

ABIODUN OLAKU: ATMOSPHERIC ABSTRACTION AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF BODILY PRESENCE

Obiora Anamaleze

Department of Fine Arts and Design

Wigwe University, Isiokpo, Rivers State

Correspondence: obiora.anamaleze@wigweuniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examines the paintings of Abiodun Olaku through the conceptual frameworks of atmospheric abstraction and phenomenology, with particular attention to the representation of bodily presence in contemporary Nigerian painting. While Olaku is widely recognized for his luminous urban and landscape compositions, this study argues that beneath their technical realism lies a phenomenological engagement with mood, embodiment, memory, and spatial perception. The paper investigates how atmosphere functions not merely as environmental depiction but as a sensory and psychological field through which human presence is implied, negotiated, and emotionally experienced. The study adopts a qualitative art-historical methodology grounded in formal analysis, phenomenological aesthetics, and interpretive criticism. Drawing on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gernot Böhme, and contemporary discourse on affect and spatiality, the research analyzes selected works by Olaku in relation to light, tonal transitions, compositional rhythm, and the suggestive treatment of figures within urban environments. The paper further explores how silence, shadow, haze, and reflective surfaces contribute to an atmosphere that evokes corporeal awareness and emotional introspection. Findings reveal that Olaku's paintings transcend documentary representation by constructing immersive visual experiences that situate viewers within psychologically charged environments. His atmospheric treatment of light and space produces a subtle tension between visibility and absence, thereby reinforcing the phenomenological relationship among body, perception, and place. The study concludes that Olaku's work expands the discourse of contemporary Nigerian painting by integrating atmospheric abstraction with embodied perception, positioning his practice within broader conversations on affect, sensory experience, and postcolonial urban visuality.

Keywords: *Atmospheric abstraction, phenomenology, bodily presence, contemporary Nigerian painting, embodied perception.*

Introduction

Contemporary Nigerian painting has continued to evolve through complex negotiations between realism, abstraction, memory, and cultural identity (Kasfir, 2007; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Since the post-independence era, Nigerian artists have consistently explored visual languages capable of expressing the social, psychological, and philosophical conditions of modern African life. Within this expanding field, the paintings of Abiodun Olaku occupy a distinctive position for their atmospheric treatment of urban environments, luminous handling of light, and emotionally charged spatial compositions. Although Olaku is often celebrated for his technical mastery and near-photographic realism, a closer examination of his paintings reveals a deeper engagement with sensory experience, mood, embodiment, and perceptual consciousness. His works extend beyond representational fidelity into a visual territory where atmosphere itself becomes a vehicle for phenomenological meaning (Böhme, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Over the last few decades, scholarship on contemporary African art has increasingly shifted from ethnographic and identity-centered interpretations toward broader philosophical and experiential frameworks (Enwezor, 2009; Ogbachie, 2020). Earlier studies on African modernism frequently emphasized nationalism, postcolonial identity, and the recovery of indigenous aesthetics as primary interpretive concerns (Oguibe, 2004; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). While these approaches remain valuable, recent art historical discourse has also begun to address questions of affect, embodiment, perception, and spatial experience within African visual culture (Dadi, 2020; Elkins, 2017). Within this context, Olaku's paintings may be understood not simply as urban representations but as sensory environments that invite phenomenological engagement.

Phenomenology, particularly as articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, emphasizes the body as the primary site of perception and experience. Rather than viewing vision as detached observation, phenomenology conceives perception as embodied participation within the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Human beings do not merely look at space; they inhabit and experience it through bodily consciousness. This philosophical perspective is especially relevant to painting because visual art often mediates relationships between viewer, space, memory, and sensation. In phenomenological aesthetics, atmosphere, light, texture, and spatial ambiguity are not passive formal elements

but active agents that shape emotional and corporeal awareness (Böhme, 2017). Olaku's paintings, with their diffused illumination, reflective wet surfaces, misty urban settings, and subtle human presences, create environments that appear simultaneously tangible and elusive. Such imagery encourages viewers to experience the painting not only intellectually but bodily and emotionally.

The concept of atmosphere has also gained prominence in contemporary aesthetic theory, particularly through the writings of Gernot Böhme, who describes atmospheres as emotional spaces generated through the interaction between environment, objects, and perceiving subjects (Böhme, 2017). Atmospheres exist in the tension between material reality and emotional perception; they are neither purely objective nor entirely subjective. In painting, atmosphere emerges through tonal modulation, chromatic harmony, spatial depth, and the orchestration of light and shadow. Olaku's urban scenes are particularly significant in this regard because they transform ordinary cityscapes into emotionally resonant environments. Streets, buildings, and human figures are enveloped in luminous haze, reflective moisture, and nocturnal quietness that evoke introspection, memory, solitude, and corporeal awareness. The city in Olaku's work therefore becomes more than a geographical location; it becomes an affective and phenomenological space.

One of the defining characteristics of Olaku's visual language is his manipulation of light as both material and metaphorical substance. Light in his paintings does not merely illuminate objects but structures emotional atmosphere and sensory depth. Rain-soaked roads reflecting artificial illumination, fading daylight dissolving architectural boundaries, and shimmering tonal transitions create visual ambiguity that destabilizes fixed perception. This atmospheric strategy aligns with phenomenological understandings of perception as fluid, embodied, and temporal (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The viewer encounters not a static image but a lived visual experience shaped by memory, movement, and sensory immersion. Through this approach, Olaku transforms realism into a contemplative aesthetic condition where visibility and invisibility coexist.

Furthermore, bodily presence in Olaku's paintings often appears indirect or fragmented. Human figures are frequently small, partially obscured, silhouetted, or integrated into larger environmental structures. Yet despite their visual subtlety, these figures carry significant phenomenological weight because they function as traces of embodied existence within atmospheric space. The absence of overt narrative encourages viewers to project themselves imaginatively into the depicted environments. In this sense, bodily presence extends beyond represented figures to include the embodied experience of the spectator (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Gibson, 2018). The viewer becomes psychologically and sensorially implicated in the painting's atmospheric field.

The relationship between abstraction and realism in Olaku's work also deserves critical attention. While his paintings maintain recognizable urban forms, their atmospheric dissolution of contours and emphasis on mood introduce abstract qualities that complicate straightforward representation. Atmospheric abstraction in this context does not imply complete non-figuration but rather the transformation of visual reality into experiential sensation. Forms become softened by haze, reflections destabilize spatial certainty, and tonal transitions generate emotional ambiguity. This balance between representational structure and atmospheric dissolution allows Olaku to construct paintings that are simultaneously descriptive and affective, aligning with broader discussions of expression and perception in modern art theory (Gibson, 2018; Goodman, 1976).

