

Fragility, Elegance and Decay

Article by A M Weaver



Left: *Ashioke II*. 2008. Clay and burlap. 28 x 35 x 4 in.
Right: *Twisted Ambience*. 2009. Newspapers, sticks and twine. Varied dimensions.

NENNA OKORE, A NIGERIAN BORN ARTIST, IS CONCERNED with capturing aspects of her native surroundings transcribed in earthenware, jute, burlap, sticks and paper. Hers is an aesthetic I am inclined to label neo conceptualism. Involved with process and the act of making and not permanence, she is ambivalent about the significance of the art object. Rather, she is concerned with form, texture and presence. Growing up in a tropical environment where life, growth and decay are integral to a natural cycle, Okore states, "I was never attracted to things that lasted, [the] deterioration of the land; the breakdown of a tree interested me. Even as a child, I observed how things passed away over time." She uses any means possible to construct her work, literally, in some instances, held together by jute cord, wire or fibre. In *Igba Nkwa* (2008) created shortly after graduate school at Iowa University, she uses rolls of clay coiled into circles and spirals two inches in diameter. Uneven clusters of these coils in red and brown earthenware and stoneware are meticulously attached by attenuated cords to create a large wall piece that resembles lace in its fragility and undulating elegance.

Clay is merely a vehicle for her to convey a feeling and ideation pertaining to her environment both in the West and Africa. Raised in Uturu, a southeastern town in Nigeria, She is a women actively shaping a future based on a past only partially known, which she continues to explore through memory and frequent visits to Nigeria.

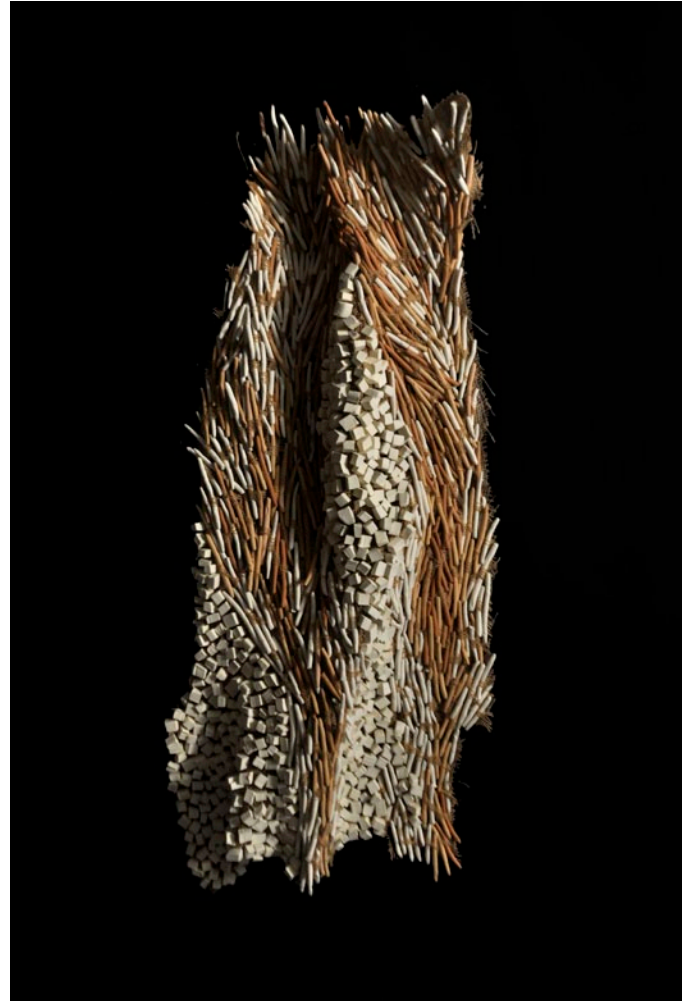
Although Okore is Igbo, she was raised Christian to parents who were academics. Class and religious orientation precluded her exposure to indigenous practices and rituals. She would rediscover the power of some of these traditions in indigenous architectural structures and shrines and through the prodding of her instructor, El Antasui, at the University of Nigeria, to discover the rural area surrounding the small township of Nsukka. The local people were separated from the University population; yet, the students roamed freely through the region and were accepted, although considered another class. Her observations of how the rainfall made undulating tracks in the hilly barren earth, the smell of the red mud, the thatched roofs of the huts and quasi-western framed homes and mounds of earth used as shrines in people's back yards had an indelible effect. From 2000 on her work would directly reflect her memories of the topography and structures particular to Nsukka, Nigeria. Works like *Fence*(2007), a piece constructed in her Chicago studio, are made of twigs and woven newspaper reminiscent of structures in rural West Africa used to enclose compounds. The fundamentals of weaving are evident in the *Fence* series and a direct correlation to nature is seen in the elaborate nests of the Ploceidae, weaver birds related to the finch. The flora and fauna of the bush and rural agricultural life supply infinite references. Perhaps her psychic connection to Africa is ever present through abstract configurations of sub-Saharan nature, topography and

architecture transcribed into relief wall sculpture and installations.

