



Contextual Analysis of the Works of Four Selected Contemporary African Artists

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Abstract. The study is focused on four purposively selected contemporary African artists and their works. Their selection is inspired by the expressive content embedded in their selected works. Primary and secondary method was used in data collection and the data obtained is analyzed using descriptive approach. While historical analysis including biographical, formal, and contextual analytical methods is employed in bring to fore the contributions of their artworks in ensuring peoples wellbeing in the society.

Keywords: Contemporary, African Artists, Expressive Context, Painting, Metal Sculpture.

1. Introduction

Contemporary art in Africa nay Nigeria is characterized by dynamics of change and continuity and the shift in traditional styles became inevitable due to the flux of foreign socio-cultural activities that ultimately influenced all aspect of the people's life. Contemporary Nigerian art can be said to have been mainly defined by the formal school system which came in as a result of the spread of western education. The exposure to western education by many African/Nigerian art students gave them the access to academic training which broadened their knowledge and scope in the theory and practice of art (Fílání; 2005; 31). The exposure to western education also gave them access and knowledge to the use of foreign materials and techniques to achieve personal expressions.

The use of foreign materials such as water/oil colour, board and converse for painting was pioneer in Nigeria by Chief Aina Onabolu the acclaimed father of modern art in Nigeria. Onabolu's canvas painting approach latter spread to generations after him. This

has really shown in the works of the two painters purposively selected for this study while the remaining two sculptors in their creative exploits also demonstrated vividly the influence and knowledge in exploring modern and western techniques in their creative welded metal art, hence making a total of four contemporary African artists focused on in this study. It is worthy to note that all of them are exploring foreign materials and tools unlike the ancient artists who depend solely on their locally sourced materials and tools for the execution of their art works. As diverse as the foreign materials and tools are is the nature of the works of these selected artists in this study. Two among the four selected for this study were painters using oil and pastel while the remaining two are welded metal sculptors using arc welding (a modern means of fusing or joining the metals together) in the production of their welded metal images, though with some variations in their production techniques and approach.

The influence in the contact of the west continues to bread new forms, through Aina Onabolu Akionla Lasekan, and Justus Akeredolu, all these three artists hail from Yoruba Western Nigeria. Aina and Akinola engaged themselves in Euro-traditional naturalism to paint portraits and landscapes; the reason for their engagement was essentially nationalistic. They wanted to proof a political point that colonized African artists can visually express themselves like their European counterparts. It is therefore myopic to bemoan Onabolu's efforts as an extension of European art just because his style is derivative of European naturalism. One wonders why Picasso's art was not criticized as an extension of African art based on his adaptation of African forms which is as a result of influence of the form in an African masks. Although, Okediji's (2002) argued that Onabolu

accepted, and willingly helped to impose Western materials and methods contributed to the assault against indigenous forms of art making may be overlooked based on a more plausible reason given by Nzegwu (1999), she opined that Onabolu may have strategically developed European upper-class mannerisms and used his newly acquired European naturalistic style to fight the battle of racial difference.

The remarkable change that African countries experienced in the 20th century due to colonial and post-colonial influences was so impactful that the entire fabric of the people's culture became completely overwhelmed. The spiritual essence that defined life in African communities was toned down by the European's rationalistic approach. Western education being the most beneficial of the colonial offerings opened vistas of opportunities and possibilities for robust search for globalised knowledge, expanded creative expressions and gave profound fulfillment.

If Africa/Nigeria is yet to realize her full potentials in the areas of science, technology, politics and economy, the case is not applicable to artistic creativity of the African race from the ancient to this contemporary age. This is obvious in the works of the selected artists for this study that African artists are very rich in visual creations. The execution of art works before contact with the Europeans in African soil depends largely on societal request, which invariably dictates the forms to be carved depending on the essence to which the artwork is meant to serve. Now are days, artist work on their art production according to their inspiration which many often is inspired by the happenings around them with occasional contextual influence from their client. Hence, their art product is characterized largely by the socio-cultural and political activities in their surroundings as it is in the works of the four purposively selected artists for this study. The four contemporary artists were chosen not because of their medium of expression and techniques, rather on the relatedness in the expressive context (contextual forms) embedded in their art works as it relates to people in their immediate environment.

