IRIN AJO

an exhibition of hybrid sculptures

Dotun Popoola



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FOREWORD

I first met Dotun Popoola in 2015 when he came to live and work with me in South Dakota U.S.A. During the period of his stay, he displayed the zeal and commitment to art which really baffles me. Within the first few weeks of his stay, he had grasped almost everything he needed to learn about using my several welding equipment, he had created a horse head and life-size motorbike from junks he collected from my studio. Within a short while again, he had created many more pieces including paintings and was set to hold an exhibition in Lemmon, South Dakota. Dotun would go ahead to win the first-prize in the Hugh-Glass Rendezvous Painting Competition. The Lemmon community couldn't help but notice that another sheriff was in town!

The welded sculptures Dotun has put together for this exhibition in Lagos reveals his strength as a sculptor as well a painter. He has masterfully infused color on the right bits and pieces while also leaving most of the natural colors of the metals as he found them. In a way, his stint with me here in South Dakota has influenced his technique while his subject matter is peculiar to him and his environment. The completion of the horse head is a true testament to his good anatomical skill and re-iterates his affinity to the American West which he always refers to as 'my second home'.

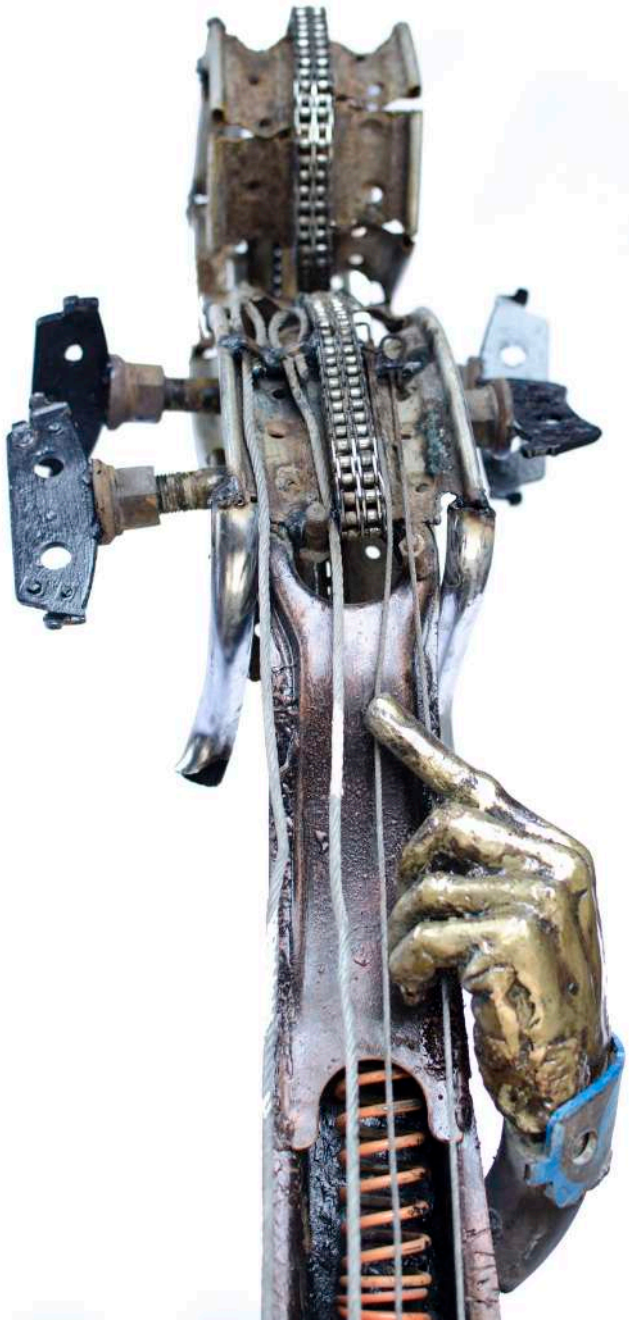
It is not surprising that Dotun has decided to exhibit his new pieces in Nigeria because he has proven beyond doubts that his creative spirit is always at its peak through several exhibitions and commissions he has had in the United states, most times with his creative partner - Jonathan Imafidor. However, it is surprising how he was able to pull this great feat within a short period of three (3) months considering the nature of irregular power supply where he lives. As an artist (sculptor) in the United States, my electricity works all the time and I could go out into the shop and weld any time of the day and night but Dotun can only use his welder plasma cutter or air compressor at certain times because they run on electricity. Nevertheless, these difficulties occasioned by irregular power supply and other logistical challenges he faces is part of his beautiful story which he has creatively communicated in the sculptures that would be on display in this exhibition.

Dotun is so positive about his country and is working very hard to convince me to take some time out of my busy schedule and visit Nigeria – an invitation which I may consider someday. I have been so blessed to have him in my life ever since his first visit to Lemmon, South Dakota and I am very impressed with his motivation to create art the way he does.

No doubt, this collection of works will situate Dotun Popoola in the history of Contemporary Nigerian Art. He is definitely one of Nigeria's natural treasures and I wish him success in this exhibition

Enjoy the show!

John Lopez
Sculptor





GALLERY STATEMENT

In Signature, we promote creativity and growth in the careers of artists and by inspiring passion and appreciation for arts in the public domain, we set the right stage for both the artist and the public to artistically co-exist. It is our policy to promote art that reflects originality and strong content quality irrespective of the genre.

On one fateful day, Dotun Popoola approached the Signature Gallery and signified his interest to exhibit here, I was curious as he wanted to show at Signature and nowhere else. Upon seeing his works, I immediately realized that this is what the gallery always stood and advocated for. In a nutshell, Dotun Popoola's works and Signature are synonymous, therefore we stand proudly behind him to showcase his creative exploits of junks and metals garnished with strong messages for your visual enjoyment, reflection, and patronage.

I thank you for coming.

Mr. Rahman Akar
Curator

ARTIST STATEMENT

Irin Ajo: My Journey into the World of Welded Metal Art

How it all started…

I discovered my artistic talent at the age of four (4). My dad called me "Doctor" because he would have preferred me to study medicine. However, I was too restless for such pristine profession as my hands were always in search of objects and colors to creatively manipulate. My art started in a single room apartment housing myself, my parents and six other siblings. I would draw on my father's sofa and scratch patterns on them. Growing up, I was seen as a black sheep of the family because my artistic experiments were considered as a menace which portends no meaningful future for me. While other kids were busy solving their take-home assignments, I would be drawing on walls and sometimes, with the aid of sharp metallic objects, create patterns on cars parked in my neighborhood. After several stringent measures were taken to deter me from this 'artistic madness' that had taken over my body and soul, my father helplessly enrolled me in a nearby art studio for apprenticeship at age nine (9), and this became the cradle of my 'Irin ajo' (journey).

My quest for knowledge especially in art related matters was so deep that I could not see myself becoming any other thing other than an artist. I find it difficult to concentrate my energy on any other profession than the arts. During the time which I grew up, no parent would allow their child to take art as a profession rather it was just a hobby because artists are always viewed as the church rats and nuisance of the society. They beautify people's lives but their own lives are far from beauty. Overtime, with my artistic achievements, I was able to change my parent's perception and became a source of inspiration to many other people possessed with this 'creative madness' and equally a source of reference to the parents alike.

'Irin ajo' in Yoruba parlance, connotes two things, the first talks about my journey in the arts (Irin ajo). In the context of my artistic practice, it describes how I have been influenced and motivated from different corners. My academic training from the colorist school of Auchi Polytechnic (2001-2004); Ife Art School of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife (2005 -2014) to Ara Studio (2006), Lagos and finally to John Lopez Studio, Lemmon, South Dakota (2015). The different experiences and learning processes have moulded

me to into the artist I have grown to become.

Secondly, it interprets to be welded metal (‘irin ti a jo’). This describes my affinity and passion for welded sculptures, which was greatly influenced after my residency training in Lemmon SD, the experience made me see another side of my creative endowment from God. After this encounter with John Lopez, I got more confidence to explore my art in the way that I find more challenging yet satisfying. I create sculptures from scrap metals predominantly automobile parts such as brake pads, ball joints, shock absolvers, bicycle spokes and chains, rust metals and disposed alloys of different kinds, spark plugs, damaged mechanical tools and small equipment, disposed kitchen utensils, stainless steels, and discarded house metal fittings and also a combination of carefully molded and cast bronze pieces as hidden objects in each of the pieces.

The combination of the two describes my expedition and exploration as a visual Artist. As a restless being, I am always on the move searching for new ideals, blending trainings in different forms of art from different schools and studios; different techniques and cultures, in order to create a unique form of art. It is this creative expedition that informs my decision to showcase my recent pieces in this exhibition themed - Irin Ajo, my journey into welded metal art.

