

# Realism, eloquence and symbolism in Reuben Ugbine's ceramic sculptures

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## **ABSTRACT**

Ceramics is often seen as utilitarian art, although some contemporary Nigerian ceramists like Chris Echeta, Tony Umunna and Ozioma Onuzulike have tried to re-inscribe it as veritable fine art. Conversely, sculpture in recent times has shifted mostly towards the stylised, abstract and conceptual, as can be seen in recent works by select sculptors. Although the above trends may be deemed to be general, there are still artists who seem to defy or subvert the trends through the formal and iconographic essences of their works. The works of Reuben Ugbine, a graduate of sculpture from Yaba College of Technology Lagos, provide a good example and have received huge attention due to their style, visual eloquence and social commitment. This paper, therefore, examines Ugbine's ceramic sculptures and how they transcend the banality of genre and subvert the common expectations from contemporary ceramics and sculpture in their embodiment of meaning and social relevance.

## INTRODUCTION

Ceramics is practised across Nigeria by artists of different backgrounds trained in different art schools around the country. While some of these artists see ceramics as purely utilitarian art, others approach it with a view to marrying function with content or celebrating form over content or vice versa. In the history of ceramics in Nigeria, there have been artists who committed themselves to the basic essence of ceramics art; that is, the exploration of aesthetics and function. Beyond this category, others have explored possibilities previously not imagined within the realm of ceramics by breaking away from the limitations of function in favour of content. Among this group are such artists as Chris Echeta, Tony Umunna, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Ngozi Omeje. (Ikwuemesi et al 2020) However, an artist like Reuben Ugbine has taken a different route in his understanding and practice of ceramics as well as in his effort to transcend the obvious and commonplace mainly by combining the techniques of ceramics, sculpture and painting in his works.

Born to Nigerian parents in 1956 in Anponya, Ghana, Ugbine studied sculpture at Yaba College of Technology, Lagos, Nigeria, where he equipped himself with the knowledge of anatomy and proportion

and a refined spatial awareness that he brings to his realistic and colourful ceramic sculpture. After graduation from Yaba College of Technology, he was appointed a lecturer at Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Nigeria, an appointment he held between 1980 and 1987 before returning to full-time studio practice (theculturetrip.com, 2020). His career as a lecturer at Auchi did not only deepen his knowledge of form, but it also helped him to break through self-consciousness and see beyond the personal homestead and cultivate his eclectic interest.

In practice, Ugbine maintains a double-edge approach; he carves wood, producing abstract anthropomorphic forms and stylised figures while also modelling with clay to create what can be referred to as "social realism - human figures that seem to disclose the existence of various aspects of the Nigerian way of life" (http://aabru.co.uk, 2020). His fired clay works, usually presented on a small scale and decorated with engobe, constitute aspects of his work that evoke specific images of history and daily existence for the spectator. In their minimality, they remind the viewer of the legendary Lilliputians, although minimalisation is the artist's technique and means of space and idea management. It is these clay

sculptures that constitute the focus of this paper.

Looking at a collection of Reuben Ugbine's ceramic sculptures displayed in a gridded rack in his apartment compares to watching a panoramic array of news events unfold sequentially in three dimensions. From one chamber of the rack to another, they seem to open up, yielding their form and content gradually. Taken together, they become what Wilson (2013:152) has described as "an encyclopaedia of variations on a theme." In that sense, they represent varying acts from the scenes of life as lived in Nigeria. Each piece represents an opinion, a situation, a story, or an event. Ugbine is a master storyteller who believes in making narratives that are stripped down to the point where every detail becomes relevant. He has the knack for translating human experiences into visual forms that read like drama and poetry, which describe different scenarios pieced together as fragments of a people's history. Although his ceramic sculpture is usually on a small scale, its impact is extraordinary, if empathic, and its combination of simplicity and directness impressive. Thus, it can be argued that the works aspire to the ideals of poetry where the affective power lies in the attainment of the enormity of meaning through the economy of means.

Beyond their formal energy, Ugbine's pieces engage the audience both literally and metaphorically. This fact will be elaborated and elucidated through a critical engagement of Ugbine's style, form, techniques and content.

