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Redefining Frances Benjamin Johnston's "Self Portrait" Allegory In Potteryscape

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Abstract – This study of Potteryscape¹ is premised on an 1895 photograph by Frances Benjamin Johnston, titled "Self Portrait". Frances, an acclaimed portraitist and prolifically successful nineteenth century photographer was one of the very few female pioneers and crusaders of creative photography, with well over two thousand classically inspired, commissioned and commercialized photographic remains. Epic and artistic as these remains were, "Self Portrait" stood out for this study, simply for its Potteryscaping² ambience, which was hitherto under played for it feminist allegory. This piece is arguably Frances' most celebrated inspired photography. Interestingly, the domain of "Self Portrait" is yet clarified but misconstrued for figure, perhaps for the prevailing *Porphyrian* sentiment of the time, which gave primacy to man as the ultimate standard. A gap this study hoped to resolve through cursory overview of photography, critical analysis of the piece from modernist cum art perspective and technically visualised its Potteryscapingness³. It consequently, appropriates Potteryscape as pragmatic genre for Frances Benjamin Johnston's "Self Portrait" and related photographs.

Keywords - Frances Benjamin Johnston, self-portrait, photograph, daguerreotype, talbotype, Potteryscape.

I. INTRODUCTION

In furtherance, to the pioneering work on the genre "Potteryscape", whose jurisprudential domain is characterized by active or passive pottery form and content in drawing, painting and print on two or three dimensional art surfaces, as on paper, wall, metal, glass, sculpture, human *etcetera* [1]. The paper excerpt however, recommends frequent and assiduous studies of the genre's prevailing instances as fundamental to plausible theorization of the concept [1, 2, 3]. In line with the aforementioned charge, this study attempts critical, technical and visual examinations of Potteryscape stance in "print"; using Francis Benjamin Johnston's "Self Portrait" as it litmus test, having been docile and supposedly ignored⁴ for too long by generations of art critics [3, 4, 5].

It is not clear though, whether the aforementioned piece at the time of production, generated a kind of social uproar among the male folks particularly for its feminist allegory; if it does, it did not resonate beyond its time. What is clear now however, is the dearth of attention on this artistic piece "Self Portrait" by later generation of art critics; a scenario that, is likened to either perceptual or circumstantial reason. Perceptual, because it is supposedly, assumed as an unattractive scholarly venture. Circumstantial, perhaps as a result of its affiliation with time or phase, which was emphatically, reflected in the Preacher's [6] words as thus;

...The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

The latter, further brings to mind Gibbon, Hicks and Glanfield's [7] view that;

...It depends very much on timing; yesterday's masterpiece can become today's cliché and a hitherto disregarded work can suddenly be attributed to a master and achieve immediate fame. This already happens with painting and, to a lesser extent because of the comparative newness of the medium, is happening with photography.

Summarily, the above submissions are pointers to the fact that, time and chance is principal in the scheme of things and same goes for Miss. Johnston's master piece "Self Portrait" whose time of redefinition has come primarily for it Potteryscaping ambience and secondarily for it feministic allegory. To appreciate this study, there is need to take cursory look at photography and its place in art before x-raying the piece under cross examination.

II. DEPOSITIONS AND DISPOSITIONS

Photograph and photography like pottery and ceramics differ though, interchangeably used [8]. The former means product while the latter connotes profession. Photograph is basically image testimony of a positive print produced on a sensitive surface by camera [9]. It is light writing or light drawing [10, 11]. Photography is a combination of visual imagination, design and practical organizing ability [11]. It is the art, technique or profession of visibly recording images by chemical action of light on sensitive material as print [9, 12]. Photograph is however, not limited to negative made of a camera or substance that changes its colour and tone under the influence of light. In fact, photographs can be made without a camera by exposing light sensitive material directly to light. It can be generated without negative as in Polaroid prints, and even on a computer screen [10].

Shortly after the ingenious discoveries of photography by Louis Jacques-Mande Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot, which was officially declared in 1839 [13, 14]. Their declarations pioneered demystification of photography from it primordial metaphysics to contemporary attendant physics with evidential cum theoretical explanation with proves. These theoretical demystifications were arguably parallel development, occurred separately though, in France and London in 7 and 31 January, 1839 respectively. Worthy of note is the fact that, their findings defers both in process and product. Daguerre's single opaque plate experiment, popularized as *daguerreotype* embraces reversal image. While that of Talbot, christened *talbotype* produces negative from which any number of copies could be made [15, 16].