I hope you enjoy this show! Most importantly, I hope you see beyond these junks, forms and aesthetic veil.

I thank you for coming

Dotun Popoola *B.A. MFA Fine Arts*
Sculptor



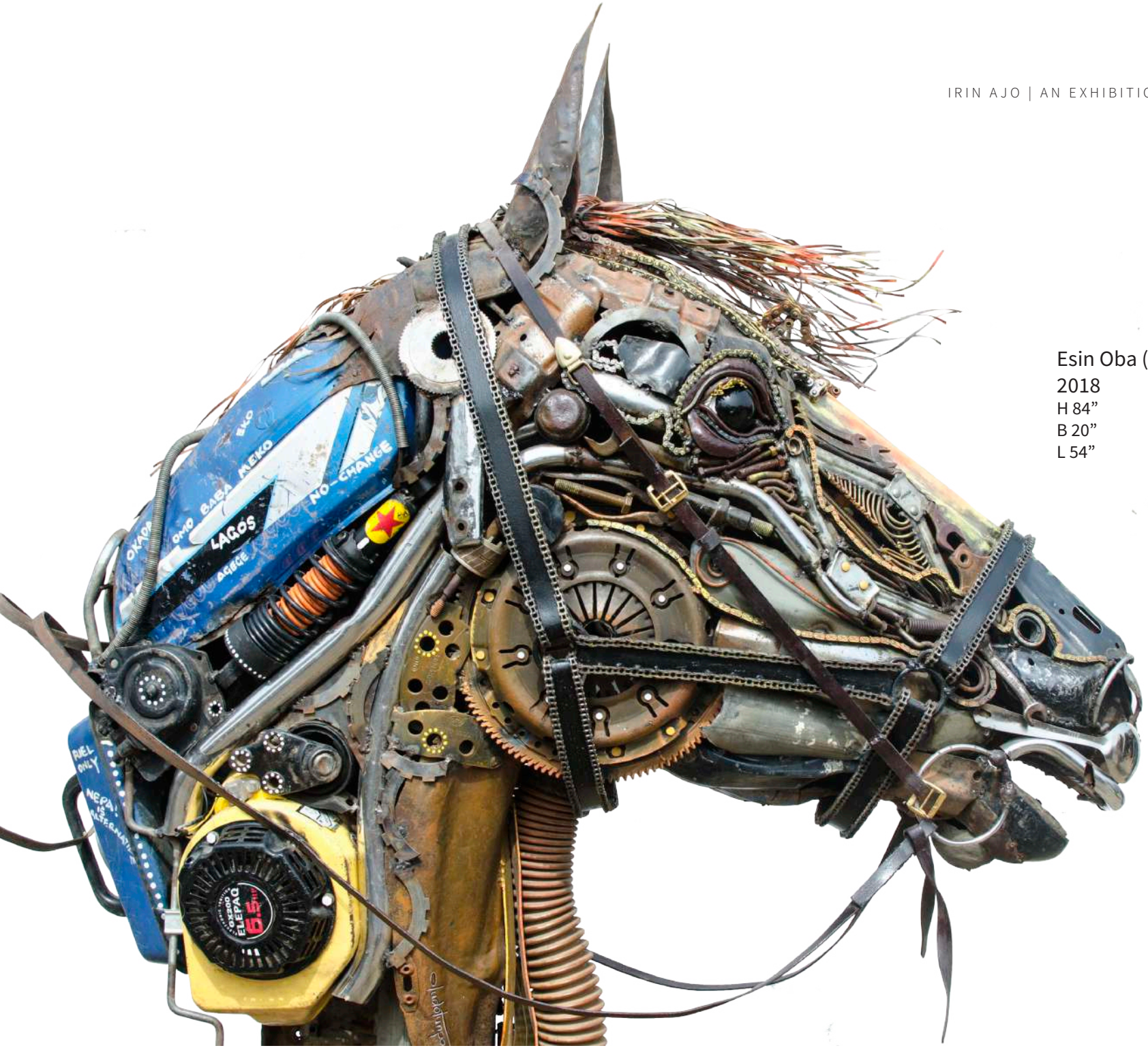
Dotun Popoola, born 1981 in Lagos, hails from Abeokuta in Ogun State. He Attends Zion African Church School in (1993), State High School Oyewole, Agege (1999), Kings and Queens College, Ibadan. He holds a National Diploma in Painting & General Arts, Auchi Polytechnic, Edo State where he graduated as the Best Student in the Institution 2004. He trained in many studios including Ara Studio. Dotun is a graduate of Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Nigeria, overall best student in sculpture, He is one of the founding member and Secretary of the Araism Movement and Auchi Heritage, and He is a member of Society of Nigerian Artist (SNA) Lagos state chapter. He won the Director General's Award of Best Artist of the year in the maiden NYSC Arts competition in 2009, held in Crypian Ekwensi Art centre Abuja. He holds a Master degree in Painting from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 2014. Currently he works with the National Gallery of Arts as a Curator II in Osogbo outstation. Dotun has executed several mural paintings in Osun State and its environs, and also coordinated many workshop and seminars for orphanage homes and rehabilitation centres. He has also made his art as therapy, using it to coordinate hands and brains of the less privileged.

Selected Exhibitions

2003 Ososo Water Colour Workshop (catalogue)
2004 Group Exhibition, De-emergence (selected fellow art exhibition). (catalogue).
2005 Group Exhibition, Within Our Grasp, National Museum Lagos. (catalogue).
2006 Group Exhibition, Kambani Arts of London and National Gallery of Art, Lagos. (catalogue)
2006 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 1, Harmattan Workshop gallery, Lagos. (catalogue).
2006 Group Exhibition, African Beauty, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, (catalogue)
2006 Group Exhibition, Arts as Life, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife, Nigeria. (catalogue)
2006 Group Exhibition, Aesthetic Bond by Creative Minds. (catalogue).
2007 Group Exhibition, Foot Print, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. (catalogue).
2007 Group Exhibition, Beautiful Nigeria organized by Art Scholars Initiative, held at National Museum, Onikan, Lagos. (catalogue).
2007 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 2, National Museum Onikan lagos. (catalogue).
2008 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 4, Inspiro, Victoria Island, Lagos. (catalogue)
2008 Group Exhibition, Ifectivity-Final year exhibition, OAU, Ile-Ife (catalogue).
2009 Group Exhibition, NYSC Art Competition and maiden exhibition (catalogue).
2010 Group Exhibition, October Rain, Society of Nigerian Artists (Lago State Chapter) held at Nike Art Gallery, Lekki, Lagos, (catalogue).
2010 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 6, organized by Ara Studio in celebration of Gani Adams, National Coordinator of Oodua People's Congress held at National Theatre, Iganmu, Lagos- (catalogue).
2011 Group Exhibition, De-emergence of a New State, Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA) exhibition. (Catalogue).
2011 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 9, Though Pyramid Art Gallery, Abuja. (catalogue).
2011 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 10, (catalogue).
2012 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 11, Mydrim Gallery, Lagos (catalogue).
2013 Two-Person Exhibition: Affinity, Cameron Hotels, Ile-Ife, Osun State (catalogue).
2014 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 12, (Cradle of life), Studio 18, City of Pembroke Pines, Florida, USA. (catalogue).
2014 Group Exhibition, Araism Movement 13, Red Door Arts Gallery, Ikoyi, Lagos (catalogue)
2014 Solo Exhibition, Quest for Space, A master of Fine Art Graduating Exhibition, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, (catalogue).
2015 Solo Exhibition, From Lagos to Lemon, A Solo Exhibition, John Lopez Studio, Lemmon South Dakota, USA. (catalogue).
2016 Two-Person Exhibition: Araism and the West, John Lopez Gallery, Lemmon, South Dakota (catalogue).
2017 Diary of Two Visual Anthropologists Kokomo, Main Street, Lemmon South Dakota, USA (catalogue).
2017 October Rain Society of Nigerian Artists, Lagos State Chapter, National Museum Lagos.

Dotun David, Popoola

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Esin Oba (The Royal Horse)
2018
H 84”
B 20”
L 54”



INFLUENCES AND INFERENCES IN THE ASSEMBLAGE AND WELDED METAL ART OF DOTUN POPOOLA

> "It is perhaps achieving that fluidity of meaning which has driven modern African artists to position themselves as material experimentalist to creatively interrogate waste and found objects, exploring their artistic qualities and meanings, as well as using such works to reflect societal circumstances and issues in contemporary Africa, as the basis for their art."
> Clement Akpang (2013)

All through the 20th-century, as a fallout of the modernist revolution against the use of traditional materials in fine art and the subsequent desire to prove that «art» can be made out of anything, artists have been creating sculpture, assemblage, combined paintings/sculptures and installations from a continuous widening range of unusual objects and materials (Seitz, 1962). From the cubist constructions of Pablo Picasso; the 'ready-mades'[1] of Marcel Duchamp; the 'combines'[2] of Robert Rauschenberg; to the Italian 'Arte Povera'[3], this plethora of variations the readymade objects/junks willingly offers formed a foundation on which other artists have built on in Europe and America.

