

Sokari Douglas camp: Steel consistency in sculpture

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ABSTRACT: Several Nigerian artists have interrogated the societal ills and challenges occasioned by the crude oil exploration activities of the multinational oil companies in Nigeria. They have used different media to express their creative sensibilities in visual forms. Sokari Douglas Camp, who is one of such artist has delved into the use of steel metal as her major working material. The use and working of metal by women are traditionally classified as taboo in most African cultures including Nigeria. This paper focuses on the contributions of Sokari Douglas Camp in the usage of steel in the global artistic scene. The essence of the paper is to highlight her impact on the visual arts and to elucidate the way she has broken through barriers using her unique creative prowess to synthesize her African traditional art forms with modern techniques and materials to create visual imageries. It is one thing to acknowledge the fact that she is a woman worthy of study and it is quite another to note her consistency in steel: the male-dominated area of sculpture. Thus, further studies on this enigmatic creative artist cannot be overemphasized. The paper employed the triangulation of art historical research methods of formalism, feminism and iconography in articulating this study with data drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The research concludes that Sokari Douglas Camp's consistency in the use of steel as a medium, her themes and issues addressed are of great relevance in the contemporary era to draw national and international attention to the plight of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Consistency, contemporary, steel, synthesize, traditional.

INTRODUCTION

In traditional African societies, women were only known for 'The Passive Arts' like pottery, jewellery, tapestry, weaving, beadwork and textile design. Women were meant to be home makers and keepers. Their traditional vocation was akin to motherhood. The roles they play in any other areas are not recognized and more so not allowed to venture into some areas in the creative arts like woodcarving or metal sculpture. These areas are strictly reserved for men. Over the years, African women have had to prove themselves capable of doing works thought to be specially reserved for men, though not as a matter of pursuit for gender equality but as a matter of recognition of inherent creativity, as they have also found their place in what we term as the male domain- painting, carving, metal - sculpture.

Implicit are the assumptions that women are marginalized, relegated to the background, and so feel the need to fight against gender inequality. This has necessitated intellectual attention that has brought about concerns, probing and investigation. One of such is the book titled "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists, written by the American art historian, Linda Nochlin in 1971. The book is noted for its contributions to feminist art history and theory. It examines the institutional obstacles that prevent women from succeeding in the arts. An example is the case of Italian painter, Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) who clearly distinguished herself as a painter in the 17th century, a time when very few females could be allowed to have a career or even access education in art. But at the dawn of the 19th century,

women rose up against the traditional status quo of just being wives, mothers and home keepers. While this feminist upsurge and evolution that initiated academic investigation was going on in the Western part of the globe, women in Africa were also breaking stereotypes and deflating perennial value systems of prejudice, bias and gender misconceptions. In the mid-20th century, female artists began to emerge in the Nigerian artistic scape. Notable amongst them were Clara Ugbudaga-Ngu (1921-1996) and Princess Tunde Olowu nee Akenzua (b.1948).

Clara Ugbudaga (1921-1996) was a notable painter and sculptor. Her style of work which were mostly abstract was a blend of traditional Nigerian and European modernism as she was the first Nigerian female artist to have a solo exhibition in London in 1958. The University of Birmingham described her thus; Ugbudaga –Ngu (1921-1996) was a pioneer of Nigerian modernism and helped to influence a generation of African artists. Her long career featured many standout moments. In 1955 she became the only Nigerian teacher in the Fine Arts Department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (NCAST), Zaria, where she taught members of the Zaria Art Society (popularly referred to as the Zaria Rebels), a group of young Nigerian artists who help to establish post-colonial modernism.

Princess Tunde Olowu (nee Akenzua) is a woman who defied all odds in the Benin tradition of bronze casting which was purely the preserve of the males. She became the first Benin female bronze caster when her father, the Oba of Benin, Oba Akenzua II who reigned from 1933-1978 gave royal permission to the Royal Benin bronze casters for her training. She had a running art workshop for empowering women and youth under the Oba Akenzua II Art Foundation in Benin in the late 1970s. She was among the first set of University of Benin trained artists in 1978. She also holds a Master in Fine Arts (MFA) degree from the same university in 1981. Her style is anchored on the Benin traditional bronze casting style and techniques with a tint of Western formalism in her cement sculptures.

In recent years, there has been a significant shift and African female artists are starting to gain recognition for their work despite the many challenges faced which include sexism, racism and lack of access to education and resources. This is made possible based on the feminist movement and recognition of the significance of inclusivity. At present the impact and contributions of some African female artists have been enormous and need to be given adequate attention and recognition. Artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Aida Muluneh and Sokari Douglas Camp just to mention a few.

