Erin M. Rice

Natural Synthesis

The concept of Natural Synthesis was set forth by members of the Zaria Art Society . They called for the merging of the best of Western and Nigerian traditions, forms, techniques and ideas in the arts into a hybrid art making practice and conceptual framework. The concept was developed in the late 1950s alongside a gathering momentum towards independence in search of a modern art that would suit the new nation. Proponents of Natural Synthesis were responding to concerns that much of Nigeria’s artistic heritage was being lost to the influence of foreign culture and academic traditions. As author of the manifesto on Natural Synthesis, and primary ideologue of the Zaria Art Society, Uche Okeke wrote, Nigeria needs a virile school of art…Whether our African writers call the new realization Negritude, or our politicians talk about the African Personality, they both stand for the awareness and yearning for freedom of black people all over the world…Our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake.

In his applying a Natural Synthesis in his own art practice, Okeke adapted the indigenous body and wall painting tradition of the Igbo culture called uli into pen and ink drawings, a practice taken up by Okeke’s student at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, Obiora Udechukwu. Bruce Onobrakpeya turned to his native Urhobo culture and the famous Benin bronzes of the Edo culture for inspiration in his printmaking.

References and Further Reading:

Kasfir, S. L. (1999) Contemporary African Art, London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.

Okeke-Agulu, C., Picton, J. (2006) ‘Nationalism and the Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960 – 1968’, African Arts 39 (1): 26-37.

Okeke. C. (1995) ‘The Quest: From Zaria to Nsukka: a story from Nigeria’ in Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, Deliss, C. (Ed.), Paris: Flammarion.

Okeke, U. (1960) “Natural Synthesis” Zaria. Reprinted in Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa, Deliss, C. (Ed.) (1995), Paris: Flammarion.

Ottenberg, S. (2002) ‘Sources and Themes in the Art of Obiora Udechukwu’, African Arts 35 (2): 30-43.