

A Dialogue with Abraham Uyovbisere's Semi-Nude Figures

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Abstract

Abraham Uyovbisere has been labelled a feminist for making numerous naturalistic images of females (Akintunde-Johnson 1989, Njoagwu, 1993). A good number of his paintings are semi nude representations of the female and are therefore covered from the waist downwards leaving the upper body completely bare. This raises questions about why an artist who has been publicly regarded as a feminist makes such images. Furthermore, it is necessary to ascertain whether the paintings in question validate or reinforce feministic ideals. Given that Freud established that the natural human is prone to distortions and censorship of original intentions (Richards, 1973), Shank and Tilley's (1987) proposed method of "decent ring" the artist from the analysis of his work was used in the critical and contextual analyses of randomly selected semi nude paintings. Feminist positions on female imagery formed the interpretive context. The results of the analyses revealed that Abraham Uyovbisere employs the wrap to serve euphemistic purposes in his semi-nude female representations. It was also observed that when viewed from the feministic standpoint, the semi-nude paintings are objectified images of the female gender and are therefore an affront to feminism.

Introduction

The female figure has been the subject of artistic representation long before art became formalised as a discipline and a profession. It appears that amongst male artists, there is a general fascination with female figures. Proponents of Feminism have taken an unappreciative stance against this fascination and interest as they have criticised the idea of woman as "art object". This paper takes a critical look at the semi-nude paintings of Abraham Uyovbisere, an artist who has concerned himself with copious representations of the female and in so doing has earned a reputation as being feminist.

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Journalist's Review on Abraham Uyovbisere

Journalists have attempted to review the work of Uyovbisere and situate his interests and ideologies on the basis of their reviews. Akintunde-Johnson (1989) in, *Rhythm of Colours at the Museum* asserts that, "Uyovbisere's Emancipation series are a running commentary on the newly acquired restlessness of the womenfolk who had been forever repressed by a male-dominated system; his women are in active engagement for social rectitude." In the article titled *Uyovbisere's Adventures into Nature*, Njoagwu (1993) opines that Uyovbisere "... proves to be in love with sea-scapes and feminism." The conclusion that the artist proves to be in love with feminism was borne out of identification with the artist's pre-occupation with female figural depiction. In the article titled *In a World of His Own*, Adebanjo (1993) describes the artist thus: "The most dominant motif that sets Uyovbisere's art apart is the nude woman."

The Lapse in Journalists' Reviews

A larger part of any society would mindlessly call an artist feminist when he/she showed voracious interest and perhaps great aptitude in the depiction of female subject matter. The artist would also be regarded as feminist when this is the view that is being upheld and circulated through the media. The artist reveals that he began painting female figures in 1981 and has consistently made paintings that primarily focus on females since then.

A good number of his paintings are semi nude representations of the female and are therefore covered from the waist downwards leaving the upper body completely bare. This raises questions about why an artist who has been publicly regarded as a feminist would make such images. Feminist artists create art works that illustrate and reinforce feminist theories. More importantly, a validation of female identity characterises many works by feminist artists. For Abraham Uyovbisere to be referred to as a feminist (as journalists have done publicly), therefore, he must be seen to be making art works that reinforce feministic ideals. This paper has attempted to verify this view.

Feminist Views

The feminist points of view which were found relevant for the analysis of Uyovbisere's semi-nude images were taken from texts on female imagery by Frueh and Roth. Frueh (1998) in the essay *making a Mess*:

Women's Pleasure reveals that amongst feminists, there is a discriminatory preference for a "monster/beauty" against "passive beauty". In this frame of reference, the lots of time, energy, efforts, and innovation channelled by women into making themselves into the orderly beauty stereotype reinforced and demanded by society is disparaged. "Monster/beauties" on the other hand, transcend such trivial preoccupations and set for themselves loftier aspirations and expectations.

Talking Back: an exchange with Marcel Duchamp is an essay by Roth (1998). In this essay, Roth describes her own performance in literary form. Roth concludes her performance by taking references from Faith Ringgold's texts on "Dinner at Gertrude Stein's". Ringgold's texts on "Dinner at Gertrude Stein's" is particularly significant as it presents a narrative about a fictional young African American, Willa Marie Simone, who moved to Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century and for the rest of her life, lived there as an expatriate artist, model and café owner.