It is equally significant to note, that long before the advent of *daguerreotype* and *talbotype*, humanity have been photographing. For instance natives around the globe, regardless of location engage in pattern making through, stamping of leaves on their bodies and when removed, reveal a picture. Little wonder, ruins of Nineveh, Egypt and Pompeii revealed lens-shaped pieces [17]. China equally, had her fair share of chemically heated plates that is sensitive to light, since two thousand years ago. Euclid and Aristophanes were acquainted with the burning lens. While, Roger Becon, a thirteenth century Franciscan friar was considered a wizard by his contemporaries, mainly for his masterly manipulation of lenses and mirrors to produce 'visible pictures', synonymous to camera *lucida*. Invention of camera *obscura* by Alberti was described *miracolo della pittra* [15]. Nonetheless, the distinction between this photographing method and prior forms of creating picture is however, inherent in its light reliance [9].

Talbot finding, no doubt, gave birth to photograph as we know it today [9]. Soon after it invention Paul Delaroche, an art critique was credited to have said painting is dead from today [15]. Perhaps, his submission was provoked by the shocking exactitude and seemingly limitless details of photograph that magically appeared on the camera [9]. Its attendant patronage was unprecedentedly acclaimed with men and women turning their attentions to this new medium. A paradigm shift that, saw artists particularly painters, embraced photography as aid in their work; they are Delacrox, Courbet, Gauguin, Cezanne and Degas. Delacrox was so fun of the camera that, he was credited to have made studies of women, draperies and back views with it. Gustave Courbet copied Reutliger's photograph for his portrait of Proudhon. Gauguin sought the help of photographs for his Tahitian natives, and same goes for Cezanne for his Café figures [15].

Paul Valery also revealed the use of photographs by artists, Degas in particular, at a time when many of them denial or disclaimed it adoption [15]. Perhaps, they saw it as an assault on high art (painting and sculpture), which was predicated on the supposed centrality of the art [18]. The latter, is putatively responsible for why photography was denied its rightful place in the committee of art form. An argument that generated scholastic momentum by modernist critics explicated as thus;

...critical measure of art lies not in the vividness with which it represent the experience of modern life, but rather in its achievement, under the contingent conditions of the modern...

level of quality for which previous art furnishes the only meaningful standard. It is through engagement with the demands of a specific medium, and through acceptance of the standards of achievement specific to that medium, that artist engages to most enduring critical effect with historical and social conditions [18].

They further argued that modernity refers to conditions characterized by a life under changed circumstances, in terms of awareness, which has a form of effect on the person's experience socially, culturally and innerly [18].

According to Jasper Johns and John Cage the paradoxical expression 'anything goes' in so far, there is a language to say it, was a strategy by the avant-garde to bridge the gap between modern art and modern life, exemplified in the exploitation of Dadaism and other media of less strictly specialized forms in Europe and America. To them removal of the privileged status accorded painting and sculpture were means to open the practices of art to a more relevant, more modern and social realities. Marshall Mc.Luhan, corroborated the latter, by positing that, modern man had been subjected to so rapid an evolution in his cognitive capacity than the redundancy of painting and sculpture [18]. This thirst was quenched by photographers who used the true critical potential, prospect, relevance and autonomous possibility of photography as art [18].

III. PIONEERS AND ARBITERS

Oscar Gustave Rejlander, ranked fore-most among pioneering creative photographers, he foreran the art for the likes of Laszio Moholy-Nagy and John Heartfield in Germany and Man Ray in France and Alfred Stiegliz and Frances Johnston in the United States [19]. No wonder, he was called "Father of Art Photography"; a painter by training but chooses to practice photography [20]. He started with copying old masters pieces, achieved through mastery merging of several negatives, exemplified in his piece "The two ways of Life", made from over thirty negatives (sixteen nude or semi-nude figures). The piece, which was earlier considered 'indelicate' and rejected in Scotland, gained stardom when its copy was bought by Queen Victoria and proudly hung on the wall of Windsor Palace [15, 20].

Similarly, Alfred Stieglitz was one man who was not only a brilliant, irresistible, uncompromising but dogged force of nature that saw the potential in the photographic print as a work of art, equal in every respect to the work of a painter [19]. He fought for the recognition of photography as a new medium of expression, to be respected in its own right, as any other art form. He argued that, just as a painter can be the master of his palette regulates density of reflected colour and modify his various tones, so is a skilled photographer [19]. A view Peter Pulham corroborated in 1952 that, if all expression is emotional, selective and personal, then photography is art. He further opined that, the raison d'être of art is in it expression of supposed reality and illumination of ordinary objects with vivid flash of light, which make everything seem clear and inevitably right [21]. In other words, art reveals the varied complexity of the human personality [21].

