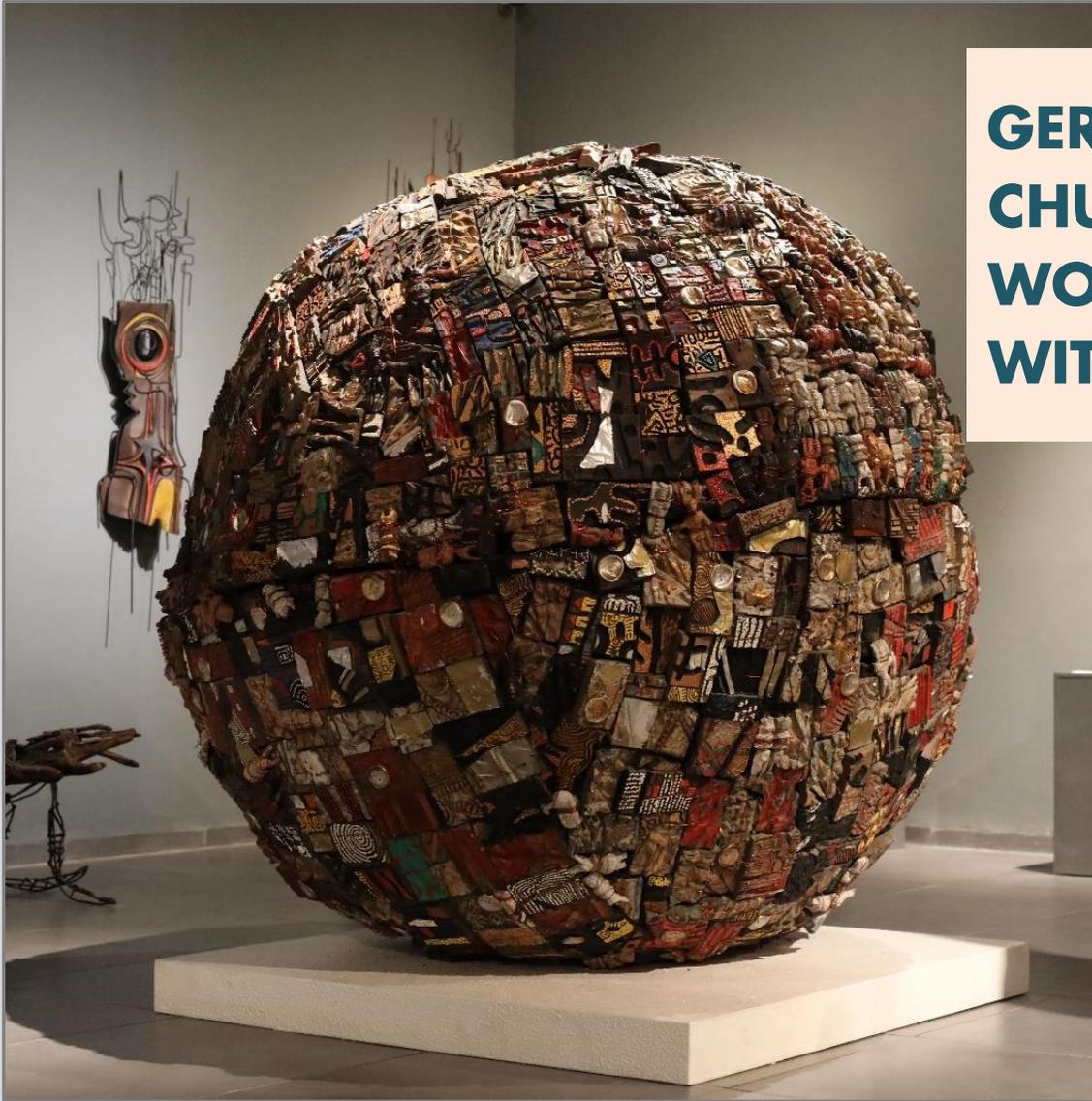


**GERALD
CHUKWUMA'S
WORLD
WITHOUT WAR**



www.worldwithoutwar.com, 2015-2019, Mixed Media, 168 cm
© Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University

THE ARTIST

Born in 1973, Gerald Chukwuma made attempts to study Marketing, a course he was never interested in, but quit to join the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in 1999. He graduated with a first-class honours degree in Fine Art (Painting) in 2003. On his decision to pursue his passion for arts he says, “it was tough, but I loved this art. There’s nothing else that makes me happier. My life is art”.

CAREER AND INFLUENCE OF EL ANATSUI

In Nsukka, Chukwuma learned under Chike Aniakor and Krydz Ikwuemesi. As a painter, he became acquainted with the *Uli* style of representation which was prevalent at the time. While studying painting at Nsukka, Chukwuma had admiration and interest in other art forms. He never fails to acknowledge the influence of El Anatsui in his career and how the latter’s pyrographic technique challenged his creative orientation though he was not his teacher (Morgan et al., 2017). He said,

People often see a striking resemblance between the work of Africa’s most famous contemporary artist, Professor El Anatsui’s wooden slats and that of mine. While I never studied directly under Anatsui (he taught sculpture and I graduated with a degree in painting), I was nevertheless influenced by his works and give credit to the great teacher’s impact in my seminal wood pieces... From this vantage point, it is exciting to see how my colours and techniques, coupled with this bold style has matured into a distinct expression of its own.” (G. Chukwuma, personal communication with Morgan, 2017).

