



## EXPLORING THE PRACTICE OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WOMEN IN NIGERIAN VISUAL ART: A CASE OF TWO NORTHERN FEMALE ARTISTS

LADI ONYI ANDREA AGADA (Ph.D)

Department of Fine Art, Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu  
Bello University, Zaria

### Abstract

*In historic times, northern women in Nigeria were not as active as men in visual art. Ladi Kwali was just about the only northern female artist that stood out among the northern male visual artists of the 50s. Few women like Lami Bature and Kaltume Bulama are identified as northern women who actively practised visual art in the 80s. With the ever growing existence of globalization, technology and modernization, more northern female artists are changing the art world today in different ways. However, with limited information on female artists from the North, this paper seeks to explore the world of Talatu Adiwu and Leni Satsi as northern Nigerian female artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century mastering in the fields of painting and sculpture respectively. Information on these female artists was sourced using oral interviews and electronic messaging. The descriptive method of analysis was used to present the findings on these artists. Adiwu and Satsi are contemporary female artists who have displayed creativity, acuity, resilience and originality in their respective visual art practice. These female artists are breaking gender barriers by standing out among their male counterparts. They have created fascinating body of work and are still churning out new works. Both artists are drawn to nature and environmental features. Adiwu whose art style is experimental in nature, draws inspiration from nature which she expresses with the elements of art such as line, shape and colour, while Satsi has carved a niche for herself by rendering her sculptures in a proportionate aggregate of different media, and a potpourri of realism and stylization. By so doing, they are paving the way for other female artists, bringing many to self-realization of their potentials and encouraging them to practice and excel. It is therefore recommended that, other contemporary Nigerian female artists, actively practising visual art, should be recognized and documented for the sake of posterity.*

**Keywords:** *Contemporary, Northern Female Artists, Art Practice, Nigeria.*

### Introduction

Contemporary art is at the cusp of explosion. Over the last two decades, there has been a paradigm shift in artistic practices and the embrace of new modes of expression. A new generation of emerging artists uses their art as a vehicle for cultural expression and social change. Gone are the compartmentalized restrictions of medium specificity and strict embrace of a mastery of technical skill (African Artists' Foundation, 2012).

Contemporary artists in Nigeria today, women inclusive have embraced a fusion of artistic practices, one where their messages are articulated, discussed, and made important. Ikpakronyi (2008) affirms that, the styles and subject matters of modern Nigerian artists are highly heterogeneous and vary according to ideology, artistic training and the medium

used. But nonetheless, regardless of the differences in their works, these artists show the same ideological and intellectual orientation, which they express through visual diversities and vocabularies in terms of styles, iconography, symbolism and techniques.

For women artists, their themes and ideas have advanced progressively and significantly and are more diverse, rich and thought-provoking. Gushem and Agada (2009) validate that, the works of modern Nigerian women reflect a clear rooting in their artistic heritage. They use the most diverse techniques and media from Nigeria and the West to enhance the power of expression of their works, which are usually vibrant and rich with conventional symbols, motifs and patterns. Gushem and Agada add that, all that could be obtained in the western world of styles and techniques in visual arts have been explored in modern Nigerian art by women artists. The Nigerian women artists of today are not merely trying to improve on what their art teachers and studio masters have done or are still doing. They continue to experiment, and the result is that, today we have many styles and techniques in modern Nigerian art.

Mohammed (2007) also affirms that, women artists have contributed positively in producing and enhancing the growth of visual art. Some of these women artists range from those who did not receive formal art training and those who went through various formal art schools and have created impressive works of national and international standards. Mohammed adds that, these women visual artists are vibrant in the expression of their artworks in various media. They express themselves through textiles, paintings, graphic, sculpture and ceramics, and so on. They have also distinguished themselves in every aspect of visual art ranging from styles, techniques and themes. In spite of women's contributions to art all over the world, Jack (2001) claims that, women participation in contemporary Nigerian visual art did not become significant until after independence in 1960 when their numbers grow.

