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Art scholarship: An instrument for 'Making' and 'Selling' creative young Ghanaian artists who engage in 'proper Ghana art'

Dickson Adom

Department of Educational Innovations in Science and Technology, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. dicksonadom@knust.edu.gh

*Correspondence: dicksonadom@knust.edu.gh

Ghana is a country with great talents especially in the field of visual arts. Unfortunately, many of the enterprising artists are swept under the carpet because of no or poor scholarship on their art practice. In this 21st century, many of these young Ghanaian artists are constantly exhibiting the spirit of innovation, experimentation, and exploration in their artistic productions using both conventional and non-conventional materials. Everyday objects and waste materials are now creatively transformed into usable, meaningful, and aesthetically pleasing art pieces worth keeping in private and public spaces. Many of these young visual artists in Ghana are struggling to reach stardom, at least, to make the world know of their creative potentials and be promoted on the global art market. Despite the decades of art practice in the country, the power relations are affecting the recognition of many creative and versatile Ghanaian visual artists. For the first time in 2019, the Ghanaian pavilion was featured at the 58th Venice Art Biennale, Italy. Commenting on the criteria for the selection of artists to represent the Ghanaian Pavilion, Woets (2019) points out that some of the creative but underdog young Ghanaian artists frown on the selection made by the renowned Ghanaian art historian, Nana Oforiatta Ayim. They retorted that the featuring of artists such as El Anatsui and Ibrahim Mahama was unnecessary, as these already baked Ghanaian artists did not need another Venice appearance to grow their careers. They were expecting the selection of young emerging Ghanaian artists who were exceptional in their career but are not known, at least, to expose their artistic prowess to the world. The meagre support from the government to the creative economy as a whole is far from the reach of these vibrant and enterprising Ghanaian visual artists. Dr. Afua Asabea Asareⁱ at the art forum in Accra reiterated the need for the Ghana government's full support to Ghanaian visual artists by promoting their art practice through exhibitions not just locally but internationally.

While power and the little support from the government are debilitating factors to the exposure and promotion of these young Ghanaian artists, there is yet another crucial factor that holds the gold prospect of promoting the underdog but creative visual artists in the country. It is the low scholarship on Ghanaian visual artists. The privileged visual artists who often get the opportunity of receiving scholarly documentation of their lives and works are those who have already advanced in their careers and have dominated the international art scene. The young, upcoming, and underdog visual artists who are excellent in their artistic creations are often left behind, receiving no attention in the scholarship of Ghanaian arts and artists. The giant artists in the Ghanaian arts who by dint of unparalleled hard work, determination and/or were fortunate to have favour from

the 'powers', have now received documentation of their careers by Euro-American scholars. As Larbi (2015) observed, there is the absence of the voices of local scholars to 'cross-fertilize' the discourse on Ghanaian arts and artists. This is even crucial at this time in the development of the Ghanaian contemporary arts where there is a new breed of young emerging artists who want to try out virtually anything, from material choice, technique, philosophy, and subject matter. Many of them, are producing what Sami Benti¹ refers to as 'Proper Ghana Art'². Some of these artists are formally trained in secondary and higher institutions of learning while others are informally trained or engage in art practice based on their God-given talents. The latter, some of whom practice by in shops and spaces perched by the roads often referred to as 'way-side artists' (Svašek, 1997) receive the least attention in scholarship on Ghanaian arts. Such Ghanaian artists, often labeled as commercial artists, are less recognized. Critical inquiries into their creative potentials are only made when they get the chance to be featured by a renowned figure in the global visual art space. Such was the case of Kwame Akoto, popularly referred to as 'Almighty' who was fortunate to have pictures of three of his works taken by Christine Kristen in 1978, featured in the popular African Art journal. This later resulted in various extensive studies on his life and works by seasoned art historians such as Doran H. Ross (Ross, 2014).