The Nigerian urban environment itself provides an important contextual framework for understanding Olaku's artistic practice. Rapid urbanization, infrastructural transformation, environmental instability, and the psychological pressures of metropolitan life have profoundly shaped contemporary Nigerian visual culture (Kasfir, 2007; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Lagos, in particular, has emerged as a symbolic site of movement, congestion, aspiration, and uncertainty. Many Nigerian artists engage the city through themes of social critique, identity politics, and economic tension (Enwezor, 2009). Olaku, however, approaches urbanity through atmosphere and sensory experience rather than overt political commentary. His paintings foreground mood, temporality, and perceptual intimacy, thereby offering an alternative mode of engaging urban modernity.

Despite the increasing recognition of Olaku within Nigerian and international art circles, scholarly attention to the phenomenological dimensions of his work remains limited. Existing discussions often emphasize technical proficiency, naturalistic rendering, or environmental aesthetics without sufficiently examining the experiential and philosophical implications of his atmospheric compositions. Consequently, there remains a critical gap in understanding how his paintings construct bodily perception, affective space, and sensory immersion. This paper addresses that gap by examining Olaku's paintings through the combined lenses of phenomenology and atmospheric aesthetics, drawing on established philosophical and art historical frameworks (Böhme, 2017; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

The study argues that Olaku's paintings generate immersive visual experiences that position atmosphere as a central mediator between body, perception, and environment. Through nuanced manipulations of light, tonal rhythm, reflective texture, and spatial ambiguity, his works invite viewers into emotionally charged spaces that transcend conventional realism. By situating Olaku within broader conversations on phenomenology, affect theory, and contemporary African art, this paper contributes to expanding scholarly discourse on Nigerian painting beyond iconographic and nationalist frameworks (Dadi, 2020; Enwezor, 2009). Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Olaku's atmospheric abstraction offers a profound meditation on embodiment, perception, memory, and urban existence in contemporary visual culture.

The history of painting has consistently positioned the human body as one of the most significant subjects of artistic inquiry. Across different historical periods, the body has functioned not merely as anatomical structure but as a site through which artists negotiate identity, perception, spirituality, memory, and emotional experience. From the naturalistic traditions of the Renaissance to the expressive distortions of modernism, the representation of the body has continually evolved in response to changing philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic concerns (Arnheim, 1974). Modern art in particular disrupted classical realism by introducing fragmentation, abstraction, distortion, and perceptual ambiguity as legitimate visual strategies for expressing human experience beyond direct imitation. Within twentieth-century modernism, abstraction emerged as a major artistic language that challenged the primacy of mimetic representation. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Mark Rothko, and Willem de Kooning demonstrated that form, colour, texture, and gesture could communicate psychological and sensory realities without relying on literal figuration (Langer, 1953). In this context, abstraction became not simply a reduction of visual form but a transformation of how perception and meaning operate within painting. Phenomenological philosophy further reinforced this shift by arguing that perception is fundamentally embodied and experiential rather than detached and purely optical. Merleau-Ponty (2012) contends that vision is inseparable from bodily experience, suggesting that meaning in visual art emerges through sensory engagement with form, space, atmosphere, and materiality. Consequently, abstraction can be understood not as the absence of the body but as an alternative mode through which bodily presence is evoked and experienced.

In African modernism, abstraction developed within a different intellectual and cultural trajectory from Euro-American formalism. Rather than functioning as a complete rupture from representation, abstraction in African art often remained connected to indigenous symbolic systems, ritual structures, and cosmological philosophies (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Nigerian modern and contemporary artists in particular have employed abstraction as a means of negotiating memory, spirituality, environment, and postcolonial identity through culturally grounded visual languages. Scholars such as Oguibe (2004) and Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu (2009) argue that African modernism emerged through processes of cultural negotiation in which indigenous epistemologies intersected with global modernist aesthetics. As a result, abstraction in Nigerian painting frequently operates through layered symbolic and perceptual systems rather than through purely formal experimentation.

Among contemporary Nigerian painters, Abiodun Olaku occupies a distinctive position through his atmospheric approach to painting, where light, spatial depth, tonal transitions, and environmental perception become central expressive devices. Although often associated with realism because of his detailed rendering of urban and environmental scenes, Olaku's work extends beyond descriptive representation into what may be described as atmospheric abstraction. His paintings are characterised by luminous surfaces, diffused light, reflective environments, and perceptual ambiguity that transform ordinary urban spaces into sensory and emotional experiences. Works such as *Lagos Nocturne*, *Ebute*, *Shadows of the Night*, *People's Paradise*, and *Oke Igbala* demonstrate how atmosphere itself becomes a visual structure through which bodily presence is indirectly suggested rather than explicitly depicted.

Olaku's paintings frequently evoke the traces of human existence through environmental conditions rather than through dominant figurative imagery. Streets illuminated by artificial light, reflections on wet surfaces, crowded yet spatially diffused urban scenes, and tonal atmospheres charged with movement all contribute to a perceptual experience in which the viewer senses bodily presence within space. In this regard, the body exists less as a clearly defined figure and more as a phenomenological condition embedded within light, environment, and spatial perception. Such an approach aligns closely with Merleau-Ponty's (2012) theory of embodied perception, where meaning arises through lived sensory engagement with the world.

Despite increasing scholarship on Nigerian modernism and contemporary African art, limited attention has been given to the phenomenological dimensions of atmosphere and bodily perception within Olaku's painting practice. Existing studies often focus on his technical realism, mastery of light, or urban subject matter while overlooking how his atmospheric structures construct embodiment through sensory immersion and perceptual ambiguity. This

reveals a broader gap within African art historical discourse, where abstraction is frequently discussed in relation to style, symbolism, or postcolonial identity rather than embodied visual experience.

This study therefore investigates Abiodun Olaku's atmospheric abstraction through the lens of phenomenology and embodied perception. It argues that Olaku's paintings function not merely as representations of urban space but as perceptual environments in which bodily presence is evoked through light, atmosphere, and spatial sensation. By examining how abstraction operates within Olaku's visual language, the study contributes to broader discussions on Nigerian modernism, phenomenological aesthetics, and contemporary African painting, while expanding critical understanding of how atmosphere itself can function as a mode of corporeal and perceptual meaning in art.

Despite the increasing scholarly attention given to Nigerian modern and contemporary art, there remains a significant gap in critical studies examining the relationship between atmosphere, abstraction, and embodied perception in painting, particularly within the works of Abiodun Olaku. Existing scholarship on African modernism has predominantly concentrated on questions of postcolonial identity, nationalism, stylistic evolution, cultural hybridity, and the negotiation between indigenous aesthetics and global modernist traditions (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Oguike, 2004; Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009). While these studies have made substantial contributions to African art historiography, they have largely prioritised historical, ideological, and representational concerns over phenomenological questions relating to perception, atmosphere, and bodily experience in painting.

Within Western art historical discourse, abstraction has often been approached through formalist frameworks that emphasise compositional structure, visual reduction, autonomy of form, and aesthetic experimentation (Arnheim, 1974). Such interpretations frequently position abstraction as a departure from corporeal representation rather than as a perceptual system capable of evoking embodied presence. However, phenomenological aesthetics challenges this assumption by arguing that visual experience is fundamentally rooted in bodily consciousness and sensory engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is not passive observation but an embodied encounter in which meaning emerges through spatial awareness, atmosphere, movement, light, and sensory interaction. This perspective suggests that abstraction may operate not as the erasure of the body but as an alternative structure through which bodily presence is perceived and experienced.

