HYBRID DIMENSIONS IN SCULPTURE: A Courtship and Accidental Off-Springs Resulting from the Matrimony of Organic and Inorganic Elements

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Abstract

Traditionally, the word hybrid has been associated with science to mean the fusion of two different elements to generate an often improved version. The term 'hybrid' as employed by some sculptors to define what they do is never-ending in meaning. Different sculptors from different cultural backgrounds give diverse meanings to what they put together to denote hybridity in sculpture. In this practice -based research, the sculptor prefers to use the term Hybrid Sculpture,to describe forms that emanated from the fusion of a variety of organic and inorganic materials; namely wood, metal, plastics and fabric, using a blend of both conventional and innovative approaches to making sculpture. These included carving, welding, assemblage/ construction and scorching.

Introduction

My experiences with a variety of tools and materials encountered through academic and professional training and practise that spanned over two decades is a compelling motivation for me to naturally produce sculptures with a fusion of appropriate materials of diverse mediums that are available often as discarded materials. Employing junk and "found-objects" to produce both non-representational and representational works using the technique of assemblage/construction, has been done by many other sculptors. Some of the reasons could have been purely aesthetical and/or for making socio-political statements.

In this practice based research, the intention is to create offspring hybrid sculptures through the fusion of organic processes. It is hoped that no answers will be found to end the intrigue of the experiments, in this context, stems from both materials and the techniques employed in the creative process. It is expected that questions may arise concerning the upshot of the fusion of an organic wood and inorganic material such as metal, plastics and fabric to determine whether or not the wood would decay, leaving out only the inorganic materials intact. What will be the effect of using traditional carving tools-adze, gouges and chisels with power tools such as chainsaw, angle-grinder and drill? What the kind of public sentiments would be evoked with audience that interact with the hybrid sculpture experiments? Is this approach to sculpture another avant-garde; recycling materials for aesthetic purposes? It is hoped that no answers will be found to the numerous questions that may emanate from the experiments to be carried out by the sculptor. Finding answers to these questions brings to end the intrigue of the experiments. The sculptor's intention is to create works that stir up questions that continuously linger on one's mind for as long as they exist.

Sculpture can be made from any organic or inorganic substance. The processes as specific to making sculptures date from antiquity and, have up to the 21st century, undergone only minor variations. These processes vary according to materials – stone, metal, clay and wood; as well as methods of production carving, modelling and casting. In the 21st century the field of sculpture has been enormously broadened and enriched by new techniques, such as welding and assemblage/construction. Although the traditional techniques mentioned above are still employed, much of 21st century sculpture is created by assemblage/construction.

Assemblage, in modern the visual arts is any work of art composed of a variety of objects, particularly, "found-objects." The term which is now sometimes used interchangeably with construction is said to have first been used in the 1950s by French avant-garde painter Jean Dubuffet to describe his collages and figures created from bits of wood, sponge, paper and glue. Rooted in cubist collage and the sculptural assemblages of Spanish artist Pablo Picasso and the members of the Italian Futurist movement, particularly Umberto Bocciono, the technique was later experimented with the Dadaists and Surrealists for its symbolic and satirical possibilities. The Dada revival of the mid 1950s reaffirmed assemblage as a technique central to much of 21st century art, typified in the so-called "combine" works of American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg

This research paper agrees with the assertion made by Jules Struppeck (1951) that construction frees the sculptor from many of the problems of modelling and carving and offers him greater opportunities of combining materials and exploring spatial

relationship but is quick to add that the choice of assemblage/construction by the artist, however, lies more in the greater opportunities this method offers in the combination of various unrelated materials, rather than the "escape" from perceived problems of modelling and carving. Moreover, as noted earlier, combining two or more materials in a design creates an opportunity of opposing and contrasting their respective properties, besides offering a richer variety of colour, texture and form. It is of interest to note that proponents of construction/assemblage rejected carving and modelling, whereas I rather seeks to combine all afore-mentioned techniques. This is in view of the quest to create hybrid sculptures based on content, which requires the consideration of subject, form, material, technique, sources of inspiration, socio-historical context, and his intention. But indigenous African artists have employed assemblage/construction or mixed media in their sculptures for time immemorial. One begins to wonder at this stage if the African artists were not already using the technique of assemblage/ construction before the documented proponents such as Jean Dubbufet and Pablo Picasso. Werner Gillon, (1994) noted:

"Carved wooden figures with magical substances embedded in various parts of the body are common with some ethnic groups in Africa. However, nail and mirror fetishes known as 'nkissi' are unique and an important phenomenon of "Kongo sculpture".[1]

Plate 1.
"Nkissi Figure." African masterpieces.

Plate 2.
Helmet Mask. African Masterpieces.

But whiles the substance infused into the wooden sculpture of the African artist was considered "magical" such as nails and mirrors, as in the case of the Nkisi sculptures (plate 1) of the Congo (Gillon, 1994), those driven into my contemporary experimentalist sculpture are junk, discarded or found materials with no magical properties (plate 7 and 17).

Werner further noted that the 'nkissi' were used for a variety of purposes; to do good or evil and that their meaning was ambivalent. They were made in stages and more than one person was involved in their creation. The 'nganga' ordered from the carvers a wooden figure in which the element of its function as an 'nkissi' were already incorporated. Some 'nkissi' had very sensitive heads and well sculpted bodies while others had a fine head, with poorly carved bodies.

He adds that a transformation is then begun with those 'nkissi'; into which the diviner will drive nails, blades etc., for benevolent or malevolent purposes. The aesthetic appeal to the European eye lies in the overall effect of the wooden statue and the added attributes. But an 'nkissi', however impressive to non-Africans, will be discarded by the 'nganga' if it appears to have lost its power. Another example of construction/assemblage or mixed media sculpture as one may choose to call it is that of the carved masks of the Kuba of Zaire. Werner observed that the helmet masks (plate 2) were constructed with the stalks of palm leaves, cowrie shells, skin and cloth, often richly embroidered. They were coloured blue, white, red, black and ochre. Another type was made of wood covered with copper sheeting, cowries, beads and skin, as is common with most African masks (plate 4 and 5).

Plate 3

Plate 4

(Wooden Sculptures with embellishments. African Masterpieces)

Also, unlike the "nkissi", the artist of this practice based research may not have been ordered by a diviner or the 'Nganga' to carve to do good or evil, but he drives nails and other metals into these chosen wooden sculptures for aesthetic purposes. That notwithstanding, the effect of the sculptures have the potential to exercise on the public may be a benevolent or malevolent effect on the public. Directly or indirectly, possess some negatively or positively "magic", incite shock, anger, disgust or instil fear, love, or simply make one smile. Jules Struppeck, (1951) on modern sculpture asserts that:

"Nearly all modern sculpture results from an inner urge of the sculptors to seek self-expression rather than from public demand. There is always hope of an understanding audience, but the sculptor finds few that can understand his language. His need for communication, however, drives him on to set up his own standards and to continue creating in spite of his realization that he is crying in the wilderness".[3]

As much as I agree with the above assertion, I am also of the conviction that artists need to bridge the gap between the public and their need to communicate inner feelings.

Jules sums up as follows:

"Ideally, there should be equilibrium between the sculptor and a public which demands the best of the sculptor's ability; in this way the needs of both could be met."[4]

It is again worthy of note that whiles the artist has an agenda of expressing himself in his sculptures it was not as such for the carver of an 'nkissi.' M. Blackmun Visona, et al in their book (A history of Art in Africa) 2001 note:

"The sculptor did not always know what purpose the figure was to serve, what powers it was to have…….their primary intention was not the creation of a work of art but the organization of a visual effect in the context of ritual use."

