

THE BEAUTY IN THE WASTE: AN ANALYSIS OF MURAINA AKEEM'S "METAL-MORPHOSIS"

by

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"A material or use of material simply does not hold one value, connotation or significance; instead, any material holds a different value and characteristic depending on the context in which it is used. This is nowhere clearer than in African artists' re-use of everyday bits and pieces".

--- Craig Halliday 2012

INTRODUCTION

We buy, we use and when out-of-use or tired of use, we throw away, but it keeps coming back - just like a buried seed, it rots and spring back to life. When things are thrown away they are re-christened, they become waste, trash or junk attracting such adjectives as; useless, "not needed" or "unproductive"; uninhabited, or worthless and so on. Then in the hands of others, they begin a new life, made valuable and attractive - One man's junk, another man's treasure one would say.

The process of making art of items that are primarily non-art materials, particularly trash or junk has attracted different names over time. Artists and art scholars, since Picasso's *Chair Caning* (1912) and Duchamp's *Fountain*, (1917), for want of specificity have labelled the by-product of this process (that though was initially found too radical to be accepted as art) such names as "readymade", "funk art", "trash art", "junk art" etc. Artists all over the globe, since the early 20th century have been exploring and experimenting with discarded items (waste) as medium/media for artistic expression, through a process generally referred to as "conversion", and the end products have not only been adjudge significantly impressive but beautiful.

Conversion refers to the use of an item or material for another purpose different to its original functional purpose(s) (Filani 1999). The processes has been explored over the years by studio artists and teachers of art, who are daily carrying out various studio-experiment oriented researches into devising new medium, new ideas, new materials, new means or new creative processes, in confronting their ever changing needs, thus breaking barriers in the transformation of ideas into visual forms.

Artists who are daily exploring waste or discarded items for creative expressions can be classified into two. The first are those who use waste as alternatives to the actual materials that are highly expensive. This is called "improvisation" and this is usually done in a bid to finding suitable alternatives for the actual materials that have become scarce, inaccessible, and the available few, unaffordable. This trend which cannot be disassociated from the depressed state of the nation's economy at a point in time, forced artists and art teachers to look inwardly, to 'local' materials for substitutes (Ademuleya 1999). The second are artists who deliberately and consciously explore waste as medium of creative expression. To the latter, both the process and the art are of significant connotations and thus require a proper discernment of the artist's intent in order to really capture the very essence of their works. Majority of the artists in this latter category are environmental activist, and conservationists who are genuinely concern with issues affecting our environment be it social, political, cultural, economic, or physical. Beyond their interest in recreating waste and aesthetics, their works are more of social commentaries. Muraina Akeem falls into this latter category. His use of discarded materials, inspired by the gross decadence and degradation of our environment, is powered by aesthetic and artistic vision and not out of share necessity.

Here in this exhibition, "***The Eden before Us***", Muraina, a member of Nigerian Conservation Foundation for over a decade who has been taking the discarded metals, repurposing it, and elevating it to "beautiful art works" for over the last two decades, calls our attention once again to the vanishing beauty of our land, of its increasing ugliness, the shrinking open space, and of an overall environment that is diminishing daily by unhealthy disposal of waste, creating more

problems than could ever be envisaged. Muraina's works which takes us back in time to the natural and peaceful Adams' **Eden** and the beginning of creation, in a peculiar way, is the conservationists' own attempt at fulfilling man's expected role as the 'keeper of the garden' and not its destroyer.

