



Wedge Gallery presents OJEIKERE: HAIRSTYLES at SOF Art House

May 5 until June 2, 2002

A Review by P.L.E. Idahosa

When aesthetically viewing Africa, one is reminded of Cameroonian philosopher, Jean-Godefroy Bidima's insight: the "gaze that is related to Africa is an intersection of gazes calling forth several questions: Who is looking at Africa? What is Africa looking at? Who looks at the one who is looking at Africa? One sees a celebratory gaze on a crucial feature of African identity in the Nigerian, Lagos-based septuagenarian, J.D. `Okhai Ojeikere's photographs of pan-Nigerian women's hairstyles. His motive for capturing and preserving these styles was the fear that part of African ingenuity that goes back over two millennia would be lost to the creolisation and early globalization of the cultural hegemony of wigs and shaven heads that were in vogue in Nigeria and West Africa from the 1960s up until the 1980s.

Like all good chronicles, Ojeikere's photographs arise out of imagination and delight in seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary: hairstyles are both everyday, but carry an imaginative significance beyond the commonplace. These photographs also reveal both a universal and specifically African aesthetic. The universal aesthetic of these photographs lies in their depicting the product of the creatively intricate skill of the hair stylist whose fashions are often complex, yet ephemeral. Like all superior styles, these creations are meant to enhance attractiveness, and bring pleasure to those who wear and those who gaze.

Part of the uniquely African aesthetic lies in Ojeikere's intimating expressive meaning behind the visual manifestation of exquisiteness. Styles are placed within ethnographic fields; they are "named" to indicate identity, origin and meaning, where each hairstyle suggests the temporality of African aesthetics, and where part of the past continues to be embedded in the present. Most of the styles are contemporary and of recent provenance; they also bear the names and marks of forms that signify pre-existing creations. Such creations are part of historical-social and cultural milieus linked to function, purpose and ritual: ceremonial or everyday, for a coming-of-age ceremony, for dancers, to exhibit social status, or just to be casual.

Few of these black and white photos find their subject fully embodied. You see only the head, profile, face-on, and from behind, and occasionally the neck is shown. Meant to emphasise the subject of creativity against a background of natural light, this focus centres the elaborate hairstyles. And such simplicity, yet intricacy and complexity of composition! There are weaved coiffures of braided filigrees, snaking loops that shimmer like dendritic, wavy weaves, across and

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down. Other styles recombine in intersected plait that spiral up into braided mini-towers. There are extraordinary arcs of cross-sectioning braids that weave complex frames that form edifices that look like sculpture. There are the intricate weaves that appear to organically grow from the head, just as there are braids that fall down under the weight of their long, gravitational lines.

Each photograph shares norms that further depict elements of an African aesthetic: a glowing and fluid lucidity of form and detail, balance and symmetry, a smoothness of finish that suggests youth, vigor and health, and growth evocative of a vibrant, fecund life. In so doing, Ojeikere lovingly captures ephemeras of popular culture and the passing aesthetic gaze of the temporary. He also presciently portrays features of its revival in present day Africa and the Diaspora, as well as its permanence. One such feature is the deeply ingrained aesthetic that has become universal among African peoples worldwide: the creativity and attention to hair that that comes out of leisure time.

April 17, 2002

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