



YEMISI SHYLLON
MUSEUM OF ART
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

Artwork Information Sheet 40

PHILIPS NZEKWE'S PRODIGY



Prodigy, Cement cast, 5.8 feet, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University.

INTRODUCTION

Philips Nzekwe is a Nigerian sculptor whose three dimensional works present a look into the life of traditional Nigerian anthropology through art. His workt “*The prodigy*” is a sculptural work produced in fiber cement by a Nigerian contemporary sculptor, Philips Nzekwe. The work produced in 2022, expresses the artist personal experience as a child and presents childhood inquisitiveness and psychology through art. The work was donated by the artist and is currently in the possession of the Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, at the Pan-Atlantic University Ibeju-Lekki. It seats at the very front of the museum left wing somewhat as a subject welcoming all to find in the museum the inquiry and inquisitiveness they seek.

THE ARTIST

Philips Nzekwe was born in 1981 at Jos, Plateau, in northcentral part of Nigeria. There he had his early education before furthering into the tertiary institution at Delta state University for his Bachelor’s degree in Fine Art and later further his education with a Master’s degree in Fine art at the University of Benin. He is considered to be one of Nigeria’s most distinguished experimental artist who explores the rich material culture from his environment. His art comments on issues affecting him as an African/ global citizen such as climate change, freedom of expression and the fundamental rights of the child. Through his choice of materials, Nzekwe addresses the effects of mass consumerism resulting in the over exploitation of natural resources in our environment.

THE PRODIGY

Nzekwe works with diverse materials that cut across, cement cast, clay and recently environmentally friendly materials. The Prodigy in fig 1 below, is a remarkable 1.8-meter high sculpture crafted from fiber cement. This piece vividly depicts a child’s head through expressive anthropomorphic spiral formation that winds from the base to the top, creating interesting gaping spaces in between. This dynamic structure carries the attributes of both naturalistic and geometric forms, resulting in a hybrid image of a child’s head that notably lacks eyes. The sculpture’s surface is predominantly black, accentuated with bluish hues that highlight various points along the spirals, resembling marks used for mapping and scaling. The eyebrows are represented as voids, while the ears are

intricately pierced. The artist creatively explores the interplay of space and mass to evoke the reality of a sculptural piece, using a cubist style for the nose and more naturalistic renderings for the lips, ears, cheeks, and chin.

Through this formal representation, the artist conveys the idea of the turbulent mind of a child in the formative stage, questioning the environment, society, and life. This concept aligns with Freudian theory regarding the mirror stage of development, where a child becomes self-aware and begins to question their existence and surroundings (Freud, 1949) a stage the artist explained as being important in his development as a person. The turbulent and inquisitive nature of the child’s mind is symbolized by the spiral form of the sculpture, representing the child’s emerging curiosity about life and the universe.



Fig 1. **Prodigy**, Cement cast, 5.8 feet, Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

The visual absence of eyes in the sculpture raises profound questions about the significance of vision both culturally and artistically. In Nigerian culture, the absence of eyes signifies blindness, which metaphorically translates to a lack of vision, understanding, and enlightenment. This absence can be related to Locke’s Tabula Rasa theory of empiricism, which suggests that a child is born with a clean

slate, implying an initial lack of understanding and knowledge (Locke, 1690). The spiral formation further symbolizes inquiry and a turbulent mind, indicating the child's quest for knowledge and understanding as they grow.

Moreover, the eyes are often considered windows to the soul, holding significant psychological power. This concept has been explored by many artists, such as Margaret Keane, who depicted children with large, expressive eyes; Francisco Goya, in his haunting Saturn Devouring His Son; Oswaldo Guayasamín, in Lágrimas de sangre; and Ken Nwadiogbu, in Brother's Keeper. Unlike these artists, Nzekwe chooses to express his subject with missing eyes, suggesting a desire for privacy and protection of the child's mind from external influences.

The Prodigy addresses societal issues related to childhood and upbringing, psychological experiences, and the shifts children undergo, along with the societal implications of these experiences. The sculpture raises questions of empiricism, privacy, inquiry, and adventure, employing a synergy of cubism and naturalism to explore dynamism and movement. The absence of eyes not only emphasizes the theme of vision and understanding but also introduces a layer of mystery and introspection, prompting viewers to consider the inner world of the child and the profound questions that arise during their development

CONCLUSION

Nzekwe employs various media for his sculptures, using materials to address mass consumerism and the over-exploitation of natural resources. His creations often incorporate salvaged junk, reflecting his commitment to sustainability. His recent studio research led to the development of "Eco-friendly wood," made from silica, organic compounds, and wood dust, which is a by-product of the lumber industry and a major environmental pollutant. This alternative wood represents his contribution to sustainability and his campaign against mass deforestation, issues he has passionately championed for decades.

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