

THE ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE EYES OF AN ARTIST¹

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For me as a visual artist the environment provides endless inspiration for artistic expression. The beauty of things around us—plants, animals, people, landscapes and buildings, natural phenomena like the moon, rainbow, and the weather—becomes even more exciting when woven into folklore, folktales, legends and mythology. Often, man recreates or destroys the environment, leading to joy or pain. All this offers limitless possibilities for artistic statements about the environment which I see as a great influence on my art creations. I will discuss these influences under four different headings.

Culture

Like every child growing up in the Nigerian environment in those days, particularly in the Delta region where I spent my formative years, my first introduction to art was through folktales and folklore passed down to the children by parents and elders in the community. These were both for entertainment and moral instruction. When I started drawing and painting, my subject matter was drawn from these. As I grew older and my powers of observation and expression increased, my repertoire expanded to embrace not only the nature around me (trees and animals), but also songs, proverbs, poems, oral history, carved and painted objects, body painting and tattoos, beliefs, wisdom of the people, festivals, masquerades, shrines and architecture. These rich cultural and physical aspects of the environment constituted an artistic legacy that became the foundation for my art. Now and again in the course of my experimental works, I return to these themes.

1. Tales of Ahwaire the tortoise were favourite stories, which were entertaining as well as morally instructive. The tortoise, cunning and selfish, becomes the victim in most of the tales. In this picture, **Ahwaire and Onemu**, the tortoise became famous for feeding the people with food produced by a bird he caught while fishing. When the bird eventually flew away, he caught another one, this time a boxer, who punished everyone, including Ahwaire himself. His uneven shell is today the result of the smashing he got from the bird.

¹Paper given on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the Nigerian Field Society, Institute of African Studies University of Ibadan, 12 March 2005. Dr. Onobrakpeya's presentation was mostly visual and gave the audience a unique opportunity to see slides of his works spanning the period from his debut as an artist right up to the present day. Space constraints do not allow the reproduction of all the works to which Dr. Onobrakpeya refers.



Lunar Myths (no. 2)

2. **Lunar myths** is a story woven around the moon. Executed in both plastograph and metal foil, it expresses the Urhobo belief that the moon changes to a goat which descends to earth at night to browse like any other animal. During one of such nocturnal adventures, it was caught and detained and there was no moonlight until it was eventually released.
3. **Eketeke and Erevbuye** are characters in Benin mythology. They are two very lazy fighters who engaged in a fight on top of a tender plant which lasted for three years. The king of the lazy people attempted to separate them, but he himself slipped, knocked his head against a cocoyam leaf and died. The scare ended the fight.
4. Folktales grow into epics in the hand of a novelist like Amos Tutuola. The pictures **Dance in the Forest of Ghosts II and III** were inspired by stories from his novel "My Life in the Bush of Ghosts". Fascinated by the songs of a tobacco-intoxicated seven year old boy lost in the mysterious forest, the ghosts danced for miles to and fro.
5. **Ibiebe glyphs** are alphabets and ideograms that I developed to represent some Urhobo concepts. Ibiebe are inspired by body paintings, tattoos and other signs.



Obaro Ishoshi (no 11)

6. **Osiebe** is a plastograph painting that combines the glyphs with an image.
7. **The Forest of The Sky Children:** In this picture, trees grow to become human forms at the top, a vantage point for observing things far and near. Thick forests appear in many of my pictures because they are the abode of spirits and dangerous creatures, as well as the setting for folktales of adventure. As these forests are threatened, the tales woven around them will soon disappear.

Many of my pictures were inspired by our traditional architecture, including the design and decoration of shrine sculptures