Scholars of visual perception and symbolic aesthetics have similarly argued that artistic meaning extends beyond literal representation. Arnheim (1974) contends that visual forms possess psychological and perceptual force capable of generating emotional and cognitive responses independent of mimetic accuracy, while Langer (1953) describes art as a symbolic form through which human feeling and lived experience are communicated. These theoretical positions indicate that atmospheric and abstract visual structures can function as embodied systems of meaning. Nevertheless, such frameworks have rarely been systematically applied to Nigerian painting, particularly in relation to artists whose works are grounded in atmospheric and environmental perception.

Although Abiodun Olaku's paintings have received recognition for their technical sophistication, luminous surfaces, and urban subject matter, most existing analyses interpret his work primarily within the framework of realism and environmental documentation. Critical commentaries frequently emphasise his mastery of tonal gradation, reflective surfaces, and nocturnal cityscapes, often celebrating his ability to recreate the visual conditions of Lagos and other urban environments. However, limited scholarly attention has been given to the phenomenological implications of these atmospheric structures or to how his manipulation of light, space, shadow, and tonal ambiguity evokes bodily sensation and perceptual immersion. As a result, Olaku's paintings are often discussed as descriptive representations of urban life rather than as experiential environments that engage the viewer's embodied consciousness.

This limitation reflects a broader issue within African art scholarship, where abstraction and atmosphere are insufficiently theorised as modes of sensory and corporeal meaning production. While scholars such as Abiodun (2014) and Lawal (2001) have demonstrated that African visual systems operate through symbolic, spiritual, and epistemological structures, critical discourse has not adequately examined how atmosphere itself functions as a perceptual and embodied visual language in Nigerian painting. Similarly, studies of African modernism have acknowledged the role of symbolism, myth, and cultural memory in abstraction (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009; Okeke-Agulu, 2015), yet few have explored how environmental perception and atmospheric conditions contribute to bodily evocation within contemporary African art practices.

Recent interdisciplinary studies in visual culture, cognitive aesthetics, and image perception further reinforce the need for this inquiry. Research into visual abstraction and perceptual cognition demonstrates that non-figurative visual systems can activate sensory, emotional, and spatial responses through texture, colour relations, tonal movement, and atmospheric organisation (Böhme, 2017; Büßemeyer et al., 2023). Atmosphere, according to Böhme (2017), functions as an affective spatial condition capable of shaping bodily and emotional experience. Such perspectives are highly relevant to Olaku's paintings, where light, haze, reflections, and nocturnal ambience produce immersive perceptual environments that extend beyond conventional realism.

Therefore, the central problem this study addresses is the absence of a comprehensive phenomenological framework for interpreting Abiodun Olaku's painting practice as a form of atmospheric abstraction and embodied perception. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently explained how his manipulation of atmosphere, luminosity, and spatial ambiguity constructs bodily presence beyond direct figuration. Consequently, there is a need to reposition Olaku's work within contemporary debates on phenomenology, abstraction, sensory aesthetics, and African modernism in order to expand critical understanding of Nigerian painting as an embodied and perceptual visual system rather than merely a representational or technical practice.

This research examines abstraction as a mode of bodily evocation in the paintings of Abiodun Olaku, with particular attention to how atmosphere, light, tonal transitions, and spatial ambiguity function as perceptual structures through which bodily presence is suggested beyond direct figuration. Rather than approaching abstraction as a departure from representation, the study interprets Olaku's atmospheric visual language as a sensory and experiential system that transforms urban space into a site of embodied perception. His paintings frequently dissolve the boundaries between realism and abstraction through luminous surfaces, diffused environments, reflections, shadows, and atmospheric density, thereby creating visual conditions in which the body is implied through presence, movement, memory, and spatial sensation rather than through explicit anatomical depiction.

The study is concerned with understanding how Olaku's manipulation of atmosphere constructs corporeal experience within painting. Through works characterised by nocturnal light, reflective streets, environmental haze, and tonal immersion, Olaku creates perceptual environments that invite viewers into embodied encounters with space and atmosphere. In this context, bodily presence emerges not as a fixed representational object but as a phenomenological condition embedded within visual experience itself. The research therefore investigates how abstraction operates within Olaku's painting practice as a mode of sensory engagement capable of evoking emotional, psychological, and corporeal responses through atmosphere and perception.

To address this concern, the study applies phenomenological and symbolic frameworks to the interpretation of Olaku's paintings. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied perception provides a major conceptual foundation for the research by proposing that vision is inseparable from lived bodily experience and that perception functions through sensory interaction with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This perspective is reinforced by Rudolf Arnheim's visual psychology, which argues that visual structures possess perceptual and emotional force beyond literal representation (Arnheim, 1974). Susanne Langer's theory of symbolic form further supports the argument that artistic form communicates felt experience through symbolic and non-discursive structures (Langer, 1953). Together, these theoretical positions provide a framework for understanding Olaku's atmospheric abstraction as an embodied visual language rather than merely a technical or stylistic approach to realism.

Central to this inquiry is the question of how atmospheric abstraction evokes bodily presence in painting despite the reduction of direct figurative emphasis. The study therefore explores the visual strategies through which Olaku constructs embodiment using light, spatial depth, tonal modulation, reflection, environmental atmosphere, and perceptual ambiguity. It further examines how phenomenology and perception intersect within his paintings to produce immersive sensory experiences that transform ordinary urban scenes into psychologically and emotionally charged visual environments.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to African art history, phenomenological aesthetics, and contemporary visual culture studies. Existing scholarship on Nigerian modern and contemporary painting has largely examined issues of postcolonial identity, realism, urban representation, and stylistic development, often neglecting the embodied and perceptual dimensions of atmosphere in painting (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009; Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Oguibe, 2004). By repositioning Olaku's work within the discourse of phenomenology and atmospheric abstraction, the study expands critical understanding of Nigerian painting beyond representation and

technical realism. It argues that atmosphere itself can function as a structure of corporeal meaning through which viewers experience bodily presence, sensory immersion, and emotional engagement within visual space.

The theoretical foundation of this study is situated within interdisciplinary discourses on abstraction, phenomenology, African modernism, symbolic aesthetics, and embodied perception. These frameworks collectively provide a basis for understanding how abstraction in the paintings of Abiodun Olaku operates not merely as formal experimentation but as a perceptual and symbolic system through which bodily presence is evoked. Rather than viewing abstraction as the negation of representation, the study approaches it as an embodied visual language that communicates atmosphere, sensory experience, emotional memory, and corporeal consciousness through light, texture, spatial ambiguity, and tonal relations.

