

SAYING IT THE ARTIST'S WAY

An Aesthetical Discourse on Selected Works of Art from the Department of Art Education, UEW

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Abstract



This paper is intended to project the inherent beauties and communicative essentials of the creative works produced by students and lecturers of Department of Art Education in the University of Education, Winneba. These works are poorly displayed at obscure corners of the University and are accorded the least of regards in the University's inventory. Through aesthetic discourse, this paper brings out the value of three selected works of art – one conceptual painting, one abstract painting and one sculpture in the round. The revelations of the kind of beauty these works exude coupled with the messages they put across give justification to the need, not only to take good care of these works, but to really find ways of putting them within the public domain.

Introduction

Sundstrom (2002) perceives art as a way of communicating that which is within to those who are on the outside and to express much more in depth than with the limits of vision for written communication. In supporting this perception, Eisner and Day (2004, p.771) assert that “neither words nor numbers define the limits of our cognition” and that “we need art forms to say what literal language cannot say”

The communicative role of the arts has a very long historical standing. Ever since man started responding to that natural inclination to embark on various artistic deeds, Art has often intended to appeal and connect with human emotion (All-Art, 2012). History

has over the years provided enough evidence to the tremendous role of various forms of art in communication, record keeping and language development. From the Cave art of the Aurignacian period in Hohle Fels, Germany, which reached its apogee in the late Magdalenian in Lascaux, France (Ayiter, 2010), to the era of computer graphics, art has continuously documented and communicated historical facts through the ages, even though modern researchers sometimes argue otherwise. When Kindler (2011), for instance advanced her argument against the communicative potentialities of art on the basis of Read's assertion that "art itself is ill defined to the point that 'no two people will spontaneously define it in the same sense'" (Read, 1969, p. 24, cited in Kindler, 2011) she was juxtaposing art against 'language' with all its stringent and inexplicable rules. When art is so superficially observed and assessed, it would obviously be "unintelligible to the multitude" (Read, 1969, p. 24, cited in Kindler, 2011). Fortunately, Kindler seems to be rather critical on those art forms she perceives to be "content-void to those who experience it", and by that, exonerates artists who "understand the dynamic relationship between the image, the artist, the art establishment, and the domain of art as it has evolved over time and across cultures" (Kindler, 2011).

Dewey views the language of Art from a deeper perspective:

Because objects of art are expressive, they are a language. Rather they are many languages. For each art has its own medium and that medium is especially fitted for one kind of communication. Each medium says something that cannot be uttered as well or as completely in any other tongue (Dewey, 1934, p.106)

This paper therefore sees it as a gross inadvertence, any effort at reducing the language of Art to, as Gombrich (1956) put it, a loose metaphor. The artists whose works have been studied in this paper see themselves beyond the artists that they are and consider it an obligation in ensuring that their works are windows to the thoughts and inner workings of their beliefs and knowledge. They consider themselves as communicators who should not just portray a subject but rather transcend traditional linguistic barriers and provide to their audience the opportunity to access meaning whether they possess the relevant cultural knowledge or not. Their effort is one way by which Visual art and indeed all the arts can play a role at this point of globalization where rapid and efficient global communication practices are mediating an array of interpersonal, discursive material, and cultural activities (Thorne, 2003).

In this paper, three works of art have been subjected to aesthetic scrutiny with the aim of bringing out the inherent beauty that makes them both enjoyable and communicatively essential.

Marriage by Capture

Marriage by Capture is a sculptural presentation of an age-old culture in the Northern part of Ghana. It was made by A.B Azumah, a former student of the University of Education, Winneba in 1974. Marriage by capture as a practice takes after what was known as bride kidnapping, or marriage by abduction, practiced throughout history and around the world in which a man abducts the woman he wishes to marry (Wikipedia, 2011). The work was built directly in cement and has been in a perfect form since 1974. It is a colossal, realistic three dimensional rendition in the round, measuring nine feet tall from the ground.

The sculpture, composed of two figures – a male and a female – forms one compact concentrated mass. The female figure has a pot on her head and a calabash in her hand whilst the male figure, in a rather compromising pose, exhibits a tenacious grip in a massive masculinity. Both figures are in the nude except for the tiny strips of underclothes worn across the groin to conceal their genitals.

Compositionally, the male figure forms the dominant element not only by the imposition of his huge masculine figure, but also by the consuming nature of his grip which almost fuses the body of the female figure into his. Interplay of balance and rhythm inject a lot of movement and dynamism into the entire composition. The female figure supports the tilted pot on her head with her right hand, whilst holding her calabash in the left. Though they seem to engage in some sort of struggle, the male figure seems to be protecting the female from falling. His grip as well as the strength in his legs, which do not only clinch firmly to the ground, but support that



of the female as well, suggest some effort at ensuring the stability of his partner. In the end, all the elements unite perfectly into a stable solid shape with definable finish.

