore, no wonder that Gardener (1995) opines that “it is not only the effect of line direction of which the artist makes use, but also the relationships that he sets up among the various lines.”

The fourth work in this order is the one titled *Funmi* by the artist, Tonie Okpe. The work is executed in 1985 in a naturalistic way, depicting a life-size head of a woman, using polyester as a medium of



expression, on a wood pedestal both polished with dark earthy colour, with touches of faded gold to show light and shade (see Plate VI).



**Plate VI: Funmi, 1985, Polyester (Life size).**

The technical proficiency of the artist is much relatively artistic, in the way he technically employed principles and elements of art to render this work. The focal point is the hair-do, though texturally rough, is interwoven and heavily plaited, just like the interlacing of weft and warp tread in weaving. The head shape is oblong, with all the characteristic features proportionally detailed, with the exception of partially swollen neck.

The last work in this appraisal is Ahmad Doso Aliyu's piece, an acclaimed gifted bronze caster, titled "Man in Turban," executed in bronze in a relief style and polished in a gold colour, mounted on a polished-wood background (see Plate VII). The smiley facial expression of the work, with a smooth textural surface, gives it an exciting, illuminating and symmetrical outlook, with flat tone. Yet, effect of light and shade is present.

More so, the elongated nose, of the work, is a reminiscent of Benin art work, with a plumpy cheek, though the lips are not tightly closed but are equally thick. Its turban is decorated with delicate lines, to create zig-zag patterns, in a fair high-relief style to enhance the beauty of its clothing. This, also, is a reminiscence of embroidery style common among the Hausas.



**Plate VII: “Man in Turban,” Bronze, (12cm by 40cm).**

### **Paintings**

There are 26 painting exhibits on display. The paintings range from naturalism to abstraction. Various media of expression were used by the painters to portray varied themes and issues in the society. The fluidity of expressions by the artists who used liquidized technique, broad and bold and definite brush strokes, stringently careful brush strokes and innovative mosaic like paintings are some of the hall marks of the paintings on display.

Chafe’s landscape titled *Internally Displaced People (IDP)*, draws attention to the plight of internally displaced people in the society, this have become a great concern as the number keeps raising due to conflict situations and the ravaging effects of the Boko Haram Insurgency. Danjuma also portrayed the same theme in his unique and characteristic and broad and bold brush strokes. Danjuma’s painting titled *Internally Displaced People* (Plate VIII), has the trappings of a violent situation, depicted in warm colours and subdued greys and browns.



**Plate VIII. Internally Displaced People, 2015, Oil on canvas**



The “V” shaped raised arm by the figure to the upper left of the painting depicts a symbol of peace. This symbolic representation was used by Goya in his painting *3<sup>rd</sup> May 1808*. Wars lead to displacement of people, and artists have responded in their own unique ways to the fall outs of wars and conflicts. According to Zappella (2015:1)

Along with Picasso’s *Guernica*, Goya’s *Third of May* remains one of the most chilling images ever created of the atrocities of war, and it is difficult to imagine how much more powerful it must have been in the pre-photographic era, before people were bombarded with images of warfare in the media. A powerful anti-war statement, Goya is not only criticizing the nations that wage war on one another, but is also admonishing us, the viewers, for being complicit in acts of violence, which occur not between abstract entities like “countries,” but between human beings standing a few feet away from one another.

The devastations of wars should be avoided as much as possible and peace should be pursued.

*Strength of a Woman and Motherhood* are paintings by Ladi Andrea Agada. The paintings depict feminine issues and the dignity of womanhood. Badamasi’s mosaic like painting and Jari’s fire and fabric on canvas series are a class uniquely presented; this is respect to materials and techniques of execution. Ahmad’s paintings of landscape imbued with Islamic calligraphic, draws attention to Islamic art and the aesthetics of calligraphy. Another of his painting, *Durbar*, shows the celebration of the northern festival in its warmth and pageantry. The basic design like rendition of Caleb Samuel’s painting also adorned the exhibition space.

The heavily impasto paintings of Wesley Ukachi portrays everyday genre and the liquidized rendition of Khadijah Tijani titled *Sambisa Forest* (Plate IX), draws attention to the plight of the kidnapped *Chibok* girls kept hostage in the Sambisa forest by the notorious Boko Haram group.



Plate IX. *Sambisa Forest*, 2015, Acrylic on Canvas, 24 x 24 Inches

## CONCLUSION

All the art forms in the exhibition bear the imprints of masters and scholars of art in the Zaria Art School. The Art Staff exhibition has come to stay, and all the stakeholders concerned must do all it takes to sustain the noble efforts. The presentation of all the various art media of expression, catalogue to document the artists and their works, lectures and all the activities for the exhibition are geared toward training upcoming artists. The authors of this review hope this article will add to literary source on art exhibition and criticism.

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