Presently, Nigeria can boast of innumerable women who are professional painters, sculptors, printmakers, textiles designers and ceramists. Many of these women artists have gained national and international recognition in their chosen profession, some of which are Afi Ekong, Elizabeth Olowu, Sokari Douglas Camp, Theresa Luck Akinwale, Fatimah Bello, Nike Davies, Kaltume Bulama, Lami Bature, Lara Ige Jacks, Halima Abubakar Tofa, Funke Ifeta and a host of others (Okoli, 2007). Others female artists not listed above are Ladi Kwali, Clara Ngbodaga Ngu, Esther Onyilo, Ndidi Dike, Peju Alatise and Umma Umar.

However, only a few women artists in Nigeria seem to have been recognized or received scholarly attention. According to Gushem and Agada (2009), the marginalization of women artists is a central issue that history has produced and reproduced particularly in the twenty-first century when the number of women artists has been steadily increasing as formal education became available to a large number of women. Gushem and Agada add that, the substantial presence of women artists in Nigeria in the twentieth century cannot however, be readily identified and mapped through materials available in library archives or museum collections. Available literature on women artists and their works that are produced from the beginning of modern art practice in Nigeria to date do not contain in depth discussions and analysis of high academic standard.

For northern women artists, the case is not different. In historic times, northern women in Nigeria were not as active as men in visual art as they were expected to look after their households. Ladi Kwali was just about the only northern female artist that stood out among

the northern male visual artists of the 50s. Clara Ngbodaga Ngu is another female artist who was born and bred in the North and taught in the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria as the first female art lecturer. A few female artists like Lami Bature and Kaltume Bulama are easily identified as northern women who actively participated in visual art in the 80s.

With the ever growing existence of globalization, technology and modernization, more northern female artists are changing the art world today in different ways but these women artists in Nigeria are still not well recognized and therefore, their art practice needs to be focused on. Thus, this paper explores the art practice of two northern Nigerian female artists; Talatu Adiwu and Leni Satsi, who collectively represent dominant movements in contemporary art. The paper is also an attempt to disclose and bring to fore the growing involvement and participation of Nigerian women in visual art.

### **Talatu Onkala Adiwu and Her Art (Painter)**

Talatu Adiwu was born on 7th December, 1982 in Kwajjaf, Borno State, Nigeria. Adiwu attended Police Children's Primary School, Jos and Girls High School, Gindiri, Mangu Plateau State for her secondary education. She obtained her Bachelor, Masters and Doctorate degree from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria specializing in painting. Adiwu is currently a lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Maiduguri, Borno State and a member of the Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN).

While in primary school, Adiwu hardly had an experience with art as it there was hardly any art lesson in her primary school. Adiwu's initial experience with art was mainly in secondary school as she picked an interest in art in JSS 3. She explains that, the art programme in her secondary was very extensive especially in the practical aspect. The school saw to it that all art materials needed were provided and gave the art students a platform to exhibit their works of art during Parent Teachers' Association Meetings, and other celebrations and activities planned within the term. Adiwu explains that, her art teachers in secondary school were qualified as formally trained artists so it contributed in enhancing what was learnt as it related to the right curriculum as well the right practical activities. Adiwu affirms that, this experience solely shaped her decision to study art at the university.

On why she chose painting, Adiwu reveals that, she initially wanted to specialize in sculpture but due to health challenges she was advised to change to painting because it was less strenuous. However, Adiwu keeps excelling in the field of painting reaching the highest level of education by bagging a Ph.D. in Painting. Talatu is greatly influenced by Piet Mondrian. An artist of Dutch and German descent. He attended the Rijksadame van Beeldende in Amsterdam. Adiwu explains that, Mondrian influenced her particularly in his ability to effectively carve a niche for himself in the practice and growth of art with his non-objective art; which has always been of great interest to her. She adds that, although she is not influenced by her northern background, being an indigene of Plateau State, she is very much influenced by the trainings and experiences she acquired from the Zaria Art School especially in the areas of colour usage which is reflected in her works. The philosophy of the Zaria Art School, which dwells firmly on freedom of expression, allowed her to be creative and extensive with her works of art. She listed Gani Odutokun and Kefas Danjuma as artists of the Zaria Art School who influenced her greatly.