8. **Leopard in the cornfield** was the impression of an animal painted at the entrance of a shrine. It scared me as a child but the incident lay dormant in my subconscious until the image re-emerged during some of my experiments at art school.
9. **Akporode** is an assemblage of artworks which include found objects from the environment. The inspiration for the installation comes from the traditional shrine.
10. **Eyere kpenu Jesu (Ascension of Christ)** and
11. **Obaro Ishoshi (Front view of a Church)** are pictures on the theme of the resurrection of Christ rendered in paint, bronzed lino or metal foil relief. Inspired by our traditional architecture, they are attempts to construct the front aspect of a church.
12. **Playtime** is inspired by northern Nigerian architecture, particularly the decorations and murals on houses in Zaria and Kano. The foreground shows children enjoying bicycle rides while the background wall displays drawings of people engaged in different activities.
13. **Hail new moon** draws inspiration from the pillars of buildings and designs on clothing. (See Vol. 69:2, Oct 2004, p. 100.)
14. **Emedjo** is a print of dancers in a procession. The masks, which include a crocodile and a boat, are typical of those found in the riverine area of the Delta.
15. **The Millennium Masks (Panel I).** These come from the Abadina series, inspired by masks. They are produced through the additive plastograph technique started during my Artist-in-Residence programme in the Institute of African Studies here in the University of Ibadan in 1984. The first ones in the series were used for demonstration in a workshop at the International School of the University.



Uyovwi Erhue (Cow Head, compare no. 16)

Sahelian Masquerades

In the mid eighties, I created a body of work titled "Sahelian Masquerades", which reflected on the deteriorating environment as the result of the southward spread of the Sahara Desert and other man made factors. Human, plant and animal life was threatened and indeed in danger of being destroyed. The pictures are prayers to halt the spreading scourge, re-settle displaced people and protect the cultural and physical environment.

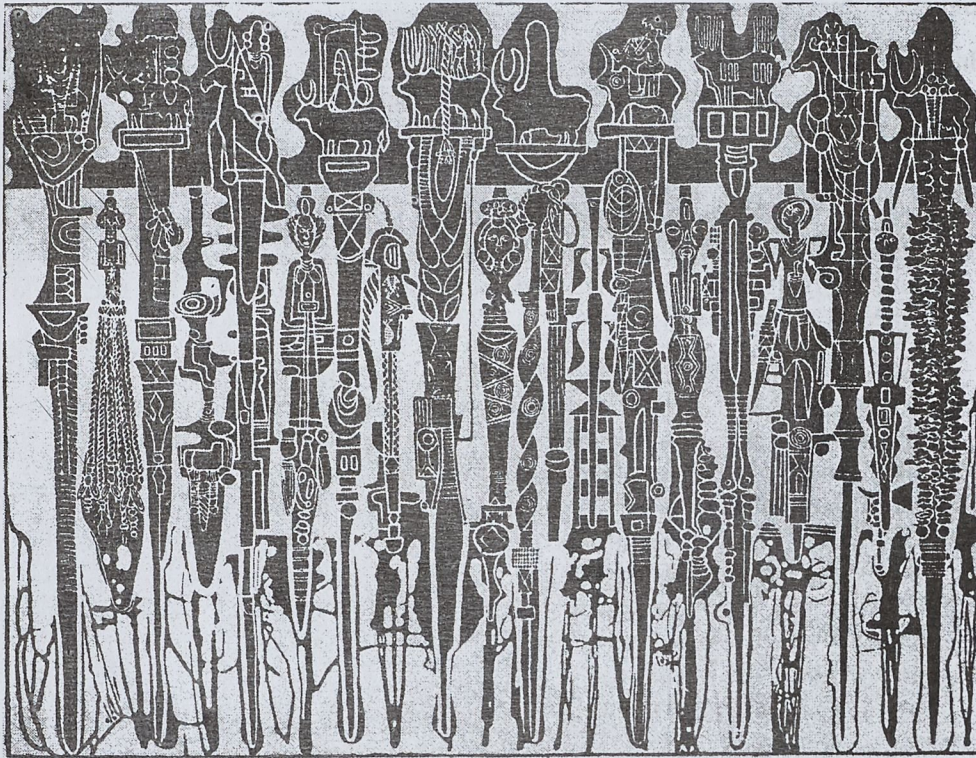
16. **Erhue Enurhe** (Bovine Statue) is a picture that was inspired by the demise of animals particularly the cows as a result of drought and the desert spread. The poem below helps to explain the picture.

"Your bones lay scorched
 And scattered on the land
 Which only yesterday was green.
 I will gather them and make you a statue
 Which will remind us
 That you once ploughed our fields,
 Hauled our luggage and baggage,
 Provided us with milk and meat.
 Someday nature will be kinder,
 Rain will fall, plants will grow
 And you will graze and roam again

17. **The Gate To The Cattle Ranch**, the title of another picture of hope inspired by drought and the Saharan spread, is also illustrated by a poem:

Beyond this beautiful gate
 Is a cattle ranch.
 Inside it,
 Men, women and children
 will eat and rejoice.
 There will yet be more ranches,
 Food will abound.

