



NNENNA OKORE
METAMORPHOSES



METAMORPHIC PROCESSES

AN INTERVIEW WITH NNENNA OKORE

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Fragments (detail), 2011. Burlap, handmade paper and dye, 137 x 147 x 30 cm.

Gerard Houghton: Two years have gone by since *Ulukububa – Infinite Flow*, your last show at October Gallery. Please tell us about this new exhibition?

Nnenna Okore: Essentially, for this exhibition, I'm working with the same materials I've always used – discarded urban materials such as newspapers and certain fibrous materials – but in quite a different way. In my recent explorations, I've been trying to find ways of re-connecting these materials to their original sources – which includes Nature herself. I chose the theme of 'Metamorphoses' because many of the works created for this show allude to some sort of transition – moving from being one entity to becoming another – perhaps in reference to life and death, or decay and decomposition, which again are integral aspects of life. Also, I'm interested in showing the range of processes that these materials can undergo. In the past, especially with the paper pieces, my works were woven or sewn together to create compositions reflective of fabrics and general organic forms present in nature. Now, these new works resemble natural formations themselves and speak about critical issues such as ecosystems and the global environment. My basic intention for *Metamorphoses* is to have people stop, look and think of how, in the long run, we ourselves, and everything around us, are constantly transitioning, ageing, fading and dying. It's therefore imperative that people perceive their surroundings differently and become more accountable, to themselves and the earthly environment, by cherishing even the most insignificant forms on the planet.

G.H. Tell me what you mean by this word 'process' which you so often use.

N.O. For me, process has to do with linked actions that occur during creation. It's about how things are made, which, in a traditional African setting, typically means familiar tasks that people do with their own hands. Obviously, many processes that exist here in the west seem to be more mechanised or technological, and as such don't have the hand-made or natural elements that my works and materials employ.

G.H. That's what the artist Aubrey Williams referred to as 'the mark of the hand.' It's also true to say that the amount of time spent making something becomes an integral part of the object made.

N.O. Precisely! I think that by virtue of my experiences growing up in Nigeria – where almost everything was made from scratch, and one spent precious time putting things together – this idea remains very valuable to me. I'm not interested in processes that churn things out quickly or efficiently. Rather, I'm more naturally inclined to make things in a manual, labour-intensive and time-consuming manner – because that's just the way I know how to do it best. There's no doubt that memory of these hands-on processes plays a crucial role in how I work. I grew up in the south-eastern part of Nigeria, in the Igbo region. Therefore, I'm highly influenced by my Igbo homeland, by its traditional and cultural processes, which have become a vivid part of my make-up and memory.

G.H. So your art integrates these older modes of making into the creative process?

N.O. Yes! And one other thing that really interests me is making the useless useful – which again relates



somehow to my creative process. I'm intrigued with re-constituting or re-appropriating my materials for an entirely different purpose. It's a way of making them relevant again, of transforming them so that they communicate with the surrounding space in a novel way. This allows viewers to experience them in a different manner to what they might have expected given their preconceptions of the basic materials.



Fragments, 2011. Burlap, handmade paper and dye, 137 x 147 x 30 cm.

G.H. As when you shape discarded newspapers into surprising forms – since, once the news itself is old and finished, the paper on which it was printed no longer has any real value at all.

N.O. Exactly – they're relieved of their role as objects that distribute the daily news and function as novel forms that make people ponder about their new existence. It excites me to re-purpose old or discarded materials that would normally take up space in landfills, and draw people's attention towards new ideas, and innovative ways in which these materials now

occupy space in unconventional ways.

G.H. I like that sculptural formulation of the 'unconventional re-use of materials in space.'

N.O. Well, I'm always trying to 'animate' the exhibition space by displaying my sculptural forms in ways that highlight their colour vibrancy, dramatic formation and stunning textures. I enjoy the way my forms re-shape space and re-contour the surroundings.

G.H. Works like *Strata* or *Earthbound* develop the basic forms of fabrics – and might be hung in very different ways. Is there a preferred way of displaying them or a proper way to hang them?

N.O. I don't have a specific way that I prefer the majority of my pieces to be displayed. I hang works to represent what's on my own mind during their composition – but this mustn't be interpreted as a permanent or fixed way of viewing a particular piece. Like most fluid things in nature – it can be anything at any time. So, whilst I set up a structure that serves as a guide, I don't believe it conditions the only way that it can be seen – there are thousands of ways that it can be composed and, indeed, viewed. I leave it up to the curator or collector to determine how they'd like to see each piece – for me it becomes successful when they are happiest with it.