For the themes she takes up for her paintings, Adiwu mentions that, she is drawn mostly to themes of nature and its entities as well as some cultural themes. She has participated in a number of group exhibitions at national levels. Some of these exhibitions include; “Through Her Eyes”, a contemporary African art exhibition held at Moeshen Art Gallery, Abuja, Nigeria (2019); an exhibition in honour of Jerry Buhari at 60 held at the National Gallery of Art, Abuja, and the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (2019); “Openspace”, an exhibition of African Patrons Cups Polo Tournament”, Fifth Chukker Polo and Country Club, Kaduna, Nigeria (2015); “Shades of Unity: Women Make it Happen”, an exhibition hosted by Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN), Abuja, Nigeria (2015); “Contemporary Artists from Nigeria”, an Imago Mundi Luciano Benetton Collection Workshop and Exhibition held in Lagos, Nigeria (2014) and “ARESUVA”, a group exhibition hosted by National Gallery of Art, Abuja Nigeria (2009).

Adiwu’s paintings are unique because of their non-objective nature and symbolic connotations. She stands out as a female artist because her perspective on many things is usually different. Adiwu mentions that, the message her artworks communicate to viewers is that, there is still a lot of beauty and good in the world if we know where to look. Adiwu’s works are usually pen and ink on paper with variations of pastels, coloured pencils, water colours and oil and acrylic on canvas. Adiwu adds that, the techniques she uses in creating works of art focus on a fusion of unlikely materials such as oil based and water based pigments on a surface with the purpose of achieving an amalgamation of differing entities. Each medium is treated separately and applied after one sets or dries. This technique is applicable to either paper or canvas surfaces thus making the works experimental in nature with the tendency to fade or crack over time. This may be seen as a short coming but it is however deliberate on the part of the artist as it serves to communicate to the viewer the transient nature of life itself.

Adiwu draws inspiration from nature and expresses such with the elements of art such as line, shape and colour. The artist believes that, the elements are the foundation of every art work and as such, should be the focus of all art expressions. It is the basic notion of the artist, that the use of elements of art as guided by the principles of design and as utilized in creating works, assists the artist in the precise articulation and elucidation of a natural object or entity. She translates an idea or natural subject matter visually for the appreciation of her audience through the use of one or more of the following elements of art, such as line, shape, form, space, texture and colour. The visual aesthetic combination of such elements with the knowledge of the principles such as balance, rhythm and dominance, has aided the artist in communicating her ideas about aesthetics and the brevity of life itself through her works.

Adiwu’s body of works usually emulates the linear and formative characteristics of the subject matter as the chief ingredient for expression. The works indicate the importance of processes, techniques, ideas, concepts over skillful and realistic representation whilst producing a suitable platform for symbolic interpretations to be made by the viewer when he or she comes in contact with the works. As an artist, she places importance on idea over photographic representations. Thus giving the full rein to the audience to make out what speaks to him or her more. To an extent, the artist aspired to project her personal views of equality within the human race through the reduction of all objects of inspiration to mere two dimensional geometric and organic shapes. These shapes are organized into painterly

compositions that bear resemblance to basic design. The symbolic, emotive and expressive role of colour is a tool of importance in the production of art works with a two dimensional orientation. The artist invites the audience to relate to the finished works on an elemental level, a level that is devoid of bias or any other emotional and sentimental affiliations.

Adiwu states that, her works of art are created with a deeply rooted concern for aesthetics. The term “aesthetics” connotes beauty of both the natural object of inspiration as well as the finished art object within the context of the artist personal style of expression. The reduction of the natural object or subject into many tiny segments and fragments imbued with a vibrant palette, in the creation of works, has formed a larger wholeness and linked them by colour as well as line, bringing to the viewer, the artist’s insistence that the finished works, be looked at, as a way of rethinking the way the society is viewed, that is, from its holistic view, to its fragmented status. The artist bases all creative exercises and production of works on her personal and strong beliefs in the simplicity of form as it relates to space whilst using the illusionistic continuity of line to reduce and embellish any natural object to its purest form.

