

An Analytical Study of Modupeola Fadugba's Paintings

Musa Ajibola Alawode and Aliyu Muhammad

Abstract

Modern Nigerian art emerged through formal and informal training: formal art training includes the artistic knowledge acquired within the four walls of classrooms. Informal art training, on the other hand includes apprenticeship and self-taught systems. Self-taught artists have no known masters, but are naturally talented. The paper focuses on Modupeola Fadugba, a female self-taught painter. It adopted qualitative research design, using historical and descriptive approaches to discuss Fadugba's paintings with particular emphasis on her background, style, theme and media. It was discovered that Fadugba is a realistic painter whose major theme is agitation. Through her works, she agitated for better condition for Nigerian women who have always been at the receiving end of cultural, political and social impediment in the country.

Keywords: self-taught artist, painting, style, theme, agitation, Modupeola Fadugba

Introduction

Self-taught artists refer to artists without known teachers (they were not taught how to make art by any artist) or artists who did not learn their art-making skills from any master. This implies that self-taught artists do not learn their skills of art-making from any artists, but they are naturally gifted. Vocabulary.com Dictionary (2024) sheds more light on this by referring to self-taught art as a genre of art and outdoor constructions made by untrained artists who do not recognise themselves as artists. It states further that self-taught art is a class of art (or artistic endeavour) having a characteristic form or technique. From the explanation given by Vocabulary.com Dictionary, it can be seen that self-taught art is the work produced by an untrained artist who does not see himself/herself as an artist because he/she has not undergone any training on artmaking. Furthermore, self-taught art is synonymous with naïve art, outsider art, primitive art or vernacular art. Fine in Odoh (2023) expatiates further by stating that the domain of self-taught art is ostensibly defined by the fact that the artists have not been formally trained. In practice, self-taught art is known through the social position of the creators.

1. Department of Fine Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo; whereisdralawode@gmail.com

2. Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; aleekone67@gmail.com

From the knowledge of art historical studies, however, the issue of self-taught artist is an old phenomenon like the Pre-historic art (cave painting and engraving on the rock shelters), which was described by Brenjes (1965) and Willet (2002) as earliest art in Nigeria and Africa at large, was executed by self-taught artists. This could be taken as the beginning of the history of self-taught art and artists. This form of art practice has contributed to the advancement of human knowledge about the historical, scientific, technological and cultural achievements of the past (Odoh, 2014). However, in modern time, the issue of self-taught art and artist is traceable to 20th century A.D, which coincided with the evolution of modern Nigerian art. This period can also be taken as the beginning of the emergence of a creative consciousness in Nigeria, which brought about modern art of Nigeria (Odoh, 2014). It should be noted that the evolution of modern Nigerian art and artists, and also the emergence of self-taught art and artists were pioneered in 20th century A.D. by Aina Onabolu (1882-1963).

Aina Onabolu, the pioneer of modern Nigerian art was also the Nigeria's first documented self-taught artist. He also pioneered the teaching of art in Nigerian schools and at the same time, he was the first artist that practised Western art style in Nigeria (Oloidi, 1995). This is obvious in the portraits of Lagos elites he executed. Okeke-Agulu in Odoh (2015) sheds more light on the emergence of self-taught artist in modern Nigeria by observing that, the naturalistic art produced by Aina Onabolu, a self-taught artist, during the colonial period in the first decade of the 20th century represents the earliest manifestation of self-taught art and art representation after Western ideals within a modernist framework. Adepegba (1995) informs that, it was through the advice of Onabolu that the colonial government in Nigeria employed a European art teacher, K.C. Murray to teach art in Nigerian schools. The "second generation artists" who were Akinola Lasekan (1916-1965) and Justus Akeredolu (1915-1983) equally followed Onabolu's footsteps and practised Western art style. It should be noted that both Akinola Lasekan and Justus Akeredolu were also self-taught artists before furthering their art education abroad. Akinola Lasekan was a painter and cartoonist whose art works were directed towards the criticism of European colonists of his time, while Justus Akeredolu invented miniature thorn carving. Akeredolu was a sculptor and his major area of interest is thorn carving. Akeredolu equally executed few paintings although he is known to many art scholars as a sculptor