The text talks about how Willa Marie Simone modelled for Picasso in order to be an artist. The model's aliveness and participatory role of the painting process are implied in Ringgold's explanations that "in order to learn how to be an artist Willa Marie models for Picasso and Matisse." What is implied is that between the artists (Picasso and Matisse) and the model (Willa Marie), there are exchanges and inter-changing of roles – the model studies the artist while the artist studies the model. More so, the model becomes a subject, as the artist in turn becomes a model and instructor for the model. The author envisions a validation of the relevance that transcends the physical body of the female to a place of equality in social and professional platforms.

The representation of the nude female figure by male artists is commonplace. Feminists have argued against the recent decadent portrayals and allusions to the female as "sex objects" and creatures of minimal intelligence by "sexist" men.

Duncan in Okpe (2008) observes that history of art has been consistent in the representation of the female body for the male viewing pleasure. She states that, "... the subject of the nude in art brings together discoveries of representations, morality and female sexuality...her body contorted according to the dictates of his erotic will."

Approaches to Critical Analysis

Five paintings from the artist's collection of images were randomly selected and examined. Two of the paintings were displayed in his studio, one had been purchased by Sam Amuka, one of his collectors, and the other two were in unknown locations (due to lapses in record keeping). A synthesis of several relevant research approaches is adopted.

Shanks and Tilley (1987) assert that it is not realistic to regard the artist as a "supreme" creator of the work he or she produces. They maintain that the idea is for the artist to be merely decentred, not abolished from the analysis. This is the approach that is adapted for analysis of Uyovbisere's paintings. The artist is therefore merely decentred from the analysis but still is an important part of the process.

Strachey and Richards (1973) reveal that in the course of his research, Freud made various groundbreaking discoveries, a number of which concern this study. He describes the preconscious behavioural development of male artists in the following statements:

....In the first place, he understands how to work over his day-dreams in such a way as to make them lose what is too personal about them and repels strangers, and to make it possible for others to share in the enjoyment of them. He understands too, how to tone them down so that they do not easily betray their origin from proscribed sources...if he is able to accomplish all this, he makes it possible for other people once more to derive consolation and alleviation from their own sources of pleasure in their unconscious which have become inaccessible to them; he earns their gratitude and admiration and he has thus achieved *through* his phantasy what originally he had achieved only *in* his phantasy – honour, power, and the love of women. p423

The physician reveals that uncovering the unconscious mental workings of the mind is often met with *violent/tenacious resistance and rejection*, and consequently, humans are prone to censorship and distortion of their original intentions to make them acceptable to society. Understandably, these distorted and censored impulses that manifest in subtle forms can be understood through psychoanalytical processes. These findings by Freud further strengthen the position that writers and art critics ought not to place the entire weight of their judgement about an artist's work on the artist's explanations.

Critical review in this context means "literal separating into parts in order to understand the whole...to try to see the components of the works (Barnet, 1982). Feminist theories and perspectives that are taken from the writings of Frueh (1998), Roth (1998) and Duncan in Opke (2008) provided interpretive context for analysis of Uyovbisere's semi-nude paintings.

The Artist, Abraham Uyovbisere

Abraham Uyovbisere was born to Alexander Odjanuyovwi Uyovbisere and Comfort Omote-ore Uyovbisere on 18th July 1963, in Burutu, Delta state. He attended Saint Joseph's Roman Catholic Mission School for his primary education (1970-1975) and Burutu Grammar School for his secondary education (1975-1980). He studied Fine Arts at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1981. At graduation, Abraham Uyovbisere was the recipient of the Yusuf Grillo and T.A. Fasuyi prizes for best student in drawing and painting respectively.

In 1988, Uyovbisere started his career in Lagos as a professional artist. He further went to the University of Benin and obtained a Masters degree in Fine Art (MFA). Adebajo (1993), states that Uyovbisere is known for his naturalistic representations of the female figure. The artist admits that he consciously became aware of his interest in the female form in 1981, his first year at the university. He was encouraged to revisit female figural paintings when in the following year a male lecturer, Chidum Onuchukwu, volubly praised a nude female figural painting he had made.