Adiwu’s paintings titled “Array” and “Composition 1” was produced for her Ph.D. research which was completed in 2015. Her research focused on the “Aesthetic Analysis of the Spider and its Web in Painting”. “Array” is a painting that follows the creative organization of shapes into aesthetic patterns which also relies on the expressive function of colour as it relates to space and the envisioned design structure. Colours and the principal subjective image have been placed in a visual format that promotes symbolic contemplation. The procedures involved in the interaction of colours, lines, shapes and textures alone is capable of communicating a particular mood, creating visual sensations of space, volume, movement and tone and building forces of both harmony and tension, even when a painting’s narrative symbolism is unclear.



**Plate 1. Array, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 182.88cm X 182.88cm, 2013**

The painting “Array” is a panoramic view of a large picture plane divided into unequal and irregular parts which are subsequently imbued with a lustrous array of colours. Predominant tones are earthy hues juxtaposed with a variety of blues, greens, yellows and reds. There is no reference to an identifiable object or subject. It is a painting of flat shapes systematically inoculated with pigments and subtly embellished with line. The painting exhibits an excessive use of yellow in large expanses of the surface and within the line. This proves effective as it projects a balanced division of light throughout the painting surface. This use of yellow evokes a feeling of excitement and pure untainted joy which is only contradicted by the stillness of the two dimensional shapes on the painting surface. This painting was created solely for the purpose of putting the viewer’s mind to a heightened level of thought that, may lead to an individualistic interpretation and appreciation of the aesthetic mysteries that lie at the heart of the interactive dialogue of the elements present.



**Plate 2. Composition I, Oil on Canvas, 121.99cm X 121.99cm, 2014**

Continuing the use of the visual language of shape, form and colour, Adiwo creates the painting titled “Composition I” which exhibits a certain degree of independence from its visual references. Following no particular logic or perspective, the painter attempts to reproduce a personal illusion of visual reality. The artist reorganizes identified irregular shapes to create a new kind of composition that loses all sense of reality. The work is symbolic as it encompasses the fundamental changes taking place in nature. The painting is completely non-objective. It features a lot of loose shapes which are related only in the appreciation of colour in them. It is a strict and preemptive departure of the artist, and artistic interpretation. The painting is set against a dark background, while the amoebic-like shapes are painted in a manner that suggests emergence. The departure from accurate representation is complete. The artist has taken certain liberties to achieve this state of un-objectivity in changing the actual colour of the object and also, in restructuring the

physical formation of the natural entity. Thus, the final piece bears no trace of any reference to anything recognizable.

### **Leni Eleanor Satsi and Her Art (Sculptor)**

Leni Satsi was born on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December, 1983 in Abuja, Nigeria. She attended Handmaids International Nursery and Primary School, Abuja from 1986 to 1994 and Regina Pacis Girls' Secondary School, Abuja from 1994 to 2000. She started her artistic training with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 2006. She proceeded to earn her Masters' degree from the same institution in 2014, specializing in sculpture. She is currently studying at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria to obtain a Ph.D. in Sculpture. Satsi is an assistant lecturer in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Maiduguri, Borno State and a member of the Female Artists Association of Nigeria (FEAAN).

In primary school, Satsi picked an interest in art. She reveals that, while in primary 4 she began to pay attention to art because her seatmate was always drawing. She also mentions that, her secondary school art teachers; Mr. Fimba and Mr. Chijioke stirred her to practice art as they made the subject interesting. She also cites her father as a great influence to her as an artist. Leni explains that, as a planner, her father created things with colours around the house. Though he was mechanical with the things he created, the colours he utilized in creating these things got her attracted to art. In secondary school, Satsi participated in a number of art events even though she was a science student. She wanted to study architecture in the university but pulled out when she realized it was science inclined and decided to study art instead. She chose to specialize in sculpture because she is drawn to creating things with her hands.