In Africa, the incorporation of materials from pop culture into her visual practice may have existed since the continent's encounter with the West during the slave trade and even earlier, as evidenced in the use of European spirit bottles assembled
to build deities and shrines (Shiner 1994). The link between colonialism, globalization, modernity and waste generation, complemented by technological advancements in contemporary

1 The readymades of Marcel Duchamp are ordinary manufactured objects that the artist selected and modified, as an antidote to what he called "retinal art". By simply choosing the object (or objects) and repositioning or joining, titling and signing it, the Found object became art.

2 Rauschenberg is well known for his "Combines" of the 1950s, in which non-traditional materials and objects were employed in innovative combinations.

3 A type of avant-garde art made from «found objects" including worthless materials, like soil, bits of wood, rags, scraps of newspaper. More specifically, it refers to a group of avant-garde painters and sculptors based in Turin, Milan, Genoa, and Rome from the mid-1960s onwards who produced a provocative fusion of Conceptual Art, Assemblage, Minimalism and Performance Art.

Africa, no doubt, has resulted in waste uniquely adapted into art to a very high level. El Anatsui comes to mind, his assemblages of liquor bottle tops and cassava graters interrogates the history of colonialism while drawing connections between consumption, waste, and Environment. While Olu Amoda and Muraina Akeem find solace in repurposing everyday object/discarded materials in their artistic productions, Adeola Balogun explores the potency of rubber tire as a tool for his visual vocabulary. The list of sculptors interrogating waste in Nigeria is numerous. The newest addition to this is Dotun Popoola.

Famous for his bright and colorful paintings, Dotun Popoola, is re-appearing into the Nigerian art scene, this time with his assemblages and highly ornamental metal works. He finds new meaning and explores new possibilities in mechanical parts. He takes these objects out of their original context and painstakingly assembles them to accurately convey the true anatomy of his subjects. His works generate curiosity and create an arena of visual satisfaction while he gives new meaning to his found objects. He refers to these works as 'Hybrid metal sculptures' a phrase which John Lopez (American Sculptor) uses in describing his heterogeneous sculptures. Dotun's new works embody technical and ideological tenets from Auchi School, Ife Art School and John Lopez Studio which is referred herein as 'the trilogy of influences'. These formal and informal training represents his creative water-pot from which he drinks.

Trilogy of Influences

Influence from The Auchi School of Art (Auchi Style)

Dotun Popoola was formally trained in Auchi Polytechnic where he specialized in painting and earned a Distinction upon graduation. Famous for the style of engaging brilliant colors and strong draftsmanship tenets, this institution has produced many successful artists who are holding sway in the contemporary Nigerian Art scene. In describing the style associated with this school, the institution website explains that "The students initially started off with a passion for impression, but later imbibed the fauvist palette, which culminated in the marriage between impressionism and fauvism with more attention being paid to color than forms in the expressive content of their work" ("The Auchi Style," 2010). This trait comes alive in some of the works on display such as *Double Bass, Boerboel, Akukogagara, Esin Oba, Oba Eye, Owl, and kokoro ton jefo*. He uses vibrant colors to highlight certain parts of his sculpture by brushing and sometimes flat application of red, orange, cerulean blue, emerald green and white hues of industrial acrylics.



Akuko Gagara II (The Rooster)
2018
H 80”
B 35”
L 75”







Influences from Ife Art School

Armed with a palette of vibrancy and good draftsmanship skill, Dotun proceeded to the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife where he specialized in Sculpture for a First degree and finishes as the best student in his set. In 2014, He would go ahead to get an MFA in Painting in the same school. His Ife Art School training, no doubt, positioned him on the right pedestal on which he now rides. Fajuyigbe (2017), while highlighting the objectives of the Ife Art School and its manifestation on paintings of Jonathan Imafidor and Dotun Popoola, asserts that; "Art training at the Ife school encourages rigorous exploration, contextualization, and intellectualization of materials and creative ideas such that the end-products are perceived and received not as mere art objects but as visual documents that could be read, understood and appreciated by viewers irrespective of their academic and cultural background". These ideals as illuminated by Fajuyigbe forms the foundation for Onaism[4].

In the period before Dotun's affinity with the Ife Art School, he had met Mufu Onifade (a protégé and alumnus of the Ife Art School and inventor of Araism[5] painting technique). Dotun enrolled in the Ara Studio in 2003 and was subsequently baptized into this unique painting form. He was one of the pioneering members that launched the 'Araism Movement' in 2006 and has been an active member since then. Dotun traveled as a member of the art movement to exhibit and make presentations in some of the most prestigious art galleries in major Nigerian cities of Lagos, Abuja, and in Florida, U.S.A.

The technical and philosophical foundation on which Onaism and Araism rides, comes alive in Dotun's new pieces which further strengthens his root to the Ife Art School. This is evident in his assemblage and fabricated metal works such as *Owner's Corner, Adeola's Portrait, Fruit of our Labor, and The Dog and Tortoise*. Through plasma cutting and painting, he imbues geometric and organic motifs to enrich his subjects contextually and aesthetically.

4 Irivwieri (2010) Works in Onaism are characterized with the use of significant symbols charged with related motifs to give verbal luminosity in such a manner that there is scarcely any surface of the picture plane without action. The exponent of Onaism includes Moyo Okediji, Kunle Filani, Bolaji Campbell, Tunde Nasiru and Tola Wewe.

5 araism is an African painting technique which derives, first and foremost, from a Yoruba concept of beauty. It draws largely from the pointillism technique in making use of thousands of small color dots to create striking background patterns. However, it does so in such a way as to immerse the observer, almost in a mystical way, in the collective cultural experience of the Yorubas (a West African people living mostly in the Nigerian southwest,)

Influence from The West: John Lopez's 'Hybrid Metal Art'

Dotun, in search of inspirational ideas, stumbled upon John Lopez's sculpture images on the internet. Fascinated by the monumental sculptures that he (John Lopez) produces from discarded materials, He would later travel to the US to meet and learn from this highly respected and successful artist. John lives and works in Lemmon, a small city in Perkins County, South Dakota. His technique involves the fusion of different sculptural media such as found objects, bronze casts, industrially customized metals, and every-day objects. His choices of materials, technique and theme reference culture, technology, memory, time and kinetics. He refers to his works as "Hybrid Metal Sculptures" (L. John, personal communication, December 20, 2017). In 2015, Dotun had a three-month residency training under him where he got acquainted with the rubrics of using a plasma cutter, wire-field welder and was introduced to the Western culture. He would ride horses, wrestle calves during branding and paint murals for the community. Dotun studied the anatomy of horses, buffalos, cows and examined how found objects could accurately mimic the anatomy of these animals with minimal or no alteration to the original state of the objects. The fruit of this residency was the exhibition - *From Lagos to Lemmon*- where he chronicled his visual odyssey through scrap-metal sculptures and painting on canvas. Since then, he has adopted Lemmon as his second home and hosts an annual exhibition to showcase his new findings.

In this show, assemblages such as *Double Bass, Boerboel, Akukogagara and Esin Oba* are upshots from his tutelage under John Lopez gallery. Paying rapt attention to the anatomy of forms, he welds locally found mechanical objects together and by leaving the natural color of the objects, he creates a unique kind-of aesthetics. He strengthens his message by introducing African motifs, personalized symbols, and written words.

Analysis of Works

Esin Oba (The King's Horse) features a gawking horse formed out of discarded machine parts. Dotun forms the mane with the gas tank of a motorcycle, dysfunctional electrical generator parts, shock absorbers, generator-pull-cord compartment, brake-pads, steering knuckles, control arms etc. The fetlocks and crest of the horse are made out of twisted metals carelessly locked together, welded and painted in red, orange and yellow. He forms the horse's tack out of cut-out metal and trims the edges of the throatlatch, cheek piece, and noseband with motorcycle chains. The Cheeks are represented with clutch-disc-covers and the bits, muzzles and chin grooves are depicted with manipulated spoons, wrenches, pliers and a plethora of small medium and large found auto parts. Staring into a void with a

gaping jaw, the life-size horse is brought to life with each part telling a story.

