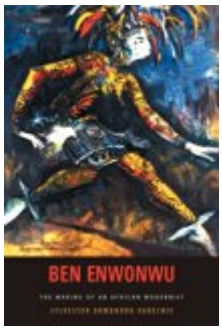
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie. *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist.* Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2008. xxiii + 295 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58046-235-8.

Reviewed by Gitti Salami

Published on H-AfrArts (April, 2010)

Commissioned by Jean M. Borgatti (Clark Univeristy)

Ben Enwonwu, as the most prominent African artist in international circles during the colonial period, was the focus of considerable European critical evaluation, beginning with his initial and highly successful participation in a 1937 group exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery in London. Enwonwu's contributions to avant-garde art in Europe were perceived as "really African" (p. 101); that is, distinct from, and superior to, as one reviewer put it, the "pale copycat perversity" of white Europeans' attempts at assimilating African expressive forms (p. 101). Yet who in the international community today conjures up an image of Enwonwu or his work when contemplating the rise of modernism?

Sylvester Ogbechie has set out to restore Enwonwu's legacy and, more importantly, his subjectivity, in *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist,* deliberately making use of a seemingly outmoded format, the artist monograph, in order to do it. In the process, he has written a book that is much broader in scope, tackling a number of intertwined theoretical narratives. First and foremost, it aims to redirect the debate about "alternative modernisms," which, according to the author, "succumbs to this lure of essentialized difference by mediating the reception of non-Western contexts as secondary locations for the unfolding of the European ethos" (p. 10). Ogbechie suggests instead, and the difference is subtle but profound, that there is only one modernism. It emerged globally out of the colonial encounter, and European modernism represents merely one of its many facets. Ogbechie uses primary documents that attest to Enwonwu's reception in Europe to support his assertion that Western and non-Western "contexts owe their canonical forms to reciprocal appropriations engendered within an international context of modernity" (p. 7).

Second, Ogbechie seeks to redress the erasure of the considerable achievements of African pioneer modernists from the discourse on African art. Thus far, texts on twentieth-century African art have tended to skip over the colonial period. They commonly propose a "short century," during

which Africans generated a belated response to modernity only after most African nations gained Independence around 1960.[1] This view, Ogbechie explains, is untenable. By allowing for a six-decade period of gestation, it buys into the colonizer's civilizing scheme and affirms Europe's construction of a temporal distance between the "West and the Rest."[2] Furthermore, such texts erroneously attribute the invention of a new, modern African visual language as well as the positioning of the fine artist in modern African society to postcolonial artists.

Third, Ogbechie expends considerable effort to provide insight into Enwonwu's intellectual grounding in Igbo aesthetics and philosophy. His step-by-step analysis demonstrates how the artist wrestled over a period of five decades to synthesize Western techniques with a sensibility that emerged from deeply ingrained Igbo artistic traditions. This constitutes a preemptive measure designed to make it impossible for the reader to interpret Enwonwu's work as mere mimetic exercise, or as third-rate. Enwonwu thought of his own work as involving a deeper, conceptual exploration of Igbo knowledge systems as opposed to European artists who were preoccupied primarily with beauty and form. He saw in his work an evocation of the wonder of the invisible world, similar to that engendered by masquerades (***ime mmonwu)*** creating spirits. Enwonwu also vehemently rejected the European notion of a self-centered artist genius and instead embraced an Igbo model of the artist as a socially responsible person.

