

Nigeria: Grillo, Antsui, Shonibare Open African Masters Series

By Tajudeen Sowole

A NEW 6-part TV series titled African Masters, which features cubist Yusuf Grillo, sculptors, Bruce Onobrakpeya, El Anatsui, Romouald Hazoume, Yinka Shonibare and Sokari Douglas-Camp is currently showing on cables in the United States of America.

Monitored via the Internet, the series, which is courtesy U.K.-based The Africa Channel also features curators, such as French-born André Magnin and Bisi Silva of the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA, Lagos). The documentary, which is quite educative, brings the progressive contents of African art into focus, while diffusing the ancient perspective from which African art has been viewed by the west.

In the first episode with the sub-theme, Revelations, a retrospection of African contemporary art is taken against the background of how the west truncated the continent's creative growth. It takes viewers' memory back into the ancient art of the continents and the looting era when most of the works were taken to Europe and the Americas. The camera gets to Lagos where Grillo and Onobrakpeya speak on the rise of African modern art. Onobrakpeya notes that the texture of European art cannot be removed from the contents and influence of ancient African art. Grillo argues that the contemporary world of art can no longer refuse to recognise artists of the continent.

Director, Raw Material Company, Dakar, Senegal and curator at 1:54 Contemporary African art fair, U.K., Koyo Kouoh, who also feature in the documentary, states that the rise of African art has produced "writers, curators and critics" who are passionate about the art of the continent.

The work includes interviews with renowned artists of African descents such as El Anatsui, Shonibare, Douglas-Camp and Hazoune, who stress the diversity of modern and contemporary art scene on the continent and Diaspora. Features include studio visits to Senegal, art activities like art residencies in Nigeria, galleries in New York, auctions as well as art exhibitions abroad.

The first episode looks at the challenges of being an African artist in the contemporary world within the context of identity. Indeed, producers of the TV series appear to have brought in a crucial issue of identity at a period when artists of African descents are divided on the issue. Most often, some artists from the continent avoid being labeled according to their skin colour or geographical space. Art, they say, is universal. But with the collapse of artistic boundaries and strengthening of globalisation, a kind of identity would be as important as the value of an

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

artist's work, others have argued. In fact, in the African Masters, episode one, Silva would not comprehend boxing "artists who work in diverse medium and themes" into a single identity.

In the past few years, African artists' presence on the international space keeps increasing as new entrants, 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair and an online outlet, The Auction Room, come with focus on art from the continent.

In Nigeria, art auctions, which started fully in 2008, have contributed to the growth of modern and contemporary art both at home and in the Diaspora.