

## Full Length Research

# Catharsis, Idowu Akinrolabu's Path to Self-Realization

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For someone dealt a cruel blow by fate at a relatively younger age, one would have thought that Idowu Akinrolabu would resign to fate, but his exemplary attitude to life in the face of crippling obstacles/daunting challenges was not only remarkable, but also unusual. As a final year student of Geology at the University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile-Ife, a wasting disease called *Transverse Myelitis* struck and turned a vibrant young man into a tetraplegic. Twelve years of hospitalization followed at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH), four of which he spent as a patient of the Occupational Therapy Department, learning mouth-painting. Thirteen years after he left hospital, his life became a paean to the dignity of labour.

**Keywords:** Catharsis, Idowu Akinrolabu, Self-Realization.

## INTRODUCTION

Until 1982, Idowu Akinrolabu would freely walk the surface of the earth like any other human being, hoping for a promising future with an oil company. With a degree in geology and an ability to learn fast, there was no stopping for Idowu Akinrolabu. But in 1982, he

suffered a catastrophic change in fortune, when he lost the power to do things; to what he initially thought was malaria. And ever since, his life has been one bundle of denials, discomfort and pain



**Figure 1:** Idowu Akinrolabu before paralysis

© Artist's collection

## BIOGRAPHY

The birth date of Idowu Akinrolabu, an indigene of Ile-Oluji in Ondo State, was recorded as 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1960. He was the third out of four children, two boys and two girls. The first two children were twins, hence the artist name is 'Idowu'. Idowu is the name that is traditionally given to a child born after twins in Yoruba land. His father was Chief Isaiah Olaseinde Akinrolabu, a primary school teacher while his mother, Mrs. Adewetan Clara Akinrolabu, was a midwife.<sup>1</sup>

He attended Bishop Philip Memorial Primary School, Ondo; Gboluji Grammar School, Ile-Oluji; and University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), Ile-Ife. As a final year student of geology, Idowu Akinrolabu was attending a departmental project called Geological Independent Mapping at Kuta, a town in Osun State, in 1982, with some of his colleagues when he suddenly had fever. As a typical Nigerian, he regarded it as just an ordinary fever, which he hoped would be taken care of after completion of the project, so he determined to finish the project. The young man never had inkling that something serious might have gone wrong with him. He later took some medications, chloroquine tablets, prescribed by a nurse nearby, and believed that the fever would soon abate. The fever subsided for a day but relapsed again. He woke up one morning and suddenly could not move his four limbs. Idowu Akinrolabu felt it was a temporary problem, he was not very alarmed. He was however rushed to a nearby clinic for a first aid attention before he was taken to Ondo General Hospital for more intense treatment. Later he was taken to Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idiara.<sup>2</sup> At LUTH, the unfortunate happened; he got paralyzed from below the neck downward. He was declared a quadriplegic. Medical investigation revealed that Idowu Akinrolabu suffered from Transverse Myelitis.<sup>3</sup>

## ART TRAINING

Idowu Akinrolabu had been in LUTH for about 4 months before he was referred for rehabilitation. Following an assessment which revealed that cognitive functions were in good working conditions and that he had a pain free neck movement, the Occupational Therapists planned and commenced a functional rehabilitation programme aimed at highlighting his abilities in spite of bilateral upper and lower limb flaccid paralysis. Since all he had left were his mental acuity, which remained sharp as if all his talents coalesced in that region, and his mouth, the only tool with which nature spared him from being a complete vegetable.<sup>4</sup>

Idowu Akinrolabu's first attempt at mouth-painting in 1983 was elementary. Vocational exploration actually commenced in 1985. In January 1986, a patient (an art graduate), who was on admission and who was being rehabilitated in the Occupational Therapy (OT) Department, volunteered to give Idowu Akinrolabu his first professional instructions in painting. This went on for one month till the patient was discharged.<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Jean Olaore, a member of the International Women's Society, introduced Idowu Akinrolabu to Mrs. Elise Johnston, an artist, in February 1986. Mrs. Johnston, the daughter of late Professor Alexander Brown of the famed Alexander Brown Hall, UCH Ibadan, taught Idowu Akinrolabu the basic rules of making art. She taught him the elements and the principles of art. She also taught him how to reduce objects to basic shapes. His art lessons gave

for instructions for painting short strokes. His painting brushes and board were adapted at the Occupational Therapy Department. Mrs. Johnston was a volunteer who took over the teaching of Idowu Akinrolabu after the patient instructor was discharged from the hospital. She was faced with transportation problem. As a palliative, Idowu Akinrolabu's occupational therapist intervened; he collected and returned her to Ikoyi each time. Mrs. Johnston attended regularly for about six months but discontinued thereafter. She also donated art books and magazines to Idowu Akinrolabu.<sup>6</sup>