Theories of abstraction within modern art history have traditionally emphasized the autonomy of form, the reduction of representational imagery, and the expressive potential of visual elements independent of direct figuration. Early modernist theorists such as Wassily Kandinsky argued that abstraction possesses spiritual and emotional capacities capable of communicating inner experience beyond material reality. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky (1977) proposed that colour, line, and compositional rhythm function as expressive forces capable of producing psychological and sensory responses in the viewer. Similarly, Rudolf Arnheim's theory of visual psychology positions abstraction as an organised perceptual structure rather than a random distortion of reality. Arnheim (1974) contends that visual forms possess inherent psychological energies through balance, tension, movement, and spatial organisation, thereby enabling abstraction to communicate emotional and perceptual meaning independent of literal representation.

Susanne Langer's philosophy of symbolic form further expands this understanding by arguing that art functions as a symbolic articulation of human feeling and lived experience (Langer, 1953). According to Langer, artistic form does not merely imitate external reality but constructs symbolic structures through which emotion and perception are organised into visible form. This perspective is particularly relevant to Olaku's atmospheric painting, where bodily presence emerges through tonal atmosphere, spatial immersion, and luminous ambiguity rather than explicit figuration. His manipulation of light and environmental density suggests that abstraction may function symbolically as a carrier of embodied and affective experience.

Phenomenology provides another major theoretical foundation for this study, particularly through the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012) argues that perception is fundamentally embodied and inseparable from lived sensory experience. Vision is therefore not detached observation but a corporeal encounter with the world mediated through space, atmosphere, movement, and materiality. This phenomenological perspective shifts interpretation away from representation alone and toward the experiential conditions through which meaning emerges in visual art. Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception is especially important in understanding Olaku's atmospheric abstraction, where urban spaces, nocturnal illumination, reflective surfaces, and environmental haze produce sensory environments that immerse viewers bodily within the painted space. The body in this context exists not as a clearly outlined figure but as a perceptual presence embedded within atmospheric experience itself.

Phenomenological aesthetics has been further expanded by scholars such as Gernot Böhme, whose theory of atmosphere examines how spatial environments generate affective and sensory conditions that shape human perception. Böhme (2017) argues that atmosphere functions as a mediating structure between object and subject, producing emotional and bodily responses through spatial ambience, light, texture, and environmental mood. This framework provides significant insight into Olaku's paintings, where atmosphere becomes an active visual force capable of evoking sensory immersion and corporeal awareness.

Within African art discourse, abstraction operates through intellectual and cultural trajectories distinct from Euro-American formalism. Scholars such as Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor argue that African modernism emerged through negotiations between indigenous visual systems and modernist aesthetics rather than through simple imitation of Western abstraction (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). In this context, abstraction functions as what Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu describe as "cultural condensation," whereby visual forms compress historical memory, spirituality, ritual knowledge, and postcolonial identity into symbolic structures. African abstraction therefore remains connected to cosmology, material culture, and indigenous epistemologies rather than existing solely as autonomous formal reduction.

This perspective is reinforced by Yoruba aesthetic philosophy, particularly through the writings of Rowland Abiodun and Babatunde Lawal. Abiodun (2014) argues that Yoruba visual culture operates through symbolic

ontology, in which meaning is embedded within form itself rather than existing externally to it. Artistic representation within Yoruba thought is therefore inseparable from spiritual, metaphysical, and epistemological systems. Lawal (2001) similarly explains that Yoruba visuality functions through relational symbolism, where visible forms simultaneously evoke metaphysical realities and embodied existence. Such perspectives are particularly relevant to Nigerian abstraction because they position visual form as a site of sensory, spiritual, and corporeal meaning rather than as mere aesthetic surface.

The concept of ritual embodiment further deepens this interpretation of African abstraction. Drewal and Pemberton (1989) argue that African visual systems often emerge through performative and ritual processes in which the body functions as both symbolic medium and experiential site. Ritual embodiment within Yoruba aesthetics involves the activation of meaning through movement, atmosphere, sensory participation, and performative presence. Although Olaku's work is not explicitly ritualistic, his atmospheric treatment of urban environments similarly constructs spaces of perceptual immersion in which bodily sensation becomes central to visual meaning. His paintings transform light, reflection, and spatial ambiguity into experiential conditions that evoke corporeal awareness through atmosphere rather than through direct figuration.

Additional theories of affect and embodied visuality also contribute to this study. Vivian Sobchack argues that visual experience is fundamentally carnal and sensory, involving bodily consciousness rather than detached spectatorship (Sobchack, 2004). This conception of embodied spectatorship supports the argument that Olaku's atmospheric abstraction engages viewers physically and emotionally through immersive visual environments. Likewise, contemporary studies in visual cognition and abstraction suggest that non-figurative imagery activates perceptual systems through texture, tonal contrast, movement, and environmental organisation rather than through representational recognition alone (Büßemeyer et al., 2023).

Despite the breadth of scholarship on African modernism, abstraction, and Nigerian painting, a significant theoretical gap remains concerning the relationship between atmospheric abstraction and bodily evocation in contemporary Nigerian art. Existing studies on Nigerian modernism have largely concentrated on postcolonial identity, stylistic development, nationalism, and symbolism (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Oguibe, 2004), while analyses of Olaku's paintings frequently emphasise technical realism, urban representation, and mastery of light. Limited attention has been paid to how atmosphere itself functions phenomenologically as a structure of embodied perception and sensory experience. Consequently, abstraction has not been sufficiently theorised as bodily evocation within Nigerian painting, particularly in relation to environmental perception, atmospheric immersion, and corporeal consciousness. This study therefore addresses this gap by positioning Olaku's atmospheric abstraction within phenomenological, symbolic, and African aesthetic frameworks in order to demonstrate how bodily presence may be constructed through atmosphere, luminosity, and perceptual ambiguity rather than through direct figuration alone.

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in visual culture studies, phenomenological aesthetics, and art historical interpretation. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research is primarily concerned with the interpretation of meaning, perception, atmosphere, and embodied experience within painting rather than with quantitative measurement or statistical analysis. The study investigates how abstraction functions as a perceptual and sensory structure in the paintings of Abiodun Olaku, particularly in relation to bodily presence, atmospheric immersion, and spatial perception. Consequently, the methodology emphasises interpretive analysis directed toward understanding the experiential and symbolic dimensions of visual form.

The research combines formal visual analysis, phenomenological interpretation, and critical textual analysis as interconnected methodological approaches. Formal visual analysis is employed to examine the compositional structures, tonal organisation, light effects, spatial depth, texture, colour relationships, and atmospheric conditions within selected paintings by Olaku. Particular attention is given to the artist's manipulation of luminosity, reflective surfaces, environmental haze, nocturnal ambience, and spatial ambiguity in order to determine how these visual elements construct perceptual and embodied experiences. This approach follows established art historical methods that treat form not merely as aesthetic arrangement but as a carrier of symbolic and perceptual meaning (Arnheim, 1974).

