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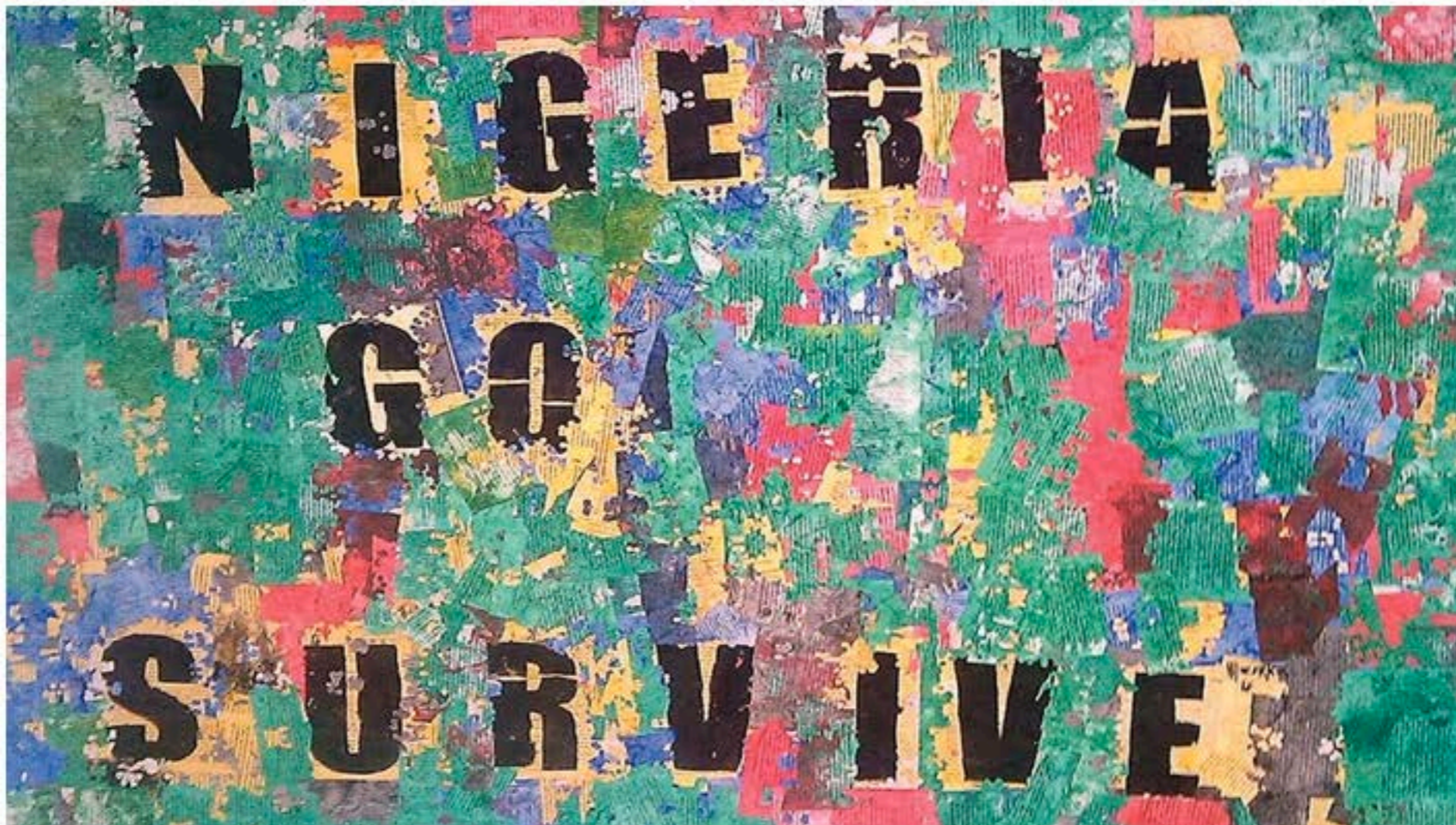
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Saturday Magazine

Breaking news... exploring the politics, mechanism of mass media through art

By Chuks Nwanne | 14 May 2016 | 2:58 am



One of the works from Uche Uzorka's *Engagement of Sympathy* series.

The Eko Hotel & Suites, Victoria Island, is known for hosting major entertainment gigs in Lagos. Almost on a weekly basis, this venue hosts different events ranging from musical concerts to comedy shows, runway fashion shows and conferences. But on April 30, 2016, visual art took centre stage with a group exhibition at the Art Twenty One tagged Breaking News.

Located within the hotel, at Art Twenty One, a brand new 600sqm space and platform dedicated to contemporary art in Lagos, is intended to contribute to and to solidify the growing art scene in Lagos, as well as position this great city as a major force in the international art world.

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The exhibition, which runs till June 22, brought together art patrons and enthusiasts, who came to see Jakob S, Boeskov, Teco Benson, Obinna Makata, Native Maqari, Abraham Oghobase, Bob-Nosa Uwagboe, Chibuike Uzoma and Uzorka explore the politics and mechanisms of the mass media through their works. From painting to drawing, photography, video and installation, Breaking News questions how information is disseminated, fact is constructed and how social and political life are filtered through the lens of the culture industry.