G.H. Do you surround yourself with your own work?

N.O. Not really! I surround myself more with objects or forms that I've found and picked up. I constantly look at them as a way of reminding myself of where I should be headed artistically – or perhaps where I'm coming from! The most important thing, to me, is thinking about how to derive ideas from the materials I find or reshape the materials I use – so having these bits and pieces of objects hanging on my walls, they become sources of inspiration that lead me on.

G.H. So inspiration comes from these serendipitous encounters with real objects you find?

N.O. I think of it as a journey of discovery, figuring out other approaches to explore my materials. And being a restless spirit, I'm always searching for new materials, new techniques, unexpected combinations, etc. I'm easily bored with using a single technique for an extended period. I may

not necessarily have exhausted its potential, however, I'm regularly asking myself 'What else can I do with this?' One of the things I love about the materials that I use is there's an inexhaustibility about them. So, even when I'm enjoying developing one thing, I'm still searching for something else that it could be doing. Sometimes, I find myself oscillating backwards and forwards between two processes – not because I feel I need to find a particular result – but, that just seems to be the nature of exploration itself. Once I discover an opening – I delve into it and explore whatever new leads it provides me.

G.H. Earlier you suggested that you're doing something different with these works.

N.O. In my recent explorations – especially in the paper but less so in the clay pieces – I've been ripping up as opposed to sewing or weaving things together. Now I'm tearing things, teasing apart the paper and the materials I find, scarring them and breaking them down, so that they begin to assume another quality that speaks of occurrences and co-incidences in nature. The works are taking on a new direction – because rather than being about synthesising, it's now about pulling apart – fraying the materials themselves to produce these forms that reveal layers of history as part of the process.

G.H. Which works are you describing?

N.O. Well, *Emissaries* uses this routine of paring and ripping and then putting back together. *Osimili*, (Igbo: 'The Great River') also – a ceramics-burlap work - uses a lot of ripped-up fibres. First, I rip up burlap and then I attach clay to the burlap. Next, I take the jute that was ripped from the burlap and put it back into the piece. This is different from what I've been doing with my older clay pieces until now. Then there's *When the Heavens Meet the Earth*, more like an installation, which is pretty much in line with this process of

taking apart and reconstituting elements of the pieces with what has been stripped out. Some of the clay pieces reminiscent of natural forms, like *Earthbound* and *Strata*, are also a little different from what I've shown at October Gallery in the past.

Gerard Houghton
October Gallery, April, 2011



Akwa II, 2009. Clay and burlap, 140 x 160 x 20 cm.