His Waste Exploration and Metal-Morphosis

Muraina's smiteries can generally be classified into three. The first are the assemblages which are made of scavenged motor spare parts and discarded metal sheets that are creatively repurposed mostly into free standing figures. Here in "**The Eden before Us**" they are mainly of animal figures. This includes "**Ara nfe isimi**", "**Wobia**", "**Agbero**", and "**Onigele-Ara**" among others. The second are the flat surface negative space figural patterns. In this, Muraina used his self created images, some abstracted and some idealised, as motifs, to create puzzled patterns. Like the typical puzzle game, the works in this category require some higher level of intelligence to comprehend. "**Erin folami**", "**Adun barin**", "**Oreke lewa**", "**Afuni Maseregun**", "**Afinju**" and "**Piri lo olongo ji**" and all in this group. The third category are the reliefs which in most cases are combinations of recreated flat sheets and discarded spare parts. Examples of this include "**Amolewa**", "**Conference**", and "**Iyawo oshingin**". They all attest to Muraina's capacity for metaphor and ability to see beyond the ordinary.

His Concern - His Messages

Muraina's concern in this exhibition is to call our attention to the purpose of creation as revealed by the Holy books and to remind us of our expected roles in "tending the garden". It is perhaps good for man to know that he (man) though pride himself to be the VIP, yet to the Creator, the environment, the first Eden and today's Eden (our natural environment) is much more important than the occupant (man) himself. The question today and as here raised by Muraina is *How well are we (men) taking care of our environment "our Eden"* – The Eden before us?

Muraina's '**metal-Morphosis**' are to engage us in conversations and inspire change in our attitudes towards the environment, 'our Eden'. The first step to doing this is evident in his choice of

his mother tongue, Yoruba, for titles of his works which can be viewed in two ways; first is to avoid his real message of being misunderstood as no other language will drum home better his message than the one he could twist and turn at will. The second is his interest in the campaign for the preservation of our local languages. That our local languages are fast disappearing is nothing but a fact. Language is the greatest means of connectivity between kith and kin. It can only be compared to umbilical cord that connects the mother (the community) to her child as well as the siblings to one another. To Muraina, this is the real **“Okun Ebi”** that should not be allowed to “cut” nor run into extinction.

The focus on animals in **“Eden before us”**, though a metaphor, is to enable us define the environment beyond the physical. The animal figures cover a wide range of themes from physical degradation to social and even spiritual decadence. To Muraina, man’s failure to properly manage his physical environment is as a result of the deficiencies he suffers in his spiritual and psychological “Eden” a reflection of the failure of man’s immediate environment – his HOME. How many parents of today could really be called *Abiyamo* - **Aboja gboro**? How well do parents tend their homes to avoid raising **“Wobia”** who are never contented with whatever they have and no matter how rich they are, when placed in position of trust they still embezzle public funds. They could but best be described as psychologically imbalance and sick.

Other works on display, which include **“Akinkanju”**, **“Olofofo yera”**, **“Adigboluja”**, **“Ifura”**, **“Eni ba laya”**, **“Okun Ebi”**, run varied commentaries on social, political, cultural, economic, and physical issues thus, creating dialogue about environmental realities. In repurposing waste and as expressed above by Halliday (2012), a material or use of material simply does not hold one value, connotation or significance; instead, any material holds a different value and characteristic depending on the context in which it is used”. This is the same with all the exhibits here on display. In **“Agbero”**, for instance, while Muraina draws our attention to the menace of the typical Lagos

“agbero” - the miscreant, he also addresses the issues of noise pollution and environmental trauma.

In “*The Eden before Us*”, Muraina’s effort at converting waste is a strong medium of calling the public’s attention not just to the fact that the so called waste is “no waste” but ever useful, it is also to awake our consciousness to the fact that our natural environment could be saved from degradation and unanticipated calamities if only we could care more for the waste in its varied shades and shapes. This is a successful attempt at presenting art to the public as end product of research and a function of exploration. All the works here on display are highly remarkable and one could perhaps say beautiful. The question then is what could be so pleasing in the waste for it to attract being said to be of beauty? The answer to this is found in “*The Eden before Us*”. While the likes of the **Agbero**, **Wobia** and **Olofofo** of this world are desecrating and polluting the environment, we have in Muraina another artist who is helping to make the world cleaner and more beautiful through sculpture. "One man's garbage another man's art, Junk can be a beautiful thing, if only you have the eyes to see it.

Cited texts

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