Phenomenological interpretation further guides the analysis by examining how viewers experience bodily presence through atmosphere, light, and environmental perception within the paintings. Drawing primarily from the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the study interprets painting as a lived perceptual encounter rather than as passive visual representation. Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied perception

provides the framework for understanding how Olaku's atmospheric spaces produce sensory immersion and corporeal awareness through visual experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). This phenomenological orientation enables the study to move beyond descriptive analysis toward an interpretation of painting as an experiential field in which atmosphere functions as a structure of bodily evocation.

The study also incorporates critical textual analysis of scholarly and art historical literature relating to abstraction, African modernism, phenomenology, atmosphere, symbolic aesthetics, and Nigerian contemporary art. Academic texts by scholars such as Chika Okeke-Agulu, Okwui Enwezor, Rowland Abiodun, Babatunde Lawal, Susanne Langer, and Gernot Böhme are critically examined in order to establish the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the study. These sources provide interpretive frameworks through which abstraction, atmosphere, embodiment, and symbolic meaning may be understood within both African and global aesthetic discourse.

Primary focus is placed on selected works by Abiodun Olaku, including *Lagos Nocturne*, *Ebute*, *Shadows of the Night*, *People's Paradise*, and *Oke Igbala*. These paintings are selected because they exemplify the artist's atmospheric manipulation of light, space, reflection, and tonal depth, thereby providing significant material for examining the relationship between abstraction and embodied perception. Through close visual and phenomenological analysis of these works, the study seeks to demonstrate that Olaku's paintings extend beyond technical realism into atmospheric abstraction, where bodily presence is evoked through sensory immersion and perceptual ambiguity rather than through direct figurative emphasis.

The methodological framework therefore positions painting as a perceptual and symbolic system through which atmosphere functions as embodied visual experience. By integrating formal analysis, phenomenological interpretation, and critical theoretical inquiry, the study establishes an interdisciplinary approach capable of addressing the sensory, cultural, and philosophical dimensions of abstraction in contemporary Nigerian painting.

Analytical Framework and Method of Analysis

The analytical framework for this study is grounded in an interdisciplinary synthesis of phenomenology, symbolic aesthetics, visual psychology, and African aesthetic philosophy in order to examine how abstraction functions as a mode of embodied perception in the paintings of Abiodun Olaku. These theoretical perspectives collectively provide the conceptual basis for interpreting atmosphere, light, spatial ambiguity, texture, and tonal organisation not merely as formal devices but as structures through which bodily presence and sensory experience are constructed within painting. The framework therefore positions visual meaning as an experiential and perceptual phenomenon emerging through the interaction between artwork, viewer, and cultural context.

A major theoretical foundation for the analysis is the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly his concept of embodied perception. Merleau-Ponty (2012) argues that perception is inseparable from bodily existence and that visual experience occurs through lived sensory engagement with the world rather than detached observation. Within this framework, painting is understood as an experiential field in which atmosphere, light, depth, and movement generate corporeal awareness. This perspective is especially relevant to Olaku's paintings, where nocturnal illumination, reflective surfaces, environmental haze, and tonal diffusion create immersive visual spaces that evoke bodily sensation through atmosphere rather than through explicit figuration. Phenomenology therefore provides the conceptual basis for interpreting Olaku's atmospheric abstraction as a structure of lived visual experience.

The study also draws on Susanne Langer's theory of symbolic form, which proposes that artistic form functions as a symbolic articulation of feeling and human experience (Langer, 1953). According to Langer, artworks communicate meaning not through literal description but through organised symbolic structures capable of expressing emotional and perceptual realities. This framework is important in understanding how Olaku's atmospheric environments communicate sensory and psychological conditions through colour modulation, tonal rhythm, spatial tension, and luminous ambiguity. His paintings transform ordinary urban spaces into symbolic environments charged with emotional resonance and perceptual depth, suggesting that atmosphere itself may operate as a symbolic structure of embodiment.

Rudolf Arnheim's theory of visual psychology further informs the analytical approach by emphasizing the perceptual power of visual form. Arnheim (1974) argues that compositional relationships such as balance, movement, contrast, spatial organisation, and tonal interaction generate psychological and emotional responses within visual perception. This perspective enables the study to interpret Olaku's manipulation of compositional structure, reflective light, environmental density, and spatial depth as perceptual mechanisms that guide sensory engagement and shape the viewer's embodied encounter with the painting. Through this lens, abstraction is

approached not as visual reduction but as an organised perceptual system capable of producing experiential meaning.

The analytical framework is further enriched through African aesthetic philosophy, particularly the work of Rowland Abiodun, whose interpretations of Yoruba visual culture emphasise the inseparability of form, symbolism, and cultural epistemology. Abiodun (2014) argues that African visual systems function through symbolic ontology, in which meaning is embedded within artistic form itself rather than existing externally to it. Yoruba aesthetics therefore understands visual representation as simultaneously material, spiritual, sensory, and epistemological. This perspective is significant for interpreting Olaku's paintings within Nigerian cultural discourse because it situates atmosphere, luminosity, and spatial perception within broader frameworks of experiential and symbolic meaning rather than limiting them to purely technical or formal considerations.

Guided by these theoretical perspectives, each selected artwork is analysed through an integrated method that combines compositional analysis, material examination, symbolic interpretation, and perceptual engagement. The compositional structure of each painting is examined through its spatial arrangement, tonal organisation, use of light, directional movement, and atmospheric balance in order to determine how visual relationships construct sensory immersion. Attention is also given to materiality and texture, particularly Olaku's painterly surfaces, tonal layering, reflective effects, and atmospheric density, which contribute to the experiential quality of the paintings. The analysis further explores symbolic content by examining how urban environments, nocturnal atmospheres, reflective spaces, and environmental conditions operate as metaphorical and emotional structures within the paintings. Rather than functioning merely as descriptive landscapes, these atmospheric spaces are interpreted as symbolic environments that evoke memory, movement, psychological presence, and corporeal awareness. Finally, perceptual engagement forms a central component of the analysis by investigating how viewers encounter the paintings bodily through sensory immersion, atmospheric tension, spatial ambiguity, and visual rhythm. Through this interdisciplinary analytical framework, the study demonstrates that Olaku's atmospheric abstraction functions as an embodied visual language in which perception, atmosphere, and symbolic form converge to construct bodily presence beyond direct representation.

Abiodun Olaku: Atmospheric Abstraction and Embodied Urban Perception

The paintings of Abiodun Olaku occupy a distinctive position within contemporary Nigerian art through their atmospheric treatment of urban and environmental space. Although often associated with realism because of their technical precision and luminous rendering, Olaku's works extend beyond descriptive representation into a form of atmospheric abstraction in which light, shadow, tonal diffusion, and spatial ambiguity become central expressive devices. His paintings transform ordinary urban scenes into perceptual environments charged with emotional depth, sensory immersion, and psychological resonance. Through this atmospheric approach, the city is no longer represented merely as physical geography but as a lived and embodied space experienced through perception, memory, movement, and environmental sensation.