From the foregoing, one can infer that at the initial stage of contemporary art practice in Nigeria, it was dominated by men, but as time went on, women equally joined. One of the earliest women that practised modern art in Nigeria was Hadiza Ladi Kwali (1925-1984), a potter who was brought to limelight by Michael Cardew workshop. Ladi Kwali was later trained on how to use potters' wheel at the workshop. Presently, there are many female self-taught artists in Nigeria, and among whom are Nike Okundaye (b.1951), Peju Alatise (b.1975), Ekene Stanley Emecheta (b.1994), Modupeola Fadugba (b.1985) among others. It is pertinent to note that some scholars see the artists produced from various art workshops organised in Nigeria such as Oye-Ekiti Art Workshop, Ori-Olokun Art Workshop and Mbari Art Workshop

as self-taught artists. This notion is completely wrong because the graduates of these workshops have been informally trained as artists and irrespective of the training, whether formally or informally, a training is a training, and based on this, the graduates of various art workshops organised in Nigeria should not be addressed as self-taught artists, but rather they should be categorised as informally trained artists.

This study, however, aims to document the works of Modupeola Fadugba, a female self-taught artist who practises painting. Fadugba has exhibited her works in many countries of the world and her works are being collected by different important personalities and reputable organisations throughout the world. But despite her significant contributions to the development of modern Nigerian art, art historians have not studied her works, although scholars like Hallie (2013), Odoh (2014), Alawode (2017), Ibrahim (2017), Alawode (2018), Popoola (2019), Odoh (2023), Alawode (2023), among others have carried out studies on both self-taught and non-self-taught Nigerian artists and their works. There is no scholarly work on Fadugba and her paintings, except journalistic appraisals of some of her paintings done by journalists like Finerty (2017), Mba (2017), Rees (2018) among others, and since these appraisals were not done from art historical perspective, they left out important aspects of art historical articulation and documentation, therefore, this study becomes inevitable. It is against this background that this study investigates, analyses, discusses and documents the works of Fadugba to put in proper perspective her contributions to the development of modern Nigerian art.

Methodology

This study relied on qualitative research design, using historical and descriptive approaches. The historical approach was employed to discuss Fadugba's historical background with an intent of linking it with her style, theme and media while descriptive approach was adopted to describe her works to bring out her styles for proper comprehension. The research also explored secondary source of data collection which includes textbooks and journal articles in both hard and electronic copies. The materials used in this study were selected based on their relevance to the topic.

Modupeola Fadugba and Her Works

Fadugba was born in 1985 in Lomé, Togo to Nigerian parents, but lives and works in Abuja. She holds a Bachelor of Engineering (B. Eng.) in Chemical Engineering and Master of Arts (M.A.) in Economics from the University of Delaware, and a Master of Education (M.Ed.) from Harvard University. Despite her academic background, Fadugba practises painting, drawing, and socially engaged installation. She has participated in several solo and group exhibitions internationally, amongst which are; *Prayers, Players & Swimmers* organised by Cité des Arts, Paris, 2017; *Synchronised Swimming & Drowning* held in London, 2017; *The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition* organised by Royal Academy, London,

2017; *Afriques Capitales* organised by Gare Saint Sauveur, Lille, 2017; Dakar Biennale, Senegal, 2016; *The Art Energy*, London, 2015. In 2016, Senegal's Minister of Communication gave her an award on her project, *The People's Algorithm*. Finerty (2017) informs that Fadugba has her works in notable collections such as: The University of Delaware, the Sindika Dokolo Foundation, and the Former Liberian President, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