Dominating elements in this work are textures, lines, shapes, planes and mass. The method used in the application of materials used in building the sculpture created physical variations on the surface of the figures, rendering them rather strongly textured. Rough is the feel all around the figures and this goes a long way to complement the roughness of the kind of struggle that is depicted.

The image can easily be reduced to a clear concise line presentation. The pose of the realistic human figures display actual lines of various directions, sizes and orientations which connect, define and divide the work at various points. The right arm of the female figure, for example connects the pot to the rest of the composition. The legs of the male figure form two thick vertical lines (slightly bent though) which do not only suggest but really serve as support for both figures. Also featuring prominently on the work are implied lines. These lines have been created through mental rather than physical connections. For instance there is a direction from the bottom of the sculpture that leads the eye through all the sensitive points where the bodies of the two figures are touching. This gives that feeling of intimacy between the figures and the artist relied on a series of implied lines for this impact. Other features like the fingers, the limbs, the breasts, muscles, lips and many others are clearly demarcated by lines, both real and implied.

A series of two-dimensional shapes have been combined at various points to form the planes that give the sculpture its three-dimensional structure. These shapes are found all around the work, projecting muscles and physical human features such as buttocks, calf, foot and breasts.

The massiveness of the form is intended to give the sculpture its stability, permanence and power. Mass is therefore an identifiable and one of the prominent features in this work.

Also prominent in the composition is the principle of contrast depicted in the presentation of the poses, sizes and statures of the two figures. Whilst the male form is dominated by rigid lines, angular corners and aggressive protrusions, the rather curvilinear form of the female is dominated by curvy, smooth and flowing lines. This meticulous application of the principle of contrast indeed brings out the two contrasting characteristics of the figures not only in the terms of gender but functionalities in the work. On one side, the "strong fingers" of the artist bring out the imposing, domineering, manliness and the

lustfulness of the male figure. On another side, the “flexible fingers” of the artist, even with all the rigidities of cement and sand, managed to depict the succulence, opulence and gracefulness of a female figure.

Implication of Symbolism and Message

The artist’s effort at depicting the tradition of Marriage by capturing, as it was practiced in Northern Ghana has been most rewarding. It is not difficult at all to realize immediately that the struggle is indeed a romantic one. The woman, though has genuinely been grabbed by the man seem not to show the expected resistance that should characterize such confrontations. In the midst of the entire struggle, she is able to hold her pot in place and her calabash positioned in a ready-to-serve manner.

The theme of the sculpture possesses some cultural underpinnings, bringing to bear some of the values in traditional Ghanaian marriage. In everything, the man is the one who has to struggle, and this does not exclude romantic and conjugal matters. Right from wooing to the payment of the bride price, the onus lies on the man to move forward and act no matter the situation. He does not struggle only for himself, but his partner as well. Even in the circumstances where his wife would be the one to enjoy most of the fruits, the man is the one to bear most of the thorns. His very survival as well as that of his family depends on the sweat of his brow. The woman’s submissiveness conforms to traditional values as well. She is not to complain; she is not to object; she only has to submit. Sometimes even against her will and her happiness, the woman has to submit to and tremble at the sound of the deep voice.

The struggle begins from the very beginning of the marriage, even in the midst of heated romance and passionate interactions. That struggle continues till the end as a perpetual struggle, and that is exactly the kind of story this sculpture has been telling since 1974.

The sculptor set out to give creative expression to an old traditional practice. He does so by physically representing the entire concept of romance as it used to be practiced some years back among an ethnic group, together with all the struggles associated with the male and female coexistence in one sculptural piece. The sculptor, much as he wanted to tell a story, also intends to document and preserve the practice for future generations. Considering the vividness of the message being put across, the appropriateness of the medium and the technique used as well as the permanent potentialities of the entire work, I believe this is one of the most successful sculptural works on the campus of the University of Education, Winneba.

Commencement des coups d'état

Commencement des coups d'état is a painting by G. A. Akrofi, a lecturer in the University of Education, Winneba. It is oil on canvas, and measures 104 by 140 centimeters. It can be found in the Art Gallery of the Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba.

The phrasing of its theme in the French language harmonizes with Coup d'état, the French expression borrowed into the English Language.

The painting is dominated by two different figures of the same person, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana. The more prominent of the two figures is a portraiture which occupies about two thirds of the entire composition. It is gloriously and perfectly depicted with all the royal effects. He is clad in a colourful cloth worn over a jumper which flows down the right arm in his country's national colours of red,



gold and green with a black star dissolving into the fabric near the elbow. His face is bright, with high bursts of light from the low morning sun throwing intense white highlight on the projected portions of his face including his prominent forehead and the upper left side of his body. He looks out charmingly and satisfactorily. His presence is potent and as real as reality can be, for his achievements are dazzling and in the full glare of all those who care to know. His looks extend into the future, and to the journey before him and his countrywomen and men. There is hope in his eyes; the kind of hope that translates into an admirably soft gaze down unto the viewer.