Olaku's visual language is deeply connected to phenomenological ideas of embodied perception, particularly the notion that human experience of space emerges through sensory engagement rather than detached observation (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). In works such as *Lagos Nocturne*, *Ebute*, *Shadows of the Night*, *People's Paradise*, and *Oke Igbala*, light functions not simply as illumination but as an atmospheric structure that dissolves the boundary between material environment and bodily consciousness. Reflections on wet streets, hazy nocturnal atmospheres, luminous urban surfaces, and diffused spatial depth create immersive visual conditions in which viewers experience the city corporeally rather than merely viewing it objectively.

Abiodun Olaku's *Lagos Nocturne* (2010) exemplifies the artist's ability to transform urban space into a phenomenological environment shaped by atmosphere, light, and sensory immersion. Although grounded in observable reality, the painting transcends descriptive realism through its atmospheric dissolution of form, muted tonal harmonies, and perceptual ambiguity. Olaku constructs the city not simply as physical geography but as an embodied spatial experience in which mood, silence, memory, and environmental sensation become central to visual meaning. The composition presents a waterfront urban settlement enveloped in mist-like atmospheric density. Wooden structures positioned along the right side of the composition gradually recede into space, creating a rhythmic spatial progression that draws the viewer inward. Their vertical extensions - electrical poles, stilts, and antenna-like forms punctuate the skyline and reinforce the fragile architectural identity of the waterside environment. The still water occupies a significant portion of the foreground, functioning not merely as reflective surface but as an atmospheric mirror that absorbs and diffuses luminous traces from scattered artificial lights. Olaku's treatment of light is central to the painting's atmospheric abstraction. Rather than using illumination to define clear visual boundaries, he disperses light softly across the mist-filled environment, allowing forms to

dissolve gradually into tonal haze. The dim orange reflections stretching across the water create subtle visual rhythms that guide perceptual movement through the composition. This atmospheric diffusion destabilizes strict realism and introduces abstraction through sensory ambiguity. Space becomes less architecturally fixed and more emotionally experienced, transforming the cityscape into a contemplative perceptual field. From a phenomenological perspective, *Lagos Nocturne* aligns closely with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodied perception, where visual experience emerges through sensory engagement with atmosphere and spatial presence rather than detached observation. The viewer encounters the painting corporeally through its humidity, silence, reflective stillness, and luminous depth. Human figures are largely absent, yet bodily presence is strongly implied through environmental traces - lights suggesting habitation, pathways of movement along the water, and architectural structures bearing the imprint of human occupation. In this way, the body exists indirectly within the painting as perceptual memory and spatial residue rather than explicit anatomical form.

The muted palette of greys, browns, and subdued blues further intensifies the emotional restraint of the composition. Olaku avoids chromatic excess in favour of tonal subtlety, enabling atmosphere itself to become the dominant expressive force. This restrained chromatic language contributes to what may be described as atmospheric abstraction, where perception is structured through tonal immersion and environmental sensation rather than through sharply defined representational detail.

The painting also reflects broader concerns within Nigerian contemporary art regarding urbanity, environmental experience, and spatial consciousness. Rather than portraying Lagos as chaotic spectacle, Olaku presents the city as a reflective and meditative environment shaped by light, water, and silence. The urban space becomes psychologically charged, embodying themes of temporality, solitude, memory, and lived experience. Through this atmospheric treatment, *Lagos Nocturne* demonstrates how abstraction may operate within realism through the manipulation of perceptual atmosphere and sensory ambiguity. Consequently, the work exemplifies how Olaku's paintings function as embodied urban environments in which atmosphere becomes a carrier of corporeal awareness. The city is not merely seen but felt through luminous haze, reflective stillness, and spatial immersion. *Lagos Nocturne* therefore stands as a significant example of atmospheric abstraction in Nigerian contemporary painting, where urban perception and bodily presence converge within a phenomenological visual language.



Plate I: Abiodun Olaku, *Lagos Nocturne*, 2010. Oil on canvas. 29 15/16 x 24 inches
Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

Abiodun Olaku's *Ebute* (2012) presents a nocturnal Lagos waterfront that is less a fixed topographical record than a perceptual field shaped by atmosphere, memory, and sensory ambiguity. Within the framework of Atmospheric Abstraction and Embodied Urban Perception, the painting dissolves the hard boundaries of urban architecture into a continuum of mist, light diffusion, and tonal gradation. The city is not simply seen; it is *felt* through moisture-laden air, fading daylight, and the quiet hum of nocturnal activity.

The composition is anchored by a horizontal expanse of water that functions as both mirror and threshold. Boats, moored sparsely across the lagoon, appear as fragmented silhouettes, their forms softened by distance and low illumination. Rather than asserting linear detail, Olaku privileges atmospheric density - smoke, haze, and reflected light become structuring elements that mediate spatial understanding. This approach aligns with an experiential realism in which perception is unstable and continually negotiated by environmental conditions.

On the left and midground, darkened industrial structures and vertical poles rise like spectral markers of human presence. Yet they are partially absorbed into the surrounding gloom, suggesting the erosion of architectural

certainty under nocturnal conditions. The occasional points of orange and blue light punctuate the composition, functioning not as narrative focal points but as perceptual anchors that guide embodied viewing through space. The sky occupies a dominant presence, transitioning from deep indigo to a muted, almost suspended grey. Cloud formations appear thick and mobile, reinforcing a sense of atmospheric pressure that envelops the entire scene. This upper register merges visually with the water below, collapsing spatial hierarchy and producing a unified atmospheric envelope in which land, water, and sky are perceptually interwoven.

Ebute operates as an exercise in embodied urban perception, where the viewer is positioned not as a detached observer but as a bodily participant within the city's humid, luminous field. Olaku's technique transforms Lagos from a geographically defined port into a lived, sensory environment - one where abstraction emerges not from distortion of form, but from the primacy of atmosphere over object, perception over description, and experience over documentation.



Plate II: Abiodun Olaku, *Ebute*, 2012. Oil on canvas. 35 1/2 x 43 1/4 inches
Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

Abiodun Olaku's *Shadows of the Night* can be interpreted within the framework of atmospheric abstraction and embodied urban perception as a meditation on the sensory and psychological experience of Lagos at night. Rather than presenting the city merely as a documentary landscape, Olaku transforms the urban environment into an atmospheric field where light, shadow, moisture, silence, and movement become expressive agents. The painting embodies not only what the city looks like, but also how it feels to inhabit it physically and emotionally.

Within the idea of atmospheric abstraction, Olaku dissolves the rigid boundaries of architecture and urban form through his handling of light and tonal transitions. Buildings, roads, and street elements appear softened by darkness, haze, rain, or reflected illumination, creating an environment where visibility is partial and unstable. His use of muted browns, smoky blues, deep blacks, and glowing yellows abstracts the city into layers of luminous atmosphere. The night scene is therefore not represented with photographic precision; instead, it becomes an experiential abstraction in which mood overtakes detail. The atmosphere itself functions as the subject of the painting. Olaku's painterly manipulation of shadow and reflected light evokes humidity, stillness, and urban solitude, allowing the viewer to sense the density of the nocturnal environment.