2. The Selected Artists and their works

Two of the four artists are contemporary welded metal sculptors; namely Akeem Muraina and Fidelix Odogwu while the remaining two are Hussein Saidi a painter from Tanzania and the fourth and only female is also a painter from Zimbabwe named Cora Ruck.

2.1 Muraina Akeem

He was born in April 1966 and hails from Ibadan, Oyo State. He holds a Higher National Diploma in Sculpture from Yaba College of Technology and a postgraduate degree in Technical Teacher Education from the Federal College of Education Technical, Akoka, Lagos. He is married and blessed with children. His interest in metal sculpting started in 1990 in his student days at the Yaba College of Technology where he had diligently understudied his lecturer Olu Amoda in metal sculpture. After his study, he took up an appointment as a studio manager in the latter's Riverside Studio on Majoro street, Onike Iwaya, Lagos. He taught Fine Arts briefly at St. Peter's grammar school, Oyan in Osun State during his National Youth Service Corp in 1994 and 1995. He is the general secretary of the society of Nigerian artist Lagos branch from 2003 to 2009. An active member of the Art zero group, and a member of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation.

On returning to studio after his one-year teaching, he went back to metal sculpting with the use of zoomorphic representation for his artistic theme to express and communicate his mind to the world about happenings in his environment. His philosophical basis for this is expressed in this saying, "pay attention to what is lesser than you so that greater things in life can pay attention to you". This he has achieved in the use of what people sees as lesser things (junk, scraps and waste metal) of which after careful thinking he was able to put life in them through his visual creative skill. A keen observation of Akeem present work will reveal his creative instinct which has made him to go an extra mile by being able to manually shape some of the forms to achieve his goal.

This reshaping of forms in Akeem has thus make his work distinct and such is found in works like "Ifura", "Aranfe Sinmi", "Wobia" in plate 1-3 "Ma Goo" in plate 6 among others. The artistic intent in the artist according to Amoda (2013:10) has helped him not to rely on the use of found objects alone. This he has exhibited in many of his welded metal works down to his exhibition titled "The Eden Before Us" through which he has once shows is love for animals such as horses, cows, swan, rabbits, ram and birds among others.

According to Uwaezuoke (2001), a glance on his work will surely evoke a cue to explain the thoughts behind each of the scrap images, and that his works is a call to the obtuse mind of the material-driven modern man. He prides himself on his giant strides in

technology but seems strangely oblivious of the fact that he has upset the natural balance that not only maintains his environment but also guarantees his very existence. For the realization of infrastructural development, trees have to be hacked down and thereby deprived the environment its source of oxygen. Edu S.H., the chairman, Nigerian Conservation Foundation commented on Akeem's images from the scrap "the crux of the matter in his work is stemming man's stupid and wanton devastation of his environment in the name of conquering nature" (2001).

Ademuleya (2012:12) observation corroborates Uwaezuoke (2001) and Edu (2001) as he categorizes Akeem as an environmental activist and conservationist who is genuinely concerned with issues affecting our environment be it social, political, cultural, economics, or physical. Behind his interest in creating waste and aesthetics, and that, Muraina's works are more of discarded materials, inspired by the gross decadence and degradation of our environment, powered by aesthetics and artistic vision rather than sheer necessity. Ademuleya (2012) further observes that Muraina's works take us back in time to the natural and peaceful Adam's and the beginning of creation, in a peculiar way, his own attempt at fulfilling man's expected role as the 'keeper of the garden' and not its destroyer.

Muraina's call for man to keep his environment is well communicated in "*Wobia*" (Scavenger). Scavenger according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary is defined as a person, animal or bird searching through waste for things that can be used or eaten. But to the Yoruba people of western Nigeria, when one is being referred to as "*wobia*", it connotes a negative connotation because what it means is that such person is greedy and not contented despite having been given enough of what is caught stealing.

Today in our community, calling our leaders (government officials) "*wobia*" is not out of place. It is the "*wobia*" in most of our leaders that made them to be duplicating or replacing themselves in a juicy position by imposing their own children to fill in their exist at the expense of other qualified people around. Also, it is only a "*wobia*" that will be living in a free accommodation, free medical treatment, free vehicle and fuel to move around, wardrobe allowance coupled with high earnings when compared with others around him/her that will still be found stealing money from government purse. In a situation where this abounds, the environment will continue to be in bad shape.

