



Rita Doris Edumchieke Ubah, *Ije Agwo (Snake)*, 2018. Fabric, shells, 120 x 144 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

I was exposed to the Igbo art body painting as a young girl during festivals, dance displays by a female peer group, and initiation and puberty rites. Igbo women are known for body painting in which selected vegetal and animal motifs are usually abstracted into linear motifs and painted on the human skin using a liquid juice known as *uli*. This art practice has endured over time and flourished as women's art par excellence. Since December 1970, contemporary artists of the Nsukka School have attempted to reinvent this art form as a means of reconnecting with modernism. I was trained to embrace this art idiom for its linear, pictorial representations. Unique to this art practice is the use of line as a means of engaging human experience in diverse media. I tried in my work to adapt the creative potential of lines because of their visual and mobile qualities. Having explored these art idioms through creative experiments with *adire* and *batik*, and weaving visual images in their three-dimensional forms, I also began to transform these into mini textile installations. However, the more I worked with the *uli* idiom in diverse media, the more my creative impulses led me into further exploration in art and materiality. The theory of creative adaptation and domestication opened new vistas for me,

and I realized that one's local site of creative production holds immense potential for exploiting found objects.

The title of the work, *Ije Agwo*, was conceived in the context of the Igbo maxim that says that cyclic movement is the serpent's walk, and that its beautiful spots were drawn from the sky's first weeping. Spiral movements are characteristic of the snake just as human life follows and echoes a spiral movement in the endless cycle of life. It is this kind of cosmological ideation that I sought to ground in the materiality of the medium used. The use of shells and other related materials is a way of appropriating aspects of the environment as if human experience were something that sprouted from the earth, a notion that is associated with the movement of the python over the earth. This idea is foregrounded in the deployment of shells and other materials at the foreground of the picture plane so as to position the spectator to establish a dialogic relationship that is very much like an exchange of a gaze returned. In semiotic terms, it is an attempt to subvert the symbolic order so as to create a conceptual space for the rise of creative innovation. This is why the shells are deployed at the foreground of the picture, arranged to echo the left lateral of the picture plane. Yet, subtle spaces were left in between the shells to pronounce their tactile value, and the upper left of the picture consisted of a disc-like shape like the sun made of rhythmic shapes of ribbons. In a reverse movement, other ribbons unfold as they create rhythmic shapes that initially spiral downwards and then redirect their movement towards the extreme right of the picture and terminate. The spaces in between these spiral rhythmic lines were filled with small knitted cups that help to create visual intensity in terms of chromatic tension and mobility. Other spaces to the right of the picture plane are also intensified with the use of a mixture of green-colored discs and their variance in dark blue. The extreme right of the picture is left dark as if to abort the continuous movement of the rhythmic forms. Yet, there are negative spaces that reveal the background color as a means of intensifying the vivacity of the chromatic surface.

The work subverts our usual expectation of a well-composed picture, and this asymmetry of the composition, especially in the suspension of some pictorial elements that seem to float as if on their own, gives the picture an irregular balance. There is a feeling of ambiguity and patches of clarity both in the arrangement of

pictorial elements but also in the feeling that one has. The picture simulates a pictorial notion of completeness and incompleteness and of harmony and disharmony, if not a feeling of unstated fragmentation and indeterminacy. For example, the left side of the picture seems stable in the arrangement of compositional elements including the upper left of the picture. At the same time, the right side of the picture seems to offset or destabilize the left side, thus creating a feeling of chromatic contention between the dominant surfaces of the picture. In other words, there is a sense of disequilibrium in the distribution of compositional elements. As one gazes at the picture, there is a feeling of a work in progress in which the process and the product seem to challenge each other. The flaming effect of color on the left side of the picture, especially to the top left, seems to overcome areas of softer hues. Yet, there is a sense of stability in the use of found objects at the foreground of the picture with extension to the right side. Because of this, the work seems to be multidirectional in its formal and chromatic references. It shares the quality of abstraction associated with art modernism but subverts this in its formal tendency towards post-modernism's predisposition to visual play with incompleteness and uncertainty, as if the work is named but at the same time not named. There are obvious and hidden formal and conceptual references. In this sense, the work conceals as it reveals. It is more like improvising and extemporizing jazz. Herein lies the work's aesthetic density.

Ije Agwo is a creative platform for further explorations into the materiality of found objects and how artists can exploit their creative potential for artistic production. Its thematic implication is that the spiral movement of the snake furnishes an artist with an ideological frame, that to create is metaphorically to tunnel through myriad experiences with a sense of mobility; to ferret out art ideas, including techniques with which to transform these ideas into visual forms by exploiting media sourced from the immediate environment. The ultimate goal of my creative experiments is to engage found objects, local and imported, for creating textile installations by taking advantage of different media sources, appropriating and domesticating them as a basis for creating textile art installation works. The implication of the spiral movement of the snake metaphor is to hint at new possibilities for media and technical transgressions so that any textile art installations will

reflect postmodernist notion of play, improvisation, extemporization, ambiguity, and indeterminacy as attributes of works of art that predicate our fragmented world. Using various media, I am optimistic about achieving synthetic art idioms with multiple narratives and possible alternative knowledges.

Rita Doris Edumchieke Ubah studied Textile Art and Art History at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she earned her PhD, MA, and MFA degrees. She also holds a Masters in International Law and Diplomacy from the University of Lagos, and a BA from the University of Nigeria. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Nike Art Gallery, Lagos; Korean Cultural Center, Abuja; and at the Nigerian Consulate in Johannesburg, South Africa, among other venues.