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Author

Windmuller-Luna, Kristen D.

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Review of *Uche Okeke: Works on Paper, 1958-1993*

Skoto Gallery (NYC) January 15-February 21, 2015

By Kristen Windmuller-Luna

Forty-six works on paper by the Nigerian artist Uche Okeke were on view at New York City's Skoto Gallery from January 13 through February 21, 2015. Beginning in 1958, when he co-created the Zaria Arts Society, and ending in 1993, the year of his sixtieth birthday and major retrospective in Lagos, the scope of the exhibition is dominated by prints, drawings, and paintings from the 1950s through 1970s. Together, these works consider Okeke at the height of his creative development, experimenting with the aesthetics and ideology of what later became his signature paradigm of Ulism.

Unlike his solo exhibition at the Newark Museum nearly a decade ago, which covered much of the same material and temporal ground, Skoto's exhibition unwinds without strict regard for chronology or medium. The architecture of the gallery—a box divided by angled walls into three discrete rooms—allows the viewer to follow a path not unlike that of the *eke*, the curled form ubiquitous in the artist's works. While this arrangement challenges linear attempts at charting the artist's evolution across his career, it rewards viewers with juxtapositions that emphasize the artist's continual reinterpretations of favored themes.

Deeply engaged with Igbo arts and literature, Uche Okeke was at the forefront of an artistic movement that strove to make the traditional contemporary. While a student at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology at Zaria, Okeke was a founding member of the Zaria Arts Society, an influential student group whose brief existence straddled the years immediately before and after Nigerian independence. It was at Zaria that Okeke and his peers first advocated for Natural Synthesis. A conscious rejection of the British-based Nigerian art system, Natural Synthesis advocated for documenting Nigerian arts and cultures while blending them with Western techniques. Okeke drew from his Igbo identity, resulting in linear works described by Kobena Mercer as "Afro-modern mark-making." The conspicuous white space and unfurling spirals now considered so characteristic of Okeke's work draw from *uli*, which he first observed as a child

in Anambra State. Traditionally, women used plant pigments to paint blue-black *uli* motifs on human and architectural canvases for significant events. Okeke revived the form from its near-death during the colonial era by casting it in modernist terms and synthetic materials, like ink and paint, and by encouraging academic research into its forms and uses.

Comprising nearly the entire first room, the charcoal and ink drawings from the Asele Period (1958-1966) are among Okeke's most recognizable. Coiling tightly, an inked motif inspired by the organic, linear forms of *uli* recurs throughout the drawings of this long decade, and forms fluidly unwrap across each page. Drawn in the years surrounding Nigeria's independence, when the country's artistic and political identities were simultaneously redeveloping, these works represent his first major foray into *uli* aesthetics. They also reflect the growth of his reputation after his 1961 graduation, as he exhibited prolifically abroad and became the center of the art world in Enugu. The *Nok Suite* displays Okeke's linearity at its most profound. Like *uli* motifs, which represent everyday Igbo life, the archetypical portraits were based on individuals in Kafanchan, where he opened a cultural center in 1958. The design potential of blank space becomes apparent in the *Oja Suite* (1962), along with a forceful, intentional use of line. Produced in Lagos as the artist waited to travel to West Germany on a scholarship to study glass arts, the series pointedly explores the gestural qualities of *uli*, in which confident strokes must be made to avoid uncorrectable errors. In *Head of Egbenudba* (ink, 1962), an entire cityscape and birds roll from the outlines of a portrait. Large charcoal works like 1963's *Beggar* allows an intimate view of the direct nature of the stroke, made unflinchingly and with great pressure, while a cinematic close-up in the previous year's *Signs of Life I* fills the page with *uli*-inspired lines. Drawn on brown paper or 2-hole punched newsprint, any thickening of lines or texture comes from the medium itself, such as thick charcoal pulled firmly edgewise across the paper in 1959's *Head of a Girl* and 1951's *Snakes*.

