Reflections of Uzo Egonu

Hiltrud Streicher
Uzo Egonu

The following extracts are taken from Uzo Egonu’s conversation with Hiltrud Streicher (now Mrs Egonu) in 1966. Although Egonu talks specifically about some of his earlier work (1964–1966), and since then his work has changed, he reveals an insight which is peculiar to Egonu’s overall thinking.

Throughout the history of man, protection has been an outstanding problem. In our modern times the need for various types of protection grows daily. Nations even go so far as to wage war, believing that they, by doing this, protect their interests. These interests are sometimes genuine and sometimes selfish, and more often a mere show of strength.

In my opinion art is not only about aesthetics. If an artist chooses to tell us about his bad experiences of hunger by displaying a cooking stove, we ought to examine this medium to discover whether it communicates the artist’s feeling or conveys what the artist is trying to express.

I admit that it may be asking the beholder of a work too much, if his interest in art is limited to aesthetics. Even people who understand art, sometimes get too involved only in the aesthetic aspects of the work.

What does art involve? Every soul has his own answer to this question. It is like asking what is art. Anyone who has the power of conveying to others how he feels by means of his art has answered this question.
A Boy with Budgerigar 1960

Hitherto, though not exactly a faithful follower of Nature, I must confess to being very much influenced by the natural objects around me. After 1958, I began to have a feeling which I had not experienced before; an urge to search for a way to express myself and my attitude to what was before me, seen or unseen, to interpret what was in my imagination. There now had to be a motive behind my painting; I must be inspired, and there must be a reason for my inspiration. This particular painting took me back to my boyhood days. My father then had a parrot, of which my brothers and I were very fond.

Reminiscing of those days, the boy came to stand for myself and my brothers, and the budgerigar to represent the parrot.

My work at this time served as a kind of window, through which were revealed many views, many prospects. There were numerous roads, each leading to a different destination; all were at my disposal, and I could follow any to search or explore to my heart’s content. I was like a curious archaeologist who, while digging the earth to uncover ancient relics, expecting something specific, chances on something else; which might have been of historical value, but was never in his mind when he embarked on his search.
Mask with Musical Instruments 1963

The title of this painting should really be ‘Bridge’, because it served as a bridge or crossing-over painting in the development of my work. There have in fact been many such bridges.

A bridge is something that links two sides, it enables one to cross from one place to another. There are many reasons why people may cross a bridge. They may have business to attend to on the other side; or, because of the available link with the other side, they may develop an inquisitiveness about what it is like there, so that the crossing would be more of a pleasure-outing than a business trip. Sometimes the traveller may be so enchanted with the other side that he decides to stay there, and never return. Whatever the reason for crossing, the link facilitates the ambition and need for exploration.

My bridges have helped me not only in my crossing in order to explore, but also as a basis for experiment.

Mask with Musical Instruments is among the paintings through which I discovered different possibilities in the art of painting. Through these paintings I was able to enter the period that I started in 1964.

It served as a bridge, to my approach, to a new way of seeing things. First of all, these two different religious images are the base of African Culture. Secondly, consciously their forms revealed their artistic beauty to me. Unconsciously, I started to appreciate the strong link these two images have with the African past.
Living Room 1964

With this painting, I found for myself a philosophical freedom. I developed the feelings of a man who, after being ill and confined to his house, leaves the house again, and walks into the street. He feels free, he feels that he could explore miles from his door, if he so wished.

While painting this picture, I began to see lines like endless journeys, lines travelling without obstruction, and emerging again. I developed an interest in the poetry of lines. The poetry of lines had interested me before, but I found that there is limitation in the poetry of lines if it is an imitation of Nature’s work. Though one may try to impose one’s will in the interpretation of Nature’s work, doing a realistic painting, one’s feet and arms are still tied, and one is free only in a very limited sense. I did not realise before that my feet and arms had been in chains.