From works on display, it's obvious that these artists are critical about divergent social and political issues in Nigeria. Using different media, the artists explore how Nigeria is defined in the local and global news media, and how cultural myths are articulated and perpetuated. In an act of subversion, they cut, crop, and shred the vernacular news archive, a literal and symbolic act of destruction.

Rather than succumb to commercial pressures of the media industry, they created a visual language to portray new perspectives and alternative narrative. But whether critiquing current events or its distribution in newspapers, television, and the Internet, the artists form a self-reflexive view of the media, identifying how it forms our personal and collective worldview.

For instance, in the series *Basket Full of Blood*, Obinna Makata creates abstract paintings that incorporate pieces of used weave basket, covered with drips of red paint. Using metaphor of the basket to represent Nigeria's potentials, Makata points to the disillusionment in the social-political sphere in the wake of the country's current political climate.

Traditionally, the basket in the Igbo culture symbolises riches, harvest, bountifulness, protection and hope. As a rich Nation, Nigeria's "basket" should be theoretically full. Yet, Makata's series illustrates the government's inability to tackle issues of terrorism, which continues to plague the security of the country. Rather than symbolise abundance and positive outlook of the future, Makata's baskets are in the process of drowning in an abyss of blood, awaiting salvation.

In *The Illicit Proliferation of Large and Small Arms*, Bob-Nosa Uwagboe probes poor leadership and the state of insecurity in the country. Featuring brightly coloured figures in neon and fluorescent hues, he creates elements forms with heavy emotional charge. Uwagboe's characters are in the midst of struggle, from militants with guns creating a state of panic to policemen drinking local liquors and attacking innocent civilians.

In his collaboration with musician Keziah Jones for the graphic novel, *Captain Rugged*, Native Magari tells the story of a superhero aiding the disenfranchised in the urban metropolis of Lagos. Its protagonist, an ex-military soldier turned superhero living in Makoko, fights against political and social corruption in Nigeria and the harshness of the daily grind.

Consequently on the run from local police, government leaders and news reporters, Captain Rugged lurks in the shadows between rescuing area boys and local beggars. As a superhero, living in one of Nigeria's notoriously photographed areas, the captain circumvents the clinched depiction of poverty that pervades western media outlets. Inspired by a desire to see their home city and country represented in the graphic novel form, Maqari and Jones form an alternative narrative that blends facts with fiction to imagine realities.

On his part, Chibuike Uzoma creates collages by cutting scraps of newspapers and printed matter overlaid with hand-drawn sketches and texts in his *Desire* series. The torn newspaper pages reference current events including political reports, elections, economic woes and society columns, as well as official court documents and public notices. The tearing of the newspaper pages suggests a natural decay, as if they were originally created by years of neglect.

Uzoma inscribes the phrase "call me", "love me," and "please" in repetitions atop the fragmented pages, along with images of faces of creatures. In its manic reiteration of the same phrases, his works plea for personal connectivity in the alienated age of technology. Speaking to the psychological yearning of desire to belong to someone or something, Uzoma blends together cultural and personal narratives that reflect a sense of desperation in the face of mass media industries.



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Uche Uzorka's *Engagement of Empathy* is a literal and conceptual deconstruction of Nigerian political analysis and commentary. Using academic books and tourist travel guides, he forcefully shreds the pages of his source materials and paints over the text, rendering the indecipherable. These books were written by foreign "experts," who observe and critique the Nigerian experience from afar; with a pessimistic and fearful outlook on the country.

His canvasses specifically reference a book by author Karl Maier entitled *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, which attempts to dissect Nigeria's political and ethno-religious difficulties. Uzorka negates their factual analysis by treating it as a work of fiction, in opposition to the artist's daily realities. Organising these scraps onto canvass and compartmentalized jars, he attempts to create a systemic order amid their commentary of "chaos."

In *Dr. Cruel and the Afro-Icelandic Liberation Front*, Icelandic artist Jacob Boescov collaborated with Nollywood director Teco Benson in the short action film, which follows the head of a terrorist organization, who kidnaps an oil executive for ransom, while preaching a message of non-violence. Inspired by the fast-paced action films in Nollywood cinema, the film, the only video featured in *Breaking News*, begins with a press conference featuring the sinister character Dr. Cruel, which quickly escalates to an elaborate escape and police shootout.

Told in the international language of violence and action, the film borrows from the Nollywood slapstick and melodramatic traditions. Shot on location in rented domestic spaces using common, consumer technologies, Boescov and Benson highlight the democratization of cinema that speaks

In a chat with curator of the exhibition Joseph Gergel, he said, "the artistes here are looking at events in Nigeria, with focus on how the media create fact, how information gets disseminated and how it really affects the way we understand ourselves in the world around us."

On choice of the seven exhibitors, the American, who has been working in Nigeria for four years explained, "we are always thinking of issues that relate with the society; we knew we wanted to do the theme of *Breaking News*. So, we approached artistes that we knew that had worked on that thematic ground. Some of the artistes already had works, but some we commissioned to do new works for the exhibition. From photography to painting, video, installation, drawing... it's interesting to see one theme interpreted in so many ways," Gergel enthused.



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