

An Anthology of Modern Nigerian Art

A Journal of Visual Arts and Related Issues



Edited by **Prof. A.R. Saliu** and **Prof J.J. Jari**

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A Journal of Visual Arts and Related Issues Vol. 2
(First published 2007)

Published by Art Dialectic Forum in collaboration with the Department of Fine Art,
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria-Nigeria.

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Cover Design & Page Layout:

Kahng Raymond K.

Cover Illustrations:

Yusuf Grillo, *Mother and Child*; Lasisi Lamidi, *Lizard*, 1998.

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05.12.2010

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An Examination of Process And Technique In The Paintings of Philip Gushem 1989-1997

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Introduction

Philip Obed Gushem was born on the 17th day of December 1959 in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. He received his formal Art training from the Department of Fine Arts, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he obtained Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Fine Arts degrees in Painting in 1987 and 1990 respectively. He has recently completed a thesis on Kolade Oshinowo for the award of a Doctorate degree in Art History. He currently lectures drawing, painting and design to undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as the supervision of their research projects at the Department of Fine Arts. Gushem belongs to the Society of Nigerian Artists, [SNA], the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA), and other international art organisations. He now heads the Painting section in the Department of Fine Arts.

In the years under review, i.e. 1989-1997, Philip Gushem exhibited concern for the socio-economic climate of the country's cultural authenticity through his depiction of man in his ethnic and indigenous origination and, an unrelenting radical approach to transforming natural, vegetational, human and architectural forms into abstractions. These divergent interests were brought together by a quest to discover a unique personal manner of expression.

This paper examines the process of bringing these themes to fruition: the techniques of colour application; manipulation of materials, as they conform to acceptable universal standards; and the innovative skill of the artist to produce striking effects. To be closely examined are the major themes of Gushem's painting career, styles, motifs, supports, media of execution, and to critically analyse selected paintings.

Themes

Three dominant themes have shaped Philip Gushem's iconographic programme. In the First Period, also called **Transformation Period**, 1989-1992, formulated during his graduate studies, he concentrated on consciously transforming the Zaria landscape into abstract compositions. To achieve those highly stylised depictions of landforms, he took the paintings through three stages of transformation. This entailed making representational studies of selected scenes, changing them into semi-abstractions and finally radically transforming them into total abstractions executed with freedom and spontaneity.

During the **Transitional Period**, 1993-1994, he introduced figures into landscapes inspired by paintings of the First Period. What began as recognisable figural renditions strongly influenced by cultural imageries later metamorphosed into stylisations. These expressions gradually gave direct inspiration for the next stage.

In the **Third Period**, 1995-1997, he was goaded by man's socio-economic status and a love for the country's cultural life style. This stage of resourceful exploration of traditional motifs is characterised by the deployment of dynamic linear patterns derived from northern Nigerian architecture and crafts. Occasionally the artist has had to paint genre pictures to satisfy the specific needs of clients who mostly commission landscapes of rural life or sporting scenes.

Form, Style, Aesthetics

A formalistic appraisal of Gushem's paintings might, on the superficial level reveal an impressionistic trait resulting perhaps, from his usage of colour, line and other design elements. His transformed landscapes have objects arranged in a pleasant manner, care being taken to place the horizon above or below centre of the picture plane, to avoid dividing the composition in two. A configuration of curves, flat images, overlapping colours, forms of varied sizes give the final compositions a well balanced appearance. Favoured colours are raw blues, reds and large doses of white which the artist claims creates an illusion of distortion and depth.

Motifs

Gushem's paintings of this period rely heavily on linearity- characteristic of art whose primary sources of inspiration are motifs and symbols. These motifs, (see Fig.1), are mostly geometric patterns of squares, rectangles and triangles. Circular ones are scarcely used except where they enhance the picture's meaning. The circle is also to be found in the depiction of the sun in his landscapes. These motifs are used purely for their aesthetic value. They are applied on canvas without alteration or are radically broken up and transformed. They are concentrated in the central part of the picture mostly.

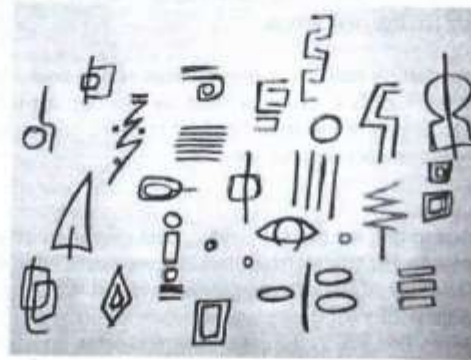


Fig. 1. Motifs as found in the reviewed paintings of Philip Gushem

Media, Techniques and Processes

Gushem uses watercolours, pencils, and enamels occasionally but favours the oil paint medium as applied on canvas supports. During the Transformation Period he painted on pressed wood as well, but is now consistent in his use of canvas. These canvasses are prepared in the conventional manner. They are stretched on wooden frames then sized with glue to create a layer upon which the paint can rest. Glue prevents the pigment from coming in direct contact with the canvas thereby retarding the rotting process.

