Sculpting Social Conscience: Insecurity and Marginalisation in Nigeria through the Work Area Boys

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Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of insecurity and marginalisation in Nigeria through the practice-based sculpture Area Boys. The study examines the social phenomenon of street boys locally referred to as Area Boys whose emergence reflects the consequences of poverty, neglect, and failed governance. Through a creative process rooted in material symbolism and social engagement, the paper explores how sculpture functions as both a mirror and critique of societal decay. The study draws upon the artistic traditions of social commentary by sculptors such as Willie Bester, Pablo Picasso, René Iché, Ai Weiwei, El Anatsui, Sokari Douglas Camp, Yinka Shonibare, and Louise Bourgeois, among others. These artists demonstrate how visual forms can translate oppression, violence, and alienation into critical discourse. Using practice-based research and critical visual analysis, the paper interprets Area Boys, constructed from welded steel, spark plugs, boilers, and rubber, as a sculptural metaphor for dispossession and resilience. The study concludes that sculpture can serve as a tool for advocacy and civic consciousness, transforming aesthetic practice into a platform for social change.

Keywords: Sculpture, Insecurity, Social Commentary, Area Boys, Found Objects.

Introduction

The visual arts have long functioned as a vehicle for social commentary and resistance. From ancient reliefs depicting conquest and protest to modern installations confronting injustice, artists have responded to societal tension through symbolic form. In contemporary Nigeria, where insecurity, poverty, and youth unemployment have reached alarming levels, art becomes not merely an act of creation but of witnessing and critique.

The term Area Boys refers to groups of street youths, mostly male, found in urban centres like Lagos and Ibadan. Typically aged between 10 and 25, they emerge from fractured family structures, economic deprivation, and systemic neglect. Over time, these youths form networks that control certain city zones, providing "security" services or engaging in activities such as extortion, drug use, and political thuggery. They are both victims and perpetrators in Nigeria's cycle of insecurity. Activities of these youngsters were noticed much earlier in colonial times, when they were called 'Jaguda'. Jaguda, meaning 'pickpockets', were a group of young boys in Lagos and Ibadan who operated informally, based on age and neighbourhood, and primarily constituted a nuisance to society (Heap, Simon. 1997). Scholars such as Schweder (2009) and Navne and Jacobson (2020) have identified parental neglect, poverty, and weak institutional frameworks as key factors contributing to child abandonment. In the Nigerian context, religious

and cultural shifts have further compounded the situation, with traditional systems of communal care eroding in the face of rapid urbanisation.

Against this backdrop, artists occupy a unique position: to interpret, critique, and communicate these realities in ways that transcend conventional reportage. The sculpture "Area Boys," the focus of this study, emerges from this context, translating social fragmentation into visual form. The work interrogates how neglect transforms human potential into societal threat, and how sculpture, through material and metaphor, can act as a moral voice in a bleeding nation.

Sculpture as Social Commentary

The idea of art as social conscience is not new. Throughout history, sculptors have confronted issues of war, identity, and inequality. Willie Bester's sculpture "Trojan Horse" (2007) depicts inequality. According to Bester (1996), "I believe that we must protest against that which is wrong. There is no form of escape; remaining apolitical is a luxury that artists simply cannot afford." Auguste Rodin's The Burghers of Calais (1889) portrayed civic sacrifice in times of national crisis. Kathe Kollwitz's expressionist bronzes mourned the futility of war and the suffering of the poor. In the 20th century, artists increasingly employed found materials to critique modernity's excesses and injustices. René Iche, working in the 1930s, used sculptural distortion to visualise the anguish of war. His Guernica (1937), a counterpart to Picasso's painting, translated atrocity into human form. In the late 20th century, Ai Weiwei's installations, including Straight (2008–2012), reconstructed twisted steel rebar from the Sichuan earthquake to expose corruption and state negligence. Similarly, Louise Bourgeois explored themes of trauma, motherhood, and vulnerability through forms such as Maman (1999), which confronts fear and memory. African sculptors have extended this lineage by linking personal expression with cultural and political identity. Ghanaian artist El Anatsui redefined sculpture through monumental assemblages made of discarded bottle caps and metal, symbolising consumption, colonial residue, and the resilience of African societies. Sokari Douglas Camp, a Nigerian-British sculptor, uses welded steel to explore environmental and political themes from the Niger Delta. Her works, such as All the World is Now Richer (2012), celebrate emancipation while critiquing ongoing oppression. Yinka Shonibare, through his hybrid figures clothed in Dutch wax fabric, questions postcolonial identity and the lingering effects of imperialism. These artists share an ethos: transforming material waste and marginal narratives into visual critique. The present study situates Area Boys within this tradition of using discarded industrial materials to expose how a nation's neglect manifests in human form.