Using Yoruba and Pidgin English, Dotun prints interjections of fragmentary phrases – "OKADA', "EKO", "OMO BABA MEKO", "LAGOS", "NO CHANGE", "NEPA IS ALTERNATIVE", "I BETTER PASS MY NEIGHBOUR") unto the gas tanks. This is an interplay between Dotun's style of giving credit to the auto-mechanics who are the reservoirs from which he collects his auto parts; and an attestation to a consciousness of his socio-political terrain. Each found object welded together in this sculpture carries a codified message which is a reflection of the true state of the country. For instance, the generator-pull-cord, motorcycle, and generator gas tanks berate the looming and biting unstable power supply, fuel scarcity and unstable pump price. The worn-out clutch-disc-covers, failed shock absorbers, ball-joints and used brake-pads are corroborations and pointers to the heavy weight of traffic congestion and the horrendous nature of the Nigerian roads. The incorporation of brilliant hues of red and orange is an evidence of the artist's affinity with the colorist Auchi Style. The infusion of decorative patterns both in twisted metal forms and color hinges largely on the 'Ona ideology' thus referring to his Ife Art School background. His technique of rendition is a result of his Western association with John Lopez and the Cowboy culture. The subject of the horse equally gives an insight into the thrills of African royalty and Dotun's Western association with the Cowboy culture.

Double-bass is another evocative piece that presents the rhythm of life using found objects that ironically alludes to African societal upheavals. Conspicuous among the numerous objects that have come together to form this piece are car shock absorbers, spark plugs, sprockets, auto-alternator carcass, car lower arm, saxophone and a lantern (with no bulb or thread) positioned at the middle of the sculpture. Dotun neatly assembles spark plugs in a semi-circular order mimicking a working social system where organization and order and peace co-exist. Considering Dotun's exposure to the Western world and how the system treats its citizens positively with the provision of social amenities and infrastructural facilities, this piece is a toast to his native optimists in bleak situations. It embodies how minds can be trapped by lack of access to basic necessities of life. "It is disheartening that obstacles to essential needs (such as electricity) still affect my country and many nations across Africa," Dotun says. He celebrates the strength of citizens working against such tough odds with this Double Bass! Despite the tough living conditions, the citizens still find a reason to celebrate.

The Broken Sax of Abami Eda presents a chiaroscuro albeit silhouette impression of the Legendary musical icon/activist

-Fela Anikulapo Kuti. He is the inventor of Afro-beat and was very critical of tyrannical and corrupt African Leadership. He died on August 3, 1997, but his cry and prophecies, while he was alive, are still fresh. This piece is made out of a flat, thin, ferrous-metal-sheet. The highlighting was achieved using a plasma cutter in a subtractive process. A complete saxophone was disassembled and the different parts were welded randomly on the metal sheet. Dotun first conflagrates the saxophone before dismantling it. An action which symbolically represents the rigorous attempt by the Nigerian government - who couldn't withstand Fela's verbal missiles at that time – to burn his voice. Musical notes are arranged rhythmically flowing alongside beautiful floral patterns which emanates from the bell-lip. The keys and mouth-piece are scattered in the composition and the carcass of the saxophone is elongated by using an automobile shock absorber to adjoin them. Orange painted bolts and screws are arranged in vertical and horizontal formations bringing warmth to this composition. Fela looks on with so much hope emanating from his posture. The disjointed nature of the saxophone and other randomly placed elements are signifiers to the irregularly shaped mien of the Nigerian Nation. According to Dotun "When one sits back and listens to some of his songs, one would be surprised to see that a lot of the things he complained about in the 1970s and 80s are still happening". Though his saxophone is broken, the melody and fact-based and prophetic jabs still live on.

Fruit of our Labour is a relief metal sculpture. In this piece, Dotun leverages solely on Plasma cutting to achieve *Ona*. He embellishes a metal bowl by cutting out designs, ornamentation, and motifs found in traditional Yoruba carvings and textiles. The natural grey color and the shimmering effect presents these objects as precious and valuable. He picks this every-day object used by local masons and transforms it into objects of beauty and admiration. He elevates it from a perceived status of filth, poverty, and hard-labor to commemoration of dedication, hard-work and society building.

Conclusion

Dotun's *Irin Ajo* is a narrative of his many travels, experiences, and influences. Being influenced by the Auchi School of Art, Ife Art School, and John Lopez's hybridity, he is well positioned to take the art world head-on with new possibilities. This body of work represents his awareness of his social, cultural, religious and political environment.

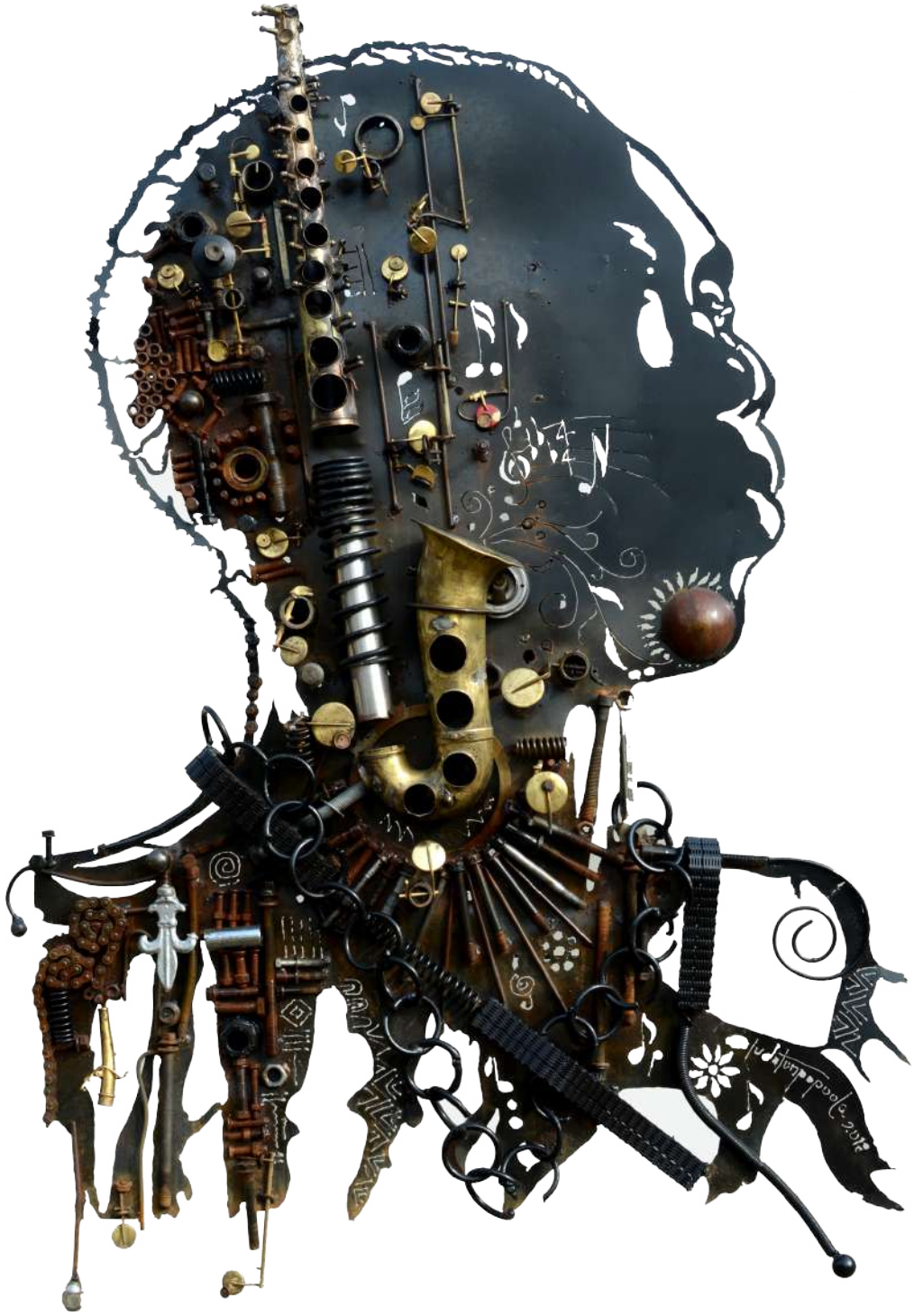
As a material experimentalist, he interrogates found objects, assembles, twists, cuts, casts, and paints. By his unique exploration of different techniques, style, material, and ideology

in these fifteen pieces on display, he is carving a niche for himself in the Contemporary Nigerian Art scene. Welcome to the show as Dotun Popoola takes you through his *irin ajo.*