While the proponents of Natural Synthesis had advocated an admixture of any and all Nigerian cultural experiences for a greater national art, Okeke remained focused on Igbo ethnic identity. This became especially potent as he championed the Uli Revivalist Period at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1970s and 1980s, following a period of self-exile in Germany during the



Oja suite, *Head of Egbenudba*, ink,
7.5 × 5.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Skoto Gallery



Beggar, 1963, charcoal,
15 × 11.5 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Skoto Gallery

1967-1970 Civil War. Produced in Munich, the monochromatic gouache studies for the 1971 book *Tales of Land of Death: Igbo Folk Tales* represent not only a renewed commitment to Igbo aesthetics, but a continued exploration of the folk tales that captivated him throughout his life. Centered on white paper, the four tightly composed sketches accumulate short opaque brush strokes from which figures emerge and dissolve. Unlike the declarative forms of the charcoal and ink works that dominate both the checklist and the papers they've been drawn on, these shaggy, horned figures and the ambiguously gendered figures elude solidity.

For Okeke, Igbo folk tales were a fantasy world that he was first exposed to during childhood. Later, they became a topic of academic study at Zaria, and then an inspiration for art making. On the title wall, the paired late 1950s etchings *Fabled Brute* and *Nze the Smart* are densely packed with feathers and scales rendered with minute lines. While the outlines of their grotesque forms are related to the sparely shaped humans seen elsewhere in the exhibition, this patterning stands apart, and relates more closely to the artist's studies of natural textures than they do to *uli*. Firmly connected to the ground by webbed feet, each mytho-heroic figure thrusts its head backwards in resplendent, yet horrific, repose, tilting towards the upper right with drooping wings or fanged mouth akimbo. In print form, the tales became instantly modern advocates for the continued relevancy of Igbo culture.

Color is reintroduced in the second room with 1962's *Flowers in a Vase*. The contemporaneous *Oja Suite*'s linearity is retained, but the artist introduces a layering of colors, and a brushy blend of multiple colors applied with a single, opaque stroke. Produced slightly more than thirty years later, *Owelle of Owe*, the second color gouache in the room, lacks its predecessor's bold strokes and palette. Perhaps this is partly due to its proximity to a series of woodcuts whose saturated punches of color vibrate with energy. Paired with its preparatory sketch, it becomes clear that the light impression of the 1972 wood cut *Bar Beach, Lagos* is purposeful, mimicking the texture of charcoal to give depth and texture to otherwise boldly executed forms. While the saturated navy blue impression of 1974's *Church in the Forest*, in the third and final room, holds the sense of force and intention that dominates most of the show's works, the other lino- and woodcuts in the second room continue to play with the effects of process. 1958's *Wild Joy*



Sketches for *Tales of Life and Death IV*, 1970,
9.5 × 7 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Skoto Gallery



Bar Beach, Lagos, 1972,
woodcut, 20 × 15 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Skoto Gallery

abandons pure linearity in favor of a two-colored craquelure evocative of wax-print textiles, whereas 1974's *Onwa Asato (Eighth Moon)* uses the same woodblock twice to dizzying effect. Printed in neon lime green and blue, the highly offset print exudes a sense of swirling disorientation and ever increasing crowds of figures both in terms of quantity and scale.

While the exhibition allows an appreciation of Okeke's formative, experimental years, fewer than a dozen works are from after the mid-1970s. This omission gives only partial insight into the art he made during the decades spent as one of the most revered leaders and teachers of art in Nigeria, where the influence of his theory of *Ulism* still reverberates. Additionally, the exhibition does not include any works directly engaged with politics, including those made in the years preceding the Civil war, or while Okeke led the Visual Art Section of the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda. A more serious weakness is the lack of wall text or an interpretive essay, which mutes the nuances of Okeke's deep engagement with Igbo art and Nigerian politics. Notwithstanding this lack of context and temporal asymmetry, Skoto's exhibition allows the viewer to dive deeply into the artist's lines. A staple during past group shows at the twenty-three year old gallery, *Works on Paper, 1958-1993* finally gives viewers the opportunity to indulge in the intimacy of Okeke's small-scale works of mid-century modernism.