Contextualising the Area Boy Phenomenon

In Nigeria's urban centres, Area Boys represent both symptom and symbol. They are the visible outcome of invisible failures of parental abandonment, unemployment, and moral collapse. Sociologically, the Area Boy embodies alienation and resistance. While demonised by the public, they also express defiance against a society that has excluded them. Historically, Nigeria's rapid urbanisation after independence created economic dislocation. As rural populations migrated to cities without adequate social infrastructure, many children found themselves homeless. The phenomenon mirrors that of the Almajiri in Northern Nigeria, boys sent to Islamic schools who often end up begging for survival. Though this paper is on Area Boys, both groups illustrate the intersection of neglect and institutional failure. The Area Boy has thus evolved into a metaphor for the nation's fractured identity. Their presence challenges the ideals of progress and modernity; they exist on the margins of legality, morality, and visibility. Art, therefore, becomes an avenue to bring them back into public consciousness, not as threats but as reflections of collective failure.

Methodology: Practice-Based Artistic Research

This paper adopts a practice-based research approach, which integrates studio production and theoretical reflection. The artist serves as both creator and researcher, using the act of making as a process of inquiry. Documentation through sketches, material experiments, and written reflection informs the interpretation of the work. Smith and Dean (2009) note that

> Practice-led research arises out of two related ideas. Firstly, that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs. The product of creative work itself contributes to the outcomes of the research process and contributes to the answer to a research question. Secondly, creative practice, the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have, and the processes they engage in when they are making art, can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research.

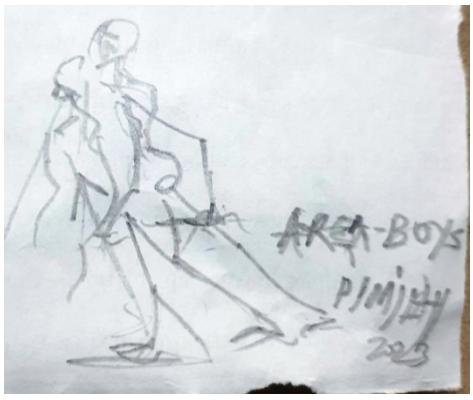

Fig.1, 'Area-Boys', Pencil Sketch on Paper, 15cm x 9.8cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2022).



Fig. 2, 'Area-Boys', Pen Sketch on Paper, 18.4cm x 6.6cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2022).

Concept Development: The creative process began with a conceptual question: How can sculpture give form to neglect and insecurity? The artist's early sketches (Plates I–II) explored fragmented bodies, distorted proportions, and implied motion. These drawings served as compositional blueprints and emotional mapping for the final work.

Material Selection and Symbolism

The choice of materials was deliberate, emphasising found objects that mirror the discarded lives of the subjects. For example, Willie Bester, through his sculpture titled "Trojan Horse III" (2007) Fig.1, in which he allegorically depicted victims of apartheid in South Africa, seeks to metaphorically transform these same refuse dump wastes into precious works of art that have over time come to be treasures and thus highlighting the falseness of such perceptions before the very eyes of society. He allegorically views his rejected fellow blacks through the eyes of the discarded waste dump which apartheid policies have foisted on the majority of the populace.

Thus, Godby and Klopper (1996) opine that "Bester's use of waste materials, which was contrary to what was obtained amongst artists of his time, does not belong to the anti-art dimension but is actually a structural part of the themes that he explores. A fundamental aspect of his personal iconography can be seen in his use of found objects, which forms a large part of the social allegories and metaphors he reels out in his works". Thus, like other artists of his time, Bester believes that artists cannot afford to be apolitical or hang on the fence, but have to be a part of societal positive reforms.