In *Agbèrò* the artist used the work in addressing two issues: the first is the menace of the typical Lagos garage boys (*Agbero*) who usually earn their daily bread through extorting money forcefully from commercial drivers. This act therefore made the drivers to hike their charges leaving passengers with no alternative. Looking at this work, one will see how it was used to capture and depict the force and strength generally associated with a horse when moving to achieve their goal. Such is also associated with the manners in which the *Agbèrò* operates in our bus stops when extorting money from the drivers. Hence their act constitutes a nuisance to the environment. The second issue the work is addressing is in the area of noise and air pollution. Lousy playing of music in public places is very rampant nowadays without anybody making an attempt in putting an end to the indecent act as well as the way industrial machines are emitting poison in the air which invariably causes people to have ill health.

Aso Àrán (Obot Pancrease) butterfly from the artist's point of view is titled *Lámi-lámi* (Dragon fly). However, in my own view this composition is more like the fly the Yoruba called *Lámi-lámi*. When someone or group of people are being viewed behaving in a way considered rude or bad intentionally, not minding the reaction of those they err or step on their toe, such people will therefore be referred to as *Lámi-lámi*. This is because a dragon fly (*Lámi-lámi*) loves roaming in a dancing manner on water, and the Yoruba people believed that it is dancing to the unseen drummer/s in the beneath of the water. This act from the fly could be likened to the way and manner of our political leader when they get into office, dancing to the tune of the political godfather at the expense of those who voted them to office. Unless there is a disagreement between such parties, commoners cannot enjoy reason why they cast their vote for such people who have chosen to neglect their statutory responsibilities by dancing to the drum/interest of their godfather.

In *Ma Goo* Muraina is here once again calling the consciousness of the people to their power in resisting any unpleasant act from the government. This could be achieved by refusing to dance to government tunes through rallies, and sit in house as a means of protest thereby ensuring change from the wrong quarters.

2.2 Fidelis Odogwu

He was born in Edo State on February 15, 1968. He studied at the Auchi Polytechnic and obtained a Higher National Diploma in Sculpture in 1991 under

the tutelage of Ben Osawe who is one of the renowned Nigerian sculptors. He moved to Lagos after his Youth Service and started operating as a fulltime studio artist at Iponri. His constant exploration of contemporary culture soon set the tone for his eventual exploration of metal as an art form in Lagos. He has participated actively in national and international exhibitions. He is a member of Society of Nigeria Artist (SNA), Treasurer, Executive Committee of Universal Studio of Art (USA) and a founding member of Guild of Professional Fine Artist of Nigeria (GPFAN)

His metal exploration has led him to discover his creative strength in the uses of basic shapes that gives a cubist nature to his three-dimensional works and a textile look approach for most of his two-dimensional works without losing the influence from his background. He sticks to metal because of the joy he derives from the rugged nature of the material (metal) and his belief that metal makes one to be intellectually rich in creativity. He sees metal as the medium with the most dexterity in nature among other materials for making sculptural piece as the material gives room for extensive exploration.

The angularity of forms in his works could have been influenced by the Yoruba wood carving tradition particularly when he has chosen to live and practice among the Yoruba and more so that he is shared the same studio with one of the living master in wood carving (late Bisi Fakeye) at the Universal studio in Iganmu, Lagos. This could have been the reason why his approach to his metal works in this study is prominently angular in form (which is one of the characteristics of traditional African wood sculpture), contrary to others from the same Auchu Art School whose works are predominantly stylize and naturalistic in nature. A cursory look at Fidelis solo exhibition held at Omega Gallery, Ikoyi on November 3rd – 12, 2012 titled “*Square Pegs Round Holes*” will attest to this characterized angularity forms in his exhibits.

In this solo show, the artist was able to display his years of experience which he has succeeded in mastery over his chosen medium conceals the difficulties involved in controlling its vitality, its resistance and demands by making his finished work looks simplified in basic shapes. Thus, the simplicity in Odogwus welded metal work is more vivid in the two works from where the title of the exhibition for this study emanated from. *The Square Pegs in Round Holes* in plate 7 and the second which is a reverse title of the first one *Round Pegs in Square Hole* in plate 8, these two reliefs works was use as metaphor

to illustrates his mind on how things are wrongly done in our society particularly when it comes to political appointment of people at the top. Thus, he sees this as a major obstacle in the smooth running of our society. Basic shapes were used in the making of these pieces of works, in *The Square Pegs in Round Holes*, some square pipes were inserted into some round pipes, while in *Round Pegs in Square Hole*; he placed some round pipe in some square pipe. The two works are used by the artist to catalogs or represents the wrong placing of people in some important and sensitive positions around us. Generally, one would not be expected to insert either a round pipe in a square one or a square pipe in a round one and expect a smooth movement of the two successfully because, when this happens, the expected outcome in the friction of the two shapes will be negative since the forms are opposite.