I discussed with Okore the issue of women's work and what relationship crafts, weaving and pottery had on her development. She eschewed the fact that her work was informed by domestic tasks of women; we both, however, pondered contemporary constructions by women who did not prefabricate their work. Recent installations by Maren Hassinger, Kikki Smith's early paper sculptures, Senga Ngudi and Doina Adams, who use fragile materials and approaches to construction that are simplistic, repetitive and engage the hands, came to mind. Is there

grandmothers embroidered and sewed. As a youth, she spent time with those in her home town who made pottery for commercial distribution and attentively watched men building thatched roofs weaving dried leaves them together with needles made of thorn. It was the repetition and patient crafting process that would ultimately influence her choice of materials: burlap, clay, paper (both handmade and recycled) twigs, branches and rope.

Okore is attracted to the texture of clay and its malleability. Her rolled coils and stick forms constitute the individual structures assembled in rhythmic patterns that cover massive wall space, yet appear cloth-like. She



Left: *Nlecha*. 2009. Clay and burlap. 72 x 50 x 7 in.
Right: *Rebirth*. 2009. Clay and burlap. 48 x 20 x 3 in.

a connection between the proliferation of women sculptors since the 1970s, dematerialization of the art object and the way many women who are concerned with concept and form produce their art? When building structures by hand, there may well be a tendency to reduce things to their core, devoid of a reliance on technology. Okore deliberates on this notion and admits that both

titles the works based on colloquial expressions pertaining to fabric, ceremonies with cloth and names of textiles such as *akwa*. Okore sculpts unfired clay, preferring to strengthen it by adding mud, fabric or straw and so forth. Her intent is to approximate adobe. Vacillating between fibre/newspaper installations and ceramic pieces, she tends to work on five to six ideas at any given

time, creating muted coloured fastidious constructions. By distilling aspects of her culture expressed through its textiles, habitats and landscape into abstract forms, these textural objects possess a visceral physicality.

Okore, in her adopted city Nsukka, was struck by the rawness of aspects of the landscape surrounding the township. People there were not concerned with form or fashion; indigenous practices coexisted with western trends and ideas. Their rich use of materials like the colourful swaddling cloth, *akwa*, that women wear, the adobe homes, the natural flora and bush found in forests, even the hills and rocky terrain informed her aesthetic. *Twisted Ambience* is a contorted array of newspaper rolled and configured into tree-like structures mimetic of the over powering presence of a dense forest she remembers



Left: *Bark and Fibre*. 2009. Clay, burlap and jute fibre. 47 x 45 x 4 in.
Right: *Igba Nkwu*. 2008. Clay and rope. 49 x 42 x 5 in.

Not easily understood by her contemporaries in Nigeria, Okore is not concerned with identity politics and, in this regard, her work is considered too abstract, too conceptual. Within the African Diaspora, however, she is positioned on the vanguard, finding receptive audiences in the US and Europe.

Beginning her career as a painter, Okore slowly abandoned oil painting and works on paper, even though she had acquired a refined design sensibility using a brilliant palette. These early works bring to mind graphic renditions of the acclaimed Oshogbo artist, Chief Jimoh Buraimoh, who renders mythological creatures and figures in colourful interpretive forms and fabric design. She abandoned colour in her later years at the University of Nigeria, beginning in earnest to create sculptural



in her hometown, Uturu. The low lighting sets the stage for a dramatic event yet to take place. It becomes a performative space that is activated by the presence of the viewer. *Lamp*, on the other hand, an installation made from newspaper, wire and lights, is populated by spirit forms ranging in height from six to eight feet. These could easily be apparitions or concrete manifestations of beings that exist in the *zamani*, the after life, as evinced in the novels *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Amos Tutoloa and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Conceivably, Okore is subliminally in tune with concepts of life and the spirit realm rooted in indigenous cosmologies. Her intent, however, was not to reference the human form but to capture the exterior view of homes illuminated at night devoid of moonlight. She openly admits to working from an African-informed aesthetic; yet, her goal is to have a universal vocabulary. She says, "some of the contemporary [global] scene slips through."

objects. The first work *Untitled* (2000) constructed completely from recycled paper would mark her new direction. In regard to ceramics, she took the proverbial electives in pottery but it was during graduate school at the University of Iowa in 2005 that she developed and burnished a preference for earthenware and stoneware. Thus clay became essential in her sculptural lexicon.

A M Weaver is a curator/art journalist residing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania US. Her focus is on the documentation of artists of colour and women. She is currently working on a lecture series and exhibition featuring the work of six international female photographer/filmmakers entitled *In Their Midst*.

Since graduate school Nnenna Okore has exhibited at the Didi Museum and Goethe Institute in Lagos Nigeria, the Contemporary African Art Gallery in New York and will make her Chelsea debut in April 2011, at the David Krut Project in NYC. She has been in residence at institutions in India, China, Maine and New Mexico. She is currently an Assistant Professor at North Park University, Chicago, Illinois US.