The Semi-nude Female figures



PLATE I: African Nude II, 2001, 120cm×90cm, oil on canvas, Abraham Ujovbisere's studio

In the painting in Plate I above, the artist demonstrates his fixation on full-breasted female figures. The foremost female figure stares at the viewer unabashedly, thereby dispelling any doubt about her awareness of the viewer's gaze, and absence of diffidence even in her unclad state. Similarly, the second figure in the painting fits into the disparaged passive/decorative beauty ideal. Her arched back plumps up the breasts as though to draw attention to them. The effected look of coyness is directed at an indeterminate person(s) or audience. Full, long, silky hair is a recurring characteristic of the artist's female figures. Here, she flips her long, silky and full hair to one side as she turns her face frontally but directs her gaze to another viewer who appears to be at an adjacent viewing point far-off from the painter's viewing position.

The "decorative" and "prettifying" elements in this painting are the pointy full breasts, the long, silky, and full hair, the fussy hair arrangements, the studied facial expressions, and the contained warmth of the green wrap around the female figures' waists. The silhouette of a third figure in the background and the spiral brush strokes that link her blurry form to the two figures in the foreground denote continuance.



PLATE II: African Nude IV, 2001, 90cm×120cm, oil on canvas, Location unknown

The artist repeats the pattern of arranging the three figures in linear perspective in “African Nude IV” (Plate II).

Despite the rhythmic formation of oblique angles, diagonals and slanting planes affected by the linear perspective of the composition, all three figures face different directions, thereby giving away hints of dissonance. The most obvious hint in the nuances of dissonance created by the seeming identical figures is the obvious pouting of the lips of the first figure as she stares after an object or some person(s) by her left side.

With squared shoulders and arms drawn slightly backwards, this figure “presents” the viewer with a stark view of her breasts even as she pointedly looks away as though in defiant refusal to meet the viewer’s gaze. The right corner of her lower lip nips up in a pout and her jaw appears to be set in determination as it juts outwards away from her neck. She seems unconcerned about what picture she makes as she stands bolt upright in front of the viewer with her chest drawn outwards, her full round breasts eliciting the naturally human inclination towards tactility, her lovely face punctuated with a pout, her long full hair prettily arranged, and her tapering waist complementing her voluptuous frame.

The second figure in the painting appears to be a personification of gloomy lethargy. With her face downcast and her left arm crossed self-consciously over her midriff to rest on the crook of her arm as though in rebuttal of her partial nudity, she seems shy. However, an almost undetectable nuance in the rendering of her facial expression and in the tenseness of her rigid form suggests the inclusion of some quiet anger simmering amid the bashfulness. The shy appearance therefore, seems to be a cover-up for an underlying build up of rage. In the portrayal of this figure, the artist captures bashfulness, which overlays feelings of anger (probably as recourse to acceptance).

The brilliance of light radiating from the top right of the picture, reflects on the third figure, which appears to be closest to the light source in a shadow. With her head turned away from the viewer, she looks toward this light, and her silhouetted form fades considerably from the viewer's gaze. Another feature that is not immediately noticeable when one looks at this painting, is the method through which the artist achieves the frontal part of the third female form by fusing the second figure's wrapper (drapery) with the third figure's torso. This forms a balanced continuum of forms (from the first to the third, which appears to be far off). The inference to be drawn from this continuum of forms is that there exist implicit bonds that link the generality of females, or perhaps the artist's implied meaning that females are generally "cut from the same cloth".



PLATE III: Reclining Nude, 2001, 90cm×60cm, oil on canvas, collected by Sam Amuka

In the painting titled "Reclining Nude" (Plate III), the artist portrays a continuum of forms in an engaging manner. As the title of the painting suggests, the main subject is a woman who lies on her back. The back of this woman arches upward, causing the barely flattened breasts (the result of her posture) to appear heaved. She connects to the silhouette of another female figure by the touch of her right hand. The point where the figure's buttock meets with the larger figure's hand becomes the midpoint or centre of activity, which infuses cryptic elements into an otherwise ordinary painting.