The paper focuses on Sokari Douglas Camp and her steel sculptures with a view to interrogating her consistency in the usage of steel in her sculptures. This paper, therefore, employed the conceptual framework of eclecticism as propounded by Drewal (2014) when he observed that since African traditional artists engaged the

use of diverse materials in the production of an artwork, it will not be out of place to also study the artwork from different view point. The paper also adopted the theoretical framework of 'Sensiotic' by Drewal (2005). "Sensiotics is a method and theory that explicitly emphasizes the role of embodied sense perception in artistic production, performance and reception" (Curtis, 2017). The above conceptual and theoretical frameworks guided this research to articulate Sokari Douglas Camp and her art (sculptures) from a broader perspective, and this has enriched this study.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP'S BIOGRAPHY

Sokari Douglas Camp is a renowned African contemporary female artist from Nigeria who lives in London. She was born in 1958 in Buguma in the Kalabari kingdom of Rivers State in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. She moved to London to live with her elder sister who was the wife of the renowned anthropologist Robin Horton. Sokari attended the Californian College of Arts and Craft Oakland in California in 1979-1980 but completed her Bachelor of Arts at the Central School of Arts and Design in 1983 and studied sculpture at the master degree level in the Royal College, London in 1983-1986.

Douglas works in various media like plastic, wood, gold leaf, bronze, silver, and metal but her primary medium is steel. She uses modern sculptural techniques and materials in manipulating her Kalabari tradition-inspired themes and subject matter. She is known for her large-sized steel sculptures with themes generated from socio-political, cultural and spiritual issues. Her large semi-abstract figurative works are inspired by the sound, movement, and colours of Kalabari masquerades; funerals, plays, boat regattas and festivals (<https://www.africa.si.edu/exhibits/sokari>). According to askART (<https://www.askart.com/facts-about-sokari-douglas-camp/artist-biography&facts>), her inspiration from culture was deepened by her guardian, anthropologist Robin Horton. Much of her sculptures are constructed from welded steel and her bronze casts are more unusual. Her artworks are the synthesis of traditional themes, current socio-political issues, western materials and technologies.

She is so versatile in her usage of materials and approach to technology and stylistic articulation. This has resulted in several scholars examining her sculptures from different perspectives. They include: Feminism/Black Feminism (Woznick, 2003; Testagiorgis, 1993), Spirituality (Nzegwu, 1999), Hybridity/Identity (Schlote, 2012) among others. This multifaceted approach could have resulted from her background; growing up as a traditional Kalabari girl child from the Niger Delta region of Nigeria and her upbringing in the United Kingdom before studying art both in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. She is also married to a British man and practices her art

in the UK. Camp's dual citizenship afforded her regular visits to her homeland, Nigeria which espoused her to several significant Nigerian artists. These are Lamidi Fakeye, a Yoruba sculptor; Suzanne Wenger, the German sculptor and dancer associated with the Oshogbo art school and Peggy Harper, the choreographer amongst others. These great artists have greatly impacted her artistic voyage.

SOKARI'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO SCULPTURE

Sokari has had over 40 solo exhibitions and numerous group shows all around the globe; her works are in private and public spaces. Some of her works are in permanent collections of great museums like the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C, the British Museum, Sategaya Museum of Art and many others. She has won numerous international awards. A recipient of the prestigious Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2006. She is also the governor of the University of Art London. She has had numerous solo exhibitions including the 'Spirit in Steel, the Art of the Kalabari Masquerade' at the America Museum of Natural History, New York (1998-99), 'Imagine Steel' at Lawry Arts Centre, Manchester. 'Echoes of the Kalabari: Sculpted by Sokari Douglas Camp', Natural Museum of African Art (The Smithsonian Institution) Washington (1988). She has had much collaboration too.

Sokari has contributed immensely to the field of art with her steel sculptural works through the theme generated from the African background. She has a firm base in the traditional philosophies that guide her thoughts, world views and perception that are drawn from her riverine environment in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The Ijo tribe of which the Kalabari is part, has fascinating stories about aquatic creatures and seems to have different levels of relationship with humans. The synthesis of her traditional art themes with modern sculpture techniques translates into concrete materials to create visual images of no small measures in the world of art globally. She has modernized African figural sculptures by industrializing them, however, African they may seem (Kuspit, 2010).