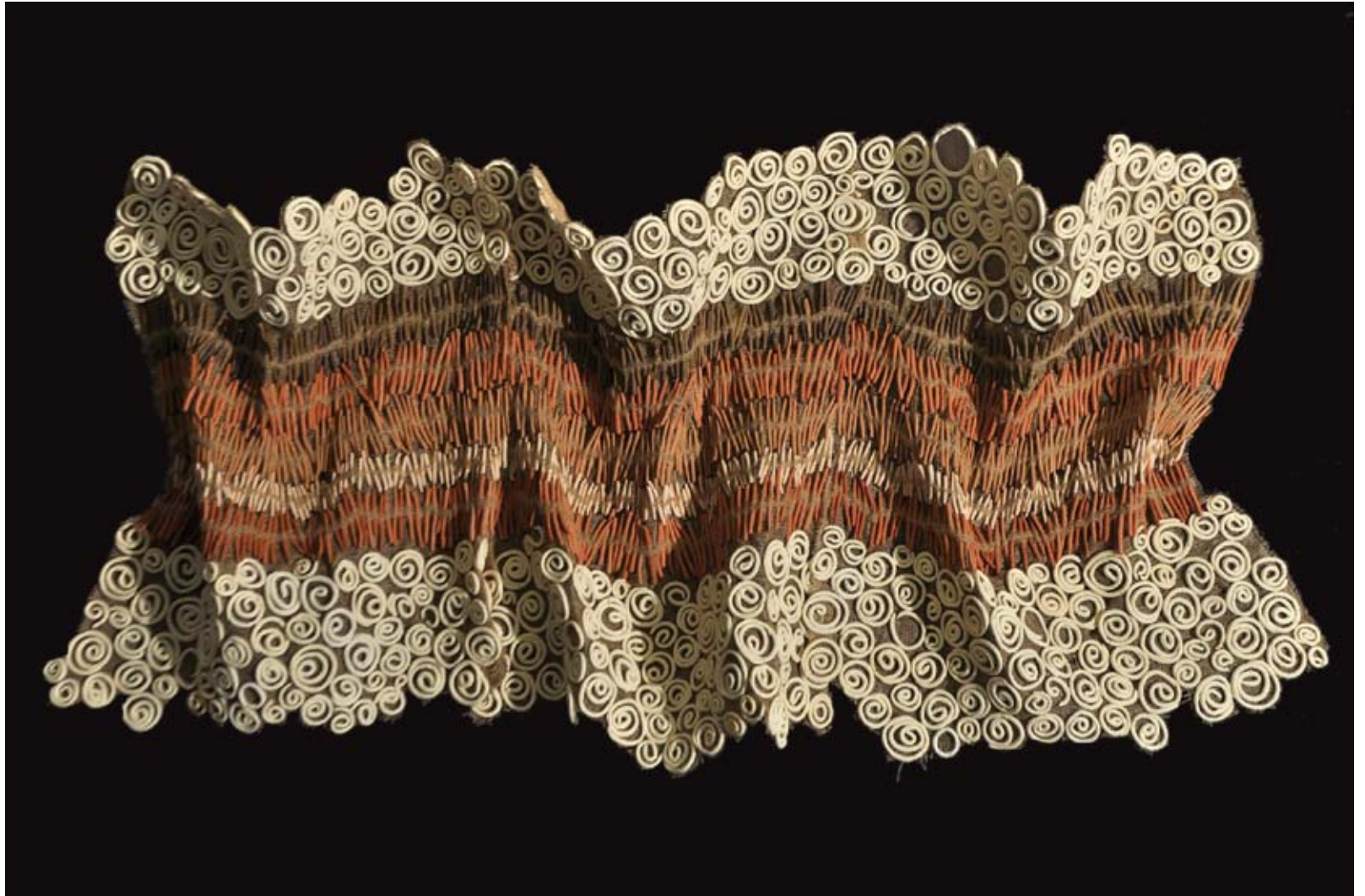


When the Heavens Meet the Earth, 2011. Burlap, acrylic and dye, 274 x 475 x 183 cm.





Crossing Over, 2011. Burlap, handmade paper, dye and acrylic, 208 x 183 cm.



Agbogho, 2009. Clay and burlap, 122 x 213 x 15 cm.



Earthbound (detail), 2011. Clay and burlap, 147 x 224 x 15 cm.



Earthbound, 2011. Clay and burlap, 147 x 224 x 15 cm.



Echi Di Ime, 2011. Clay and burlap, 91 x 91 x 5 cm.







Emissaries (2009). Handmade paper, dye, burlap, jute rope and yarn, varied dimensions approx. 274 x 366 cm.





Threads of Time, 2011. Rope, handmade paper and dye, 145 x 150 x 25 cm.



Strata, 2011. Clay and burlap, 165 x 112 x 20 cm.



Would We Ever Know?, 2011. Burlap, handmade paper, jute rope and dye, 91 x 165 cm.
(detail on back cover)

B I O G R A P H Y

Education

- 2005 M.F.A. Sculpture, University of Iowa.
2004 M.A. Sculpture, University of Iowa.
1999 B.A. Painting, University of Nigeria. (First Class Honors)

Professional Experience

- 2011 **Associate Professor**, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
2009 **Department Chair**, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
2005-11 **Assistant Professor**, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
2002-05 **Teaching Assistant**, Instructor of Record, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
2001-02 **Studio Artist**, Purple Art Studio, Lagos, Nigeria.
2000-01 **Studio Assistant**, El Anatsui -Africa Studio, Nsukka, Nigeria.
1997 **Studio and Gallery Assistant**, Abuja Council for Arts and Culture, Abuja, Nigeria.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 2011 *Metamorphoses*, October Gallery, London, UK.
Torn Apart, David Krut Projects, New York, USA.
On The Edge, Dittmar Memorial Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, USA.
2010 *Life After*, Noyes Art Center, Evanston, USA.
Textile, Blachere Foundation Art Center, Apt, France.
Recovered Energies, Bekris Gallery, San Francisco, USA.
Absurd Beauty, Northeastern Illinois University Gallery, Chicago, USA.
2009 *Strings and Patterns*, Viterbo University Gallery, La Crosse, USA.
Anyanwu, Carl A. Fields Center Gallery, Princeton University, Princeton, USA.
Twisted Ambience, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, USA.
Of Earth...Bark and Topography, Goethe Institut, Lagos, Nigeria.