The artist, is using this works to explain how people were being wrongly appointed into a position which they were not fit to, particularly when they are short of the expected academic certificate or they lack experience for such vital position, example of this kind of wrong placing is common among our leaders where a lawyer is being appointed as the minister for mines and power or a medical doctor being appointed to head the educational sector at the expense of the qualify professional hands, like the saying goes, placing a square peg in a round hole.

Unity in Progress/ Zip Up: The amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914 has clocked 100 years in 2014, and before and after the centenary celebration, the more the treat of the country unification is being loud on daily basis. *Unity in Progress* is a work executed by the artist in calling people’s attention to the fact that there is no need for separation and that there is strength and advantage in the amalgamation of the three regions (North, South and West). One of the advantages is the fact that the country is the most populous and populated black nation in the world. Considering this piece of work from its form which seems to look more like a zip adds to its value and meaning that brought about this probably title “Zip Up”.

From the latter, this work could be seeing as a means of contributing to the global campaign to people on the deadly venereal disease *HIV / AIDS* that claims life. The source of the incurable deadly virus comes in several means of which unprotected sex carried the larger percentage, thus, to stop the increase at which the people are being affected by this disease, a lot has been done by the government, N.G.O, health parasternal and medias to sensitize people. In this work, the artist is putting his own quota by making

the piece look like a trouser zip closing up. This work thus, is telling the people to close/ zip up their tights from unprotected sex so as to prevent themselves from being infected.

Stepping Stone: this welded in the round piece of work is use to x-ray the life of the people particularly among the youth who are living a successful life in the society. From this, he was able to see that most successful youths inherit their success from their parents who they used as their stepping stone to their own present position. In this work, he placed one cubic shape on another to represent the son and the father respectively. He representd the father as the pedestal to his child's achievement, while he represented the child on top with more embellishment as one who is at the prime of his success. Through this work, he is trying to encourage parents to live a life worthy of emulating by their children and that parent should do their best in giving proper investment in their children so as to have something to fall back on when they are old for them to be able to reap part of their fruits of labour. Corroborating this is a Yoruba adage which goes thus *bí Òkéte bá dàgbà, omú omo rẹ̀ ló ma fà bọ̀ sí.* (Parents at old age need their children's support). This can only be true for whose children are successful.

A demonstration or street protest is action by a mass group or collection of groups of people in favour of a political or other cause; it normally consists of walking in a mass march formation and either beginning with or meeting at a designated endpoint. Actions such as blockades and sit-ins may also be referred to as demonstrations. Demonstrations can be nonviolent or violent (usually referred to, by participants as "militant"), or can begin as nonviolent and turn violent dependent on circumstances. Sometimes, anti-riot police or other forms of law enforcement become involved. In some cases, this may be in order to prevent the protest from taking place at all. In other cases, it may be to prevent clashes between rival groups, or to prevent a demonstration to go out of control.

Demonstrations can be used to show a viewpoint (either positive or negative) regarding general public issue, especially relating to a perceived grievance or social injustice. A demonstration is usually considered more successful if more people participate. Topics of demonstrations often deal with political, economic, and social issue. In the execution of this relief work, metal sheets of variants forms (plain and perforated) were used symbolically to represent different people at the demonstration. The arrangement of the placard also shows the nonviolent in the demonstration as it was well arranged to the

extent that perspective is reflected on it. While the plane placard in the circle depicted the unity of the leaders who initiates the demonstration. With this piece, the artist is making an attempt to educate people to be peaceful in their agitation whenever the need arises rather than fighting and destruction of lives and properties such as in the case of "end sars" demonstration in October 2020 in Lagos, Nigeria that started peacefully and ended as very bloody.