A Northern Nigerian 1964

The Northern Nigerians seem not to belong to the part of Africa that they live in. If it were not for the black colour of their skin, their rightful place would seem to be further north and not south of the Sahara. The cloth and culture are very similar to that of the North African Arabs. No wonder some early
European travellers described them as black Moors. Their features often differ from the typical black inhabitants of the West Coast of Africa.

Different peoples in different parts of the world have different philosophies. Sometimes the invaders of one country impose their philosophy on the country that they invade and conquer. In Northern Nigeria, the British did not impose their philosophy nor did they destroy indigenous beliefs. As a matter of fact the Northern Nigerians were encouraged to maintain their way of life.

When Britain took the whole of the North, West and East, Nigeria was not a united country. Large areas became protectorates. By the way, the name Nigeria was not an original name of any part, but was created from the name of the river Niger by Lord Lugard and his wife. The British found that through the natural rulers of the Northerners they could keep their own type of courts, police, etc. They were discouraged from learning anything European, including having a European education. The men were enlisted in the Army en-mass, because they would make good soldiers. The consequence of this was that the North was more backward when Nigeria gained its independence.
There is something that often baffles me. It is when I hear that such and such a person is highly intelligent and educated and yet may turn and say, "I am a Catholic and I think that the Muslim religion or the Buddhist religion or Jewish religion are rubbish, because these religions do not mean anything to me." The same person might say, "The Africans have no culture, what have they invented, what have they achieved?" If I hear these sort of things from a flower seller in Piccadilly Circus, or a pigeon seed seller in Trafalgar Square, I should only think of the injustice the State has done him for not extending his education beyond the age of fourteen or I may conclude that he does not want to tax his brains by trying to find things out by himself. A few years ago this person might not have been able to find out any truth about Africa and the Africans, except via that which the colonial government encouraged colonial writers to write about the black man and his country. Times have changed, but I still find many things in the newspapers here which amaze me.

Those who go into the Mosque go there for the same reason as those who go into Westminster Abbey or the Synagogue. I do not doubt that people who worship in Westminster Abbey or Mosque, or Synagogue think that the other places of worship are not as suitable a place as theirs. If I want spiritual protection why should I not go into the nearest House of God, whether it is a Synagogue, Mosque or Church, as some places of worship and spiritual protection are called.
Flight: Spiritual Protection 1966

What was in my mind was flight. By this I mean an action which one takes in order to protect oneself from physical danger. It is happening too much and too frequently in different parts of the world. It happened yesterday, it is happening today, and it will happen tomorrow. There is no need for wishful thinking nor to build castles in the sky by dreaming of the day when there will be tranquility and peace in the world. We have to live with the evil of war.

Although we have the right to question other people’s thinking and how they put it into practice, I do not think anyone has the right to question why a thinker should think or put his thoughts into practice. This is a thing which every one of us is entitled to, i.e. freedom to think, to interpret our thoughts in whatever form and pattern we wish. Our thinking may be spiritual or philosophical, it makes no difference, the eventual interpretation of our thoughts when it takes place ceases to be our personal belief because there may be some people somewhere who may incline to see things as we do.

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The following extracts are taken from Uzo Egonu's reflections on the struggle he had to go through to carry on with the work during his illnesses.

PAINTING IN DARK 1979-83

I believe that there must be a motive in an artist’s creation, but sometimes accidents occur and may open doors to a creation. For many years I have suffered from bad eyesight, but between 1979 and 1983 it was worsened by cataracts in both eyes, which led to my partial blindness.

As a professional painter and printmaker who does nothing else, I did not let my handicap of being partially blind deter me from carrying on with my
art. Besides my love for art, it is also the only means to provide for sustenance. I ignored my fading sight and continued with my work, but gradually it came to a point where I could hardly see what I was painting, except by looking through a tube or rolled black paper to judge the colours. While painting, every colour looked greyish. I had to use black, white and burnt umber to mix with colours straight from the tube for the nuances of colours that I wanted to use. This was done more with feeling, than seeing clearly, what I was mixing. Looking through the tube was to see the end result.