A very huge rifle, taller than both images, is imposed at the right hand side of the picture. This ushers in the sick, disappointed and disillusioned face of Nkrumah surrounded by a number of military activities. Right below his right eye is an armed soldier with a rifle, ostensibly poised for action against the image. A look at the right side of the head invokes chaotic and destructive feelings. There is a falling statue of the protagonist landing on the head and crumpled halfway. Ironically, the butt of the same huge rifle supports the statue from landing completely. In other words, the remnants of the statue are under some sort of protection. An image of a war canon fused into the back of his head seems to depict both the reality of the occasion as well as his own imaginative retaliation.

The entire painting is composed against thick clouds slightly highlighted at the front to create an area of energy which is opposed by the dark and bloody raging forms beneath them. The strength of this light which is enough only to illuminate the front view of the clouds and the image of Nkrumah was probably not enough to pierce through the thickness of the darkness and blackness of the surrounding clouds. The brightness of this light was to last whilst the sun was on.

Colour plays a dominant role in the painting. All the other elements in the work – lines, shapes and texture – are perceivable through the rather complex colour scheme adopted. The sharpness and richness of colour and application of chiaroscuro gives the painting a neoclassical dimension. The artist used an extensive range of hues to capture the richness of reality and to position relevant portions of the work in a royal milieu. In the image of the main figure for instance, a full spectrum of hues has been used to define the Ghanaian national flag colours, the richness of his clothes, his mood and facial expressions. He looks peaceful, calm, heroic and satisfied. In much the same way, the spots of red highlights and dark shades in the face of the second figure establish the contrast between the two main figures in the painting. Indeed, colour sets the tone for the general atmosphere in the entire painting. The chromatic gray background of the work is made from a mixture of colour, rather than a simple blend of black and white. The colour scheme in the smaller images for instance is dull and lacks harmony. This is probably because of the fact that the subject matter is disturbing.

The use of lines in the painting has been prominent as well. Various objects such as the human figure, shapes and plains in the figures, the big rifle, the fallen statue and the soldier have been rendered in a manner that makes delineation very easy. In most parts, however, the edges of volumes are less clearly defined, causing figure and ground to merge. Examples are the war tanker, the maze and the other military activities in the background.

A lot of illusory textures were introduced to add weight to shapes and suggest three-dimensional volume, such as the textured background that depicts heavy clouds and smoke.

The painting portrays a figure with a series of interesting elements which almost immediately contrasts it from a glorious to a gloomy one and transforms its bright feelings to gloom.

The painting, which seems to be an idolization of the personality of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, is also shrouded in political tinges. The painter heralds the perfection in the ideals of Nkrumah by depicting the main figure in a rather bright, imposing and triumphant manner; bemoans his overthrow and eventual demise, and predicts a dooming consequence for the nation through the second image.

Viewing the various elements of the painting against its uncertain background, it is possible to conclude that the gloomy imagery depicted at the lower part of the painting is predictable. It is the story of a hero who emerges before his time; a savior whose subjects are not ready to be saved; but a laborer whose efforts would be forever remembered.

The success of this work lies within its ability to invoke sympathy for the figure depicted in the painting, especially at a time when his ideals are perceived in diverse perspectives.

Philharmonic

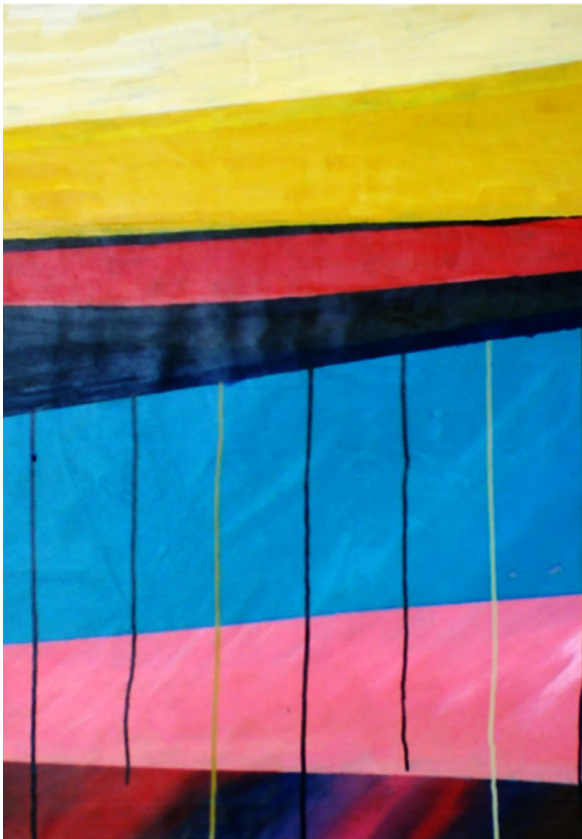
Philharmonic was created by Nana Yaw Asante, a former student of the University of Education, Winneba, in 2008. It is acrylic on canvas, measuring two by four feet and can currently be found in the Art Gallery of the Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba.

