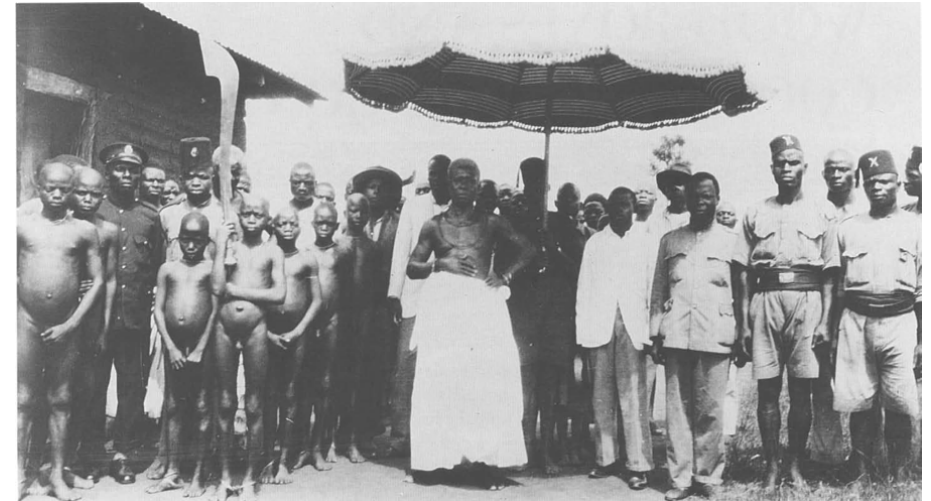


MAKING TIME

Emmanuel Iduma



Photograph by W.H. Humbly, ca. 1930. Courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

There is a photograph of Oba Eweka II, who ruled the Benin Empire between 1914 and 1933, flanked by naked boys—the *emada* (sword-bearers)—and other attendants in colonial uniform, at least thirty-five in all. When the photograph was taken in 1930, over three decades had passed since the Benin Punitive Expedition of February 1897. Those pictured, including the Oba, consider the camera sternly, almost with sobering intensity.

I weigh their sternness against a timeline of enforced submission. It is a photograph depicting the Benin Empire as successfully annexed into the colonial administration, an alliance of sorts. The alliance was not mutually conceived. Fewer groups in Nigeria have been photographed in their capitulation as the Edo. Recall the photograph of a condemned and manacled Ologbosere, the Benin chief who masterminded an attack on British forces around May 1897; another of Oba Ovonramwen flanked by his wives while in exile; Jonathan Adagogo Green's portrait of the deposed king alone, likely in chains, with a smirk on his face.

Thousands of artworks found in Oba Ovonramwen's palace were seized during the Punitive Expedition. This is a fact known almost intuitively in Benin City, retold as secondhand knowledge. But, while there have been successive kings since Oba Ovonramwen (his son Oba Iweka II was reinstated after his

death in 1914), and while those kings have supervised artist guilds and commissioned brass and ivory objects to replace those confiscated by the British, there remains a longstanding inability to make peace with the stunning blatancy of the looting. Once intended as objects primarily dedicated to the monarchy, they were introduced into a global market of arts patronage—auctioned off to defray the costs of the expedition, and provide pensions for the participants or their survivors. Hence the grudge has festered.

This grudge, held over time, establishes the character of Victor Ehikhamenor's new work, "A Biography of the Forgotten". A series of undulating canvases are covered with masterstrokes of white, black, and red paint, forming curvilinear, flowing forms. Several palm-sized mirrors are sewn on the canvas, as well as miniature bronze heads and other emblematic statuettes. Besides their impressive length, the lush, polychromatic surfaces of the paintings are particularly noteworthy: Ehikhamenor's deftness here equals that of his recent installations, such as "The Prayer Room", even if they differ in size. The mode of address is similar: remarkable evidence of repeated strokes by the hand, an almost-limitless horizon of abstraction.

Does the abstract incline towards the figurative? Ehikhamenor hopes for that. His use of miniature bronze heads, sewn on unfurling canvas, allude to a secondhand experience of the Punitive Expedition; an Edo man, "A Biography" of the Forgotten bears subliminal witness to the confiscated artwork produced by his forebears. These forebears were organized into artists' guilds by reigning monarchs as far back as the fifteenth century, who sought to control their autonomy. Membership into the various guilds—comprising of blacksmiths, brass casters, ivory and wood carvers, bead

and costume makers, and leather workers—was traditionally hereditary, its skill passed from generation to generation. Today a sufficient amount of the bronze objects are cast for sale to tourists, and some artisans practice the trade despite descending from non-artist families. Ehikhamenor's family did not historically belong to any of the guilds, although his maternal grandfather was a blacksmith. By using the bronze figurines, presenting them to a wider audience, he endows them with a promise more valuable than touristic kitsch.