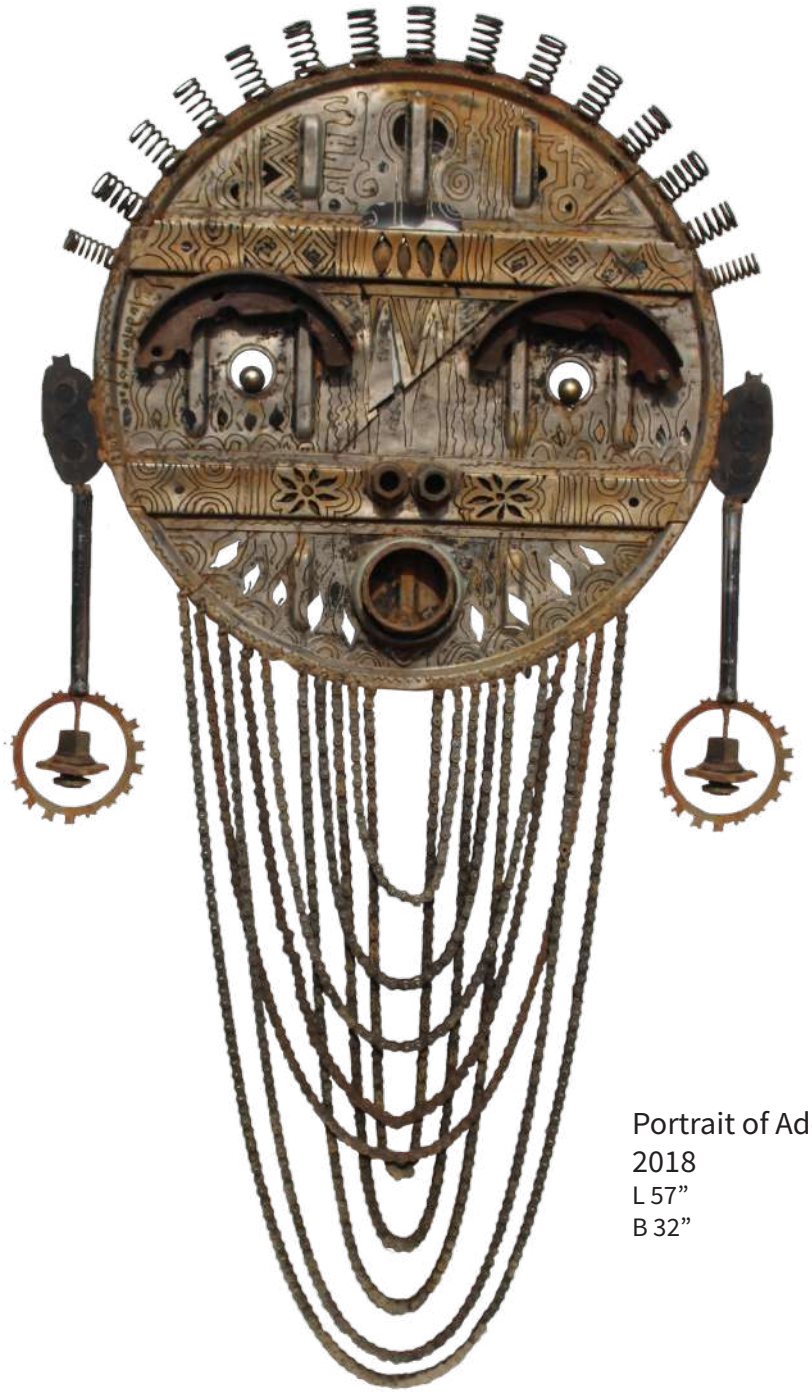
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The Broken Sax of
Abami Eda
2018
L 53”
B 37”



Portrait of Adeola
2018
L 57”
B 32”

IBI ORÍ Ń GBÉ NI RÈ: NOSTALGIA IN DOTUN POPOOLA’S METAL SURGERY

Actually, when I travel I always carry a special paste, which I have made for me—paste which I put in my pocket….
--Wole Soyinka

Ibi oŕi ń *gbé ni rè, kẹ́*sẹ̀ sin *ni kálọ*.
--Yoruba proverb

Dotun Popoola’s compositions in this exhibition titled *Ìrìn Àjò* are allegories of relocations and travels. All travelers carry with them personal forms of memory of home; sometimes these memories are truthful pictures, but oftentimes they are false recollections of a lost past for which the traveler longs. With nostalgic gusto, these voyagers frequently dig into these memories to fight feelings of an uprooted self, while attempting to find new roots in distant community. For the nomadic wanderings of Wole Soyinka, the poet laureate carries a spicy paste, as his totemic idolatry of home. But for his metal surgeries, Popoopla, as an assemblage artist, carries with him his oxygen tanks to re-pair and re-locate things broken from their original home or contexts, to find them new destinations alongside novel companies.

With the body of metal sculptures in this exhibition titled *Ìrìn Àjò*, Popoola relocates images to the world of words, and move words to the landscapes of images. He is following the beaten paths of ancestral journeys, using multilateral vehicles adapted to suit the shifting terrains of universal truths, to re-mark the symbols of linguistic expressions. The images that he presents in this catalogue of assemblages therefore transform pictures into proverbs and idiomatic expressions: these assemblages are replete with hyperboles, allusions, Illusions, analogies, amplifications, and other subjectivities that place the work at the intersection of seeing things and saying them as *òwe*, or visual proverbs. Only the sage can dis-member the complexity of the visual proverbs that Popoola has welded together in these labyrinths of images.

Using a soldered palette of self-invented and rigorously honed visual idiolects, he travels to a landscape with an open-ended horizon, without imposed limits of interpretation, teasing the traveler with notions of a fluid boundary. This short incantation or *ọfọ̀* will examine the multivalent interconnectedness of disciplinary bridges that inform Popoola's assemblages, as his work transgresses across borders of expressive mediums to demonstrate possibilities of creative conversations outside and within conventional walls of visual creativity.

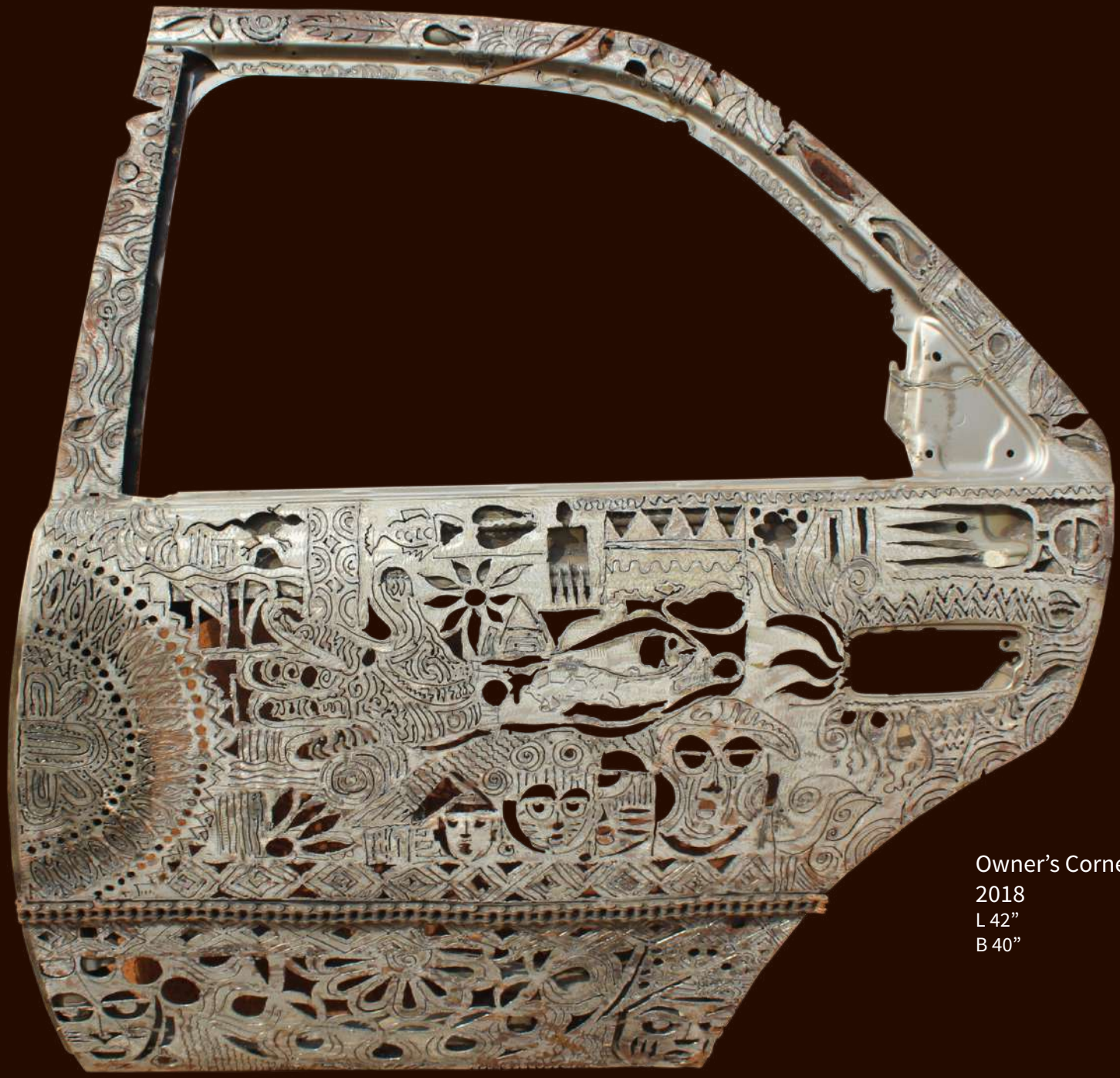
Among the Yoruba speaking people of West Africa, *ìrìn àjò*, in transliteration, means "walked journey," with implications of movement from one point to another. The premise of the title for the exhibition comes from the proverb, *Àjò nilé ayé*, meaning "life is a journey." But it is a journey that began in *ọ̀run*, (the world above), to *ayé*, (this world), and in which every voyager is no more than a sojourner that will return to *ọ̀run*, in a cyclic exploration without interruption or end.