IV. FEMINIST AVATAR

The latter argument is however evident in Francis Benjamin Johnston's photographic artistry. She was an accomplished photographer who considered herself on equal terms with male photographers and with hard work was paid highly as any. Miss. Frances no doubt, pioneered female movement in creative photography in America [21]; with well over two thousand classically inspired, commissioned and commercialized photographic pieces to her credit. Her works articulates humane understanding of personality and social cum educational triumph of the Victorian epoch, which uniquely brings past delights to mind. "The Old Folks at Home, A Class Judging Swine, Studying the Seed, Arithmetic Measuring and Pacing, Field Work in Sketching, Saluting the Flag and Self Portrait" are some of her master pieces [15].

Miss. Frances was born in 1864 in Grafton, West Virginia and at a tender age, decided she will be a photographer. She had her early education at Notre-Dame Convent, Mayland; from where she proceed to Paris to study drawing and painting at the Academie Julien between 1883 and 1885. And subsequently enrolled for phototography under the tutelage of Professor Thomas William Smilie, director of Photography, Smithsonian Institution. Miss. Frances took a leap of faith in 1890 in opening her studio in Washinton, DC., from where she started a career of intense vibrance that lasted till her death in 1952. She no doubt, enjoyed an exalted social position, apparent in access to the White House under five administrations; having acquiantance with Cleveland, Harrison, Mackinley, Teddy Roosevelt and Taft. She was a recipent of the prestigious Grand Prix medal at the Third International Phographic Congress, among others [15].

The quality of her works were acclaimed impeccable, smooth and silvery, comparable to that of H. P. Robinson [15]. Epic and artistic as her pieces were, "Self Portrait" stood out for this study, simply for its Potteryscaping ambience, which was hitherto under played, by Miss. Frances for her feministic upheaval and in extension photography. Interestingly, the domain of this master piece is yet clarified but often misconstrued for figure, as a result of the prevailing *Porphyrian* sentiment that pervades the art world even to her time. This sentiment gave primacy to man as the standard rule of measure, pioneered by the Hellenist and championed by Kantian philosophers [22, 23, 4]. This phenomenon is consequently, scrutinized in this study through technical visualization of the piece, so as to clarify and assert its rightful place in photography.

V. THE PIECE

Tehnically and visually, two sources of Frances' "Self Portrait" were consulted; one is the original copy, while the other is the simulated copy. The original copy was rendered in black and white exposure (Plates, 1), while the simulated copy was system generated coloured superimposition (Plate, 2). Arguably, Miss. Frances would most likely prefere her black and white exposure to coloured, if she is still alive today; a guess premised of the fact that, photographers on her generation consider black and white print, an end in itself. For them, it is in the production of a negative and print, that creative vision is realized. As such, a print can stand on its own as a true work of art [19, 24]. The simulated copy however, was generated to quench the cravings of contemporary living, which is colourful with immense possibilities of strong, vibrant, soft, subtle and gentle colours [7]. The simulated copy however, gave vivid account of the time's vitality.



Plate 1

Frances Benjamin Johnston, *Self Portrait*, 1895. Scanned from Brommer, 1997. Discovering Art -Histiory. P. 25.

Plate 2

Frances Benjamin Johnston, *Self Portrait*, 1895.

Downloaded. American. Photograph. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Going forward, the concern at hand is to give a synoptic understanding of how "Self Portrait" can be generated, significantly the original copy. Truth be told, the paramount thing in photography is not the sophistication of the camera or its gargets but vision, choice of subject and dynamic transformation of vision into permanent image using photographic techniques and composition [25]. "Self Portrait" is no doubt a good photograph, capturing the spirit or features of it subject more strongly than others. Miss. Frances employed image fundamental elements, emphasized the most useful for the interpretation of the subject

using composition and lighting [25]. An advantage she took by using lens to gather and focus light, while shutter measure amounts of light that passes through to the film that, when processed, renders permanent the image [7].

Little wonder, why Hedgecoe [25] said photographer's skill lies not only in knowing what to include in the photograph, but also what to leave out. In Grunwald's [19] view, "The one quality absolutely necessary for success in hand camera work," as credited to Stieglitz, is patience. She must have waited patiently for the perfect moment in which everything appears balance and satisfying to the eye, before taking the shot. This often takes hours of patient waiting and the result of waiting for the proper moment is usually outstanding as evident in the piece "Self Portrait". However, it original or simulated copy (Plates, 1 and 2) was technically generated through, the workings of light, which beams colours. And indeed, colour changes in hue and intensity according to the level and angle of the light reflected from it, as exemplified in photography [7].

Nonetheless, the attempt here in showcasing the two variations of "Self Portrait" is not to prejudice one over the other, but to lay the cards straight as they are today and possibly use one to compliment the other in visualization. More so that, the two variations have been argued to be of equal wave length in terms of quality, there difference according to scholars is subjective though, it is prevalently based on individual disposition or perception [16]. Frank [26] and Bryn [27] went further to assert that, black and white photographs suggest, while coloured photograph states. In variably, much can be implied by suggestion, but statement demands absolute certainty; their views were to a large extent inherently evident in the piece (Plates, 1 and 2).