It can be argued that the artist's interests straddle sculpture and ceramics. Ceramics often aims for utility in its essence, although recent techniques used by some artists have tended to re-inscribe it as fine art (Ikwuemesi et al, 2020). Sculpture, on the other hand, is easily one of the fine arts and often commits beyond form through social-oriented content. In light of this, it seems that Ugbine's works are tactically located in the middle of the above binary, creating a middle ground where ceramics and sculpture complement each other, not only in form but in content as well. It is possible that Ugbine could have chosen other media other than clay as his favourite but he seems to enjoy the malleability offered by clay in view of the limitations inherent in the minimalist architecture of his figures.

### Form and Style

Form is the basic element of all art and it is therein that Ugbine commences his articulation, manipulation and transformation of ideas into reality. In

terms of form, Ugbine's works portray him as a lover and master of realism. His forms, though highly minimalised and suggestive, are not idle in their outlook and character. They are imbued with life and attitude of their own which are leveraged for the engagement of the audience at the levels of aesthetics and empathy. The figures and their formal characters approximate frozen scenes from the mundane lives of ordinary people or even people we feel we know. The figures, at a cursory look, may appear simplistic or commonplace, but on critical interrogation, they expose their symbolic energy which resonates with the qualities of storytelling. In other words, Ugbine is a fine storyteller, and his terracotta sculpture forms are his words, metaphor and imagery. This quality easily pervades all the illustrations of the artist's works included here.

Ugbine expresses universal concerns. There is volatile energy that permeates his works and facilitates a compelling experience as viewers try to imagine the story and mood harboured in the compositions. The specificity of reference that Ugbine's ceramic sculpture conveys is presented in visual forms which unfold like a series of melodrama and metaphor. The processes involved in their configuration are of equal interest to the images that he has

observed and documented as well as the resulting forms. His artistic talent seems to draw immensely from the pop art culture, especially its recourse to mass appeal. Depending on his personal experiences, Ugbine gleans most of his subjects from everyday events and situations, creating works that are aesthetically charged and emotionally arresting. While his style may be direct, it is effective and appropriate for his technique and the emotional content of his forms. It is driven by a clear, natural formal language that, combined with the generous application of colours, resonates with poetic qualities that stimulate layers of experience for the viewer. In each work, the drapery of the figure(s) is constructed to echo meaningful connections to identity and status, a technique that alludes to the social nature of textile and fashion arts. In other words, he creates "people" (not mere figures), gives them identity and assigns roles to them based on the narratives he weaves around them. He does this in full recognition of the essence of empathy in the interaction between the work of art and the audience.

### **Visual Narratives as Content**

Empathy, the impassioned commerce between the work of art and the audience, is often a major factor in Ugbine's painted terracotta. Although he seems to pursue a

similar objective with Doris Salcedo, a Colombia-born artist who argues that she is rather addressing experiences and not narrating a particular story (Wilson, 2013), Ugbine imbues his works with stories that address his experiences in the Nigerian geography. In *Pineapple Seller*, *Fruit Seller* and *Mother Cooking Food* (Figs. 1 - 3), the artist captures the role of women, particularly in his home country, Nigeria, where domestic chores and childcare are regarded as the exclusive responsibility of women besides their expected contribution to the family industry and economy. They toil all day, either on the farm growing crops or at the market square selling their produce, sometimes with babies on their backs, just to keep the family going. And in the evenings, they return home to prepare food and take care of the children however exhausted they may be. The full weight and effect of these responsibilities are reflected in *Pineapple Seller* where the woman, seated on a stool and carrying a baby on her back, succumbs to sleep, not minding some potential customers and pilferers that might be around. Also in *Fruit Seller*, the posture and facial expression of the figure make one intuitively feel that she is probably faced with a "bad" market (poor patronage) and is uncertain about her survival. She carries a baby on her back

just like the *Pineapple Seller*. Ugbine's interest in modelling women carrying babies on their backs while at work (see also Figs. 4 and 5) is one way of confronting his audience, in an emphatic manner, with the silent tasks women grapple with from day to day in building the family and the society at large. Subtly, Ugbine's compositions, with their underlying stories and meanings, problematize and subvert feminist realities and theories in a most positive way. He seems to raise questions around the definition of feminism as mostly a Western phenomenon in the African world and whether feminism should take on a different meaning in a purportedly patriarchal society that clearly depends on the role and contribution of women for its development and perpetuation. In other words, feminism becomes a culturally-sanctioned celebration of women's indispensability and not a means to an endless debate about gender equality or a reaction against masculinism, as popularly held by most scholars (Karen, 1988; Raina, 2017: 119-157; Chnadler and Mundy, 2020, Omeje, 2018) . Thus, beyond their arresting formal architecture, the works remind one of the peculiarities of societal genderisation in this part of the world and the place of women in it.



