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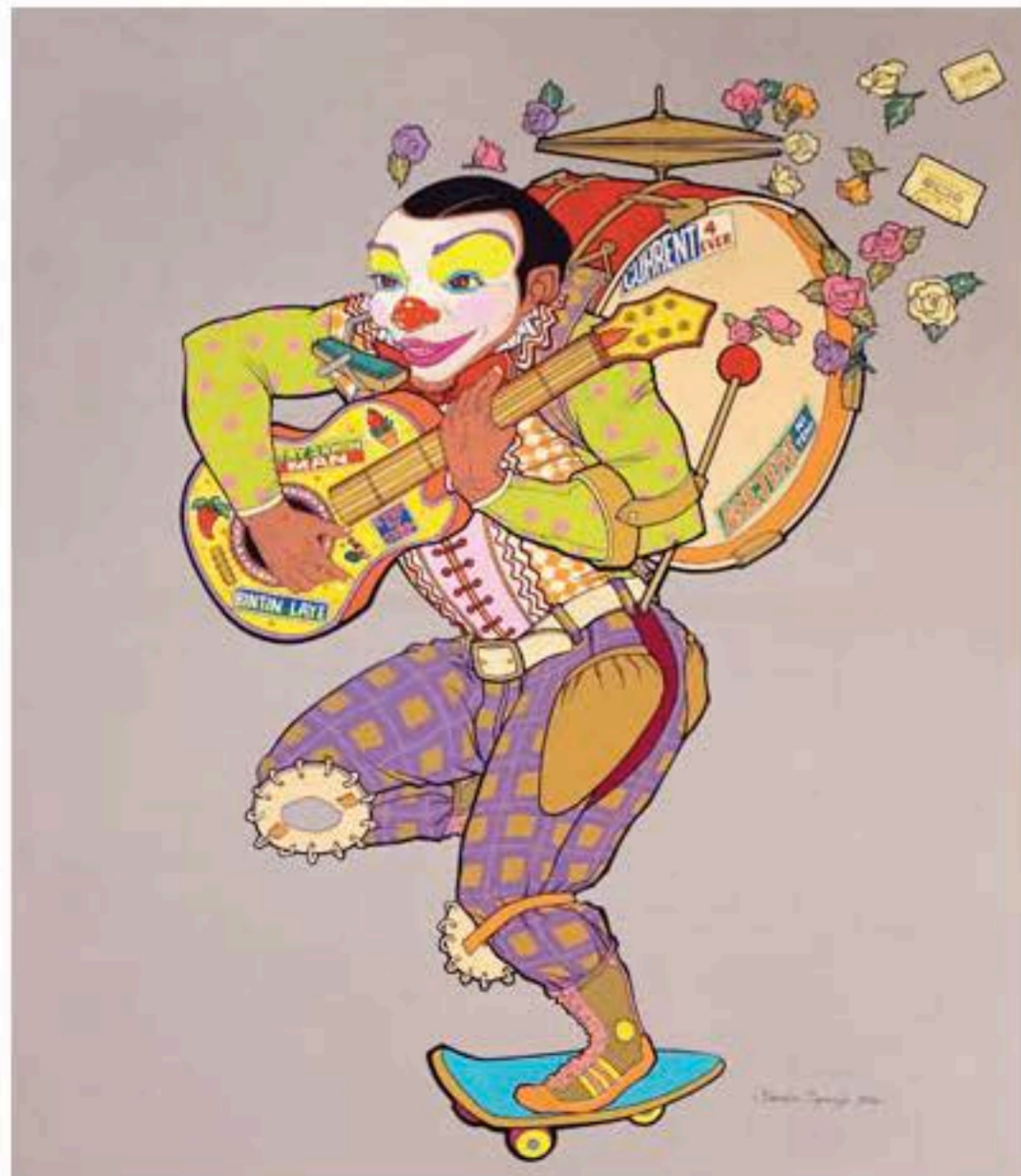
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Paradigm Shift As Elsewhere Artists Converge

By Tajudeen Sowole on July 12, 2015 12:07 am



Keep on Moving by Demola Ogunajo

From Switzerland, France, Ghana and Denmark six artists join three Nigerian counterparts in a gathering that makes contemporary art more acceptable across political of content divides.

Titled Elsewhere, the exhibition, which is currently showing till September 10, 2015 at Art Twenty One, a space within Eko Hotel & Suites, Victoria Island, Lagos, attempts to rescue art from straying into the forest of the unknown and self-destruct.

As much as postmodernity and contemporaneity have, no doubt, expanded the scope of art into more exciting textures, most artists and spaces that identify with the 'progression' – in the last two decades – have been subconsciously racing art at a speed that even the academia could get lost along the way. But the works of Joseph Eze, Abraham Oghobase and Demola Ogunajo (Nigeria); Namsa Leuba (Switzerland), Vincent Michéa (France), Paa Joe and Jacob Tetteh-Ashong

(Ghana), Yarisal and Kublitz (Switzerland/Denmark) have

been collectively appropriated to keep the temperature of art appreciation within a sustainable degree.

The gathering of artists across cultures for the exhibition is aimed at defining “alternative ways of depicting otherness, not rooted in spatial boundaries but by instability, fluidity and cross-cultural assimilation,” Art Twenty One’s curatorial note explains. “Elsewhere explores the relationship between history, memory and the creation of new imaginary, ranging from material manifestations of the afterlife to fake artifacts, cultural reconfigurations, and performative interventions.”