Luckily, my work is like that of a poet or music composer. I began to compose things in my mind...before I started to draw on paper or direct on the canvas. Drawing on a canvas was a tedious business, because lines seemed to fade away. I had to redevelop a simple technique in order to be guided by the drawings, and also for the drawings to be related.

The first operation on my left eye was carried out on the 11th April 1983 by Professor Dardenne of the Bonn University Clinic, and the second operation on the right eye on the 19th May 1983. The operations were of the latest type, which is a posterior chamber lens implantation. The operations produced good results. The first colour to which I reacted strongly, was an orange which was about four yards away from me. I had to ask for the orange to be removed, because the colour was too bright for my eyes.

Working during the period of my partial blindness was like painting in darkness. I am an artist who always starts off by drawing on a canvas before painting. My experience then was the difficulty in seeing my drawing, because charcoal on a white canvas practically looked as though the completed drawing was incomplete, no matter how thick the lines were. The reason was, because if a certain part of the canvas was focussed on for about a minute, the lines on that part would seem to gradually fade away. My answer to the problem, just as to the actual painting, was visualization of my thoughts, which to me was complete and just needed transferring on to the canvas. I painted quite a few paintings during this period of darkness, and that lifted my morale.
NEW LEASE OF LIFE 1988-89

There are events which one may experience, ignore, and regard as a thing of the past, and there may be an event which might dwell in one's mind forever. Either one pretends that such an event never occurred, or one takes the event and analyses and assess the general effect. A writer might be influenced by a traumatic experience and produce a novel, a painter might paint a picture relating or interpreting his traumatic experience through expression of his emotion. On the other hand, the writer or the painter might not consider it appropriate to express an emotion which was the result of a traumatic experience through their medium. Artists have different perceptions, and also it depends on how one's sensation is rendered.

The circumstances leading to the theme of my recent paintings are due to my traumatic experience. It is not an experience which one can successfully evoke in oneself and express through painting, because others can never experience the same feeling. While I was in Germany, in 1985, for an exhibition of my work, I had a severe heart attack and another in 1986. After a long period of hospitalisation, different kinds of drugs were prescribed to deter another recurrence...It is said that prevention is better than cure, but sometimes it is
too late, if one has not taken a preventative attitude earlier in life. However, I derived great benefit from a change of diet as advised, and through the guidance of my wife, I kept to my dieting and light exercise — such as an hour’s walk each day — and other recommendations.

There comes a time in one’s life, when a change in life style either has to be voluntary, or circumstances compel a change. A lesson to learn from such a traumatic experience, that comes through ignoring the facts of life healthwise, is that one cannot light one’s candle both ends. Either you keep to the old ways and bear the consequences, or you follow a new way which leads to a new lease of life.

I like to think that this is an age of pluralism and a new era in art. Today’s earth has shrunk so much, thanks to modern transportation, that it takes no time to travel from one part to another.

People leave their homeland either because of the spirit of adventure; poverty and the urge to seek a better life; or to flee from political persecution and the turmoil of the system of their country’s government. Others for personal reasons decide to live abroad instead of their own country. Although the maxim "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" holds good in many ways, cultural tradition dies hard and will not be easily abandoned... The answer to the question as to whether the contribution of the culture of the newcomers to music, art and literature will enrich and enhance the indigenous culture, depends on the origin of the newcomer (human nature being what it is) and the recipient of the question. The nationalist answer would be negative, while the internationalist would affirm the statement and idea.

My attempt and direction as an artist has always been the exploration of a new area of expression which would not be just a search for a cultural identity, but a search for an expression which will embody and demonstrate a universal culture. One starts with a base which in this case is the cultural tradition of one’s background. I do not see anything wrong in a recourse to a cultural tradition in art if it leads to a new area of expression and understanding.