18. **Plant two trees where you cut one** is both a picture and a slogan against the indiscriminate felling of trees for local use and export.
19. **Urhe Ohwahwa** (a tree in the Harmattan) is actually a tree with withered leaves scorched by a bush fire. Such fires, which are very common along our highways, do considerable damage to crops and trees.



The Gate to the Cattle Ranch (no. 17)

20. **Edjo Aton** (Desert Spirit), also called “good governance” is a reflection on the resilience, courage and bravery of the sub-Saharan nomads who were badly hit by the North-South movement of the desert.

Totems of the Delta

My next series of works titled “Totems of the Delta” is a reflection on the effects of oil exploration and extraction in the Niger Delta, a rain forest zone of flat arable low land. This territory, criss-crossed by many rivers and stretches of swamp with numerous species of flora and fauna, has farming, fishing and game hunting as the most important occupations. A large deposit of petroleum has been found in the region, whose exploration and extraction have had serious adverse effects on the lives of the people who have lived peacefully in the region for centuries. Land, water and air are polluted, robbing the people of their means of livelihood, dislocating their entire lives. This environmental damage has resulted in continuing protests, particularly among the youths. The series called Totems of the Delta therefore focuses not only on the ecological damage but also the human reactions arising

from it.

21. **The Burning Wetland** is a picture that gives a general impression of a region in flames. The three flaming masquerades suggest destruction and unrest.
22. **Travail of the Continent** is the expression of pain and suffering on mask-like faces. The picture relates the Delta experience to what is going on in other parts of the country and the rest of Africa.



Lament (c.f. 22)

23. **Jesse** is a picture which reminds us of the pipeline fire which killed more than a thousand people a few years back in Jesse near Sapele. The foreground shows the charred bodies of the victims while in the background are expressions of woe on mask-like faces.
24. **Suffering Mothers and Children** is a picture inspired by the common sight of people begging for support on our highways in the Delta region and other parts of the country. The picture seems to ask the question: why will the government or humanitarian bodies not rehabilitate these sick people, particularly the lepers who mix with vendors on the highways?
25. **Totems of the Delta** is a water colour study for a composition of vertical pillars showing various facial and bodily expressions caused by the suffering of the people, animals and plants within the region.
26. **Totems of the Delta**, another version of no. 25, is here rendered in bronze relief.
27. **Rape of the land** is a water colour study of a burnt landscape. The main figure is that of a charred tree which looks like a lamenting nude woman.
28. **Nudes and protest** is an oil colour painting of women in the nude, protesting in the Delta. Nudity in a public place is a traditional way of expressing serious grievances by women, and now has become a common form of protest. Nude processions are believed to be backed up by ancestral spiritual force which helps to achieve the object of the protest.



Rape of the Land (no. 27)

29. **The Hawk prays for Peace** expresses the misappropriation of the wealth from the Delta and other parts of Nigeria. It is actually a pictorial interpretation of a poem by a Nigerian poet, Tanure Ojaide.

After my feathers have turned red
 With the blood of victims,
 After I have converted the moon into a nest
 and filled it with the spoils of undeclared war,
 After I have seized the arms of the armed
 and disabled the fighting spirit of the youth,
 After I have become the only bird
 and all titles and praise-names mine,
 The sole proprietor of the world,
 After I have become immortal,
 Let there be peace.

30. **The Execution of the Ogoni Nine** recalls those who protested the ill effects of oil exploration and extraction on the land, water and people. The execution is situated in an imaginary forest of wailing totems.
31. **Mothers' Protest** is a stylized linear nude study of the women protesting the execution of their courageous sons.
32. **The flaring gas totem** shows angry ancestral spirits receiving the soul of the Ogoni martyrs.
33. **Isolation I and II** again show the suffering of the masses (here represented by women and children). The anger of human right watchers over the execution of the Ogoni Nine led to foreign sanctions on Nigeria.
34. **Statue of the Ogoni Nine** shows the nine martyrs' return to earth where they are immortalized as war gods. At the base of the statue, youths drink from the fonts and dance round and round to gain inspiration for the struggle to liberate their land.
35. **Youths and Protest** shows youths protesting the marginalization and poverty in the Delta region.
36. **Embrace friendship and not guns** is a picture which is an appeal to different people, including the youths in the Delta and elsewhere, to engage in constructive and sincere dialogue to solve their problems and so return to traditional brotherhood and friendship.
37. The painting called **Triumph** focuses on the political implications of the struggles in the Delta and other parts of the country. The picture is here accompanied by a poem

which invokes divine intervention for eventual victory over the effects of misrule.