The elegant "y" that is formed by the meeting of both female figures is precisely punctuated with a huge question mark (?) that begins from a point above the reclining figure's right breast and terminates at a point above her knees where light reflects on her wrap. The meaning of the letter "y" and the question mark to the artist can only be accurately revealed and verified through psychoanalysis (as there is a possibility that he is not consciously aware of the fact that he made these symbols, thereby making them a product of his unconscious mind). Nonetheless, both signs ordinarily bear *interrogative* connotations. This painting further explains the titling of the solo exhibition, *Labyrinth*, which the artist organized and hosted in 1993. Thus, despite the artist's affinity with the "womenfolk" due to intimate familial associations with his mother, in his preconscious reasoning, women are still to him a labyrinthine lot.

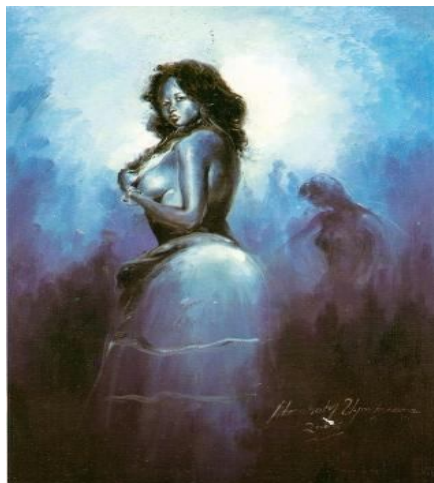


PLATE IV: *African Blues*, 2008, 61cm X 86cm, Oil on Canvas, Abraham Uyovbisere's studio

“African Blues” (Plate IV) is another monochromatic depiction of a semi nude female. The artist achieves in the painting of this female figure, an ambiance, which is distinctly identifiable in its sheer subtlety. This ambiance is precisely identifiable in the three quarter angle of the female’s face, the knowing look, which she directs at the viewer, and her overall appearance of astuteness. The effect thus gained is that of an *independent inner life*. She presents the viewer with a three quarter view of her face, and a side view of her upper torso.

Even so, she denies the viewer proper (side) view of her breast as she covers it with her left hand in what appears to be an averment of her power to decide what the viewer should see or not see, rather than shyness, coyness, or acquiescence to the wishes of either the artist or the viewer. There is implied participatory involvement of this female in the overall process of painting, which confirms Ringgold’s (1998) allusions to Willa Marie’s (the model cum artist) story (in Roth 1998), and further invalidates the passivity of females in the creative male artist/passive female model equation. The painting seems to insist that contrary to popular feminist opinions, the female model is not a passive entity that is gagged, and artistically pushed around by male artists before an array of applauding onlookers. One could even allege that the artist is trying to insist that the model chose to be portrayed in the manner that he has portrayed her in this painting.

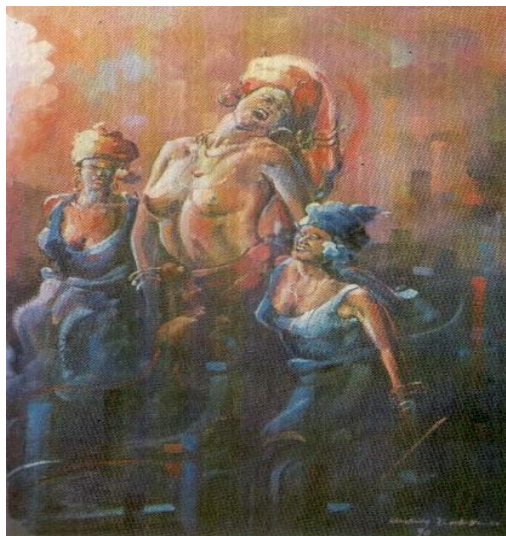


PLATE V: *Eruption II*, 1993, anon dimensions, oil on canvas, Location unknown

“Eruption II” (Plate V) is one of four paintings in the Eruption series. In this painting, (that features three female figures), there is evidence of movement of the forms, but only the magnified figure in the middle appears to be exuberant apparent validation of the title of the painting. She appears euphoric and is positioned right at the middle of the painting to underscore her importance in the overall composition. In manner of depiction, this figure fits into Frueh’s (1998) description of monster/beauty, which epitomizes *messiness*, “a wildness that aggressively calls attention to it and demands response.”