2.3 Hussein Saidi

Hussein Saidi, is a Tanzanian artist that combines traditional African themes with modern style. Saidi hails from Tanga community in Tanzania, which is about 5° south of the equator on the east coast of Africa. His paintings were on display at various locations around the world including the U.S. embassy in Niamey, Niger, Gdynia, Poland. He has several groups and solo exhibitions to his credits. Among his solo shows held in May 2004, was titled "Body Art" is the focus for this study. In this piece, the artist explored traditional and modern African culture.

The artist works contains an overriding theme of community and family life. He attempts to unify and intertwine his two worlds; that of Tanzania and of the United States he presently lives by focusing on the commonality among all people globally. His artwork embodies two distinct styles. From his father who is also a painter and from whom Saidi acquired the skills to create his paintings. In these paintings, he utilized bold colors and shapes, which are lively, active and pure in emotion. Saidi also creates unique collages utilizing natural materials such as barks, leaves, husks and other natural fibers, combined in a meticulous process. When he was a boy, as is typical of children in Tanzania, Saidi created his own toys out of found-objects; this creative act is synonymous with most artists at their early stage. Saidi now continues this process in his art, as he incorporates natural materials in his collages, where the materials he uses reflected his perceptions of the strong ties between humans and earth. His paintings show scenes from African daily life that reflects unity in family and in community life.

Saidi Hussein's work is highly focus on theme that are very peculiar to his background (people) and there way of live. He rendered his painting in naturalistic manner. He is very fond of exhibiting rhythm in is work as it is depicted in 'bold excitement' and 'drum and body attitude I and II, where both the dancer and the drummer were shown in high spirit as if they are in trans. The energetic display in these two pieces of painting from Saidi is

also a common feature in *bàtá* dance where both the drummer and the dancers often displayed a highly energetic frenzy mood. He goes further in communicating good manners to his viewers that Africans loved and showed respect for each other's and that such attitude enhance their spirit of togetherness which bring forth good relationship and understanding in African communal life.

In *communicating with manners*, the artist is making the admirer of his work to see that Africans have good manner in the way they relate with each other and these is embedded in the way they react in a situation like such depicted in the painting. Looking at the work, one will see that the bridge is very narrow, thus, it has a limited number of people it could carry at a time and despite the fact that all the people on the work were under a tense situation in getting to their destination on time as the present of umbrella in their hands is an evidence of either the weather is ash of its raining, the love thy neighbor spirit in the African communal life is here shown as they waited for each other to cross to the other side without struggling to outfit on another nor is there an evidence of rushing that could invariably lead to a traffic germ on the narrow bridge.

While in *Cherish each drop and one foot in front of the other* is depicting how people enjoy what looks like lovers enjoying the moment spent together despite being under the rain.

In *Cherish each drop* the man in the painting probably seems to be the owner of the bicycle, allowing the lady on it may be either to relieve the lady of stress in trekking a long distance, it could also mean that he is teaching her how to ride a bike and it may as well be that the bicycle is not strong enough to carry two a time. Whichever the case is, the man is showing affection needed from a man to a lady he cherished. Thus, under such feelings, what the weather is does not matter.

In *One Foot In Front Of the Other*, Saidi again brings to the mind of his viewers how people cherished and caudle each other walking slowly to enjoy the moment, wishing time to slow in other to enjoy the moment. The two figures depicted in a way to probably look like lovers could be seeing not in any way in hurry as the figure shown in distance to the opposite sex holding themselves cannot have the privilege of hearing their private conversation. The dress code of the two walking with one foot in front of the looks more like those of teenager who were just starting life.

The African skill of drumming and dancing to the rhythm of drum was display by the artist in "Bold Excitement", "Drum and Body Attitude I and II". The artist though living in America as at the time of executing the works and his contact with drum set being handled with just a drummer might be the reason for the inspiration that led him in making the above mentioned three painting. In this works, he is trying to convinced his lovers abroad that African are capable of doing same. The energetic movement by the dancers is a testimony to the fact that the rhythm of the drums synchronized and pleased the hearing of the dancers, thus, making the dancers to be more excited and responded in a dance and fast movement to encourage the drummer and also making him happy for a job well done.

2.4 Cora Ruck

Cora was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in 1973 and brought up surrounded by the beauty of nature which has given her a wonderful heritage. She attended a local art college after school and attained a Diploma in Applied Art and Design. Her love for wild life scene is an influence from her father who is also an artist with emphasis on series of wild life paintings. Also from her father, she learned to recognize and appreciate the invisible links and shared values that bind man and animals together. It is with this in mind that she did some of her painting's series selected in this study.

