

TRANSGRESSIVE VISION **SUBVERTING THE POWER OF MASCULINITY**

Nkiru Nzegwu

Ndidi Onyemaechi Dike is indisputably Nigeria's leading female sculptor and installation artist. Teaching herself to sculpt after having been trained as a mixed-media painter, Dike was unceremoniously thrust against prevailing gender stereotypes of middle-class women ought to pursue.

Through this career shift into sculpture, she crossed gender categories and adopted a self-empowering language that recasts history and tradition. Despite the pioneering breakthrough of women sculptors like the Benin Princess, Elizabeth Olowu (who works in cement and bronze), and Mrs. Awa (who works in stone), sculpting is still perceived as an exclusively male preserve. Long-standing cultural attitudes about the medium, and the pervasive Western, Christian, and Islamic ideals of domesticity and women's identity have reinforced cultural perceptions that contributed to the proscription against women as sculptors.

The effects of these conservative beliefs and attitudes have been the creation of social and psychological obstacles that track women away from a career in sculpture. In the context of 1980's Nigeria in which such cultural attitudes still linger, Dike's decision to become a sculptor assumed transgressive overtones, placing her in a deviant, adversarial relationship with a section of the populace who harbor outmoded ideas about the gender capabilities of women and men. Inconsistently, this group of people would marvel at the fact that modern Igbo men are pilots and computer scientists, but would chastise modern Igbo women for doing the same because they never did these things in the past.

An encounter with Dike and familiarity with her sculptural works raises pertinent questions about culture, gender identity, art, and the politics of *uli* stylistics that

are crucial to an evaluation of her role and significance in contemporary Nigerian art. In this essay, I examine the implication of Dike's choice of sculpture as a medium of expression in a social environment in which women hardly sculpted, and in which contemporary female sculptors are few and far between. Sometimes rebuked by men for being a feminist, the label simultaneously marks and circumscribes Dike's deviation from conventionally sanctioned behaviour.

Indeed, the negative connotation of the label exposes the latent sexism in Nigeria's art world. It also sets up a male-biased view of art in which women artists are expected to occupy a subordinate status.

In the last section of the essay, I shall argue that the transgress character of Dike's art ultimately derives legitimacy, not from feminism as may be assumed, but from family lineage, the conceptual flexibility of Igbo gender identity, and the cultural practices of its women. In short, this conceptual flexibility provides the requisite ground for subverting the near-total masculinization of Nigerian art.

Excerpt from Transgressive vision by Professor Nkiru Nzegwu