Many Sculptors create forms that express their cultures by making use of available materials and techniques. Some contemporary sculptors have expanded the idea of assembling unrelated materials into a rational artistic whole. Employing non-traditional materials and methods, these artists utilize a variety of found and manufactured articles of the most incredible variety to create organic and inorganic artistic wholes.Notable among them are El Anatsui (Ghana/Nigeria), Kofi Setordji (Ghana), Louis Mwaniki (Kenya), Mambakweza Mutasa (Zimbabwe) and Komla Olu (Togo/Ghana).

Like the late Vincent Akwete Kofi, a popular Ghanaian sculptor, the artist isinspired by the organic forms of wood and sometimes retains the natural cracking found in wood

to characterise features of the anatomy of his figural sculptures. The artist, Antsui, experiments emanate from the natural forms of sawn, or roughly hewn wood he finds. It will be noted also that the metal embellishments to the wood forms are not fabricated but discovered and used in their 'natural' state. Not only that, he leaves textures, cracks and colour on material that he works with so as to leave the sculptures to continue the process of change; which may span over decades and which others might choose to refer to as decay. However, the combination of power tools with traditional ones perhaps is yet another unconscious attempt at bridging the gap between the known and the unknown; the developing and the industrialized; the king and the servant the list is endless.

And So What?

It is common to see felled trees left at the mercy of the elements of nature or salvaged for firewood, virtually "pleading" to be transformed into arresting, challenging and visually pleasing forms of utilitarian value, or ornamental qualities. Admittedly, wood, being an organic substance, naturally disintegrates over many years into the soil. But why should that be when it could be used for aesthetically pleasing forms that educate and gratify mankind?

Aside that, it is common to see inorganic "junk," such as scrap metals, plastics and fabric littered all over. The combination of an organic material such as wood with inorganic ones as metal, plastics and fabric for sculpture is an attempt, although minimal, at mopping some debris off our already polluted and suffocating earth.

Unfortunately, this "aesthetic marriage" between organic and inorganic materials for sculpture has not been widely explored within the Ghanaian sculptural milieu. There is therefore a need to encourage and promote a courtship that leads to matrimony of organic and inorganic elements to beget sculpture.

Accoutrements and Ingredients of Courtship.

As demanded by Ghanaian marriage "custom", the following accoutrements and ingredients were the imperative requirement "knocking" or "engagement" items for courtship rituals that resulted in the four forms that were begat. It should be noted that the list consists of both local and foreign items, in conformity with the modern nuptial culture in Ghana.

Accoutrements

Chalk, Carving Tools, Disc Grinder, Hammer, Electric Drill, Portable Electric Sander, Brush, Scissors, Hack-saw, Mallet, Electric chain saw, Portable vibrating sanding device, Portable Disc Grinder.

Ingredients

Assorted Wood, Nails, Wax Polish, Adhesive Glue, Jute Sack, Assorted Wrought Iron, Assorted Metal Pole, Jute Sack, Bolts and Nuts, Paint, Sand Paper, Ball Bearing

Courtship and Off-Springs.

The period of courtship that preludes matrimony quite often result in three distinct results; matrimony, disappointment, unexpected or expected gestation, depending on a variety of environmental influences. In this instance, the result is that of "expected gestation" so as to have no doubts at all about the blessing of off-springs during matrimony, considering that our culture "demands results of a union"

Experiment 1 (Mask) *Procedure*

Plate 5. Mask. Untitled. 1.90m x 20cm

Step 1. Parts of the wood were ground, using a Disc Grinder fitted with abrasive sand paper.

Step 2. A piece of chalk was used to mark out geometric shapes simulating a face on the wood.

Step 3. Nails were driven into the marked area.

Plate 6. Nails driven into marked area.

Step 4. With a u-gouge, the cavity of the mouth was enhanced by systematically grooving and leaving tool marks.

Step 5. Using a Blow Torch, portions of the wood were burnt.

Step 6. After that, glue was applied to the fabric and fixed across part of the face.

Step 7. Finally, wax was used to burnish the work.

Plate 7. Close up view of mask with jute sack fixed to left side of face.

