

TAPPING INTO THE KNOWN

An Exhibition of Poetry by Late Poet Christopher Okigbo And Paintings & Poetry Installations by Obi Okigbo

A Curators note:
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As I was preparing this paper, I remembered the night in March 2007, when I experienced a profound feeling of being compelled to write down my thoughts on this process that I had unconsciously taken on and a distinct sense of being guided, and my emotions, as the words tumbled from my mind and onto the page with what seemed like abandon, but once read, made complete clarity.

This experience was one of many that occurred on the 'voyage', resulting in what was a powerful journey for me and all who were involved in this project, but none more so than for the late enigma that is the Nigerian born poet **CHRISTOPHER OKIGBO**, considered to be one of Africa's most influential writers and his artist daughter, **OBIAGELI OKIGBO**.

Tapping into the Known, an exhibition of Poetry, Paintings and Installations by the late Poet and his artist daughter Obi, emerged as a result of 'Conversations' between Obi and her father. Christopher Okigbo, widely recognised as one of Africa's pre-eminent and enigmatic poets, died in the battlefields of the Nigerian civil war, in September 1967, leaving his wife Judith Sefi Attah and two year-old daughter, Obiageli.

He left poetic masterpieces, including 'Heavensgate', 1962 and 'Labyrinths with Path of Thunder' - exacting, burning and truthful works from beginning to end. Prophetic and visionary, his words were first heard by his equals, Chinua Achebe, JP Clark and Wole Soyinka amongst others. He once described what his poetic vocation meant to him:

"There wasn't a stage when I decided that I definitely wished to be a poet; there was a stage when I found that I couldn't be anything else. And I think that the turning point came in December 1958, when I knew that I couldn't be anything else than a poet. It's just like somebody who receives a call in the middle of the night to religious service, in order to become a priest in a particular cult, and I didn't have any choice in the matter. I just had to obey." Christopher Okigbo¹

An outstanding personality, Okigbo encouraged one not to be confined by cultural, political, artistic, creative and humane limits, but despite his standing amongst his peers and African intellectuals and artists as a founding figure in the development of modern literature in Africa, ironically little is known about him in the wider cultural audience.

As the Curator of 'Tapping' the intention was to address this conundrum and bring forth his artistic magnitude to an untapped audience. The exhibition would be a homage to Okigbo, a contextual kaleidoscope of documentation, photography past and present, poetic verse from a true master, memorabilia, 'Mbari' pilgrimages, video footage, and his awe-inspiring manuscripts, never before seen and now part of UNESCO's World archival register; juxtaposed against his daughter, Obi's haunting melodies of visual expressivity.

When I met Obi Okigbo in 1992, she was a practising architect and experimenting with the dynamics of incorporating her architectural grounding with her creative impulses. She went on to develop her artistic verve, consequently establishing herself in contemporary art circles, exhibiting in Brussels, Paris, New York and Lagos. She cited her influences in "archetypes: 'a primordial mental image inherited by all' and 'points of convergence ... constants'."

¹ Preface – Christopher Okigbo, Collected poems, 1986

However in the last ten years she began to embark on her *'Father Quest'* inspired and driven by her father's work, their common interest - mythology, nature and science, which she believes exist in every culture but with timeless themes. *"Myths are 'clues' to the spiritual potentialities of the human life...shared potentiality."*

Obi's encounters with Christopher began with monochrome studies, *'Manifest'*- early mappings of the journey she was to take, then vibrant collages, *'Forecast'*, which became one of the iconic images for the exhibition – a collage depicting Obi's mother (a carbon copy of Obi in adulthood) and father, an intimate portrayal of young lovers and Obi's rhythmic searching utterances, *'...sometimes a god in the sky, sometimes a holy man on earth,...'*. This culminated into resonating and wonderful artistic manifestations, paintings titled *'Predominantly Red – Sacrifice and Bliss'*, *'Predominantly Orange - The rebirth of Venus'*, *Predominantly Yellow*; and so on and so forth. The spectrum of primary colours, figurative and abstract, the female form with goddess prowess - nurturer, mother, lover, spiritual provider - evoking a mood that transpires into places in time where chapters are crossed. With purity she inhabited her father's visions and themes encapsulating distinct and inspiring images resulting in breath-taking interpretations of proverbial themes...*'Sophisticreamy'*²

The final masterpiece, *'Predominantly, Black/White, The last Supper'* - an installation evoked by Da Vinci's masterpiece. With a play on Christ, with Christopher Okigbo as Jesus and his brotherhood comprising of African or black heroes including Biko, Soyinka, Malcolm X, Achebe, Mandela, Marley and Fela Ransom Kuti. Heroes, who for Obi, who was brought up in the Nigerian context 'were people who had/have dedicated their lives to the Black cause, freedom and integrity'. Obi, the Mary Madeleine figure, symbolises Compassion – as it is 'she' who must mourn the loss of these great men.

And so through this exploration Obi came to redefine her identity, finally finding her father and therefore herself, moments with her father that she thought she would never possess. What transpired was a profound journey through the LABRINTH, awash with new beginnings, awakenings of self and realisations of the truth. For Christopher this was a visualisation of his life's work, his haunting prophetic verse, the intensity of each word chosen, that trip and fall, undulating prose and voiced images that dance across your mind, leaving one stunned, alive, breathless, overwhelmed yet soothing to the soul to the point of tears. It seems that Christopher is uncompromising in what he desires. He knew there would be a time that his daughter would find him...on his creative echelon. Obiageli was fated to take this journey – a TIMELY meeting of spirits, divine and earthly, for their cosmos is intertwined and all who have been compelled to take it with her are illuminated and uplifted by this pilgrimage.

Okigbo's friend, fellow wordsmith, Nobel Prize winner, Professor Wole Soyinka and enthusiastic patron of *Tapping into the Known* describes this meeting poignantly:

"An intimate dialogue between daughter and father, two distinct artistic personae, two modes of creative responses, a dialogue across time, over which filial memory constructs a luminous bridge. A dialogue? No, more expressively, a duet." WS

For me, the rationale behind *'Tapping into the Known'* was to bring to the fore the sheer brilliance and sensibilities of Christopher Okigbo's poetry and the hauntingly mesmerising paintings of his daughter. The aim was to exhibit two invigorating and thought provoking artists working in different artistic mediums, and the spiritual link that encapsulates their independent visions and shared personal experiences. In the same breath we wanted to allow the viewer the opportunity to step into the 'Labyrinths', to find or feel a sense of this profound expedition between Father and Daughter, the celebration of their awakening relationship and this their final long awaited delicate and inspirational HOMECOMING....

This exhibition was an intrinsic part of the celebrations planned by the Christopher Okigbo Foundation, to mark and honour his legacy in 2007 and I was honoured to be part of the year long events which included the

² 'Watermaid', Heavensgate, 1962

successful Boston Conference in September and the Memorial Service in Okigbo's home town, Ojoto in August, where Christopher was finally laid to rest, in a symbolic ceremony³ and where a Daughter was finally able to cry for her beloved Father.

And so the final words MUST come from the Genius, Christopher Okigbo....

*"FOR YOU return to us
From a forgotten farewell
From the settled abyss
Where the twilights cross....*

*.....Today on your homecoming
Patient mother
With you in your palm
The life hour is in our cup"⁴*

³ Okigbo was killed at Opi Junction, a Northern Igbo town and it is believed that Okigbo died hauling a grenade. His body was never recovered.

⁴Dance of the Painted Maidens – Christopher Okigbo, 1964