As adventurers who must walk the full distance from aye to *ọ̀run*, the road is an infinitely organic route filled with strange encounters, some for which the traveler is prepared, while others catch the travel by surprise. Every step is a dance along the path of destiny, a fate that every individual must choose and enact throughout a lifetime. The dance of fate moves to the beats of the choices made by the individual spirit, at the preternatural studio of the head portrait sculptor, known as Àjàlá Alámọ̀-tĩĩ-mọ́ri.

The human dance of life begins before the premises of Àjàlá's studio. But it is in Ajala's studio that the individual must choose a name that will transform the body into a specific character, as all individuals start existence simple as *èníyàn*, after being formed in the hands of Ọbàtálá, the divinity of anatomical creativity. Once *èníyàn* leaves Ọbàtálá's studio, the gender as *akọ* (male)

Ilekun Igbega (Door of Opportunity)
2018
L 44”
B 4”





Owner’s Corner
2018
L 42”
B 40”

or *abo* (female) is already determined. What remains unknown is the type of *oŕi* or head that the individual would choose at Àjàlá's studio. The portrait sculptor, Àjàlá, fashions the heads from clay and fires it to his taste, desires and moods, but assists no one in making a choice.

Àjàlá simply has a studio filled with myriads of readymade heads of various dimensions and properties. Some heads are large and others small; some properly fired, and others mildly or overfired. Ènìyàn, after choosing the head, must carry the choice for the rest of existence, along the endless routes of life through fortunate and difficult passages. This is where the legs, (*ẹsẹ̀*) enter the picture: the head (*oŕi*) is a heavy burden that the body must bear, and it is the duty of the *ẹsẹ̀* to support the body in conveying this load.

Sometimes the legs get weary and refuse to move. The traveler therefore must pray the leg to assist in the journey with the proverbial prayer, "*Ibi oŕi* ń *gbé ni rè, kẹ́*sẹ̀ sin *ni kálọ*." it is part-incantation, and part propitiation, and a gentle reminder to the legs to fulfil the duty of the perfect, indefatigable caryatid.

In Popoola's sculptures, three journeys are simultaneously transpiring: the first consists of the story of his experiences as he crosses various boundaries and inches across the landscapes of personal distances, along the passages of his human achievements. From the original starting points before his birth, he leaves home, *ọ̀run*, and travels to the human world, *ayé*, a diasporic experience of transgressions across the milestones of his continuing existence. In the anal of his mind and in the arteries of his body, the memories of the past mingle with the realities of the present, as he re-members these details into a constantly evolving mnemonic diary. The sculptures that he produces are therefore autobiographical diaries, which double as milestones of time.

The second journey consists of the stories of the various objects he brings together in his assemblages, from different places, with different names, identities and previous lives, into a new character. Within the invented, semi-coherent world that Popoola fashions for them, as consolidated, welded, and re-membered assemblages, they find formidable challenges and brilliant opportunities.

This literary incantation will start the third journey with equestrian struts, as the point of departure to other displayed objects in the exhibition. In *Ẹsin Ọba (The Royal Horse)*, Popoola transliterates the notion of the horsepower into imagistic re-collections, by retrieving shards from multitudes of automobile body parts, to realize the picturesque deportment portraying an equestrian

profile. The assemblage of myriads of strange objects into a new pictorial framework to form the head of the horse is a collection of many stories, as each object brings its own specific narrative and memories into the equestrian carriage. At the first glance, the viewer experiences the overall portrait of the stallion. But as the eyes settle on the details of the head, one begins to see the anatomy of the horse, as if Popoola has stripped the skin to reveal what is hidden under the costume of the masquerade. We are all playing the game of the masquerade, Popoola seems to say, and it is the duty and privilege of the artists to look under the hood and reveal the various parts motorizing our lives. A Yoruba proverb says, *Sún mó ni là á mọ̀ṣe ẹni: èrìyàn gbókèèrè ńíyì*. It means that from afar you cannot tell the true character hidden behind the mask that folks wear on a daily basis. But once you move close enough, you begin to perceive the mechanics powering the muscles of the *Royal Horse*.

The theme of the head, *ońi*, runs through the exhibition in assemblage pieces such as *The Broken Sax of Abàmìi Ẹ̀dá*, *Ọ̀kẹ́rẹ́ Gońi`Irókò*, *Ilẹ̀kùn`Igbéga*, *Òwìwí* and *Àkùkọ Gàgàrà*. A tribute to the life and music of Fela Anikulapo Kuti, *The Broken Sax of Abàmìi* Ẹ̀dá, celebrates the deceased musical maestro who conscientiously honed his art as an instrument to fix the broken political, economic and cultural systems of Nigeria, but got crushed under the iron hand of the authorities. In the process of trying to fix Nigeria, Fela invented an exquisite and robust brand of music, AfroBeat, which various artists all over the world have now inherited and turned into weapons of resisting oppression, as well as soundscapes for nurturing innovative musical growths. Popoola in his assemblage focuses on the representation of Fela's head on, around and within which he scatters the shards of Fela's shattered saxophone, which is the maestro's iconic identity. Fela in 1975, released the album *Everything Scatter*, which opens with a sonorous sax refrain before breaking into the lyrics of "Rẹ́rẹ́ run/Rẹrẹ̀ run/Rẹ́rẹ́ run o…" repeated *ad infinitum* to emphasize the idea. *Rẹ́*ré *rún* means "the bridge is shattered, thus pidginizing the concept of confusion, disarray, disorganization and corruption that he registers in the polity of African leaders, especially pronounced in Nigeria. Like a visual brain surgeon, Popoola fixes the broken parts of Fela's life, using the homeopathic magic of optical orthopedics.

The orthopedic adventures of the bits and pieces retrieved and re-paired into Popoola's visual surgical practices are narratives in the trials and travails of borders crossing travelogues. From their initial identities of garbage, the old, broken and abandoned parts transition into new diasporas where they assume other characterizations of being or *`iwà*, with the meticulous arrangements of *ètò*, a theoretical notion invoking organization,

discipline, transformation and methodical order. Ètò is a theory of taming chaos and imposing rules, control and sanity, where once there was disaster, waste and decay. With the mechanism of *ètò*, Popoola initiates an aesthetic of visualizing regenerations by providing second lives, similar to raising dead bones from the grave, and breathing new lives into them.

As an inventive visual artist, Popoola uses *ètò* mechanisms to accentuate the eyes of the owl in his work titled *Òwìwí*. Dispatched as the symbol of the artist who sees clearly and most easily in the dark, the *Òwìwí* is the creative spirit who is always finding opportunities where others only perceive darkness. The owl has the capacity to rotate the head (*orí*) on a flexible neck that orbits perfectly to present both the back and the front views in alignment with side perspectives, bringing together vistas of the past, the present, and the future, like the Orunmila divinity. Popoola postulates the role of the artist as one endowed with special gifts of vision in a community that appears leaderless, a society marooned in myopia, jaundice, and impending blindness, a citizenry groping around with no insight with which to inform and repair their circumstances, while abandoning itself to the chaotic tides of life, with undercurrents billowing it along a turbulent ocean blanketed in fogs and darkness. What will announce the dawn of a new era, if not Popoola's *Àkùkọ Gàgàrà*, the poet, the singer, the bard, who Soyinka depicts as crushed to death by the automobile in his poem, "Death in the Dawn?'" Soyinka writes:

" …it was —
Sudden winter at the death
Of dawn's lone trumpeter. Cascades
Of white feather-flakes ... but it proved
A futile rite…."

"Dawn's lone trumpeter" is the *Àkùkọ Gàgàrà* which, hit by the automobile, meets it's "sudden winter," an untimely death, with its feathers flying, scattered in the wind, like "flakes." The poet, the artist, the visionary tragically dies in a culture that does not harken to the call of reason. Yet Popoola, with his orthopedic visual surgery, meticulous retrieves every feather, and brings them together to give a new life to the dead poet, the artist, the visionary, in *Àkùkọ Gàgàrà*.