Satsi's skills and craftsmanship stems from an innate potential nurtured through years of training in Nigeria's foremost school of Art, Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria also known as the Zaria Art School and further strengthened by the knowledge that no two artists are the same. She is also influenced by Zaria artists in various ways especially Kenneth Okey Okoli. She explains that, Okoli who is a sculptor pays attention to accuracy and details and these attributes have influenced her as an artist. Satsi is also influenced by her northern background as an indigene of Jaba, Kaduna State. She is currently working on cornstalks, which is part of the corn plant grown abundantly in the north. She also tends to create more relief works than free standing sculptures, as relief and non-figurative sculptures are more appreciated in the North.

Satsi takes up any theme at any time which is commonly influenced by her mood at the time. It could be emotional, environmental or anything else. She reveals that, her works of art have different meanings that communicate different things to different people. However, Satsi is naturally drawn to the outdoor and all the beauty in it. The artist finds pleasure in translating outdoor elements into the matters of our existence. For some time now, flowers have been a recurring subject of the artist's contemplation. She finds reason to juxtapose, magnify and manipulate them in any way possible for the production of sculptures that would engage the viewer. The artist is hopeful that her sculptures would enlighten the minds of viewers having rendered them in a proportionate aggregate of different media, and a potpourri of realism and stylization.

However, the African culture is stereotyped as one that shows less affinity for flowers but there are a number of artists who care about flowers. Satsi's flower series is inspired by

the works of Georgia O’Keffe, but her Nigerian upbringing produces something different from what the Westerners see in flowers. O’Keffe was an American artist who studied at Art Institute of Chicago. She was best known for her paintings of enlarged flowers. Satsi regards flowers as something she has so much interest in as it resembles the works of Georgia though she is a painter. Satsi also identifies Jerry Buhari and Mustapha Garba Nadama, as Zaria artists who have created floral paintings. Unlike these painters, Satsi’s floral works are rendered in sculpture. Satsi has participated in a number of group exhibitions at national levels. Some of these exhibitions include; “Seven Diaries” an exhibition hosted by Art and Culture, Abuja (2006), “Shades of Unity: Women Make it Happen”, an exhibition hosted by The Female Artists Association of Nigeria – FEAAN, Abuja, Nigeria (2015), and “Press for Progress”, a group exhibition also hosted by FEAAN in Abuja (2018).

As an artist, Satsi believes that, art is tied around existence. She regards art as a tool for existence as she sees art in everything. She adds that, art plays a role in everything found around us. She further declares that “if we must live, we should live side by side with art.” Satsi also perceives art as an unending stream, going deeper reveals that there are many different ways of doing one thing. For this reason, she is open to new ideas, trends, materials, styles and practices. Satsi has worked with metals particularly with mild steel and aluminum sheets. Metal might just be her starting point because she still intends to work on a variety of media. She also practices other forms of art such as fashion design and textile design especially batik and tie - dye production. She also has a couple of paintings to her name. Satsi’s paintings titled “Umbrella” and “Uncertainty” was created for her MFA research which focused on “Harnessing Floral for Sculptural Possibilities.”





**Plate 3. Umbrella, Mild Steel and Aluminum Sheets, 27 inches, 2012**

The sculptural piece titled “Umbrella” hangs beautifully on the wall. It is a representation of an average sized umbrella that is finished with mild steel and aluminum sheets. The handle of the umbrella is made of mild steel, while the edges of the umbrella designed with flower petals is made from aluminum sheets. The petals are suspended by thin stripes of mild steel that meet at the tip which is subsequently covered with a petal like cap. The flower petals at the edges of the umbrella contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the entire work. The main tones of the sculptural piece are earthy hues of brown. The sculpture exhibits the use of dark brown in large expanses of the umbrella and light brown in projecting the flower petals. This proves effective as it projects a sense of balance and stability. The use of brown evokes a feeling of elegance, calm, stability and warmth. This sculptural piece was created to take the viewer’s mind to an amplified level of understanding that could result in a characteristic interpretation and appreciation of an

umbrella. An umbrella is regarded as a shield or protective cover from rain and other harsh weather conditions. Everyone needs an umbrella and probably everyone has an umbrella. However, everyone needs to figure out what their umbrella is all about.