Segun Agbabiaka, another art teacher, continued for as long as he could. He taught Idowu Akinrolabu how to use pastel to paint. He also illustrated and taught him how to draw and shade with charcoal. He taught him from 1988 till 1989. When it was not possible for Agbabiaka to continue, Mrs. Ayo Menkiti, a Physiotherapist at the College of Medicine introduced Mr. Segun Adejumo, another artist. Segun Adejumo is a multi-talented and versatile artist with Higher National Diploma (HND) in painting from Yaba College of Technology, Yaba, Lagos State. He graduated from the institution in 1987. He volunteered his time and materials between 1989 and 1990. He taught Idowu Akinrolabu to be bold in the expression of his creativity. He continued with the teaching of drawing, pastel, water colour and gouache painting which Segun Agbabiaka had started. His busy schedule prevented him from attending as regularly as he would have wanted to.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, early in 1991, Mrs. Menkiti again introduced Mr. Ade Kukoyi who was then a final year HND art student at the College of Technology, Yaba. He attended regularly, two times a week, and sometimes at weekends. He was the paid tutor that brought Idowu Akinrolabu up to a level of competence. Kukoyi was very careful in the selection of art materials for Idowu Akinrolabu, because he knew that the selection could make or mar the art process. Therefore he aroused the interest of Idowu Akinrolabu in oil painting and gave him a thorough foundation in it. Oil paint has been Idowu Akinrolabu's first choice, with

good reason. The colours were wonderful to work with and he did things with them easily and they could last forever. Oil paint is slow drying so he would remove what he did not like while it was wet or paint over it when it was dry. Ade Kukoyi carefully taught him the step by step of oil painting which he did not depart from throughout his life, as an artist. He was taught the materials needed to get started as an artist. He was also taught the basic information of easy steps of painting.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 2:** Wonderful Idowu Akinrolabu at work. © *Sunday Sun*

## PAINTING PROCESS

Idowu Akinrolabu's painting process has revealed that for him there were three or four main stages: "investing", "dead-colouring", and "working-up", followed by "retouching". The term "investing", corresponds to the terms drawing or sketching, "dead-colouring" to under painting and "working-up" to finishing or the application of colour and detail.<sup>9</sup> Idowu Akinrolabu was a master with respect to space management and dimension and his ability to effectively use the colour palette, with all its limitations, demonstrated his talented competence in overcoming obstacles and creating scenes of photographic quality with just a paint brush.