Fig. 1 - Pineapple Seller



Fig. 2 - Fruit Seller



Fig. 3 - Mother cooking food



Fig. 4 - Pregnant Mother I



Fig. 4 - Pregnant Mother (side view)



Fig. 5 - Pregnant Mother II



Fig. 5 - Pregnant Mother II (side view)

*Draughts Players* (Figs. 6) and *Ncholakoto Players* are other works driven by a narrative compulsion to entertain the viewer. Using the simple technique of pinching and slabbing, he explores a sort of concentration and scheming that is involved in winning a game. In the works, all the players are engrossed in the game with the opponents eager to play their turns or spot foul play. This set of works

alludes to common pastimes in some of Nigeria's urban areas and villages and seems to stir up some nostalgia for some long-forgotten indigenous games and sports. Although Ugbinde does not create his figures with mathematical precision, the players are so life-like that they are as if they would move their limbs at any moment. He would make a clay slab, cut out some pieces, roll them up to form the heads, the torsos and the limbs, and then

pierce their eyes with a cylindrical object in a way that strikes a resemblance with Nok terracotta images. Although he does not attempt to reproduce reality, Ugbine imbues his figures with the features and

necessary anatomical details that make them alive and expressive. They are generally a confluence where realism meets with symbolism in conjunction with form and meaning.



Fig. 6 - *Draughts Players*



Fig. 7 - *Hairdresser*



Fig. 8 - *Readers*



Fig. 9 - *Boy and His*



Fig. 10 - *Search for Water*



Fig. 11 - *Boy Carrying Fruits*

While *Hairdresser* (Fig. 7) and *Readers* (Fig. 8) yield similar readings with *Draughts Players*, there is some cadence of formal similarities among them. The works highlight the popular pastime activities people engage in to keep their worries at bay. Curiously, some of the works share a

remarkable facial resemblance. In fact, it appears Ugbine has devised only one shape of mouth, nose and eye for almost every one of his clay figures. The shapes of these features look so much alike that they give his figures the resemblance that makes them seem as if they are members

of the same family. On each face is written a perceivable sign of seriousness or mood fitting for the role he/she is drafted to play. Their pose is dramatic, which suggests Ugbine's desire to create scenarios where every one of his subjects is treated as an actor. To the viewer, there is nothing hidden about the figures; their poses immediately suggest the actions they are engaged in and the meanings they possibly embody. To this extent, they have the power to challenge the imagination through their philosophic reflection and unspoken intents.

The consistency in Ugbine's formal language is rather unusual given that he employs a variegated colour scheme and wrestles with different poses in the effort to invigorate his works. In *Boy and His Loads* (Fig. 9), *Search for Water* (Fig. 10) and *Boy Carrying Fruits* (Fig. 11), the viewer is confronted with the pathetic situations of existential crisis and trauma among many children subjected to abuse or forced into child labour, which can be interpreted in two different ways. First, while they may be a non-verbal protest against child labour, they are also a proposal to humanity for a positive and collective response against child labour and abuse. In *Boy Carrying Fruits* especially, it appears Ugbine sculpted directly from life rather than working from

imagination, as can be seen from the expressive pose. He appeals to our emotions in a vivid and realistic way by exploring the boundaries between child labour and abuse in an innovative and idiosyncratic manner. Here, the boy is burdened on his head with fruits displayed on a tray and caused to kneel down. He maintains a stiff pose and wears a blank, sober expression. His gaze is fixed probably at someone who has pinned him down. He appears to be waiting to hear, "stand up; next time, you should sell your goods and come home with much money instead", as is usually the case with his peers in such a situation. Seen from another angle, they could be a reflection of the African positivised view of child labour which rejects the notion of abuse and upholds the need for the child to contribute to the family economy or industry as situations and circumstances may require. Although such a reality is likely to be seen as a fallout of the pervasive poverty on the African continent, it remains culturally acceptable in much of Africa.