The painting also aligns strongly with embodied urban perception, a phenomenological approach that emphasizes lived bodily experience within urban space. In *Shadows of the Night*, the viewer is positioned as a participant moving through the city rather than as a detached observer. The wet roads, dim streetlights, and empty or semi-deserted spaces stimulate sensory memory: the smell of rain-soaked asphalt, the silence of late-night streets, the distant sounds of traffic, and the emotional tension of navigating Lagos after dark. Olaku's atmospheric treatment encourages viewers to "feel" the environment bodily. The city becomes tactile and immersive.

Importantly, Olaku's urban nightscapes often communicate the contradictions of Lagos itself, vitality and exhaustion, beauty and uncertainty, movement and stillness. In *Shadows of the Night*, darkness is not simply the absence of light; it is a metaphorical condition that reveals the psychological depth of urban existence. The glowing lights cutting through the darkness suggest resilience, survival, and continuity amid the instability of metropolitan life. Through this interplay of illumination and obscurity, Olaku transforms the ordinary urban scene into a contemplative and emotional space.

Furthermore, the painting demonstrates Olaku's mastery of tonal realism while simultaneously approaching abstraction through atmosphere. His technique blurs the distinction between representation and sensation. The city is recognizable, yet it also appears dreamlike and transient, reflecting the fragmented perception characteristic of modern urban living. This quality situates the work within contemporary discussions of phenomenology in African urban art, where the focus shifts from objective representation to subjective experience.

Shadows of the Night exemplifies how Abiodun Olaku uses atmospheric effects to reinterpret Lagos as a lived psychological environment. Through shadow, light, and spatial ambiguity, the painting transcends straightforward cityscape representation and becomes an exploration of memory, embodiment, and urban consciousness.



Plate III: Abiodun Olaku, *Shadows of the night*, 2012. Oil on canvas. 16⁷/₈ X 23⁵/₈ inches
Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

Within the framework of atmospheric abstraction and embodied urban perception, *People's Paradise* transforms a waterside Lagos environment into a contemplative atmospheric field shaped by silence, darkness, and reflective light. The painting is less concerned with detailed topographical description than with evoking the emotional and sensory condition of inhabiting urban space at dusk or night. Olaku abstracts the environment through atmosphere rather than distortion. The muted green-grey sky, shadowed horizon, and soft reflections on the water dissolve clear spatial boundaries, creating a dreamlike ambiguity. The scattered points of light in the distance interrupt the darkness delicately, producing a tension between visibility and obscurity. In this sense, atmosphere itself becomes the primary subject of the work. The still water functions almost like a mirror of urban consciousness, absorbing and diffusing light into subtle tonal vibrations. The painting also exemplifies embodied urban perception because it invites the viewer into a bodily experience of quiet urban immersion. The viewer senses humidity, silence, and the slow rhythm of waterfront life. The elongated reflections and darkened shoreline create the impression of standing physically at the edge of the lagoon, observing the city from a reflective distance. Rather than presenting Lagos as chaotic or overcrowded, Olaku reveals its meditative and introspective dimension.

Importantly, the title *People's Paradise* introduces an ironic or poetic tension. The environment appears serene, yet the subdued darkness and emptiness suggest fragility and uncertainty beneath the calm atmosphere. This duality reflects the contradictions of urban existence in Lagos - aspiration alongside instability, beauty alongside hardship. Olaku therefore uses atmospheric realism not merely for visual pleasure, but as a means of exploring psychological and social experience within the modern African city.

Technically, the work demonstrates Olaku's mastery of tonal modulation and luminous realism. His gradual movement from dark to light creates emotional depth while softening the distinction between realism and abstraction. The cityscape remains recognizable, yet it is filtered through memory, mood, and perception. This atmospheric treatment situates the painting within phenomenological interpretations of contemporary Nigerian art, where the lived experience of urban space becomes more important than objective representation.



Plate IV: Abiodun Olaku, *People's paradise*, 2012. Oil on canvas. 29 1/2 x 23 7/16 inches
Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

Another of Olaku's painting - *Oke Igbala II (Salvation Hill)* presents a hauntingly atmospheric vision of human presence within a liminal landscape. The painting depicts silhouetted figures scattered across a smoky hill under a dim reddish sun, transforming the terrain into a psychologically charged environment rather than a literal topographical space.

Olaku abstracts the landscape through atmosphere, tonal ambiguity, and diffused illumination. The hill, smoke, fire embers, and distant sky merge into a muted field of greys, blues, and burnt orange hues. Spatial clarity dissolves as smoke drifts across the composition, obscuring details and softening boundaries between land, sky, and figures. This atmospheric treatment shifts the focus away from physical description toward emotional and sensory experience. The environment feels suspended between dawn and dusk, reality and memory, presence and disappearance.

The painting strongly embodies the concept of embodied urban perception because the viewer experiences the scene corporeally and psychologically. The smoky air, scattered fires, and shadowed figures evoke sensations of heat, ash, movement, and physical labour. Rather than observing the landscape from a detached distance, the viewer feels immersed within its environmental density. The silhouettes moving across the hill generate an awareness of bodily endurance and collective activity, suggesting survival within difficult socio-economic conditions.

The title *Oke Igbala* ("Salvation Hill") introduces spiritual and metaphorical dimensions. The elevated terrain can be interpreted as a symbolic site of refuge, struggle, or redemption. Yet the somber atmosphere complicates any straightforward idea of salvation. The dim sun and drifting smoke create emotional tension between hope and despair, transcendence and hardship. Olaku therefore transforms an ordinary scene into an existential meditation on human resilience within contemporary Nigerian life.

Technically, the work demonstrates Olaku's mastery of luminous darkness and tonal realism. His gradual layering of dark values punctuated by glowing fires and solar light produces dramatic atmospheric depth. The figures are minimally detailed, appearing almost as transient shadows within the landscape, which enhances the phenomenological quality of the work. Human presence becomes sensed rather than fully seen.

Ultimately, *Oke Igbala II (Salvation Hill)* exemplifies how Abiodun Olaku uses atmospheric effects to explore memory, spirituality, labour, and bodily experience in Nigerian environments. Through smoke, shadow, and subdued light, the painting transcends straightforward realism and becomes an immersive meditation on the emotional texture of collective urban and social existence.



Plate V: Abiodun Olaku, , *Oke Igbala II (Salvation Hill)* 2018. *Oil on canvas*. 31 1/2 x 40 3/16 inches
Source: <https://www.art.salon>

This atmospheric sensibility aligns Olaku's work with broader theories of abstraction that understand visual form as a perceptual and symbolic system rather than a rejection of representation. His paintings demonstrate that abstraction may exist within realism through the manipulation of atmosphere, tonal rhythm, and spatial perception. Consequently, bodily presence in Olaku's work is often implied through environmental traces, movement, light, and sensory ambience rather than through dominant figurative representation. The urban environment itself becomes a phenomenological field where atmosphere operates as a carrier of memory, emotion, and corporeal awareness.