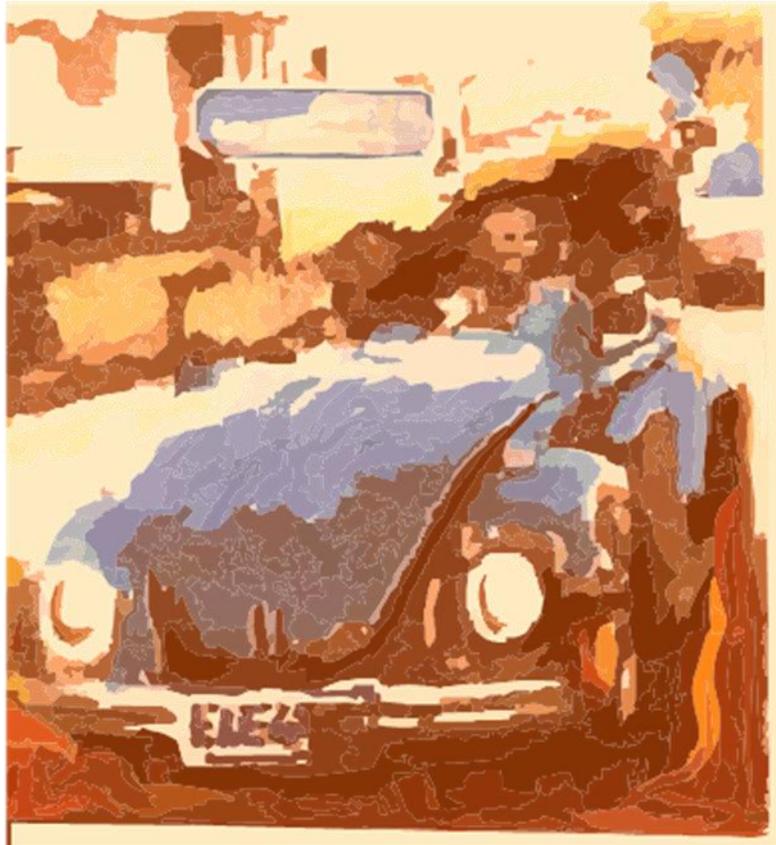
## HIS PURGE

Idowu Akinrolabu's works are product of his emotion. Catharsis exists in all media.<sup>10</sup> There is a long history and so much research into the cathartic effect of art-making. And art, as a therapeutic act, has long been taken seriously by artists and health professionals.<sup>11</sup> Many curative angles exist, but here efforts are made to highlight how making work that has a cathartic impact is something artists do regardless of what their practice is about, as well as reiterates its equal visual importance.

Generally, art works are product of emotion.

The relationship between art and emotion has been a subject of extensive study; thanks to the intervention of esteemed art historian, Alexander Nemerov. Emotional or aesthetic responses to art have previously been viewed as basic stimulus to response. But now, new theories and research have suggested that these

experiences are more complex and to be studied experimentally. Emotional responses are often regarded as the keystone to experiencing art, and the creation of an emotional experience has been argued as the purpose of artistic expression (figure 3).<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 3:** Elegan Tie Da, Oil on Board, 20 by 20cm 1996.  
© Jibola Akinrolabu

There is a long history and so much research into the cathartic effect of art-making. Art, as a liberating act, has long been taken seriously by artists and health professionals.<sup>13</sup> Many curatorial angles exist, but here efforts are made to highlight how the making of work that has a cathartic impact is something artists do regardless of what their practice is about, as well as reiterates its equal visual importance.

Catharsis links both the 'mainstream' art world and the 'outsider' art world; in fact, it links all artists, or, to go even further, every human. It is a universal process – something that reiterates the widely held belief that every human has the potential to be creative. Many well-known outsider artists did not create with an audience in mind. Henry Darger, for example, never

thought his work would be seen by anyone.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, there are many 'mainstream' artists whose work is cathartic. Idowu Akinrolabu's art was influenced by traumatic and psychological events, chiefly those done in his early years as an artist. Idowu Akinrolabu at a point in time realized that his art facilitates his wellness. Therefore his art could be said to be cathart. Idowu Akinrolabu at a time confirmed that making art has truly been cathartic experience for him. It stripped him off all residues of pain. It gave him stronger legs to stand, and it helped him to embrace all in him.<sup>15</sup> You cannot separate catharsis from his art. Although catharsis is indeed in every art work because art heals. Art is visual emotion. Catharsis happens when memory and thoughts connected with trauma become

associated with feelings of safety. Modern science has rediscovered that consciously experiencing distressing emotions in a context of empathic connection and safety produces long term healing, the healing that Freud first called catharsis. Catharsis was quite a liberating experience for Idowu Akinrolabu. His cathartic paintings speak of hope and ability in disability.

'Many times, Idowu Akinrolabu would set out on a spiritual journey to find and rejoin his soul. Along the way he would dump his personal identity and began to trust the cosmos. He would surrender to a greater power; a metaphorical rebirth into which a more evolved person and a better artist emerged. At that instance, he was studying under the guru who is himself. At that period, his life and art would merge into

one sensible whole, and as a result began a journey to his full potential. Idowu Akinrolabu had lived a life receptive to intuition and intelligent self guidance.<sup>16</sup>

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**Figure 4:** *Sun Set*, Oil Pastel, 10 by 25cm 1988. © Jibola Akinrolabu