II.

In some of his recent work, Victor Ehikhamenor has placed exacting demands on lines, covering entire surfaces such as walls, drums, or large canvases with flowing, curvilinear forms.

There was, in 2015, at the Jogja Biennale in Indonesia, a two-site installation collectively titled "The Wealth of Nations" At the entrance to the Jogja National Museum, nearly 150 rusty black oil drums, splattered with drips of red paint, sat stacked on top of one another, as though awaiting use. Up close, each drum was marked with age, showing traces of abandonment before appropriation. Within the museum, at the farthest end of a 20×10 room, three newer-looking drums hung suspended above a tub: two red drums painted over with black, placed on either side of a middle drum, painted white. The tub below the drums was full of water. Black liquid from the middle drum dripped into the tub, pooling around a submerged and illuminated word: Oloibiri, the site of Nigeria's first commercial oilfield. The letters were carved sharply on a glassy rectangular surface, lit from the bottom, giving off reddish glow. The walls of the room were covered in black drawings on a yellow

background. The drawings, the paintings on the wall, floor, and drums seemed to join without end, painstakingly linked, with the adeptness of a calligrapher.¹

It is a similar execution in "The Prayer Room" (2016), an installation at the Dakar Biennale. A roomful of drawings, this time more spectacularly presented. On some days the room is brightened with white light, allowing a higher, sanguine visibility for the monochromatic drawings. On other days the room's visibility is low—lit with cerulean blue fluorescent, meditative. And, in "Isimagodo, The Unknowable" (2016), installed at the Nirox Sculpture Park at the Cradle of Humankind in Johannesburg, a towering masquerade-like figure, 4.5 metres high, is covered similarly as the drums in Indonesia, with black drawings on a yellow background.

As they mature, artists tend to pare down their raw materials to few essential ideas. In Ehikhamenor's case there has been little variation in his formal techniques, especially in his application of lines, whether on paper or canvas. But I do not only allude to that: a multidisciplinary artist, Ehikhamenor holds the malleable dough of collective memory in his hand, tinkering with ways to put painting, sculpture, and drawing at the service of his ideas.

His obsession with the scale of his work is the likely result of a kind of restlessness—no, a relentlessness—through which he tests the limits of skill, even the extent of passion. When his obsession is conceived as anecdotal, and particularly because he has often alluded to his interest in memory and mythology, his recent work depicts the momentous, atmospheric traces of history.

III.

It is said that Igueghae, a brass caster, came from Ife in the fourteenth century to pass his skills to Benin artisans. He came with terracotta heads, which he used as teaching models. Perhaps this is why, traditionally, terracotta heads were placed on the ancestral altars of members of the brass casters' guild. They were also prototypes for brass heads—the process of modeling clay for terracotta heads is similar to that of modeling wax for brass heads. As recently as 1979, at the coronation of Oba Erediauwu, the coral-bead crown placed on his head had been kept on a terracotta head from which a brass head would later be cast.²

Such terracotta heads commemorate the timelessness of craft. They serve to remind brass casters of their ancestors, and help to anticipate work to be done in the future. They owe their importance not only to history but also to work-in-progress. Their character, given this, could be considered contemporary.

Ehikhamenor sourced the bronze figurines from two brass casters, Destiny Aigbe and Monday Ihama of Igun Street, Benin City. He provides their names as counterpoint to the anonymity of the brass casters whose work are held in collections around the world, following their confiscation. Their identities were likely obscured by a tradition of artwork produced at the behest of an Oba, intended to glorify and decorate his court. Yet the artist suspects that by naming those he worked with, to create work unhampered by genre, he enters into a non-traditional alliance with them. Their names do not merely serve to affirm their worth as individuals, or to coat "A Biography of the Forgotten" with an individualist sheen. Quite the contrary: their names are synecdochical.

An unbroken link is thus established with ancestral brasscasters: Eikhamenor's work is progeny of earlier work, bronze heads and statuettes whose makers are labeled "Unknown" or "Anonymous."

IV.

In the aftermath of her life, a woman long suspected as a witch was buried above ground. Her body was placed on a slab, which rested on a raised platform, left uncovered in the open. As the story goes, from eyewitnesses in Esit-Eket, burial of that sort was punishment for the evil life she led. Suspended in that manner, her spirit, it was believed, had been banished neither to heaven nor hell, not even purgatory. Wandering forever, she had become a placeless and rootless being.