- 2008 *Ulukububa*, October Gallery, London, UK.
Moonlight Tales, Tall Grass Gallery, Park Forest, IL, USA.
Affrika West, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, UK.
2007 *Reflection*, Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York City, USA.
Sub-consciousness, Adam Hall Gallery, Wheaton College, Wheaton, USA.
2006 *Betwixt and Between*, Carlson Gallery, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
2005 *Paper to Paper*, Armature Gallery, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
2004 *Accumulations*, Arts Iowa City, Iowa City, USA.
2003 *Re-presented*, Armature Gallery, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
2002 *Beyond the Lines*, Didi Museum, Lagos, Nigeria.
2001 *Metaphors*, Alternative Space, Lagos, Nigeria.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2011 *Transcending Integration*, Baltimore Clayworks, Baltimore, USA.
Art Dubai, with October Gallery, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, UAE.
Environment and Object in Recent African Art, Tang Museum, Skidmore College, New York City, USA.
2010 *Scratch*, presented by Sakshi Gallery at Latit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, India.
Art Dubai, with October Gallery, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, UAE.
Joburg Art Fair, with October Gallery, Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
(Re-) Cycles of Paradise, UN COP16, Cancun, Mexico.
29th Sao Paulo Biennial, Sao Paulo, Brazil.
Textile, Blachere Foundation Art Center, Apt, France.
2009 *(Re-) Cycles of Paradise*, UN COP15, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Common Ground, Bekris Gallery, San Francisco, USA.
In Progress, Group show at Calson Tower Gallery, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
Art Dubai, with October Gallery, Madinat Jumeirah, Dubai, UAE.



Osimili, 2011. Clay and burlap, 157 x 137 x 13 cm.

- Joburg Art Fair*, with October Gallery, Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Trash Menagerie*, Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Salem, USA.
- Paper to Pulp*, Howard County Center for the Arts, Ellicott City, USA.
- Transvanguard*, October Gallery, London, UK.
- Chance Encounters*, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, India.
- Object of A Revolution*, Galerie Dominique Fait, Paris.
- Trace/Memory*, Evanston Art Center, Evanston, USA.
- 2008 *Angaza Africa*, October Gallery, London, UK.
- Affrika West at Galeri Artspace*, Caernarfon, UK.
- Channel4 Art Exhibition*, Channel 4, Art4, London, UK.
- Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York City, USA.
- Refabrication*, Carlson Gallery, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
- Clay and Fiber*, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, USA.
- Joburg Art Fair*, with October Gallery Sandton Convention Center, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Trading Spaces*, Binghamton University, Binghamton, USA.
- 2006 *African Contemporary Art Exhibition*, Dakar Biennale, Senegal.
- 2005 *Twelfth SOFA International Exposition*, Chicago, USA.
- Faculty Show*, Carlson Gallery, North Park University, Chicago, USA.
- 8th International Open Exhibition*, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, USA.
- 2003 *Migrations*, Legion Arts CSPA, Cedar Rapids, USA.
- Units*, Legion Arts CSPA, Cedar Rapids, USA.
- 2002 *New Works*, Armature Gallery, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
- 2001 *New Energies*, Nimbus Gallery and Mydrim Gallery, Lagos, Nigeria.
- 1999 *B.A Exhibition*, Ana Gallery, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

Grants/Awards/Residencies

- 2010 Artist Residency, Jean Paul Blachere Foundation, Apt, France.
- Artist-in-residence, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, USA.
- 2008 North Park University Individual Project Grant, Chicago, USA.
- 2007 Artist Full Fellowship at Global Art Village, Delhi, India.

- Residency at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, USA.
- 2006 Art Omi International Residency, New York, USA.
- UNESCO-Aschberg Fellowship for Artists (Gruber Jez Foundation), Mexico.
- 2005 North Park University Individual Project Grant, Chicago, USA.
- 2004 SFAI Residency, Santa Fe Art Institute, Santa Fe, USA.
- 2002-05 Graduate Assistantship, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
- Emma McAllister Novel Scholarship, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
- Teaching Assistantship, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
- 1999 Valedictorian (Fine Arts), University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.
- 1994 First prize, UNIFEM Women's Art Contest, Lagos, Nigeria.
- 1993 First prize, UNICEF African Child's Day Art Competition, Mbabane, Swaziland.