**Plate 4. Uncertainty, Mild Steel, 27 inches, 2012**

The sculpture titled “Uncertainty” is an assemblage of flower petals with a detached stalk at the end. The entire piece is made of mild steel. The petals are held together by a thin strip of mild steel that depicts the stalk. Most of the petals are wilted, curled, bent or squeezed depicting the process of withering which may have been caused by either disease, poor soil structure or weather conditions. The sculptural piece of mild steel is rendered in colours of red and brown. The brown areas show that the flower petals have begun to experience wilting, while the red areas indicate that the petals are somewhat fresh. This colour application proves effective as it projects a sense of realness. This sculptural piece was created to show that the nature of flowers is uncertain, as the title suggests. When flowers pop up they are beautiful but they could also wither and die. This also implies to the general nature of existence which is uncertain.

### **Conclusion**

Northern Nigerian female artists, just like their southern counterparts are changing the art world today in different ways. Talatu Adiwu and Leni Satsi are contemporary northern female artists who have been able to create a niche for themselves in their respective fields of painting and sculpture. Their journey to achieving this feat was through dedication, hard work and commitment. Just like Ladi Kwali, Lami Bature, Kaltume Bulama, among others, Adiwu and Satsi have been identified as northern female artists who actively participate in visual art. It is on this basis that, this paper explores the world of Talatu

Adiwu and Leni Satsi as practising artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adiwu and Satsi have displayed creativity, acuity, resilience and originality in their respective visual art practice. These female artists are breaking gender barriers by standing out among their male counterparts. They have created fascinating body of work and are still churning out new works. Both artists are products of the Zaria Art School and are drawn to nature and environmental features. Adiwu whose art style is experimental, draws inspiration from nature which she expresses with the elements of art such as line, shape and colour, while Satsi renders her sculptures mainly of flowers in a proportionate aggregate of different media, and a potpourri of realism and stylization. By practising actively in art, they are paving the way for other female artists, bringing many to self-realization of their potentials and encouraging them to practice and excel. It is therefore recommended that, other contemporary Nigerian female artists, actively practising visual art, should be recognized and documented for posterity's sake.

### References

- Adiwu, T. O. (2019). Artist's Statement.
- Adiwu, T. O. (2019, November 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>). Personal Interviews.
- African Artists' Foundation (2012). Nigeria Now: Emerging Trends of Contemporary Art in Nigeria. A Catalogue of Exhibition at Art Africa Miami Arts Fair, Miami Florida, USA, 4<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2012, Retrieved on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2019 from <https://www.africanartists.org/exhibition/nigeria-now>.
- Gushem, P. O. and Agada, L. O. A. (2009). Ndidi Dike and Female Art Renaissance in Nigeria. *Environ, A Journal of Environmental Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 10, June. Published by Faculty of Environmental Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Pp. 1-7.
- Ikpakronyi, S. O. (2008). There is Modern Nigerian Visual Art. In: *Selected Art Works from Nigeria. An Exhibition Catalogue*, Abuja: National Gallery of Art, Pp. 42-47.
- Jack, B. R. (2001). Preface in Ikprakonyi, S. (2001), *Nigerian Women in Art, A Catalogue of Art Works/ Programme of Events*, 41<sup>st</sup> Independence Anniversary Exhibition. Abuja: National Gallery of Art.
- Okoli, K. O. (2007). *The Contributions of Female Artists to Modern Nigerian Art. An Unpublished Doctoral Thesis Submitted to the Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.*
- Mohammed, A. (2007). *The Role of Women in Visual Art Practice. The Studio, A Journal of Contemporary Art Practice and Theory, Maiden Issue*, Published by Department of Fine Art, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.
- Satsi, L. E. (2019). Artist's Statement.
- Satsi, L. E. (2019, November 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>). Personal Interviews.