Her works also create the validation of the significance of history that relies on traditional philosophy as regards its relevance in contemporary times. As her works unfold with a dramatic intensity that reveals the reflection of themes of culture, the intention is not to create art-for-art sake but to give narratives embedded in African philosophy. She also shows through her creativity, the universality of the visual arts as a unique language or genre of communication of unforgettable experiences, as abstract thoughts are translated into tangible forms through the aesthetics dynamics of the principles and elements of art and design. Historical relics are replayed and saved in valuable and more tangible forms...as Sokari uses her

artworks to retell the history and give a visual impression of the events both of her African origin and global events in their socio-political sphere. She gives visual imagery to events of the past in one of the most apt manners.

She expresses profound emotions in her works as they also command emotions reminding us of the struggle and its devastating effect as is seen in "All The World is Now Richer." This piece is a sculpture to commemorate the abolition of slavery. The sculpture hopes to show that the people of slave heritage are brave and have dignity and strength as stated by Bernier and Willson (2020). They further added that for Douglas Camp, transatlantic slavery failed to eradicate African diasporic histories, cultures, beliefs, social practices, political ideas and art-making traditions.

Sokari has broken the liminal boundaries of cultural prejudice as a female artist. She has used her sculptural creations with unique creativity to transcend what is known as the male domain. In the Kalabari tradition her home culture, the allowance of women to sculpt, carve or participate in masquerade was a farfetched cry though the Ekine masking tradition from whence she generates most of her inspirations, is the revered masking tradition that was founded by a female deity named Ekine. Douglas not only translates the themes, music and movements within the abstract realm into visual imageries but also creates intricate concrete sculpture pieces.

According to Sinclair (2021), Sokari's sculptures are instantly recognizable. They are often welded in steel and crafted contorting shapes frequently depicting elements of the human experience. Her consistency in steel is extraordinary as she mentioned that she uses steel because she needs to hold together her moving machine creation. She had a remarkable impact with her works as regards black history and womanhood. She noted that she is a black woman and that black women are her heroes. This sums up the numerous duplications of women as seen with "Rain Forest Pawn Woman with Child on Back" (1986). In an interview with Sinclair; Sokari stated: "I have always had a foot in both camps and had to shout very loudly that my culture matters as much as yours". Her works on blackness are also documents of black history and experience. The educational values that she portrays are immensely important as was portrayed in "All the World Is Now Richer". It relates the history of slavery as it has never been captured and accessed in books as she notes. Although leaving it open for the audience to contemplate its significance and interpretation. She worked extensively with themes from her nativity, blackness and black womanhood, she also worked on global issues like socio-political arenas.

ANALYSES OF SOME WORKS

In the span of about 30 years, Sokari has showcased



Figure 1. All the World is Now Richer, Sokari Douglas Camp. 2010, stainless steel, 560 x 216 x 120cm. Courtesy: <https://octobergallery.co.uk/artists>

consistency in style and themes. She has consonantly told the stories of the deprivations, degradations of her environment and the sufferings of her people. The themes are usually derived from her Nigerian traditional events, ideas, socio-political and global challenges and these are in turn made to confront those very issues. Her consistency is confirmed as she rightly said in one of her interviews; “I keep returning to what I have always done”.

Sokari’s life-size public monumental works also made her stand out amongst the body of creative artists in the world. ‘Battle Bus’, ‘All The World Is Now Richer’, ‘Spirit In Steel’ and ‘Europe Supported by Africa and America’ are some of the most known for their evocative, controversial and intriguing social-political features. The above works are analyzed below.

‘All the World is Now Richer’ (Figure 1).

This piece (Figure 1) is a sculpture to commemorate the abolition of slavery. The sculpture seems to exhibit the trajectory that shows that the people of slave heritage are brave and have dignity and strength (Bernier and Willson, 2020). They further added that for Douglas Camp, transatlantic slavery fail to eradicate African diasporic histories, cultures, beliefs, social practices, political ideas and art-making traditions. This composition is made of steel. It consists of six life-sized figures made up of two female and four male figures respectively. It reminisces the different processes of the infamous slave trade and they are positioned horizontally to highlight the successive phases of the slave trade events. The first figure from the left side of the composition is attired in the traditional dress