By examining Olaku's paintings through the interconnected frameworks of abstraction, atmosphere, phenomenology, urban spatiality, and embodied perception, this study positions his work within contemporary debates on sensory aesthetics and African modernism. It argues that Olaku's atmospheric abstraction redefines urban painting as an experiential and perceptual encounter in which the body exists not only as visible form but as lived presence within space and atmosphere.

This study examined the paintings of Abiodun Olaku with particular emphasis on how atmosphere, light, tonal ambiguity, and spatial immersion function as structures of bodily evocation in contemporary Nigerian painting. The research departed from conventional interpretations of Olaku's work that primarily categorize his paintings within the discourse of realism and technical virtuosity. Instead, the study repositioned his artistic practice within phenomenological and perceptual aesthetics, arguing that his paintings extend beyond descriptive representation into a form of atmospheric abstraction grounded in sensory and embodied experience.

Through qualitative and interpretive methodologies involving formal visual analysis, phenomenological interpretation, and critical textual analysis, the study examined selected paintings including *Lagos Nocturne*, *Ebute*, *Shadows of the Night*, *People's Paradise*, and *Oke Igbala*. These works were analysed through interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks derived from phenomenology, symbolic aesthetics, visual psychology, African modernism, and Yoruba aesthetic philosophy. The theoretical perspectives of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Rudolf Arnheim, Susanne Langer, and Rowland Abiodun provided conceptual foundations for understanding atmosphere not merely as visual background but as a perceptual structure through which corporeal presence is constructed.

The research found that abstraction in Olaku's paintings does not emerge through complete non-figuration but through the atmospheric dissolution of visual certainty. Light, haze, tonal diffusion, reflections, and spatial ambiguity collectively destabilize strict realism and transform urban environments into perceptual and sensory spaces. These atmospheric conditions generate what may be described as embodied urban perception, where viewers encounter the city through emotional and sensory immersion rather than detached visual observation. The research demonstrated that bodily presence in Olaku's work is often implied indirectly through environmental traces, luminous reflections, architectural rhythm, and spatial atmosphere rather than through dominant figurative representation.

The findings further revealed that Olaku's manipulation of atmosphere functions as a mode of abstraction rooted in phenomenological experience. His nocturnal cityscapes and waterfront scenes create environments charged with silence, memory, temporality, and sensory depth. In this context, atmosphere becomes an active visual force capable of evoking corporeal awareness through perceptual engagement. The paintings therefore align closely with Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied perception, where visual meaning emerges through lived interaction with space, atmosphere, and environmental presence. The study also established that Olaku's atmospheric treatment of Lagos and other urban environments transforms the city into a psychological and experiential landscape rather than a merely geographic or documentary subject.

Another significant finding of the study is that abstraction within Nigerian contemporary painting may operate through environmental and perceptual structures rather than through formal reduction alone. Olaku's paintings demonstrate that realism and abstraction are not mutually exclusive categories but interconnected visual strategies capable of coexisting within the same pictorial space. Through tonal restraint, luminous diffusion, and atmospheric layering, his paintings create abstract perceptual experiences while retaining recognizable urban imagery. This challenges dominant formalist definitions of abstraction that privilege non-representation as the primary criterion of abstraction.

The study also found that Olaku's atmospheric sensibility resonates with broader traditions within African aesthetics, particularly Yoruba conceptions of relational and symbolic visibility. Atmosphere in his paintings functions not simply as environmental condition but as a symbolic and emotional structure through which memory, habitation, movement, and lived experience are communicated. Consequently, his paintings contribute to contemporary African modernist discourse by demonstrating how urban environments may be transformed into phenomenological fields of sensory and corporeal meaning.

Conclusion

The study argues that Abiodun Olaku's paintings constitute a significant contribution to contemporary Nigerian art through their synthesis of atmosphere, abstraction, and embodied perception. His work expands the discourse of Nigerian painting beyond technical realism by positioning atmosphere as a mode of corporeal and perceptual meaning. Through luminous spatiality, tonal ambiguity, and sensory immersion, Olaku constructs urban environments that are experienced as much bodily as visually. The study therefore concludes that atmospheric abstraction in Olaku's paintings functions as an embodied visual language through which the city becomes a site of phenomenological encounter, emotional resonance, and perceptual consciousness.

By theorizing the relationship between atmosphere and bodily presence in Nigerian painting, this research contributes to broader discussions in African art history, phenomenological aesthetics, and contemporary visual culture, while also opening new directions for interpreting abstraction within African modern and contemporary art.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has examined atmospheric abstraction and embodied urban perception in the paintings of Abiodun Olaku through phenomenological and perceptual frameworks. However, the interdisciplinary nature of the subject opens several possibilities for further scholarly inquiry within African art history, visual culture studies, phenomenological aesthetics, and urban visual studies.

Future research may expand the scope of atmospheric abstraction beyond Olaku's work by investigating other Nigerian and African contemporary painters whose artistic practices engage atmosphere, spatial ambiguity, environmental perception, and sensory immersion. Comparative studies involving artists such as Bruce Onobrakpeya, Tola Wewe, or other contemporary African painters may further reveal how abstraction operates across different material, symbolic, and perceptual systems within African modernism.

Further studies may also explore the relationship between urbanization, memory, and environmental psychology in Nigerian contemporary painting. Since many of Olaku's works are deeply connected to the visual and atmospheric conditions of Lagos, future scholarship could examine how contemporary African artists negotiate themes of urban anxiety, migration, environmental transformation, and spatial identity through atmospheric visual language. Such studies would contribute significantly to emerging discourses on urban visuality and sensory geography in African art.

Another important direction for research involves the application of phenomenological aesthetics to African art history. Although phenomenology has been extensively applied in Western visual studies, limited scholarship has examined African painting through concepts of embodied perception, sensory engagement, and atmospheric experience. Further interdisciplinary studies integrating phenomenology, African aesthetics, architecture, environmental studies, and cognitive visual theory may deepen scholarly understanding of how perception and embodiment function within African visual culture.

Future research may equally investigate the role of light as a symbolic and perceptual structure in contemporary Nigerian painting. Since Olaku's work demonstrates how illumination shapes emotional and corporeal experience, additional studies could analyse the psychological, spiritual, and symbolic dimensions of light within African urban imagery and environmental painting traditions.

There is also a need for more archival, curatorial, and documentary research on Abiodun Olaku's artistic development, exhibition history, studio practice, and critical reception. Existing scholarship on the artist remains relatively limited despite his significance within Nigerian contemporary painting. More catalogues raisonnés, exhibition studies, interviews, and monographic publications would help strengthen academic discourse surrounding his contribution to African modern and contemporary art.

Finally, future studies may extend the concept of atmospheric abstraction into digital and interdisciplinary visual practices, including photography, film, installation art, and virtual environments within African contemporary culture. Such investigations would broaden theoretical understanding of how atmosphere, embodiment, and perception continue to evolve across multiple visual media in contemporary artistic practice.

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