According to Brommer [21], it is very useful to ask oneself, this pertinent question "What would I call the work?" For instance, Picasso called one of his early self-portriates Yo Picasso (I Picasso), rather than say, "Portriat of the Artist", and indeed his title goes well with depicted allegorical self confidence. Similarly, Miss. Frances must have pondered on and thouroughly thought out this question before titling her piece "Self Portrait". She must have hinged her unconventional persona on Plato's phrase "Man Know Thyself" [28], buttressed by Kant and his followers as *Sapere aude!* Dare to know [23]! Which is apparent in her cross-legged pose, beer stein and lit cigarette fly, symbolizing courage and recilience; it allegorical interpretation or implication is a clear indication of a woman of substance who does what she wants [21].

VI. CONCLUSION

In Barret's [29] view, all images require interpretation to function as an art work and this can only be done by stating both the obvious and the not so obvious through descriptive criticism [30, 4, 5]. The obvious in this case is the subject matter (an imagery of a young enterprising woman, elegantly dressed in Victorian apparel, full of life and majestically seated facing the west) centrally and focally placed at the centre of the piece (Plate, 2). It allegory though, not of ultimate significance to this study but brings to mind what the Yoruba calls;

Okere loju,

Opo sikun"

Small by visual perception,

Tremendously endowed in the belly.

The implication of the above is noticeably a sign of an independent woman, who takes order from no one not even from her male counterpart [21].

That as it may, of significant to this study however, is the not so obvious or subtle complimenting elements in the piece (Plate, 2). That is, the burnt vessel features [31, 32, 33, 34], which suggests the inadequacy of the piece's inferred figure domain, which consequently is inconsistent, absurd and illogical amidst prevailing pottery/ceramic evidences particularly in modern times [33, 34, 35]. For instance, the piece, apart from the dominating female figure in the Victorian architectural interior, housing all together fifteen burnt items [36]. They are namely, six portable portrait glass frames, one medium skyscape glass frame, one big jar, one water bottle, one water vase, one flower vase, one octagonal pot planter, one pen holder, one sculptural candle stand, one wall candle stand, several 3 x 12 inches red brick tiles, one metal hanger, one metal rectilinear patterned board, one metal table and one metal fire stand.

In view of the attendant subtle or subsumed pottery evidences in the photograph, it is therefore right, critically logical and apt to redefines the piece from it Potteryscaping perspective, appropriating Potteryscape as its rightful sub-genre and domain

as against figure. Moreover, Potteryscape is active or passive pottery form and content in drawing, painting and print on two or three dimensional surfaces [1]. Interestingly, the aforementioned features are apparent in Miss. Frances Benjamine Johnston's "Self Portrait", and as such deserves a redefinition for it Potteryscapingness. This development no doubt, will showcase Frances' 1893 photographic piece as a work of art. Consequently, it finding is hoped to further provoke scholarship on affiliated and related works, particularly in print as a genre or sub-genre worthy of inclusion a theoretical entry and entity in photography and allied disciplines.

Notes

- 1. Potteryscape is a coinage by Dr. Toyin Emmanuel AKINDE, an applied ceramic material cum design conceptualist and didacticist. Potteryscape is a research led practice and its pottery/ceramics contribution to art practice. It is a new genre conceived in 2017 and published in 2018, with recommendation that, persistent advocacy is pivotal to stimulating the concept's theorization. However, the concepts jurisdictional domain is characterized by active or passive pottery form and content in drawing, painting and print on two or three dimensional art surfaces, as on paper, wall, metal sheet glass, sculpture, human *etcetera*. It is hoped that, with this article, Potteryscape will, in no distant time become a household name, particularly within the art circle and in extension the globe.
- 2. Potteryscaping is the act, state of or the evidential practice of pottery/ceramic form and content interms of material, place, process, product and personalities on two or three dimensional art surfaces.
- 3. Potteryscaping is simply the quality or state adherece to pottery/ceramic form and content on two or three dimensional art surfaces.
- 4. Ignored, forgotten or remembered is one of the three occurrence in a life time of things living or non-living. However, to be remembered at all time is the most blissful. Excerpt of the Thanksgiving Service of June 5, 2022. Delivered by Pastor Enoch Adejare ADEBOYE (General Overseer of the Redeem Christain Church of God). [It is inline with its submission, that it became patinent that Miss. Frances Benjamine Johnston's Self Porttrait is remembered, courtesy of it Potteryscaping ambience...]

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