Observation/Results:

The use of nails to simulate facial features was successful. However, care must be taken to avoid edges of the wood so as to prevent splitting.

The bark of the wood was intentionally left to create contrast with the opposing side which had no bark and thus revealed the actual colour and grains of the wood. White carpenters' glue was used to fix the bark in place when it peeled during the working process.

Experiment 2 (Torso)

Procedure:

Step 1. A piece of chalk was used to mark out the posture of the figure.

Step 2. An adze was used to block the figure.

Step 3. A portable sanding device was used to make smooth the head and the pedestal of the figure.

Step 4. Using a u-gouge and c-gouge simultaneously, the neck, arms and bust of the figure were defined.

Step 5. Much of the lower portion was left unscathed because of a natural protrusion in the wood which motivated the researcher to carve a female torso. The protrusion simulates hips and buttocks.

Plate 8.
"Wake Up and Live!"
1.70m x 45cm

Plate 9.Blocking with an Adze.

Step 5. Much of the lower portion was left unscathed because of a natural protrusion in the wood which motivated the researcher to carve a female torso. The protrusion simulates hips and buttocks.

Step 6. With a c-gouge, tool marks were systematically made on the figure.

Step 7. A portable drilling device was used in making several holes in the head. A bigger one was made at the base of the figure and the top end of the pedestal to accommodate the iron rod that connects them.

Plate 10. Grinding with Sanding Device.

Plate 11. Artist defining neck, arms and bust of figure.

Plate 12. Drilling wood

Step 8. The wrought iron was cut into various lengths with a portable sanding device fitted with a cutting disc.

Step 9. By hammering, the iron rods were fixed into the holes and bent backwards to simulate braided hair.

Step 10. The metal bolt was hammered into the right breast

Step 11. By first fixing the iron rod into the base of the figure, the torso was fixed into the pedestal.

Observation/Results:

All the materials selected responded favourably to their intended use. It is observed that the circumference of holes drilled to accommodate iron rods should be smaller so as to make a tight fit. The figure had to be turned on its pedestal till it became stable to avoid tilting and tipping over.

Experiment Three (Mask)

Plate 13 "The Watch Dog" 76 x 47cm.

Plate 13a.Side View.

Plate 13b. Side View.

Procedure

Step 1. The wood to be used had natural lines which depicted furrows in a human face.

Plate 14.Wood with natural lines.

Step 2. Using a piece of chalk, a circle was drawn to the left side of the face to depict a circular eye. A gently swept curve to the right side of the face depicted a closed right eye.

Step 3. The nose line was drawn, starting from the left circular eye and sharply curved up towards the right, just before the top of the mouth line.

Step 4. The mouth line was first drawn in a circular sweep and then divided by an arc starting from the right edge down to the left where the chin starts and ends.

Step 5. With a parting tool and mallet, the drawn lines were incised.

Step 6. Beginning with the left circular eye, a U and C gouge were used to carve out and level the circular indentation representing the left eye.

Step 7. The left side of the face around the nose was also carved and depressed, but not as deep as the eye, so as to project the nose.

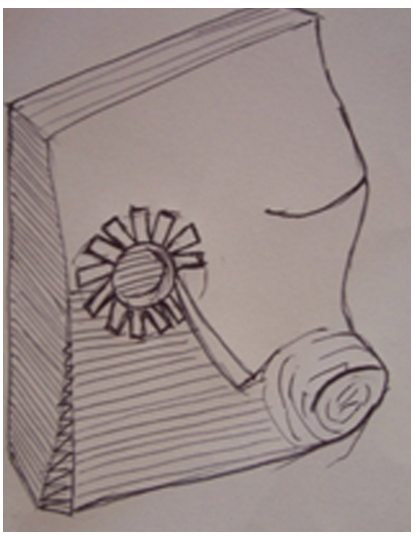

Plate 15.Carved area on lower left side of face.

Step 8. In a similar manner, the mouth was carved, with the depression towards the base of the nose being deeper so as to project the nose. The groove parting the mouth was achieved by the use of a u-gouge and mallet.