Fadugba works in series, which address cultural identity, social justice, game theory, and the art world within the socio-political and economic landscapes of Nigeria. For example, in her *Synchronized Swimmers* (Figs.1 to 4.), which are in thematic series, she displays agitation for social justice, unity, freedom, among others for women. With this, one can confidently describe her works as a vehicle for activism and empowerment for women. The works are created in multi-media, full of active characters in symbolically laden environments, that is, playgrounds whose figures challenge their surrounding hierarchies through alternative movements and viewpoints. It can be noted that, the themes of these works include ideologies of change, states of duality, and depictions of women, from intimate self-portraits with soft power to large-scale groups bursting with collective strength. Finerty (2017) describes Fadugba's works as laboriously detailed with great splendour and aesthetically seduce her viewers with gold leaves, precious beads, pops of colour, and classically charged compositions.

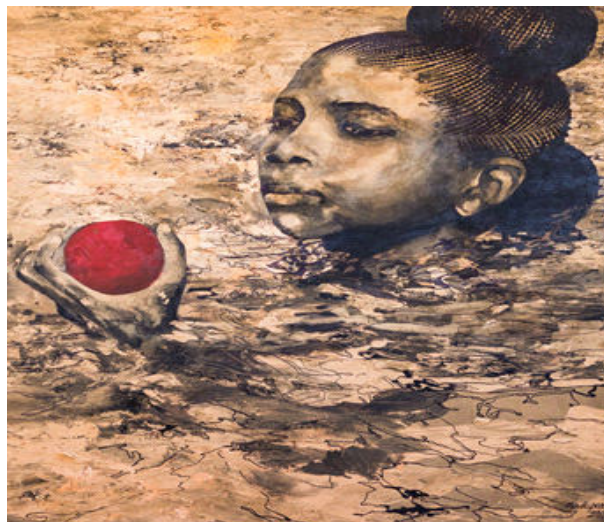


Fig.1: *Tagged Series*, Modupe Fdedugba, mixed media, 85x115cm, 2016.

Retrieved October 4, 2017 from <http://africanah.org/>

From the work executed in Fig.1 titled *Tagged Series*, it can be observed that the image is rendered in realism. It is a female head that wears a braided coiffure. The entire body seems to have been immersed in water with the exemption of the head and hand that appear. The head and its various organs are photographically depicted; likewise a hand depicted holding

a red ball. The water where the lady is swimming is equally captured photographically. The entire scene is rendered in mixed media where the dominant colour is black.

It is clear that the artist explores play as a form of resistance to the suppression of freedom of expression and other forms of control. In Fig.2 titled *Like Play, Like Play*, one can see that Fadugba's works are centered on play and games, depicting mental and physical playground in which swimming and jumping are being performed simultaneously. Fadugba expresses possibility where impossibility is obvious, and creates illusion where there is opacity by depicting swimmers as footballers in a pool of water who are swimming and playing ball simultaneously. This implies that the artist uses her work to advocate for change by reconsidering what was previously considered impossible.



Fig 2: *Like Play, Like Play*, Fadugba Modupeola, Acrylic on canvas, 95x145cm, 2016.

Retrieved October 4, 2017 from <http://africanah.org/>

Fadugba depicts worlds of water and swimming pools in dynamic landscapes where there is a constant flux. She depicts women in different poses, some are floating and swimming, while some are sinking and drowning. A red ball, which is carefully positioned, appears either at the centre or edge of all the works in the series, giving them a striking illumination. The work is done realistically in a recontextualised setting. The water in the swimming pools appears in a golden colour, which adds elegance to the work

Finerty (2017) is of the view that Fadugba's works are done in such a way that makes the swimmers to transcend the original rules of the game and activate stories of friendship, teamwork, and unity, giving voice to the infrequent representation of young black women in water together. The observation of Finerty is correct because if one closely examines the works, one will see that the artist advocates for unity, freedom and co-operation among African women. She also clamours for attitudinal change among the women folks, because previously, women were not known to swim in the pools with braided coiffeur. But in all of the works in the *Synchronized*

Swimmers series (Figs.1 to 4), women appear in braided coiffeur. This implies that women should not see their braided hair as a barrier that will prevent them from swimming in the pool. It should be noted that when swimming in a pool, there is a tendency for the swimmer to deep her head with braided coiffeur in the water and when that is done, the braided coiffeur will be soaked, its aesthetics will be affected and it will also produce an offensive odour. It was because of this that women with braided coiffeur would not like to swim in the pool so that the aesthetics of their braided coiffeur would not spoil and also, produce bad odours.