Ètò, this discipline of optico-surgical re-pairs, informs Popoola's assemblage titled *Ilẹkùn Ìgbéga (Door of Opportunities*) in which he harvests the discarded detritus of a car door, and infuses a new life into it. His creative activity on this automobile door

is reminiscent of the oracular divinity, Orunmila, the central character engraved on the flattened panel. Hailed as "*Atóńi-ẹni-ti-ò-sunwọ̀n-ṣe*," (The-One-Who-Surgically-Repairs-Broken/Unfortunate-Heads), Ọ̀rúnmìlà is the divinity of fortune and transformations, as the embodiment of all knowledge of the past, the present and the future. *Ilẹ̀kùn Ìgbéga* perforates the door of the automobile, further invoking the virtues of Ọ̀rúnmìlà as a divinity who opens any doors that closes the path to wealth and blessings, while shutting away the doors of adversity, tragedy and troubles. Because the automobile is a symbol of the good life in Nigeria, while also serving as the analogy of the leg traveling along the road of life's adventures, there is a direct link between *Ilẹ̀kùn Ìgbéga* and *Ẹsin Ọba (The Royal Horse),* with the proverb, *Ibi ońi* ń *gbé ni rè, kẹ́*sẹ̀ sin *ni kálọ*. Popoola's dawn is just beginning to break in this exhibition, *Ìrìn Àjò*, yet it is already clear that his legs are ably supporting him along his creative life journey.

Moyo Okediji
Department of Art and Art History
University of Texas, Austin, United States.



Owiwi (Owl)
2018
H 19"
L 12"
B 8"

THE 3DIMENSIONAL SIDES OF DOTUN POPOOLA

"I am interested in art as a means of living a life; not as a means of making a living."

- Robert Henri

LOVE FOR EXCELLENCE:

I got to meet this young but vibrant mind in the year 2004 at Auchi Polytechnic when I was admitted to study Painting and General Arts. He was a year ahead of me and of course he was my senior. I met several persons while I was a student there but Dotun Popoola stood out both in artistic practical expressions and theoretical aspect of the arts. I remembered how he would work tirelessly and sometimes sleep in the class day and night to ensure he perfects his crafts and attain excellence in his academic assignments. He loves daring the impossible and doing the unthinkable. Little wonder how bagged the overall best student in the School of Arts and Design, Auchi Polytechnic in the year 2004.

I have been greatly inspired by his large murals and sculptural art pieces. Sometimes I wonder how he is able to accomplish such monumental artistic feats. Dotun doesn't like settling for anything small and this is evident in his gigantic art projects and exhibitions in Nigeria and United States of America.

LOVE FOR OTHERS

Dotun Popoola is someone that wants everyone around him to succeed irrespective of their limitations and failures. He always inspires them to be a better version of themselves and not to entertain mediocrity.

He became a brother, mentor and friend I could look up to during my undergraduate days. He is a great leader who knows the way, shows the way and leads the way.

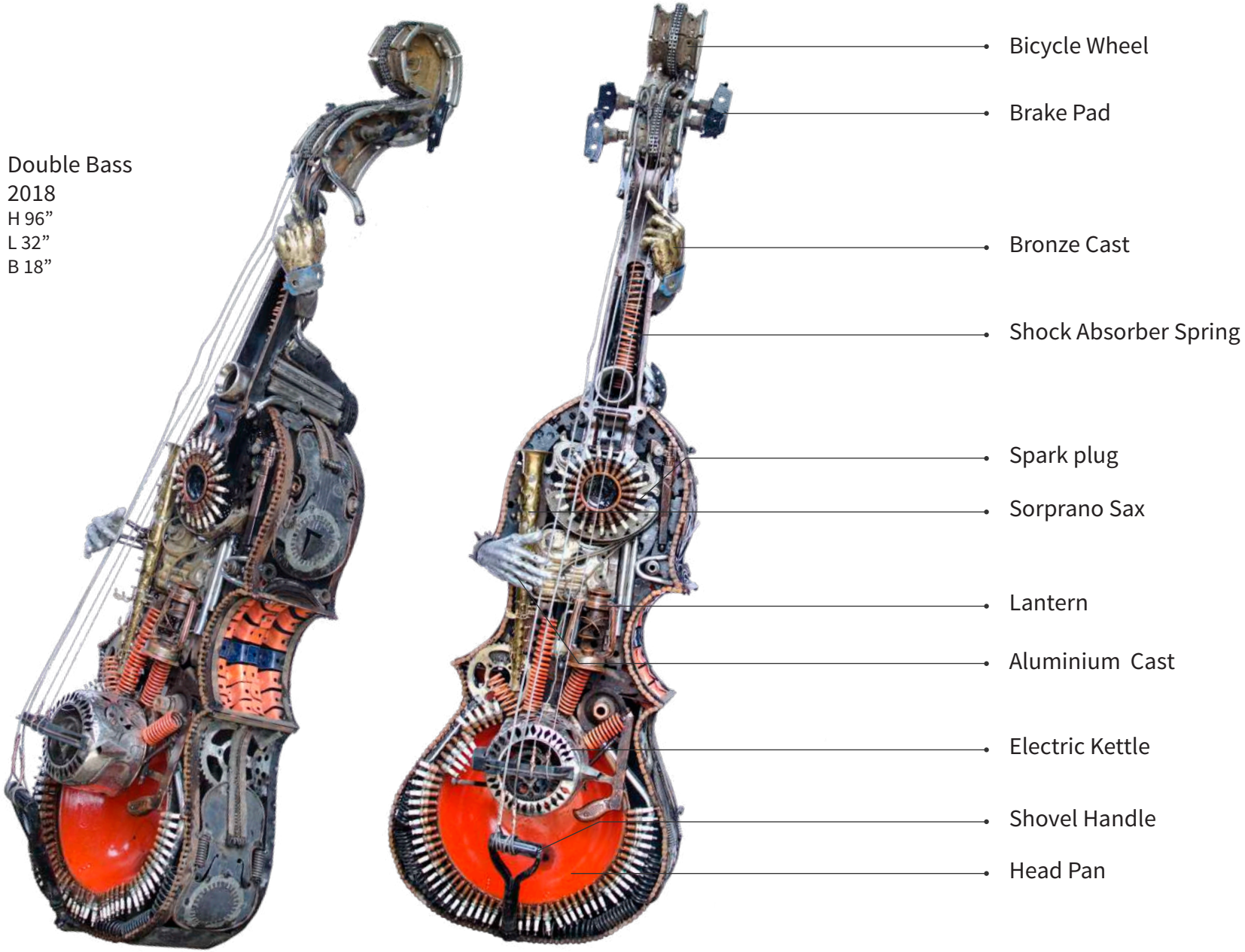
As a great friend and brother, Dotun encouraged me to come to Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife for me degree programs and accommodated me for years. During this period he would facilitate art sessions to mentor both non artists and art students in his studio at Ile-Ife. He has mentored lots of great young people in Nigeria including myself to attain a level of greatness.