Despite the similarities in the style of both artists, there are remarkable differences in their works when closely observed and studied. For instance, compared to Chukwuma, Anatsui has not richly applied colours in his works done on planar wood with power tools. Unlike Chukwuma’s, his motifs on planar wood reliefs

and metallic wall hangings are both less varied and more repetitive (Kwame, 2010). Thus, we discover a more pronounced usage of colours, stylish finish and more variations in relief and motifs in the works of Chukwuma.

Chukwuma’s style has guided his creative experiments in his aesthetic re-invention of painting and sculpture in a different visual language (Morgan et al., 2017). His multifaceted approach to cutting, burning, chiselling, nailing and painting discarded objects found in his immediate environment – aluminium cans, sheets and wooden planks – captures the nation’s richly layered history, whilst imbuing his works with both personal, cultural and political meanings. He explains:

“The use of wood in my work is symbolic – it gives me the freedom to pierce, to cut, to attach and to interact, cultivating an aesthetic characterised by pre-eminence and solidity of the material. My work also explores the relationship between their structural, architectural and organic qualities of the medium and image.” (G. Chukwuma, at the exhibition Standing Ovation, Apr-May, 2017).

NEW DEFINITION OF STYLE: PAINTAGLIO

In an attempt to define Chukwuma’s unique style of visual aesthetics, Morgan et al., (2017) referred to it as “Paintaglio”, a term derived from the words *-painting* and *intaglio*– to express the application of colours (paint) onto hollowed-out/engraved patterns and designs (intaglio). The Paintaglios are unique because of their tactility, heightened visual quality, meaning and message. Thus, Chika Okeke’s description of El Anatsui’s works as a re-invention of sculpture, a style characterized by mark making, can be applied to Chukwuma’s “Paintaglio” experiments and those of other avant-garde artists of Africa whose techniques and media express diverse visual languages (Okeke-Agulu, 2010).

THE ARTWORK

Figure 1 is a magnificent piece by the artist in the YSMA collection, probably the largest 3-dimensional work he has done so far in his amazing career.



Figure 1. www.worldwithoutwar.com (Detail), 2015-2019, Mixed Media, 168 cm, © Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art.

Figure 1 is a good representation of his Paintaglio style, with an admixture of other features including images/motifs cast from molten silica which are quite uncommon in his works. These motifs and symbols function as ideograms which resonate with various themes of human identity, race, religion, migration, knowledge, unity, environment, culture and heritage. Chukwuma says, he is “fascinated by motifs and symbols” for the “purposes they served in their times and their historical significance.” This justifies why he profusely uses them in his works. As seen on *Narrow Way* (Figure 2), done in 2013, by engraving these indigenous signs and symbols on wood panels, he demonstrates his skill in handling mechanical manual sculpture tools such as the router, angle grinder, gouges, and others which helps him unveil imageries latent in woods by subtracting non-essentials to create desired shapes, forms, and patterns.



Figure 2. *Narrow Way* (2013). Mixed media, 38 × 65". Reproduced with permission from Gerald Chukwuma. Photo Credit: Trevor Morgan.

Unlike his two-dimensional pieces in figure 1, the wood panels in figure 2 are not long or whole. They are cut into numerous chips/blocks of different sizes, pierced, interwoven and stitched to the core with copper wires. However, both works bear obvious and identifiable similarities as well. They exhibit a rich use of colours, painting on engraved symbols and patterns of *Uli* and *Nsibidi*. Also visible in these figures is the nailing of pieces and parts of recycled aluminium cans to panels/chips which are quite common and unique to his Pentaglio aesthetics.

The *Uli* motifs on figure 1 are of two categories identified by Okeke-Agulu (2006):

1. Archetypal shapes: dots, lines, curvilinear triangles (*isinwaoji*), and circles (*onwa*, the moon).
2. Extensions in concentric coils: *agwolagwo* (derived from the snake) and double triangles (*mboagu*, leopard's claw).



Up-close view of figure 1 showing different Symbols of *Uli* (in the yellow circles) and *Nsibidi* (in the red circles).

World without war explores the concept/theme of globalization. Describing the masterpiece in figure 1, Chukwuma says,

My work explores migration as a concept of transformation reflecting on how it affects culture and language as it grinds in the mortar of globalisation. It was inspired by the paradox arising from the fact that the world is actually getting smaller and people more connected with each other than ever before through the Internet. Yet, there is a sudden eruption of multiple global conflicts and wars. This work proffers a simple Solution... To achieve harmony and agreement, we all have to change form or state yet not lose our identity... sometimes even "getting cut" into smaller pieces in order to fit with each other to produce a perfect globe." (G. Chukwuma, personal communication with Solomon Nkwagu, November 1, 2019)

Using different patterns of *Uli* and *Nsibidi* as metaphorical connotations of cultures, the piece captures the rich cultural diversity of the globe and the unique place of every single one of them. Despite the differences, we see a bond or an interconnection of these cultures expressed by how they are interwoven together and how the patterns, lines and forms gently flow from one piece of wood to another. Cultures across the globe have features they all share in common; these should act as binding forces for unity and harmony.

The human figures are not engraved and painted on the wooden pieces of the work. Rather they are cast from molten silica into different forms and painted with different colours, a conceived expression of our racial and individual differences across the globe. Our imperfections, strengths and weaknesses are subtly captured on the human forms by the broken/deformed body parts (heads and limbs), differences in body size and other features. Yet for us to co-exist and have a peaceful globe we must learn to acknowledge and respect these differences and make proper adjustments/changes for everyone

to fit in. Despite the increasingly congesting globe, there is a space for every single person as we are all important.

Culture must also be seen, not as a concept that divides us, but as the essential fabric that binds us all together as one world. We can learn about our differences and respect them but we must also strive to discover the similarities that connect us all so that we can enjoy a harmonious and peaceful "World Without War".

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