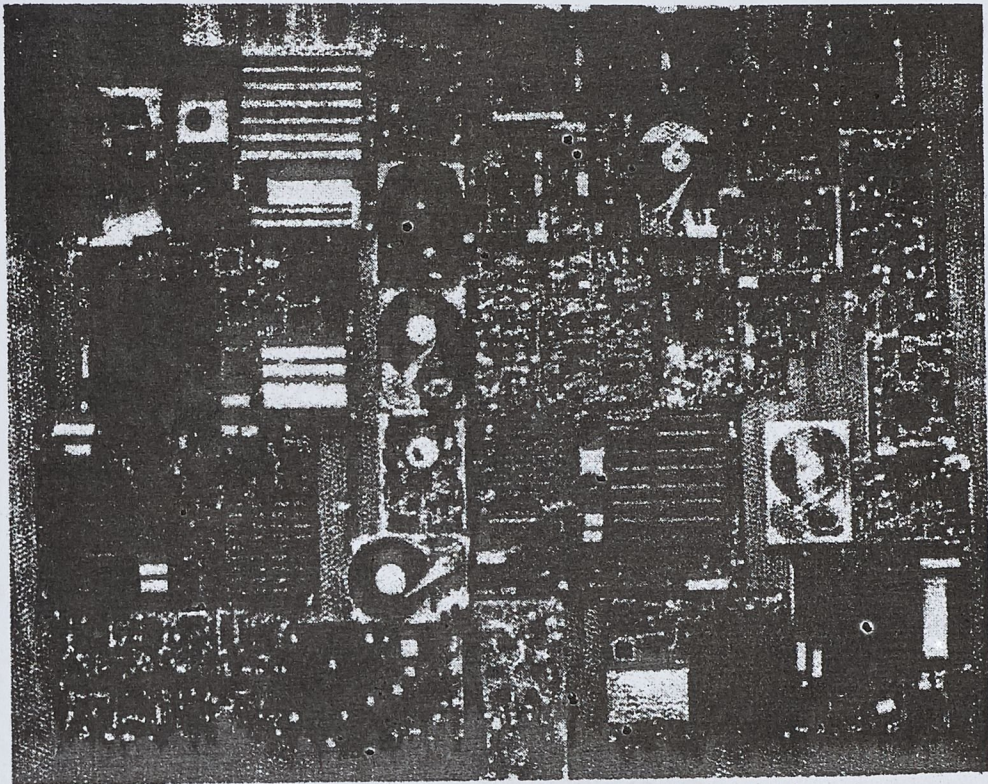
The masses are without jobs
And are hungry.
They lack basic needs –
Shelter, light, potable water,
Medicine and good roads.
Focus on mineral extraction
And wealth
Creates environmental problems
And discourages farming.
Influx of foreign goods
Closes down industries
And devalues the currency.
Education of the children suffers.
Armed robbery, assassination,
Engineered ethnic strife,
Corruption and the looting of the people's wealth
By their supposed leaders,
All create insecurity and refugee problems
And a new slavery.
The masses pray for divine intervention
And will surely triumph
Over these mortal challenges.

Waste to Beauty

The last series of my works inspired by the environment in this presentation is titled **Waste to beauty**. The artist as scavenger combs everywhere for discarded objects and re-arranges them into an assemblage which may also address issues in the environment.

In the last three to four years, I have developed a fascination for discarded computer parts which I put side by side with my own works and other found objects. The computer parts remind me of my childhood interest in machines whose workings are unfortunately nearly always covered up. One has to open them up to see the interesting forms and colours that are invariably hidden.

38. **Aerial Landscape** is an attempt to capture the beauty of the forms and colours of the land as seen from a very high altitude. This picture brings back to me the joy I often experience when I fly over the Sahara Desert or large cities in the daytime. It is also the projection of a future man-made galaxy when towns and settlements will be eventually developed in space.