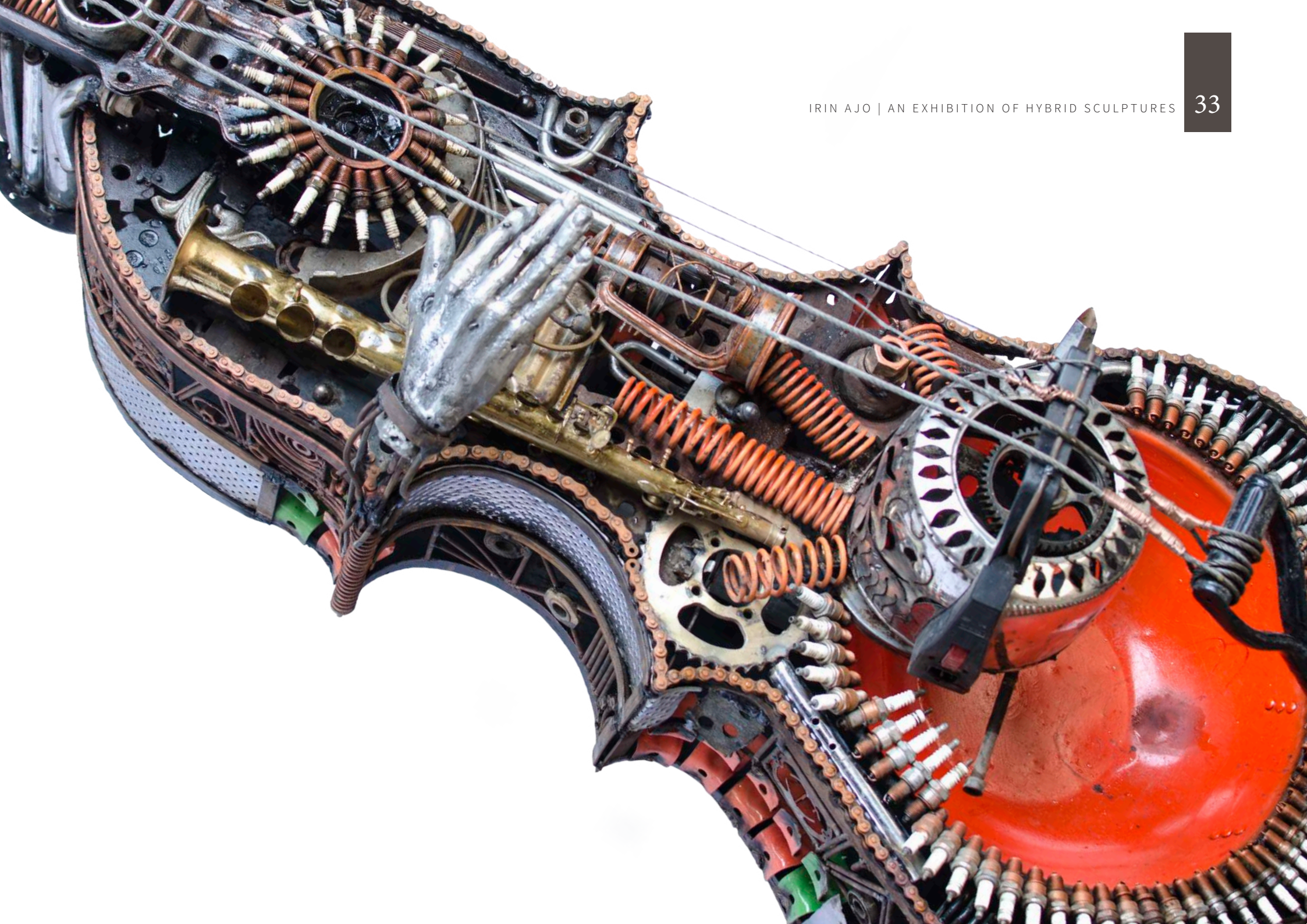
LOVE FOR GOD:

During our undergraduate days in Auchi Polytechnic and Obafemi Awolowo University, Dotun's passion for God is evident in the way he conducts himself and how he ensures we talk to God first before we embark on anything for the day. His faith is critical to his artistic practice because to him, art is a spirit and the artist needs to be spiritual to connect to the supernatural to dominate in the natural.

Kunle Adewale
Commonwealth Youth Worker Award Winner,
United Kingdom

Double Bass
2018
H 96”
L 32”
B 18”







Fruit of our Labour
2018
L 50”
B 27”

DOTUN’S IRIN AJO: MY THOUGHTS

It was like yesterday when Dotun Popoola held his last exhibition which was a huge success. A lot has been said about the artist and yet so much is there to say but how best do one talk about this restless Dotun who is here to change the beliefs in Contemporary Art.

I have known Dotun for a considerable number of years. More so that he works as a curator under my supervision at the National Gallery of Art, Oshogbo, Osun State Nigeria.

Irin Ajo in the Yoruba language literarily means; *Irin* (iron), *Ajo* (weld). In another form, *Irin Ajo* in Yoruba means journey. These, therefore, explains the title of the exhibition as Dotun’s sojourn into metal sculpture and his own creative adventure at discovering far more than has been achieved. This I believe is an experiment he will continue to nurture.

Dotun’s metal works are created with materials mixed to form imperishable and meaningful designs that communicate

easily to the audience in vibrant colors. His styles worth great accolades and worthy of tribute as he has courageously developed a style more personal to him than the ARAISM he is known with as a medium of expression. From inception as a staff at the National Gallery of Art, Dotun left no one in doubt about his impeccable performance which could be seen in his daily longing to break new fronts with great skills to conquer the impossible without allowing technical limitations as obstacles but as challenges, he can surmount. He has therefore been able to revolutionize his craft and a carved a niche for himself which would be his signature for years.

I categorically wish to state here that his journey into metal sculpture begins with an innate dream which he has tirelessly worked on over the years to attain to this level. A discovery he yearned to bring to fruition and have worked tremendously on to bring to force as captured in this exhibition like the visionaries who energize science as they search for the cures. Dotun's zeal to break new grounds in Contemporary Nigerian Art cannot be overemphasized as he supports in no small all artists out there who dream daily of breaking new ground in the techniques, discovery, and practice of contemporary art using self as an experiment into new discoveries. His style should not be overlooked in the discussion of contemporary art because his, is a well-spring of creative talent. His journey into the world of metal sculpture shows the inner mind of the artist who has found inspiration in the struggle for creative independence and breaking free from the hardship of daily life. His works show the richness and complexities of his cultural heritage and the beauty of his national and natural environment.

Watch out for more from this great artist.

Mr. Obikunle Olushola
H.O.D Curatorial Services
National Gallery of Art
Osun State. 08037706661





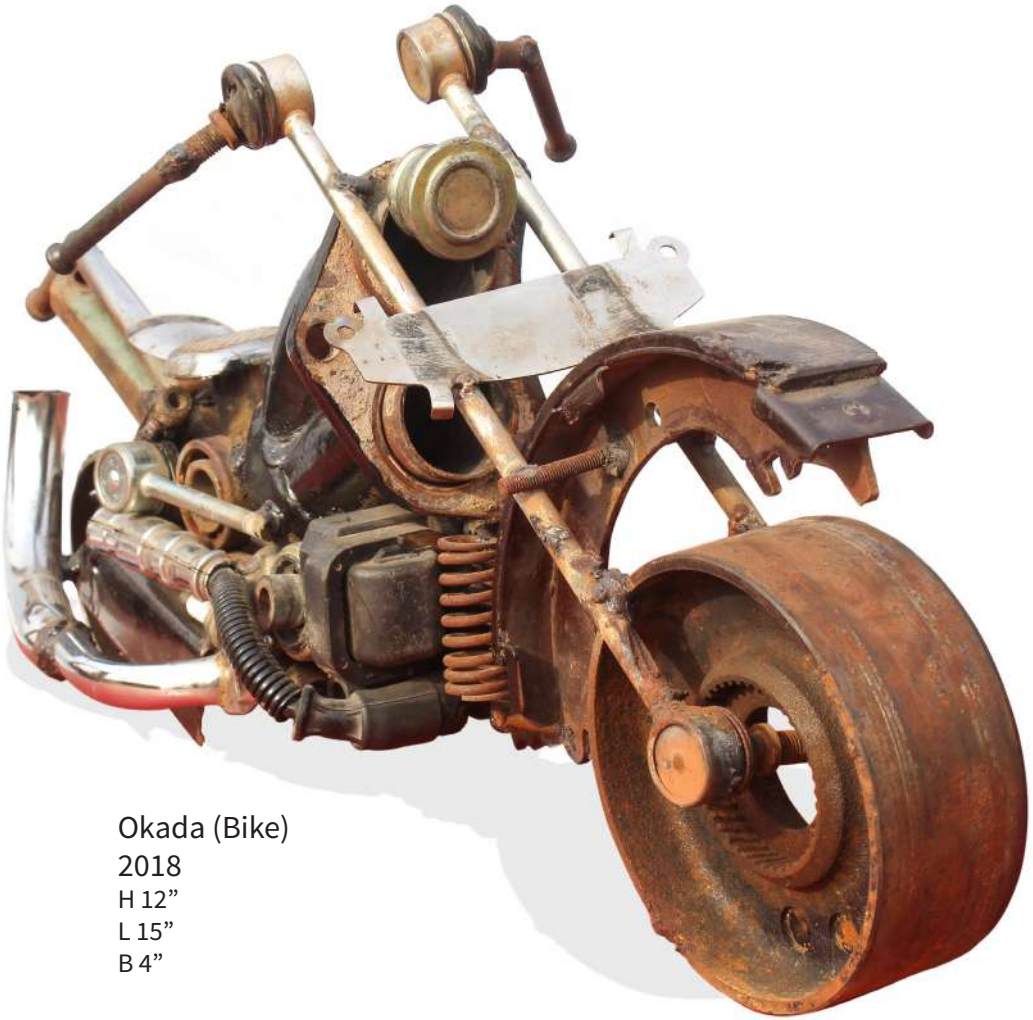
Boer Boel
2018
H 64”
L 84”
B 38”







Kokoro ti n Je Efo
2018
H 64”
L 84”
B 38”



Okada (Bike)
2018
H 12”
L 15”
B 4”



Ponpon Bricklayer
2018
L 69”
B 39”

APPRECIATION