The artist, in this work presents sweet reciprocal actions and reactions of hues, shapes and lines, which aim at captivating not only the viewing but the listening senses as well. It seems to follow the conventions of Minimal art owing to simplicity in both form and content of the work and the absence of personal expression.

The elements used in the design are conspicuously and distinctively defined with no attempt at blends and fuses, thus rendering the entire painting rather graphical. Shapes are purely geometric and are mostly quadrilateral by definition, but in different sizes

and orientation. Their arrangement constitutes a harmonious flow which directs the observer through the entire work no matter which part is viewed.

Colours have been flatly filled into the shapes, with some effort at texturisation to control the viewing speed and also prevent slipping through the colours. The nature of the shapes that graduate from narrowness into broadness or vice versa highly complements the colours to determine the pitch. Overlapping shapes and transparent targets create an energetic panorama. Shapes are gradated to suggest spots of light sources and create the illusion of space. The broad beige shade narrows for the broader stroke of orange to take over. But these two bright colours need to be toned down by just a thin stroke of a rather dark blue shape. Its presence cools down the pitch entirely, and this calls for a much brighter tone of red stroke to introduce some loudness. The loudness of the red makes this point the highest in the entire design and so has to be contrasted



by a much broader stroke of coolness. Getting to the last of the cool part of the design is a much cooler but thin stroke that introduces a very broad but a much brighter blue to bring the design into crescendo.

Adding to these effects are flowing wavy lines stretching vertically to direct the eyes as it intermittently bounces back and forth the borders of the shapes and tones. Viewing the painting along a horizontal column create a picture of the keys on a musical keyboard. Flowing down into a warm magenta, the composition is completed in a harmonic blend of note of colours, so gentle, so smooth, and so sweet.

The Philharmonic, which is a painting presented more graphically, is a bold attempt at achieving equivalence between musical and visual forms. Shapes, lines, colours and textures seek correspondence with

sounds, rhythms and melodic unity. Like music therefore, this piece of work observing it critically invokes the same rhythmic feeling one experience when one listens to a piece of music.

The artist has successfully proved the fact that visual art is an aesthetic force in our lives that can calm and relax us. It exhumes an inherent freedom that allows the audience to view the composition more intensely and flows with it, since anything that would lead to distractions in the theme has been removed.

Apart from commanding enjoyment as a work of art, this work can be featured in a musical feat in which visuals are needed, and I believe this is where its success lies.

Recommendations

This paper's attempt at eliciting delectation from works of art cannot end without premising some recommendations towards ensuring a proper recognition and utilization of works produced in the Department of Art Education, UEW.

The first step towards ensuring a profitable use of works produced in the Department should involve the conception of functionality-oriented idea developmental procedures for every single work to be created. This should be the responsibility of both teachers and students. When the intended function of a work is identified and assessed as part of the idea developmental processes, its function within the visual community becomes one of the overarching purposes for its production. Such a work is naturally bound to be appropriately located within the public domain on completion.

Again, putting works of art within the public domain demands a much organized and conscientious approach. One such approach is periodic exhibitions that highlight how students and lecturers deploy their specific skills and knowledge in the execution of intriguing works of art. Physical exhibitions could be supplemented with virtual display of the works in the form of online exhibitions within the University's website.

It is also important for the Department to possess a depository for collecting and displaying works of art having enduring aesthetic values. This can serve as a museum or an art gallery to attract people within and outside the University community as well as any important visitor who will happen to be in the University. This will go a long way to exposing to the general public the creative prowess in the Department.

Conclusion

The three works cited above conclusively attest to the potentialities of many useful works that are left unnoticed and unappreciated in the University of Education, Winneba's Department of Art Education. These are works which, though were for academic purposes, have been produced by students and lecturers who have been trained in the beneficial engagement of their creative sensibilities, intuitive perceptions, feelings, experiences and imaginations. The intents for the creation of their works therefore extend beyond satisfying academic requirement into contributing to the visual definitions of our culture. The University therefore risks violating its own principle of educating for service, if it fails to appropriately channel these useful end-products of the education it offers to effectively take up their places within the contemporary Ghanaian visual culture.

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