Most of the standing figures in Ugbine's collection are couples created with clay and finished with engobe. They are created in series. Dressed up in well-tailored traditional attire sewn with colourful uniform cloth and designed in styles that are associated with different ethnic groups

in Nigeria, each couple seems to pose for a snapshot. Every surface is defined in detail with equal attention – every headgear, dress, jewellery and walking stick. In their colourful dress codes and flexible poses, the works appear attractive. The viewer is drawn to the multiple cultures, as well as to the romantic experiences they engender, but the ultimate appeal of these miniature ceramic sculptures typifies Ugbine's innovative power, as can be seen in the crafting of their clothes. In all, the attire metaphorically evokes the image of a social club attended by people from different ethnic affiliations in Nigeria.

Interestingly, the figures offer different possibilities of display for appreciation. They can be presented in singles as individuals, as in *Hajia* and *Mallam* (Figs. 12 and 13), and in twos or groups as a couple(s) (as can be seen in Figs. 14, 15, and 16), posing for snapshots. *Hajia* and *Mallam* are also a couple, but they are separated and shown here individually as models. As each of the couples in the series, their feet are only revealed to the viewer in the mind's eye as they are completely hidden from view under their long garments and wrapper. At a glance, the figures appear as if they were created by means of the slab method. But on a closer look, it becomes obvious that the figures are casts, with each given a

different finishing. For instance, *Couple II* and *Couple III* (Figs. 15 and 16) suggest evidence of replication, which was only possible with the use of a mould. Whereas they share formal similarities, their dress colours, headgears and bead necklaces were manipulated to create some differences. With this approach, Ugbine is able to meet the demand for his work placed by people who collect them for themselves and as souvenirs. There is no doubt that the demand is high given the wide appeal of the works. However, they are not mere craft or tourist art, which Nelson Graburn describes in these terms:

The subject matter and form of commercial arts must symbolize to outsiders a few central characteristics or beliefs about their makers...The major tendency is toward naturalism, the simple portrayal of some being, person, or object in such a way as to be understood and recognized by someone who is not too familiar with the culture (Graburn, 1976: 17).

As Ben Amos has also explained it: "Tourist art ...operates as a minimal system which must make meanings as accessible as possible across visual boundary lines... (a) reduction in [the] semantic level of traditional forms, expansion of neo-traditional secular motifs, and utilization

of adjunct communicative systems" (Graburn, 1976: 17).

There is a sense in which Ugbine's pieces can be termed "tourist" but certainly not in Shiner's sense of the term which, as Steele (1995:74-77) asserts, is limited. We argue thus not because Steele (1995) insists that local people also patronise tourist art – and most of Ugbine's collectors are also local people – but mostly for the fact that the artist has maintained a sense of social commitment in creating art that echoes the realities of his environment. Thus, stylistically and formally, the works cannot be easily pigeonholed into the tourist art or craft realm. They are located at a point

where they defy such traditional classification, especially for their ability to communicate meaning by aligning themselves with common attitudes and experiences. While they are not necessarily functional, they are not also "art for art's sake" which Achebe (1975: 19) describes as "a deodorised piece of dog shit." Although it is possible to view the language of Ugbine's forms from Jules-Rosette's (1984) theory of "pidignisation" and "creolisation", that is, the domestication of popular language or experience (art in this instance) in a peculiar slant, Ugbine's works remain highly evocative and expressive.



Fig. 12 - *Hajia*



Fig. 13 - *Mallam*



Fig. 14 - Couple I



Fig.15 - Couple II



Fig. 16 - Couple III

## Conclusion

Taken together, Ugbine's ceramic sculpture defies the general notions about contemporary ceramics and sculpture, even as it relies on both arts for its form and *raison d'être*. Generally, it conveys both the pride of being a Nigerian and the sadness of the tendentious consequences of lack and subjugation thereof. His oeuvre offers fresh perspectives on everyday concerns in simple but effective and uncompromising visual language. Although Ugbine has been employing clay in relaying socially relevant experiences over the past few years, his interest in exploiting multiple points of view in creating dynamic figures is ever gaining

momentum. In a personal way, he explores colours, patterns and styles to the point that they figuratively take the viewer to the Nigerian streets. Even as he sculpts highly critical statuettes embodying the realities of the rising cost of living, particularly for the common man, entailed by a capitalist economy, he also takes time to model the rich in their showy display of affluence through fashion. "The idea", he declares, "is to thrill the beholder to a standstill..." (Ugbine, 2016). Yet in that "thrilling" exchange, he goes beyond entertainment and amusement – some of the hallmarks of tourist art – to provoke thought and command serious attention in his audience.

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