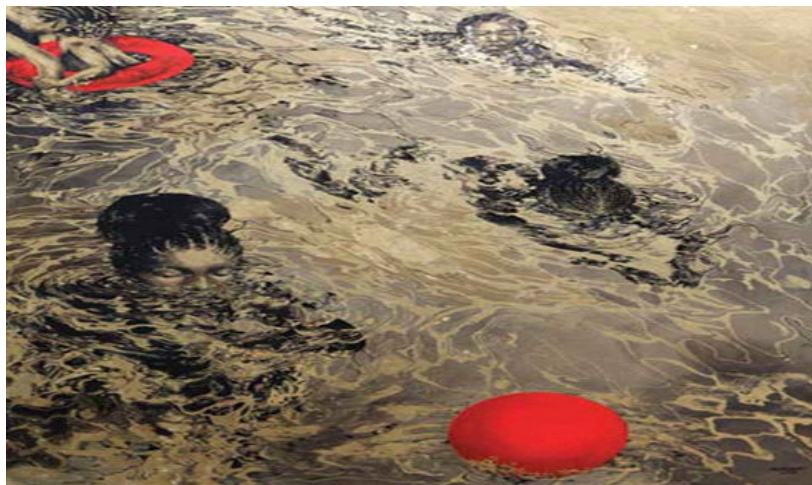


Fig.3: *Tagged II*, Fadugba Modupeola, mixed media, 2015, 122 x 152.5 cm
Retrieved October 4, 2017 from <https://www.mutualart.com/artwork/>

The work in Fig.3 titled *Tagged II* also shows three ladies in a swimming pool, and the water of the pool is depicted in gold colour which gives life and movement to the water. The artist renders the swimmers' heads in full or in a schematic form. The red ball is placed towards the edge of the canvas. The work is rendered in photographic realism; both the water and the swimmers are realistically captured. It should, however, be noted that Fadugba renders her works with a great sense of meticulousness and painstakingness.

Throughout the works, Fadugba applies the theory of games to narrate her stories. The artist seems to engage her audience in a dialogue about Nigeria's prevailing social and political landscape so as to elicit both individual and collective change. Fadugba (2017) is of the view that, the works mirror challenges that exist (unspoken or spoken) in any social or physical space. This is obvious in view of inadequate attention being giving to women in Nigeria, and the cultural curtailment of their freedom.



Fig. 4: Reach, Fadugba Modupeola, mixed media, 2015, 112 x 183 cm.

Retrieved October 4, 2017 from <https://www.mutualart.com/artwork/>

In *Reach* (Fig.4), the artist depicts two ladies who are swimming in a pool without covering their braided coiffeur, which is a common feature of all her works in the series. The red ball is strategically positioned on golden water which seems to be the target of the ladies. The entire works in this series are rendered in standardised proportion. From the foregoing, the artistic expression of Fadugba is not limited to these series. She expresses her artistic ingenuities in various genres of painting such as portraiture, composition, landscape and installation. Her visual artistic expression is basically on technical competency.

Conclusion

This paper did not pretend to be all-inclusive; it has documented the works and style of Fadugba, a female self-taught painter of Nigerian extraction. Fadugba renders her works in series which are thematically related. Her works which are discussed in this paper are compositions of women in similar scenes and her style is photographic realism. The prominent theme in her works is agitation which is just like a thread that runs across all the works. Her works make a visual statement that agitates for paradigm shift for women in their struggle for equality. She produces paintings that agitates freedom for women, that is, women should be freed from cultural, social, political and other impediments which have prevented them from exercising their fundamental rights.