Every artist is a story teller. Some only hit down harder than others. Most are less dramatic. Sometimes it might be called "character". It's not all just drawing and painting. Your work is to discover your world with all your heart in it. To create art is to experience the power of intrinsic motivation and the subsequent impact it can have on a life.<sup>18</sup> Idowu Akinrolabu embraced what art can cultivate as both a form of expression and communication. There is no such thing as a solitary endeavour on the journey of his becoming. Idowu Akinrolabu's art teachers had built this foundation in him. These teachers taught him the fundamentals of drawing and painting. Art helped him

to give farewell to anxiety and boredom. They also gave him a solid understanding of how the gifts or talents of an artist can tap into one's individual strengths, allowing the artist to explore, express, and document an array of thoughts, feelings, and emotions that may be difficult to put into words. He was lucky to have them as his art teachers. He would forever be grateful for the ingenuity and spirit that was passed on to him.<sup>19</sup>

After diagnoses and his eventually introduction to art, Idowu Akinrolabu soon realized that his love for

Art became a cure for his suffering. As he became more disciplined in his art; he strengthened his ability to map out compositions. It was then he developed an avenue of signature, artistic styles. Throughout his artistic journey, he never underestimated the only thing that was seeing him through his exhausting battle with quadriplegia was his ability to project his emotions into his art. While examining his art, he realized that art had been used for centuries as a curative tool, and this had become his restorative intervention.<sup>20</sup>

His paintings had been from the depth of his psyche. His emotion was his guide and his creative source. When faced with conflict, he allowed himself to go to abyss. This unknown was painful and dangerous, but he faced it successfully and transformed himself spiritually. When he created, he found

inner peace, the intangibles which a materialistic world could not provide. Despite being not responsible for his quandary, Idowu Akinrolabu gave God the glory, as such, during various hospitalizations, he gave ease to people. He believed ailments must have something constructive about them. Out of this struggle came the capacity to sense his own vulnerability and his ability to relate with the less fortunate.<sup>21</sup>

On his pilgrimage towards wholeness, Idowu Akinrolabu's clarity of vision and truthfulness to nature on canvas contain symbols that bring us in contact with our spirituality which could work as a healing agent. His religion provided a sense of meaning and purpose to his life, a connection to the transcendent and a connectedness to other sojourners who accompanied him on life's journey. In this turbulent journey, these spiritual qualities fortified him to survive the ravages of his predicament. In expressing his feeling, he found the meaning in the chronic nature of his illness, learned to appreciate the gift of health and found strength to combat time from the pits of depression, to the seductive highs of mania. The unconditional love provided by his wife, Jibola, empowered him to hang through and to accept that he cannot forever live in the infirmary. His creativity served as a safety rope that kept him from drowning in the black waters of depression.<sup>22</sup>

Idowu Akinrolabu's art reveals the milestone of a man who took an inward ascent and found divine order within himself. He achieved his ascent through scrupulous spiritual discipline. He trained himself to concentrate exclusively on reflection, prayer, inner silence and never permitted himself to be distracted by idle thoughts and day dreaming. He achieved complete self mastery through voluntary suffering. This training gave him inner power and purity which provided the psychic strength that brought him

closer to the divine light. He established permanent contact with the higher self, or at least the ability to concentrate when necessary. He expressed beauty, as well as truth and goodness, because these qualities were reflected in everything he did, just as the presence of light dispelled shadows (Figure 5).<sup>23</sup>