Selected Reviews and Publications

- 2011 *Fragility, Elegance and Decay*, by A.M Weaver, Ceramics: Art and Perception, Issue 83, March 2011.
- 2010 *Nigerian Art Market....,says Nnenna Okore*, by McPhillip Nwachukwu, Vanguard, November 25, 2010.
- Material Meaning*, by Jessica Hemmings, Wasafiri Magazine, Issue 63, 2010.
- Into the Art of Africa*, by Elizabeth Upper, Above Magazine, Winter 2009/2010.
- 2009 *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, by Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, 2009.
- New Order*, by Chika Okeke-Agulu, Arise Magazine, Issue 6, October 2009.
- Nnenna Okore's art ... recycled material installation*, by Jessica Kronika, The Examiner, August 11, 2009.
- Visual Arts: Five artists 'paper' the arts center*, by Mike Giuliano, Howard County Times, July 30, 2009.
- Tom Torluemke and others at the Cultural Center*,

by Albert Stabler, Proximity Magazine, July 26, 2009.

Wakeful Souls, by Uzor Maxim Uzoatu, Next, July 10, 2009.

From Rags to Riches with Art, by Vanessa Offiong, Weekly Trust, June 2009.

The goddess of small things ..., by Victor Ehikhamenor, Next, June 19, 2009.

Imitations of Nature, by Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, This Day, June 20, 2009.

'Of Earth...' *Nnenna Okore stages home show*, by Chuka Nnabuife, Nigerian Compass, June 16, 2009.

Nnenna Okore: Ulukububa at October Gallery, London, by Jessica Hemmings, Surface Design Journal, July edition, 2009.

Contemporary Art Auction in Lagos, by Emmanuel Anyifite, Next, April 9, 2009.

Okore, Enwonwu, Onabrakpeya, Anatsui, Kentridge others in London's art auction, by Chuka Nnabuife and Emmanuel Agozino, Nigerian Compass, April 7, 2009.

Groundbreaking African Artists In Spotlight At First British Auction Of Contemporary African Art At Bonhams, by Julian Roup, Bonhams Headlines, March 2009.

Art of Africa, by Simon de Burton, The Financial Times, March 28, 2009.

Artist to Watch: Nnenna Okore, by Katy Donoghue, Whitewall Magazine, Spring Issue, 2009.

Studio Visit with Nnenna Okore: Art from Discarded and Found Things, by Molar Wood, Next, February 08, 2009.

2008 *Ulukububa: Infinite Flow*, by Bunmi Akpata-Ohohe, Africa Today, December 3, 2008.

Introduction: Ulukububa-Infinite Flow, by Polly Savage, Exhibition Catalogue, London, Oct 16-Dec 6, 2008.

Using Old Materials to Put a New Face on the Museum, by Roberta Smith, *New York Times*, September 26, 2008.

2007 *Nnenna Okore NY Exhibition*, by Sylvester Ogbechie, AACHRONYM, October 31, 2007.

Mind Opens-Women Artists in Africa, by Barbara Murray,

Farafina Magazine, No 8, January, 2007.

2006 *The Yam is King*, by Obi Nwakama, Farafina Magazine, No. 7, October, 2006.

As Dak'art Beckons, by Ugochukwu Uwaerzuoke, This Day, March 26, 2006.

2005 *8th International Open*, Exhibition Announcement by Woman Made Gallery, March 4, 2005.

2003 *Chasing the Paper Trails with Vision*, by Vidya Murthy, Daily Iowan, June 26, 2003.

2002 *Plenty Art Shows, Lean Patrons*, by Chukka Nnabuife, The Guardian, May 21, 2002.

2001 *The Metaphors of Today*, by Victor Ikwele, National Interest, August 19, 2001.

New Energies, Rebellion against the Old, by Ozolua Uhakheme, The Guardian, May 15, 2001.

The Real Values Beyond the Tags, by Okechukwu Uwaezuoke, The Comet, May 15, 2001.

Collections

Jean Paul Blachere Fondation, France.

Indianapolis Art Center, Indianapolis, USA.

Royal Collection, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

Art House Contemporary Limited, Nigeria.

Channel 4, London, UK.

Renaissance Capital, Moscow, Russia.

Daraja Art Foundation, London, UK.

Farafina Magazine, Lagos, Nigeria.

Kenna and Associates Law Firm, Lagos, Nigeria.

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october gallery

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