Linseed oil is the vehicle for mixing the oil paints. Pigments are applied in thin washes then allowed to dry before other thick layers of desired colours are added. Enamel paints are applied directly unto the canvas from the containers. Here emphasis is on the wide range of interesting effects produced from spillage, dots, splashes and drips. Application of watercolours begins from light tones to dark tones. Colour application is done with the aid of brushes. The wooden handles are used to create special effects. Wet on wet method is sometimes used for variety.

Colours are not used for any philosophical significance. Cool colours suggest depth, medium tones represent the middle distance, while warm ones suggest the foreground. This is true of the landscapes especially. These colours are derived from atmospheric conditions as determined by sunsets, harmattan, etc or from vegetational forms as trees, rocks and finally from manipulated derivatives.

Forms are first rendered as lines, then painted in with the brush using hard edge techniques. Colours are subsequently rendered linearly, taking vertical or horizontal formats. Some colours run across the forms already painted. This heightens the distortion and ultimately transforms the hard-edge forms. The length of time for completing a painting, according to Gushem, is dependent upon level of commitment, devotion or importance. On the average three days are enough.

Analysis of Selected Period Paintings

Transformation Period - "View from Area 'A' Site Z", (Fig.2), derives its inspiration from one of nature's most valuable gifts to mankind, trees. The pleasant green foliage forms the dominant pictorial element. These trees are almost recognisable. No attempt is made at planning a horizon. The foliage is spiral, abstracted zigzag lines rendered in light and dark tones to represent transformed elements of the landscape. There are white lines and splotches of paint in the foreground standing for a farm area. The sky has blues, greens and violets. A general overbearing white pervades the whole picture.



Fig. 2, Philip Gushem, "View from Area 'A' Site Z", oil painting, 202 cm x 76 cm, 1990

Transitional Period - The oil painting "*Corporate Lady*", (Fig.3), best exemplifies the later styles of the Transitional Period where the artist preoccupies himself with the aesthetics of stylisation and fusion of form into abstracted space. On the left, there is a slightly recognisable female figure with aquiline features in an elongated profile pose reminiscent of ancient Egyptian wall murals. Her hair swirls towards the right of the picture plane where it is filled up with high-rise buildings evocative of a city, of the magnitude of Lagos. The buildings are elongated. This effect is achieved through the application of lines repeated vertically, with some cutting across in short dashes almost like pointillist dots extended just a bit longer. Above these structures is a brilliant sun, radiating raw cadmium yellow rays over the city. On the lower right edge of the foreground, brilliant hues of cadmium red, cobalt blue and white

are painted with sweeping brushstrokes, creating unity of design. As usual the colour white is used to create effect of depth in the sky and at equidistant points on the canvas.



Fig. 3, Philip Gushem, "*Corporate Lady*", oil painting, 94cm x 72cm, 1994

Third Period - "Man In The City", (Fig.4), has as its central ethos, a plethora of decorative patterns derived primarily from the architecture of northern Nigeria rendered in a beadlike manner. The art of linear composition interpolated with motifs has been developed to a high degree. The central figure is illusionistic as he is buried behind a Philipian mesh of vertical lines with only colours distinguishing his lost form. This is a deliberate design manipulation to show that man can get lost in the city. Perhaps this is a village man newly arrived in the city and is lost in its sheer magnitude. This city could be the city of our dreams or of our dread. Here all sorts of economics gimmickries go on, the social landscape is agog with commercial activities and it can be daunting for a new

come without a guide. The use of white to supposedly heighten the visual drama is subdued in this painting. It is rather a harmonious blend of magentas, purples, blues, leaf greens, lemon yellows, colours of the rainbow, that hold sway.



Fig. 3, Philip Gushem, "Man in the City", oil painting, 204cm x 78cm, 1996

The Critique

Certain critical remarks are necessary concerning the artist's use of colour, motifs, symbols, range of media and techniques.

Use of Colour – Philip Gushem's oeuvre demonstrates a high mastery of colour as much as his contemporaries in the Zaria Art School have. While Kefas Danjuma (b.1958) may direct his attention to the spatial aspects of colour, and Jerry Buhari (1959) to its fluid, technical and symbolic possibilities, Gushem explores the basic aesthetic propensities of colour. He uses white excessively. In the hands of a less capable painter, it might make an otherwise good range of pictures look chalky. But Gushem manoeuvres its vibrancy and denies us the feeling of a naïve painting which is obviously not the artist's intention. In some instances, colours are applied raw, thereby limiting their symbolic essence; such ambiguity leads to usage of the same colours that depict poverty of struggle to also depict scenes of joy and life or culture and tradition.