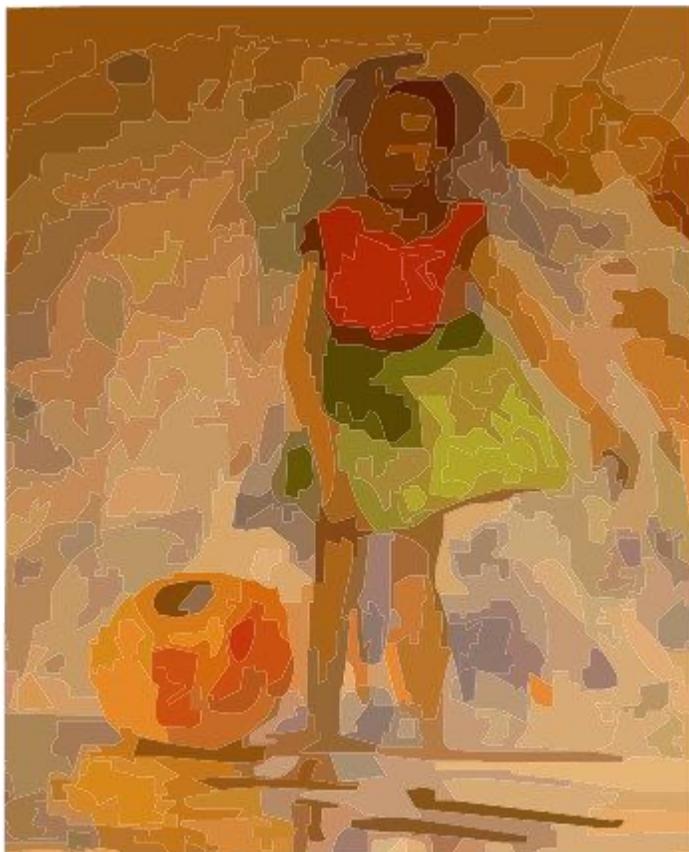
**Figure 5:** Imole De, Oil on Board, 28 by 33cm 2001.  
© Jibola Akinrolabu

The law governing the effect of light on darkness applies equally to the spiritual and to the physical world. It is the same law with two aspects, one visible and sensory, the other invisible and psychic. He painted this principle to illustrate the invisible in terms of the visible. For example, the absence of darkness indicates a luminous world where God is present. The beings depicted are themselves sources of light. Idowu Akinrolabu's philosophy was the idea that the world was created by the entry of spirit into matter, and that light was primarily spiritual. He understood that its component elements are colours knowing full well that the law of spirit and matter operates at all levels; he demonstrated this by his brilliant use of colours; the descent of the divine spirit into the world of humanity

His art is a physical celebration of the divine manifestation, both in the cosmos and in himself. His art showed no signs of pathology.<sup>24</sup> Few weeks before he died, Jibola described him as a broad – shouldered man with healthy colours, a smile on his face and a resolute appearance.<sup>25</sup> His art has triumphed. His art became a bread and wine that everyone could share. He took his faith in his hands and transformed it into

his gospel. He exposed feelings and emotion, in such a way that they cannot be ignored, rationalized, or erased. The relationships between him and the

environment and between reality and canvas are richly convoluted and layered into ambiguities (Figure 6).



**Figure 6:** *Once Upon a Time*, Water colour, 30 by 20cm 1986.  
© Jibola Akinrolabu

## CONCLUSION

A French Philosopher and literary critic, Jean Paul Satire wrote about emotions in a spectator when contemplating a painting. He suggests that the aesthetic pleasure consists first of making the discovery of the subject, then by the association of thoughts that emerge as a result of the discovery of the personality of the artist.<sup>26</sup> Emile Zola, another French author and art critic, wrote in 1868 that art is a little corner of creation seen through a temperament.<sup>27</sup> Vincent van Gogh was also of the same opinion when he wrote a letter to his youngest sister "...you read books to draw from them the energy to act but I read books to find the 'artist' who wrote them..."<sup>28</sup> For this reason, art therapists should holistically view art in order to consider the striking concordance between

emotional vulnerability and creativity, and the neurobiological basis of mental instability and creativity, and to study deeply how a mood disorder may nourish or sharpen creative thinking.

All arts have a structure that persuades their creators to explore, to confront further whatever difficulties their anxieties have tempted them to express. Once our creative potential is known, seen and experienced, our creations could become our best friends. Symbol and image producers artists were born to be, and so symbol and image producers' artists must allow themselves to become. At present, the relatively new field of art therapy is one of the few acknowledgements that art is not merely decoration for the rich or the academic elite or the preserve of the

obsessively talented. Art therapy spreads its wings to all strata of society and facilities through its process of creating a release for emotional anxiety. It sets in motion the possibility of understanding oneself and our environment.

If art is a key to unlock our catharsis, let's give art a new meaning. Catharsis is based upon struggle for existence and the reflection in the purge (art work) gives the affected a certain amount of dignity. Idowu Akinrolabu's work has a reflection of human dignity. It is as if he wants his paintings to say: 'if our struggle is strong enough, we can see how marvelous our world is and what a fine place to live in it might be.'

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