of the Kalabari people with its innocent pose. This is closely followed by a female figure with a machete. This figure could be classified into two personages: it seems to represent the resistance spirit of the indigenous black people to the slave raiders and their Western collaborators, which is symbolized by the holding of the machete which is a weapon of defence. Again, the possession of a machete could also represent an already subdued plantation worker. The next is a female figure dressed in a domestic robe serving as a domestic slave. Both figures seem to authenticate the Trans-Atlantic labourer as a resistant but forced domestic and farm worker. The remaining three figures represent the post-colonial era: A Sierra Leonean woman dressed in nineteenth-century Creole apparel, who seems to be celebrating the end of the slave trade and the return to freedom in her native homeland of Africa. While the immediate male figure is adorned in a twentieth-century executive suit and the last figure is in a relaxing posed, dressed in casual trousers and a tee shirt (<https://www.sokari.co.uk/alltheworldisnowricher>). They are both obviously Europeans who seem to be basking in the euphoria of the ill-gotten wealth which has been used to develop their countries. In contemporary times, this is a continuous scenario as the monies stolen from Africa by the political elites are been kept and used in Europe for the development of the Western world.

Spirits in Steel: The Art of Kalabari Masquerade (Figure 2)

A critical examination of her works (Figure 2) in relation to



Figure 2. Spirits in Steel: The Art of Kalabari Masquerade, 1998, Life-Size, Steel. Courtesy Sokari Douglas Camp Art (AWARE). Courtesy: <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/article/422571/pdf>.

themes and subject matter shows captivating visuals centred on political, cultural and historical events. This ranges from typical depictions of masquerades and gender issues....an example is her “Spirits in Steel” exhibition held on April 25, 1998, and closed on January 30, 1999, at the American Museum of National History. “Camp’s life-sized sculptures were installed in one long, narrow gallery, creating the illusion that viewers entered a space where an organized procession of masquerades was in progress” (Barnwell, 1998).

This is a depiction of the masquerade performances of the people of Kalabari, for masquerades are very important ceremonial events with music and dance. Participants wear masks and costumes that enable them to communicate with and embody ancestral spirits losing their everyday identity. Human and animal features are repulsive, frightening comic –together with symbolic and traditional patterns are characterized with the masks. They are worn so that the faces look at the sky, effectively attractive to the souls of the spirit. Sokari Camp’s configuration makes the sculptures look as if they are vibrant phenomena- in sharp contrast to the static ethnographic environment in the museum, which represents masquerade by showing only the masks. She sets the masks within their context. It is particularly significant that this has been created by a masterful

woman using the stuff of industrial technology often seen as a male bastion. This masquerade procession symbolically exemplifies the trajectory of the water spirits emergence from the underwater world to the sacred groove inland.

Battle Bus (Figure 3)

This piece (Figure 3) was created in memory of the Niger Delta social and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and the 8 other Ogoni indigenes who were killed by the military government in 1995 for the struggle against environmental pollution and degradation by the multinational oil companies in Ogoni land in particular and Niger Delta in general. As Schneider (2015) puts it, it is a huge moving sculpture on wheels. The “Battle Bus” created in 2006, is a life-size replica of a real bus sculpted in steel. In 2015, marking the 20th anniversary of the event, the Battle Bus was brought to Nigeria on the demand of an environmental organization but it was ceased by the Nigeria Customs Service at Lagos, Nigeria, claiming that it would cause havoc due to its political message (www.assemblagejournal.org/socaridouglascamp/battlebus). The piece created a huge awareness and attention to the issues in the Niger Delta. Issues of environmental



Figure 3. Battle Bus, Sokari Douglas Camp, 2006, Stainless steel, life size. Courtesy: Adesanya (2020). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77030-7_177-1.

pollution, degradation and marginalization as the bus travelled from the Guardians office in Central London to Bristol, Hull, Liverpool and Birmingham- these places were chosen due to their works on the slave trade. The “Battle Bus” tells the story of injustice as it points back to the reactions of the multinational oil companies and the government. It is symbolic of a people’s pains and the government’s insensitivity, corruption and breakdown of the constitution.

The middle of the bus is painted in a mixture of yellow and orange. On one side is written “I ACCUSE THE OIL COMPANIES OF” while on the other side is written “GENOCIDE AGAINST THE Ogoni PEOPLE” and on the front is a plaque card with the inscription of Ken Saro Wiwa. On top of the bus are eight (8) steel drums, an indication of eight (8) oil drums, the drums are kept in place with rods. Each drum bears the name of one of the 8 others that were killed. The “Battle Bus” is an interactive steel sculpture, which was actually the winning proposal from an international competition held by the platform.