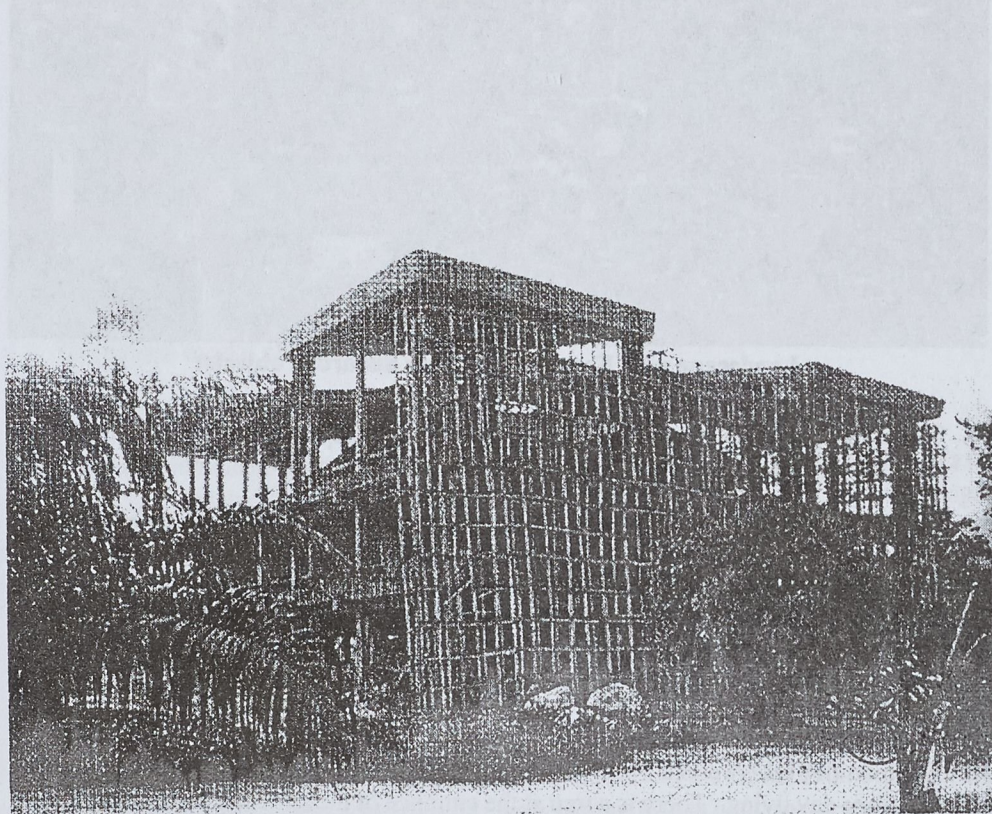


Landscape with Four Moons (from discarded objects)

39. **The Shrine of the Serrated Dome** is inspired by the shape and wall decorations of the mosque. The components of the picture again emphasise that the machine is beautiful.
40. **Sky Scraper** shows high-rise buildings here assembled from discarded computer parts which are mounted on vertical metal pipes.
41. **Bridge Across time** is an assemblage of objects. Fossil bones, old art pieces, my artworks and computer parts are combined to create the type of mystique usually associated with shrines. This mixed media picture represents the past, present and future.
42. **Environmental trap** is a metal and wooden structure, which houses objects needed for every-day living. There is a trap at the entrance of the structure. This trap, like an animal snare, is a kind of built in hazard that abounds in most constructions in our environment. People innocently pursuing their daily needs are caught in these traps.

43. **Phase I of the Niger Delta Cultural Centre.** This is the main building of the Niger Delta Cultural Centre Complex. Although not completed, it has been serving as the venue for the Harmattan Workshop series which has now reached its 7th edition. The Harmattan Workshop is a forum where artists meet to acquire skills, exchange ideas and inspire one another towards excellence in creativity. Some of the discussions there have inspired artists to create art pieces which are reflections on the environment.

In this presentation I have looked at the environmental influences that have inspired some of my art works. The cultural influences have been tremendous, so have the natural changes which affect vegetation, as expressed in the **Sahelian Masquerades**. The series, **Totems of the Delta** is inspired by the search for black gold. The last series, **Waste to beauty**, the assemblage of discarded objects, shows not only aesthetically beautifying elements in our lives but also acts as a cleansing agent in the environment.



The Niger Delta Cultural Centre