In conclusion therefore, there are many other self-taught artists in Nigeria, among whom are numerous sign-writers whose calligraphic works and glossy, fairly naturalistic paintings can be found on vehicle bodies, walls of local bars, advertisement boards, panels of shops and hair styles in barbers' shops. Furthermore, despite the fact that formal art training is springing up, self-taught artists are also contributing to the growth of modern art of Nigeria. From this foregoing, it can be deduced that Fadugba has contributed not in a small measure to

the development of modern art in Nigeria. She was able to achieve this through the visual treatment of the subject matter of her paintings.

References

- Adepegba, C.O. (1995). *Nigerian Art: Its Tradition and Modern Tendencies*. Ibadan: Jodad Publishers. P.6
- Alawode, M.A. (2017). An Analysis of the Works of Sati Panshak Yilwat. *Maiduguri Journal of Art and Design* 2, (4), 207-213
- Alawode, M.A. (2018). Postcolonialism and Art: An Analytical Study of Mufu Onifade's Paintings. In Awosanmi T., Adeduntan, A. and Ajayi, W. (Eds), *Postcolonialism and Beyond: Cultural Production and Social Sustenance*. A Proceeding of the Colloquium in Honour of Dele Layiwola FNAL. Ibadan: Society for Postcolonial Culture Production. Pp. 144-154
- Alawode, M.A. (2023). An Analysis of Styles of Oladimeji Tirimisiyu Ayedun Gbolagade. *Journal of Studies in Humanities* 13, (1), 92-101
- Brenjes, B. (1965). *African Rock Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press. P.43
- Fadugba, M. (2017). Synchronized Swimmers, 2016-2017. Retrieved October 4, 2017 from <http://africanah.org/>
- Finerty, K. (2017). Moupeola Fadugba: Synchronized Swimming and Drowning. Retrieved 4 October 2017 from <http://www.edcrossfineart.com/news/>
- Hallie, R.R. (2013). Reconstructing the Body: The Textile Forms of Peju Alatise and Grace Ndiritu. An M.A. Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin. Pp. 10-23.
- Ibrahim, D. (2017). A Study of Painting Careers of Self-Taught Female Nigerian Artists Nike Okundaye and Peju Alatise. An Unpublished PhD. Thesis Submitted to the School of Postgraduate Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pp.14-26.
- Mba, A. (2017). Modupeola Fadugba's Paintings. Retrieved October 4, 2017 from https://twitter.com/adora_mba
- Odoh, G.C. (2023). Transacting the Modern in the Works of Segun Aiyesan, a Self-Taught Nigerian Artist. *Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2, (03), 12-28. Retrieved October 2, 2024 from <https://doi.org/w.55559/sjahss.v2103.92>
- Odoh, G. C. (2014). From the Margin to the Centre: Creative Footprint of Self-taught Artists in Modern Nigerian Art. *Journal of Art and Design Studies*, 4, 24, (20-34). Retrieved June 4, 2017 from www.afrevjo.com
- Oloidi, O. (1995). Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria. In Havell, J. (eds) *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. London: White-chapel Art Gallery. Retrieved October 9, 2024 from <https://galeriemagazine.com>
- Popoola, T. (2019). Effects of Light in the Paintings of Damola Adepoju. An Unpublished M.A. Thesis Submitted to the Postgraduate School, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Pp.14-25.
- Rees, L. (2018). Modupeola Fadugba Causes a Stir with her Dreamy Artworks. Retrieved October 9, 2024 from <https://galeriemmagazine.com/>
- Vocabulary.com Dictionary (2024) Definitions of Self-Taught Art. Retrieved October 5, 2024 from https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/self-taught_art
- Willet, F. (2002). *African Art*. Singapore: Thames and Hudson. P.4