Europe Supported by Africa and America (Figure 4)

This artwork was inspired by William Blake’s (1757-1827) drawing (1795) which was meant to be an abolitionist campaign picture with three female nude figures (Figure

4). The figure in the middle is a white woman with pearl jewellery on her neck and her long hair draping down to cover her pubic region. She leaned against two female figures (black and brown) with exposed pubic regions to her left and right hand sides, respectively. The two coloured figures have bangles (armlets) on their biceps which indicate that they are slaves with both facial expressions looking away from the central figure. This oppressive pose caught the attention of Sokari who reconfigured the concept in steel to express her resistance to European exploitative attitude towards countries of Africa and South America (third world countries), and the plight of the female gender in Nigeria especially amongst the Kalabari people where she hails from. The sculpture depicted slavery, power and gender sensitivity. Analyzing the composition to elicit attendant meaning, three submissions come to mind:

1. The supportive nature of women is clearly seen as the feminine gender is used to depict the characters.
2. The oppression of super powers on lesser countries which at the same time exemplifies female subjugation and putting women at the receiving, giving and helping end.
3. The depictions of the trajectory of neo-colonialism or modern slavery of the third-world countries.

The composition clearly defines the standpoints of



Figure 4. Europe Supported by Africa and America, 2014. steel abalone, gold, copper leaf and petrol nozzle. 200 x 84 x 97 cm. Courtesy: RDN Arts. https://rdnarts.com/gallery/?s=europe+supported+by+Africa+and+america+&submit=&post_type=product.

the continents depicted. The three female characters represent these three continents:- Europe, Africa and America. The central figure which is supposedly Europe, seems to be in dire need of help; for it looks frail, tired and helpless. She is supported to stand by the other two women. The one on her left is holding the wreath across the three figures as it passes in front of them. This seems to connect them together as the other end is held by the central and the figure on the right. However, the two figures though trying to help do seem compelled to be in full support. Their facial expressions are melancholic; they each look away in disapproval. The weak and helpless middle figure holds the wreath which ends with a fuel nozzle at the two ends, symbolic of her sucking up their resources; both natural and human. The two figures' facial expressions could also depict frustration and anger as they seem uninterested. The figure on the left (South America) seems to be in disagreement as she only tries to give a helping hand by stretching her hand at the back of Europe. On the other hand, the central figure (Europe) is tilting and leaning more on the figure on her right (Africa), with arms across shoulders in which Africa looks overburdened. She

is also not in a supportive mood as she looks away. This seems to typify the present state of Africa.

Female characters are consistent and recurring features in Sokari's works and this is reflected in this unique composition made up of three female figures. She has prolifically ornamented her depictions with Nigerian attires over the years. The treatment of attire with what seems to be a traditional wrapper in a very colourful, harmonious combination of design arrangement is tied below the waist. While lace blouses and head gears adorning the figures are a very prominent feature in most of her works. All three figures' belly bottoms are visible underneath their blouses, this is suggestive of how transparent they all are, which may connote vulnerability and uncertainties. This expression introduces an undefined meaning of powerful complexes to the composition in highlighting the realities of the impacts of Europe on the two continents on either side. She continually makes visual expo of her culture, expresses traditional abstractism and juxtaposing them within the modern context that creates new realities to what was termed primitive or tribal art. This seems to highlight her living the reality of being both a Nigerian and

British citizen while feeling outside both cultures. This probably accounts for the incisive stance of Sokari's works. The depiction of the figures in African traditional apparel, consisting of a blouse, wrapper and headgear also leaves the intention of the artist open for the audience to contemplate its significance and interpretation. This piece challenges the oppressive attitude of the so called world powers.

CONCLUSION

To Douglas, steel is her primary medium and she has shown a great mastery in skillfulness and unique technique in her usage of steel. Her works are made out of steel, fabricated and manufactured rather than carved. She cuts, bends and welds the sheets of steel together instead of casting them which makes Sokari Douglas Camp's African sculpture distinctive.

Sokari explores issues relating to everyday life, social justice, black history and identity. Her works reflect a combination of beauty and impressionism of global issues. She seems to subtly devote her art to supporting social justice, and fighting against political injustice and gender inequality as the complexities of the narratives in her themes change with societal issues that confront our very existence globally.

Caught between two distinct worlds, her African heritage and her new reality as one who lives in the United Kingdom, she draws her inspirations from the former, as she works and brings to bear her creative inner self with the aid of western modern technologies. Sokari's art has clearly distinguished her as one of the world's greatest female sculptors in contemporary times as she transcends cultural barriers and breaks rigid traditions. The universal ability of art is emphasized by the transformative power of creativity in Sokari as she crosses the luminal boundaries. She manipulates steel medium in subtle ways to create tangible imagery from abstract thoughts in a consistent manner.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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