Cora believed that if one is privilege to see beyond the exterior of a woman and see her inner being and thought, one will realize that there is a wild side to us all. Therefore, Cora sees in each woman a lioness protecting her cubs with fierce determination against the odds or the tenderness, patience and love of a zebra helping her foal stand for the very first time. Cora used pastel colours for the execution of her paintings. Her works are a reflection of woman's inner self, strength and believe. The female face juxtaposed with the Tiger in her works depicts a symbol of violence tendency of the human nature. The moon tiger depicted, a carnivorous animal with a full disposition of violence, allegorically symbolize its violent disposition.

The female face gives a symbolic meaning of peace in deceit while the animal represents the inner strength, violence, death embedded in woman when they choose to execute it. Hence, these probably suggest that a calm looking woman should not be taking for a weak person because if she chooses to exhibits her hiding strength, she would be as deadly as the moon tiger. The works also expresses the artist

feeling for beauty in nature in a simile manner to that of a woman while the beauty in the tiger shows the influence of the African natural habitat of the Zimbabwe environment where the artist is familiar with in the Eastern and Southern African region. She's uses portrait approach with dark background in a realistic naturalism technique of juxtaposition that also suggests probably the strength of the Tiger particularly at night. Also, it could as well be depicting the strength of witchcraft in women at night. Witchcraft is generally associated with women in Africa society.

Looking at the three works of Cora for this study, it seems she was painting probably her portrait as the face in the three works have strong semblance with her own. One of the probably message Cora Rucks might be sending to people in this series of works is that every woman has the tendency to be very wild and aggressive which requires patience and wisdom from a man to handle. This therefore goes with the Yoruba saying that *oní sùúrù ní fún wàrà Kìnnihún* (with time and patience, one extract milk from lioness). In relation to man's relationship with woman, it means that it requires extra patience for man to cope and tame the animalism in a woman. She might also be using the painting series as her own contribution to warn men that are 165asanovas, and of the impending danger in jumping from one woman to another of there likely contact with the slow deadly venereal decease know as acquired immune

deficiency syndrome (Aids) for underrating and neglecting to be conscious of protecting themselves sexually.

3. Conclusion

The influence of western art education in Africa cannot be over emphasis as these reflected greatly in the production mannerism of the works of art being done by the artists in African soil with emphasis on the four selected in this study. The use of foreign materials and tools which caught the interest of the fore runner of modern art in Africa nay Nigeria in the likes of Chief Aina Onabolu, Justus Akeredolu down to artists from the formal art school till date continued to dominate their art products. The four artists selected for this study were not left out from the use of modern art materials and tool in the execution of their artworks without losing the African essence embedded in their works. Thus, their works were used to communicate to the people in sharpening things the right way as it relates to their socio-political situations.

The selected artists were able to contribute their own quota in putting things the way it should through the communicability power of their art works. This they were able to communicate to people with their works as Maitland (1999:49) observed that contemporary Africa artist's blend traditional themes with western media



Plate 1: Muraina Akeen



Plate 2: *Ifura*.



Plate 3: *Ara nfé sinmi*.



Plate 4: *Wobia (Greed)*



Plate 5: *Agbèrò*.



Plate 6: Fidelis Odogwu



Plate 7: *The Square Pegs in Round Holes*

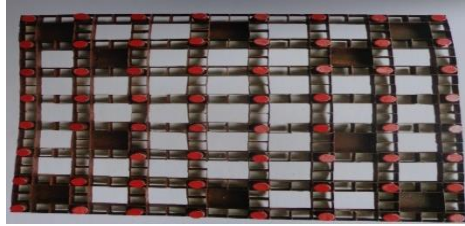


Plate 8: *Round Pegs in Square Hole*



Plate 10: Hussein Saidi



Plate 13: *communicating with*



Plate 11: *Peaceful Demonstration, Fidelis Odogwu*



Plate 15: *One Foot In*



Plate 16: *Bold Excitement.*



Plate 14: *Cherish each drop*



Plate 17: *Drum and Body*



Plate 18: Cora Ruck



Plate 19: *Concealed*



Plate 20: *Yearning*



Plate 21: *True Nature*

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