Ogbechie organizes his text into six chapters that delineate various phases of the artist's life. Chapter headings all begin with a verb ("Making Man," "Making Meaning," "Making a Life," "Making Ideals," "Making Peace," and "Making History") not merely to recognize Enwonwu's agency, but to emphasize it. A detailed account traces Enwonwu's development from his earliest exposure to his father's sculptural practice within the ***iba***, a sacred space in Igbo houses devoted to honoring spirits, through his period under the tutelage of Kenneth C. Murray that ended with international success at age twenty at the Zwemmer Gallery. During the years that he was teaching on behalf of the colonial government at Umuahia, Calabar, Ikot Ekpene, and Benin City (1937-44), themes arose that preoccupied him for the remainder of his life: a fascination with shrines and their custodians; female dancers engaged in ritual practice; and the Onitsha-Igbo ***mmonwu*** pantheon, whose members appear among the living as masquerades. A solo exhibition in Lagos in 1944 resulted in his receiving a joint Shell and colonial government-sponsored scholarship for graduate study in London, and, in 1948, Enwonwu graduated with a Diploma from the Slade School of Fine Arts, becoming the first African to do so. This set the stage for an international career with participation in group exhibitions of modern art in Paris as early as 1946, solo exhibitions in London (1947) and the United States (1962), interviews broadcast by the BBC as early as 1948, induction into the Royal Society of British Artists the same year, commissions for sculptures of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Charles shortly thereafter, and the acquisition of a Medal of the Order of the British Empire in 1956. Enwonwu's was a career that in terms of scope and name recognition was really not replicated until the rise of Yinka Shonibare MBE during the 1990s.

Enwonwu's success placed him in an ambiguous position relative to both the colonial government and African nationalists, forcing him to constantly negotiate his subjectivity in response to the conflicting expectations of various constituencies. The colonial government used Enwonwu as a stellar example of its civilizing mission and construed his success in terms of its benevolent tutelage; African nationalists fighting for liberation from colonialism interpreted his international stature as evidence of African capability and used it to argue for Africa's emancipation. Upon returning to Nigeria as art advisor to the government,

Enwonwu found himself moving among members of the upper echelons of colonial society. Again, his relationship to the colonial government forced him to curtail his role as an activist with a Pan-African vision, led to his eventual rejection by a younger generation of Nigerian artists, and ultimately contributed to the "historical amnesia" regarding his highly successful and prolific career (p. 225).

Ogbechie's detailed text provides the reader with a number of secondary discussions as well. Drawing on his intimate knowledge of the culture and numerous interviews with Enwonwu, Ogbechie gives a description of Onitsha-Igbo masquerades and an explanation of their bearing on Enwonwu's mythopoetic conception of creativity that is not only brilliant, but relevant to the oeuvre of many other modern African artists. His argument emphasizes Enwonwu's distance from mere mimesis of European conventions and the tremendous achievement entailed in his invention of a visual language appropriate for his particular local modern context.

Sylvester Ogbechie's monograph on Enwonwu, an artist who has engaged the author since he first encountered the sculptor's work *Anyanwu* outside the National Museum in Lagos when he was a secondary-school student, is a landmark work.[3] It is the first artist monograph to restore the subjectivity of an African modernist artist of the colonial period with regard to his contributions to global modernism, and, alongside Elizabeth Harney's interrogation of the post-independence Senegalese art world, one of the first book-length projects in African art scholarship devoted to countering the West's hegemonic discourse regarding its particular version of modernity's claim to universality and preeminence.[4]

The scholarship is superb. Unfortunately, the book's illustrations do not match the quality of the research and writing. Most of the images are poor in quality, and their number does not adequately support Ogbechie's arguments. Despite this flaw, the book is a seminal work that will stimulate numerous dissertations and monographs on modern African art and artists.

Notes

[1]. Ogbechie's use of the term "short century" (pp. xv-xvi) is a direct reference to and critique of Okwui Enwezor's 2001 exhibition and catalogue *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994* (New York: Prestel, 2001).

[2]. This term was coined by Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 35.

[3]. Ogbechie writes about this encounter in his B.A thesis, *Ben Enwonwu in the Art Historical Account of Modern Nigerian Art* (University of Nigeria,1988), 2.

[4]. Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

Citation: Gitti Salami. Review of Ogbechie, Sylvester Okwunodu. *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist.* H-AfrArts, H-Net Reviews. April, 2010.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29943