Motifs and Symbols - For one who has relied heavily on motifs and symbols to embellish pictures produced essentially during the third period of his abstraction incursion, it is surprising that Gushem does not attach any philosophical significance to them. In the traditional context, these motifs are supposed to be genetic codes and formulae with deep meanings and implications for the parent society they are derived from. To avoid misinterpretation, it is advocated that the artist attempts applying appropriate motifs with their approximate meanings. The artist favours the angular geometrical patterns since they are so prevalent. The artist can adapt the numerous circles, semi-circles, half moons and animal motifs inherent in northern Nigerian architecture and crafts. However as an

artist who gains inspiration from cultural themes and has concern for the rustic level of our socio-economic life, Gushem has indeed striven to make his art meaningful and has remained faithful to its goals to the last drop of his artistic ingenuity.

Range of Media – Much in line with the renaissance spirit of Zaria artists, where oil paintings on canvas hold the highest esteem, Gushem has restricted himself to oil colours, neglecting other media that can build variety and dynamism into his large repertoire of paintings (Gbaden, 2011:68). He should dare to experiment with many materials such as acrylics, gouache, polymer paints, watercolours, pen and ink, and mixed media of synthetic and found objects. One medium alone has its own distinct characteristic that gives it advantage over others. For instance nothing can surpass the transparencies of watercolours, or the dry brush effect of gouache or the glazes of oils or the tactility so effectively achieved with mixed media techniques.

Technical Proficiency - Gushem's distortion of reality resultant from his abstraction tango has made him seem too fixated in his approach to handling the technical problems of his cherished medium, oils. His persistent use of the brush as sole tool for applying paint onto the much cherished canvas could be negotiated. Surely other tools for experimentation can be adopted; the palette knife for instance or his fingers. Even though this writer agrees that his insistence to handle the brush sorely helps him to achieve the delicate finesse in his picturesque statements. Many students have become his protégés in this unique style of delicate aesthetics, especially as it applies to paintings of landscapes, rural scenery, cultural activities, and the re-interpretation of the cityscapes of Nigeria.

Conclusion

The effervescent presence of white colouration in the painting aesthetic of Philip Gushem as a factor for achieving the illusion of depth possesses some merit when viewed from the perspective of global art practice. Painters have always tended to use white to simulate the effect of light falling on subjects, transparencies, opacity, smoke, water, clouds and other ephemeral, spiritual and elemental significations. Caravaggio [1571-1610], a master of chiaroscuro, spent his entire art career finding new ways of expressing the effect of light on the subjects in his paintings. His painting, *Conversion of Saint Paul* [1601], shows the subjects bathed in dramatic intense white light, which suffuses the whole composition, but leaves a dark background behind to show effective use of positive and negative space. The learned apostle is thrown off his confounded horse and an attendant tries to restrain it so it does not trample on the fallen rider¹.

White also suited the temperament of Spanish artist El Greco (1541-1614) for executing his elongated paintings. His oil painting *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, (1586), is divided into two pictorial planes, an earthly one and a heavenly one. On both planes white permeates the whole picture plane. Above, the heavenly hosts ride on clouds of glory while below the choir of faithful, undergoes the rituals of burial. Noticeable are the collars, clerical garbs, cloud formations, the Christ figure who welcomes the transfigured Orgaz, and the pervading ambience surrounding the whole picture, are all depicted in white.²

¹ Microsoft Encarta (2009)

² Microsoft Encarta (2009)

The Tempest [The Bride of the Wind], a painting by Oskar Kokoschka (1886-1980), done in 1914 also seems to vindicate Gushem's use of white pigment. The two figures who dominate the picture in Kokoschka's painting are depicted amidst whirls of thick white oil paint as if to emphasis the stormy emotions of the lovers. Most of Kokoschka's paintings are usually laden with thick white pigment (Seiz 1981:152).

It is also possible that if thorough investigations are carried, one may likely find parallels in Nigerian painting where, this white colouration is entrenched. Gushem may not be a lone pariah after all, meriting prosecution for forging new canons of aesthetic presentation. However this researcher would rather leave that aspect to further research by interested art theorists since the possibilities seem limitless.

We have followed Philip Gushem's logical, thematic departure from formalistic representation, and his enduring romance with stylisation, [which for him is actually a subtle form of abstraction], to his rigorous romance with abstraction. In this bid, he has had to accept Nigeria's contemporaneous exigencies, by depicting them in his oeuvre. A sensibility highly cherished and advocated for. His art in the period under review evolved to embrace a perceptive response to social issues; a virtue worth extolling. He may have to free himself from the rigid confines and strictures of over-reliance on one medium [oil] and technique [the brush] so as to continue to truly transform his whole artistic career for the better. At the moment, his incursion into acquiring a doctorate degree in Art History has stolen him away from the canvas. Certainly, when he resumes studio practice, his aesthetic gambit, his technical proficiency, his cultural authenticity, having been grounded in art theorisation, would transfigure his paintings.

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