Frueh (1998) compares Monster/Beauty (which is favoured by the Feminist) and Passive Beauty and makes the summation that “the richest beauty is monster/beauty, erotically saturated with a twist, a ‘flaw’, a nastiness of attitude or appearance, which shows up the blandness of a passive ideal.” This is precisely the idea that this painting conveys. The middle figure’s facial contortions, posturing, bareness of chest, and fiery appearance of colour and form unequivocally cast this figure within the mould of Monster/Beauty. The relative lack of exuberance of the first and the third figures is emphasised by the exuberance of the second figure and vice versa.

The Wrap as a Euphemistic Tool in Nude Representations

In making the sculpture of the Aphrodite of Cnidus, Praxiteles ensured that her hand protectively covers her delicate body parts in order to give the impression that the viewer had come upon her unexpectedly, and she gives no consent to the viewer’s gaze. Clark (1956) observes that aside from the Aphrodite of Cnidus, Praxiteles also “executed for the Thespians, a statue in which the legs were draped and the breasts nude, around 350 B.C.” According to Clark, draping the legs and leaving the torso bare, Praxiteles achieved so firm a foundation for the figure that he could dispense with any support (vase, pillar and so on), thereby allowing the arms free play. For Praxiteles, the practice of draping the legs was to resolve the “despair of sculptors that the torso should rest on tapering, spindly supports”, and thus the drapery achieved for the figure a firm foundation (Clark, 1956). Like Praxiteles, Abraham Uyovbisere covers the legs of his female figures and leaves the torso bare. The wrap which is used to cover the nude female figures in Abraham Uyovbisere’s paintings serves the same euphemistic purposes as the posture of Praxiteles’ Venus of Cnidus.

Uyovbisere states that his unwillingness to “offend the sensibilities of any religious group” compels him to drape his nude figures from the waist downwards. The bareness of the upper body, the sensuality of their forms and suggestiveness of postures, titillates the senses and creates a lot of room for the same anti-puritanical feeling the artist claims to be unwilling to offend. In comparison, the nude figures of Michelangelo clearly show in execution and posturing that the intent is a complete mastery of the art of naturalistic representation and analysis of the human anatomy, with no innuendos and euphemisms.

The Idealization of Forms

The artist primarily portrays young females who are at their reproductive peak. In pre-twentieth century African art, ephebism of the human figure was a pervasive and unvarying characteristic, which the people combined with other characteristics to produce iconic images. On the other hand, Uyovbisere's depiction of fully-grown females in the prime of life, in the semi nude state, indicates his subliminal acceptance of young female images as ideal medium of expression and communication. The artist often portrays the female figures as possessing all his idealized qualities of feminine beauty. Hence, the qualities the artist accords all his female figures are - oval face; high forehead; small, symmetrical facial features; long silky hair; long, and often disproportionately slender limbs; voluptuous figure that includes round, full breasts and broad hips; slim, tapering waist; and bright chestnut brown complexion (for the paintings that are not monochromatic).

Conclusion

From the paintings analysed, the following key elements are manifest and noteworthy:

Plate I – Decorative beauty; an embodiment of the passive ideal

Plate II – Passive aggressiveness

Plate III– Mysterious and labyrinthine quality of females

Plate IV – Averment of feminine symbolic power

Plate V – Discordant Passion

The intent of this paper is not to label the artist as feminist or non-feminist (more so as not every painting that was made by the artist has been analysed), but to turn out facts that would lead to a reassessment of views/publications which referred to the artist as feminist, and further clarify the values that the artist's semi-nude paintings reinforce. The semi-nude figures with their seemingly apologetic and coy allusions to female sexuality (seen in discussion about the wrap) are objectified images of the womanhood. Duncan in Okpe (2008) defined how the female body can be objectified when idealized by male artists for the purely male gaze. The figures in the painting, African Nude II, African Nude IV, and Reclining Nude, clearly embody an ideal that is strongly criticized by feminists. African Blues (Plate IV) registers the defiance of non-feminist identified while Eruption II leads the viewer into making comparison. The result of the formal/contextual analysis does not bode well for the artist's reputation as a feminist.

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