Step 9. An electric sander with abrasive sand paper was used to make smooth, the lower left side of the face, and then the top triangular half of the back of the head. Tool marks already left by the chain saw initially used to cut the block of wood were left as texture, in contrast with the smooth areas.

Step 10. The portable sander was then used to further make smooth some parts of the mask.

Step 11. The electric sander was used to incise geometric-shaped lines on the left side of the mask. The same method was employed in further deepening the line depicting the right, closed eye. The speed of rotation of the grinding disc attached to the sander caused the wood to burn, and this is an intentional action of the researcher to incise and burn geometric shapes on the mask.

Step 12. A gas blow torch was used to burn selected parts of the mask, especially the face so as to enhance the furrows depicting frowns.

Step 13. Smooth sand paper was used to take off some burnt ash, leaving the furrows darker.

Step 14. The jute sack was cut in a circular shape, using a pair of scissors. Its outer ends were split to create a flared look.

Step 15. Adhesive glue was applied to the circular groove and the jute sack.

Step 16. A pattern was made where the jute sack was to be fixed.

Step 17. After some minutes the cut circular jute sack with split outer ends was fixed in place.

Step 18. Glue was applied to the base of the depressed circular eye, this time on the jute.

Step 19. After some minutes, metallic ball bearings were systematically arranged in the circular depression to depict a wide-opened-eye.

Plate 16. Metal ball-bearings arranged in circular depression.

Step 20. Acrylic red paint was then used to paint the inner eye of the depressed circular eye to portray the "Redness" of the "watch dog's" eyes.

Step 21. Using a hammer, nails were driven into the top part of the masks head to portray hair.

Plate 17. Arrangement of nails on top part of mask.

Step 22. Finally, the sculpture was polished with mansion wax, using a brush and a clean cotton rag.

Observation/Results

The artist achieved all that he set out to do in this experiment.

The adhesive glue used was suitable for both fabric and metal ball bearings.

In addition to this, the disc grinder can also be used as a tool for incision and burning.

Experiment Four (Relief Sculpture)

Plate 18. "Big Things" 1.13m x 40 cm.

Procedure

Step 1. First of all, a 3 foot long forked wooden plank was cut to for use as the representative fore limbs of an elephant.

Step 2. Using a portable disc grinder fitted with a flexible abrasive disc, the chosen part of wood was smoothened.

Step 3. For further smoothening, a portable vibrating sanding device was used on the wooden board.

Step 4. Two legs of a discarded plastic chair were cut with a hacksaw.

Step 5. After getting all the various parts ready, they were assembled on the forked wooden plank in the following order:

a. The air cleaner cover was positioned at the opposite end of the forked side to portray the head and trunk of an elephant.

b. The plastic chair legs were positioned to both sides of the extended metal portraying the head and trunk. These depicted the tusks.

Plate 19. Air cleaner and plastic chair legs on wood.

Step 7. The plastics and metal parts were then taken off.

Step 8. Using a U-gouge and mallet, grooves were made to depict the toes on the fore limbs of the elephant.

Step 9. Silicon gel adhesive was applied to the traced line on the wooden board and the edges of the metal and plastic parts.

Step 10. Finally, the parts were re-positioned and fixed firmly in place.

Observations/Results

It is possible to assemble disparate materials into a coherent artistic whole.

Silicon gel adhesive is suitable to hold together metal, plastic and wood.

Conclusion

This practice based research dilated and experimented with assemblage/construction as a technique for producing sculpture. The artist is of the conviction that the technique

has not been widely explored in the Ghanaian sculptural milieu. The experiments conducted are preludes to further explorations by the artist. This is aimed at bringing to light the endless possibilities of putting together disparate elements to produce an aesthetic whole. It is hoped that more artists and students will continue to explore this technique which has many advantages, among them the relative freedom of technique and making good use of "junk". One man's junk, can always be another man's art.

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