Christine Kristen might have caught his attention during one of his numerous self-funded travels to Europe. Yet, how many of these underdog Ghanaian artists, both formally and informally trained, can self-finance the high costs associated with travels outside the country to exhibit their works? The situation is even worse for young Ghanaian artists who are now struggling to gain popularity in their artistic creations. Such is the ordeal faced by two very creative young artists I met at the Sounds Out exhibition in Accra on August 28, 2021. They were Ebenezer Nana Bruce³ and Daniel A. Kukubor.⁴ They told me how it has been difficult getting the required funding to come to the lime light to show their works to a larger audience and to partake in global art fairs and exhibition. Without fame and status, patronage for their works are practically low. For many young artists such as Ebenezer and Daniel, all they have to do is to wait patiently for an opportunity to be exposed. Their earnest prayer is to hope for a platform to get them known and have a breakthrough for their career, which they have waited for years without luck knocking on their doors. What Ghanaian art scholars ought to do is to engage in biographic studies on these creative but underdog Ghanaian artists who are consistently pursuing their careers, striving hard for exposure to their artistic creations. This is the ripe time for Ghanaian art scholars to do this, as we live in exciting and evolutionary times in the development of Ghanaian art. Young Ghanaian artists are defying all odds, breaking all former boundaries and borders formerly imposed on the art practice in the country by colonialism and the short-sighted desire to kowtow to the laid down conventions on what defines genuine art

¹ Sami Benti is a U. S. based Ghanaian Fine artist who has a wealth of experience in the Ghanaian art industry. He has exhibited in Europe, North and South America, and in Asia. He was a panelist at the art forum organized as part of the Sound Out exhibition, a premium art exhibition organized by the Ghana Exports Promotions Authority under the Ministry of Trade and Industry on August 28, 2021.

² The term 'Proper Ghana Art' is a term coined by Sami Benti and accepted by attendees of the art forum at the Sound Art Exhibition held on August 28, 2021. The term refers to artistic creations produced with Ghanaian flavor and resonates with the rich Ghanaian cultural heritage in its contents within, and of course, taking cognizance of the global cultural, economic and socio-political ecosystems.

³ Ebenezer Nana Bruce is a young Ghanaian mixed media artist in his early twenties who works with graphite/charcoal, acrylic and pastels, a graduate from Ghanatta College of Art and Design, Accra. He practices his art in his home studio in Accra, Ghana.

⁴ Daniel A. Kukubor is a young mixed media artist in his middle twenties who works with newspapers, pastels and acrylics. He graduated from the Ghanatta College of Art and Design in 2006. Through a senior artist and the curator of the Sound Out exhibition, Amarkine Amartefio, he got selected to exhibit his works at the exhibition venue in the Accra International Conference Center, Ghana.

in the country. Adom, Adu-Agyem, and Osei (2020) noted of the contemporary phase in the development of Ghanaian art as fueled largely by the younger generation of artists. They have explored every opportunity in terms of themes, concepts, and materials out of unbridled freedom of expression. The products of these extensive and high spirits of exploration and experimentation are artistic marvels worth acknowledging in the scholarship of Ghanaian arts. Borrowing the words of one of the celebrated Ghanaian contemporary artists and poet, Amarkine Amartefio⁵, Ghanaian art scholars should through their writings help in the 'making' and 'selling' of these young Ghanaian artists. Amarkine told me that Ghanaian art scholars need not wait for these artists to attain stardom like Ibrahim Mahama before we start writing about them and their works.

Ghanaian art scholars must urgently make it a priority to assist these creative, but underdog Ghanaian visual artists by engaging in extensive biographic scholarships of their lives and works. Ghanaian scholars must embark on critical investigations and analyses into the philosophies, themes, and subject matter of their works of art. Also, they must scholarly engage in iconographical analyses into the design qualities and characteristics and how they speak to the socio-political, economic, and cultural narratives of Ghana and the larger global context. Ghanaian art scholars have to make the voices of these undocumented visual artists heard; it is their civic responsibility. It is a duty they owe the artists, as patriots of the nation to help them advance their careers. Going forward, private and public agencies that seeks to promote artists through art scholarship must help create a Ghanaian art writers guild to have a team of writers dedicated to art scholarship of the Ghanaian visual artists and their works. The scholarly writings of their artistic creations would serve as an important platform to expose their artistic productions, helping them gain sustainable economic livelihoods and to contribute significantly to the artistic heritage of the country on the global art landscape.

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¹ Dr. Afua Asabea Asare is the Chief Executive Officer of the Ghana Export Promotions Authority as part of the Ministry of Trade and Industry. She is also a fine artist who works more in mosaic with her works collected in the Faith Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. She spearheaded the organization of the premium sound out exhibition on August 28, 2021 in the Accra International Conference Center, Ghana.

⁵ Amarkine Amartefio was the curator for the Sound Out exhibition in Accra on August 28, 2021. I engaged in conversation with him on the need for Ghanaian art scholars to intensify biographic studies on the undocumented Ghanaian artists, especially the young Ghanaian artists as an instrument for promoting their careers.