There is something laughable about the esoteric claims of those who claimed victory over the alleged witch, a victory they could only claim following her death. But what struck me when I heard the story, from two women in Enugu, was the affinity I had, in my conception of time, with the woman's body. How insightful it seemed, I thought, being punished with neither mortality nor immortality. It would be as if you were in and out of time concurrently, an endless present.

What if all considerations of the past were to limn the outline of a body placed in a continuous present? In the broad sense in which a Nigerian history might be discussed, what if all those who declare "forget the past!" wondered about the nature of time itself, where the present is always in motion, pivoting into what's past, or the basis of what is to come?

Once the past is cordoned off as "history," we face other dilemmas. First is the question of

the historical record—in what ways have the stories been told, and who have told them? Then we face the question of usage: those stories, how might we bring them to bear on everyday decisions? And, supposing we shrug off the fact that the historical record, for a country like Nigeria, was determined in large part through the colonial imagination, and we make of no consequence our difficulty in accessing those records, how do we deal with our constant attempt to understand, once and for all, what a "Nigerian identity" is? For, it is clear that as a federating unit, we owe our collective sense of identity to a chain of successive events, occurring in the rooms of power or within the pages of newspapers, since at least 1914, on a scale best described as "national."

For many, the idea of Nigeria as an amalgamated entity, for which there is shared history, is fictional, or squarely improbable, at best. You hear them say, "We are not one." In each generation since independence, they allege, there have been events to prove just that, our irreconcilable diversity; better we go our separate ways. For those younger, such as myself, there is an even greater uncertainty about nationhood, when all we have done is struggle under the weight of an attempt to make a life out of hollow promises.

So we say to our elders, the generation that came of age immediately after independence, "We are young. Unripe. We have heard all our short lives that we are to be responsible. What could that possibly mean in the catastrophe this world has become; where, as a poet said, 'nothing needs to be exposed since it is already barefaced.' Our inheritance is an affront. You want us to have your old, blank eyes and see only cruelty and mediocrity. Do you think we are stupid enough to perjure

ourselves again and again with the fiction of nationhood? How dare you talk to us of duty when we stand waist deep in the toxin of your past?"³

The woman buried above ground in Esit-Eket, if I could pursue further my inclination towards her, was freed from the toxin of the past. Those who buried her sought to punish her, but cast her, instead, into an eternity without punishment or reward. How she will exist there is left to our imagination.

Perhaps the earliest definition of the woman's time was given by St. Augustine: "There are three times: a present of things past; a present of things present; and a present of things future."⁴ In today's vocabulary, we might refer to Augustine's "present" as "contemporary." Within that contemporary there are many "ways of being in and with time, and even in and out of time at the same time."⁵

V.

In "A Biography of the Forgotten," mirrors are sewn on undulant canvas. These familiar

objects can pose the question of individual destiny. We perceive this when, while looking at a mirror, we catch a glimpse of a facial expression otherwise unrecognizable to us. At that moment we become aware that we are not fully known, especially to ourselves. And yet mirrors engage us in an intimate address. We catch a reflection of ourselves; we reflect upon ourselves. The vision we see of ourselves is one that puts into perspective who we are, and have become, at the moment of looking. With a mirror, the adverb "presently" takes on a deeper meaning. The mirror is a direct, personal address to time. We consider ourselves as we instantly are. We come closest to understanding a body placed in an endless present.

Thus Eikhamenor is aware of the immediacy to which all mirrors attend. He has sewn them on his paintings so several viewers may wonder about themselves from all possible angles. So that, alternating between a glance at the bronze figurines and the mirrors, we find ourselves in a continuum of experience, in a history utterly biographical.

¹ I have written a longer essay on *The Wealth of Nations*, for the online magazine *Guernica*. See: "Emmanuel Iduma, *The Wealth of Nations*." *Guernicamag.com*. Accessed March 22, 2017. <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-wealth-of-nations/>

² For a detailed appraisal of Benin art, see: Ezra, Kate, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 1992.

³ Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture." *Nobelprize.org*. Accessed March 25, 2017. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html.

⁴ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. J.G. Pilkington (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1876), 304. Cited in Joao Ribas, "What To Do With The Contemporary," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. (Milan: Mousse Publishing), 2012, p. 71.

⁵ Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," in *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006, p. 702, cited in Joao Ribas, "What To Do With The Contemporary," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*. (Milan: Mousse Publishing), 2012, p. 89