Despite what seems like imbalance of the miniature sizes of framed silhouetted portraits in a huge space as Art Twenty One, Michéa’s spots of blue on dark images provide a kind of reflective lighting elements. These sets of eight works, in semi-monochrome of collage by Michéa, mounted on the immediate left entrance of the exhibition space, dwells on identity as the faces and bodies of the individual models are concealed behind blue impressions of cut-out pieces of a face. Produced in Dakar, Senegal and Saint-Louis, France between 1986-1987 during the artist’s first trip to Senegal, the portraits retrospect the artist’s visit. Interestingly, what look like blue spots – covering the identity of the models are “fragments on top of the photographs, cut from a series of small paintings in acrylic and oil.”

For such a small set of works, perhaps a little creativity is needed in the presentation. They are in the same shape of frames and lined in one horizontal form appears flat, particularly when all the inner framing of the pictures are even.

If you weren’t appreciating Eze’s sculptures of assembled slippers which the artist ventured into a few years ago, his concepts at the Elsewhere gathering he calls Tribal Kings/Tribal Queens series could restore a loss of tracking between him and his fans. In portraits, the royal Tribal series highlight identity crisis and clash of cultural values. The painting collage depicts couples with tribal marks, yet in western clothing. Most of the portraits are not exactly of verifiable tribal marks except for Inbal Vuitton and Tribal Pink that have semblance of Tiv (north central) and Yoruba (Ibadan, south western) Nigeria, in that order. Eze’s concept is quite an odd mix of fashion and identity crisis that the portraits explain.

For example, three piece suits, fedora hat and designer sunglasses adorned on bold facial tribal marks are not just an identity loss, but also a mockery of culture. In fact such combination, as liberal as it appears is also best for clowns at circus. Eze’s collage portrait is not exactly new in the artist’s periods; he has shown similar works severally. Perhaps the difference now is that the tribal perspective and toning as well as thickness of the marks technique for the portraits at Elsewhere appears more like a progression.

A step further through Elsewhere brings the works of Oghobase, suggesting that the theme of the exhibition is viewed through the window of portraits. Oghobase’s works of portraits look like something inspired by African American artist, Kehinde Wiley’s styles of portrait painting, except that the former’s work is photography. All the works take one pattern of portrait of a man (self), dissolved into or super imposed on different pattern of fabrics. The fabrics – widely known as ankara – are made of wax, commonly used for both native and western designs among West Africans. But the postures of the model are gymnastic-like. What exactly is the artist aiming to achieve with these self-portraits? A text attached to his work says he “explores issues relating to human emotions and identity against specific socio-economic backdrops, often using himself as material for his performance-based work.”

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Yarisal and Kublitz are two artists who work in collaboration to create sculptures that fit more into a design space than gathering of art. However, the sculptures strengthen the richness of the exhibition with the design textures. One of the works, Let's Get Randy, Om Shanti Shanti, a sculpture made of mahogany, jaguar emblems, incense sticks and brass appears like a good promotional concept for jewelry products. But Am I Looking Through You, a deep concept in sculptural composition stresses the blurring line between art and design, particularly in contemporary context.

Adding painterly look to Elsewhere are the works of Ogunajo, in pop art texture, and sometimes, surreal concepts. His canvas is full of theatrics and comics as well as other imageries that remind you of some nightmare rides with the world of mysticism. For example, Keep on Moving, a character of slight Fela resemblance armed with guitar, drum and circus clown make over as well as baseball pants, on a roller coaster is really a larger than life kind. However, there is more to this than laughter that the concept generates. Inscriptions all over the painting such as bintin laiye (vanity), Asejere (wages of deeds) Try 2 know man, current 4 ever, suggest reflective message for whoever cares.

Presenting branded sculptures of two popular soft drinks, a well-known mobile phone and defunct airline in art exhibition space appear complex, particularly when the works are so loud on the floor. The Ghanaian sculptors, Paa Joe and Jacob Tetteh-Ashong are so bold in their themes such that the branded wood sculptures are used to depict "fantasy coffins" that explain the artists' thoughts on "the aspirations and values of their intended users." Interestingly, one of the artists, Paa Joe is said to be among "the most important Ghanaian coffin makers of his generation."

After Yarisal and Kublitz's design texture pieces as well as daring sculptures by Paa Joe, the portrait tone of Elsewhere continues in the costumed photography works of Namsa Leuba, which has as sub-theme African Queen Series. More of documentary and less of photography as an art, the framed pieces section at Leuba's corner are loud in costumes and props. Quite easily, the focus explores "the signs and symbols of her cultural heritage from rituals and ceremonies to statuettes and masquerades."

Perhaps, a little bit of creative photography, despite the daylight or outdoor setting, would have added some strength to the works.

Oh yes, here comes something that takes Leuba's lens into the realm of creative photography: about three or four works from the unframed displays exude the real photography as an art. Titled Lesotho File. It captures a lady against a mountainous and misty background. Basically, the photo artist brings in performance flavours with costumes and gestures to 'question' the link "between fact and fiction, action and representation, and the sacred and the profane".



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