Mild steel rods (5mm): Used as skeletal structures, symbolising fragility and endurance. Spark plugs: Affixed to heads, representing volatility, anger, and explosive reaction to societal pressure. Ring water boilers: Welded onto arms, suggesting the buildup of heat, frustration, and potential eruption. Discarded car tyres and rubber: Used as clothing, symbolising poverty, improvisation, and environmental decay. By recycling industrial refuse, the sculpture converts waste into narrative, a metaphor for transforming despair into artistic resistance.

Fabrication Process: Using welding and assemblage techniques, the components were joined onto a metallic base. The process of fusing fragments through heat becomes symbolic of reconstructing broken humanity. The physical strain of the welding process parallels the social tension embodied in the subject matter.



Fig. 3, A Welding Session, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2023).



Fig. 4, Piecing some 5mm Rods Together, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2023).

Analysis of the Sculpture Area Boys

The completed sculpture portrays two emaciated figures, stripped of individual identity, their elongated limbs and hollow torsos suggesting hunger and exhaustion. Their posture, alert yet burdened, communicates both defiance and vulnerability. The spark plugs serve as metaphors for ignition, quick tempers, and impulsive acts, while the boilers attached to the arms embody the psychological pressure under which these youths operate. The tyre drapes evoke the resourcefulness of the poor and the environmental degradation of urban Nigeria. Together, these elements construct a layered metaphor: a nation overheating under its own neglect.

Formally, the sculpture draws from Expressionism, emphasising distortion, tension, and emotional intensity over realism. The hollow forms and rough welds recall the work of Alberto Giacometti, whose figures conveyed existential anxiety after World War II. In contrast, the local context of Area Boys situates these forms within African urban decay, linking aesthetics with activism. Sculpture, in this sense, transcends decoration and becomes documentation, serving as a civic witness. The Area Boys sculpture participates in a broader discourse on how art engages with trauma, politics, and the human condition.

Each material used in the sculpture functions as an index of social commentary, reflecting the artist's concerns. Metal rods symbolise endurance amidst fragility, while rubber and tyres evoke urban pollution and survival. Spark plugs metaphorically ignite conflict, and boilers signal internalised rage and heat. Through this symbolic layering, the sculpture speaks to national anxieties, including unemployment, urban violence, and governmental apathy.



Fig.5, Finish Sculpture (Right Side-View) 'Area-Boys', Mix-Media, 34cm x 20cm x 15,5cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2023).



Fig.6, Finish Sculpture 'Area-Boys' (Front View), Mix-Media, 34cm x 20cm x 15,5cm, Photography: Paul Aziza Imieh, (2023).

By transforming private suffering into public art, the sculpture raises awareness about these pressing issues.

The work aligns with the perspective of Rauschenberg (2007), who asserted that "the artist's job is to be a witness to his time in history." By materialising the unseen victims of neglect, Area Boys transforms aesthetic experience into ethical engagement. It demonstrates how sculpture can be a catalyst for dialogue between policymakers, citizens, and the marginalised. The significance of Area Boys lies not only in its form but in its function as social critique. It situates Nigerian sculpture within global conversations about art as activism. In a nation beset by insecurity, unemployment, and corruption, the artist's studio becomes a space of resistance and re-imagination.

The use of discarded materials also aligns with sustainability discourse, emphasising environmental consciousness alongside social critique. By transforming refuse into reflection, the sculpture asserts that what society discards, whether waste or people, retains value when re-contextualised through art. Moreover, this work challenges the perception of sculpture as elitist. Its raw materials and subject matter speak directly to the public sphere, making art accessible as both object and message.

Conclusion

The Area Boys sculpture exemplifies how artistic practice can interrogate the moral and political condition of a nation. Through form, material, and metaphor, it exposes the contradictions of a society that neglects its youth while lamenting insecurity. The work thus positions sculpture not merely as aesthetic production but as a civic witness.

Recommendations

Government Policy: Develop rehabilitation centres and creative training programmes for street children to prevent recruitment into violence.

Art Education: Integrate social and community art projects into university curricula to encourage socially responsive practice.

Public Engagement: Encourage art exhibitions and installations that address social issues in public spaces.

Cultural Policy: Support artists whose works engage civic themes through grants, residencies, and public commissions.

Scholarly Continuity: Further research should examine how contemporary African sculptors use material hybridity to articulate social critique.

In conclusion, Area Boys transforms waste into warning, sculpture into statement, and art into action. It stands as testimony that in the midst of national bleeding, creative practice can still restore humanity through form, conscience, and voice.

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