

AESTHETIC DUALITIES: GESTURE, GEOMETRY, AND THE DIVERGENCE OF EXPRESSIONIST AND FORMALIST PRACTICES IN NIGERIAN PAINTING

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Abstract

This paper explores the aesthetic dualities underlying the differences between expressionist and formalist tendencies in contemporary Nigerian painting, specifically the visual vocabularies embodied in gesture and geometry. Through the paintings of Chike Obeagu, Odun Orimolade, and Tola Wewe, the study examines how Nigerian artists negotiate form and emotion to signify identity, cosmology, and political engagement. Drawing on Nelson Goodman's theory of symbol systems, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of perception, and Rowland Abiodun's Yoruba philosophy of aesthetics, the paper argues that these visual approaches serve not merely formal purposes but also function as culturally situated signifiers. Using qualitative methods, specifically formal analysis, interviews, and textual reviews, the study demonstrates that Nigerian painting operates along a continuum defined by the interaction, tension, and hybridization of gesture and geometry. By theorizing this duality, the paper contributes to the historiography of African art and complicates simplistic binaries commonly found in global modernist discourse.

Keywords: Nigerian painting, gesture, geometry, expressionism, formalism, Yoruba aesthetics

Introduction

Modern Nigerian art embodies complex interactions between visual representation, cultural memory, and philosophical inquiry. One of the dominant characteristics of this visual landscape is the tension between expressionist and formalist tendencies. Expressionist artwork is often marked by an energetic gestural quality, deep emotional intensity, and symbolic forms, while formalist approaches favour compositional balance, geometric structure, and aesthetic restraint. These art paradigms do not exist in isolation; rather, they overlap in subtle ways that reflect the mixed cultural contexts of Nigerian artists.

This duality is present in the practices of artists like Chike Obeagu, whose socially conscious paintings use expressive figuration and vibrant mark-making; Odun Orimolade, whose installations and drawings are based on conceptual geometry and spatial abstraction; and Tola Wewe, who engages Yoruba cosmology to produce highly stylized, geometricized human figures that address metaphysical and cultural issues. These artists illustrate how gesture and geometry are not only visual methods but discrete aesthetic languages with symbolic and philosophical valence. While Nigerian modernism and its postcolonial elaborations have been the subject of critical inquiry (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ogbechie, 2020), the formal-aesthetic opposition between expressionism and formalism is undertheorized in African art discourse. Gesture and geometry as aesthetic and conceptual approaches within this tradition have not been adequately discussed, resulting in a lack of understanding of how Nigerian painters utilize these forms to express structure and spontaneity.

This paper explores how aesthetic dualities - namely gesture and geometry - govern the divergence and occasional convergence of expressionist and formalist tendencies in recent Nigerian painting. It concentrates on the paintings of Chike Obeagu, Odun Orimolade, and Tola Wewe to reveal how these artists mediate visual structure and emotional intensity within culturally grounded and philosophically engaged frameworks. It also addresses how Nigerian artists utilize gesture and geometry as conscious visual tactics to convey emotion, ideology, compositional order, and cultural identity. It further investigates the dialectic between expressionist and formalist impulses in their practice, noting points of intersection, divergence, and hybridity. Additionally, it identifies and interprets the philosophical, spiritual, and symbolic systems - both indigenous and theoretical - that guide their aesthetic choices.

Via these focal areas, the paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Nigerian painting engages with formal and affective modes which contributes to contemporary African art scholarship and challenges reductive classifications in global art historiography.

The theoretical model brings together three different but complementary perspectives. Nelson Goodman's (1976) theory of symbol systems helps to explain gesture and geometry as expressions of visual language, in which colour, shape, and mark are interpreted as symbolic codes. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1964) phenomenological

theory of perception provides a model for investigating the embodied and affective qualities of gestural painting, emphasizing the artist's bodily engagement with materials. Lastly, Rowland Abiodun's (2014) Yoruba aesthetic theory provides a culturally situated framework, especially through the concept of *àṣẹ* - the metaphysical energy of artistic creation - which explains the spiritual and symbolic role of geometry in painting traditions of Yoruba cultural influence, as seen in Tola Wewe's work. Together, these theoretical tools enable a multifaceted exploration of how Nigerian artists combine form and content, material and metaphysics, within hybrid visual vocabularies.

This study uses two complementary theoretical frameworks - Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and indigenous Yoruba aesthetics - to critically examine the diverging courses of expressionism and formalism in the scope of contemporary Nigerian painting. These frameworks allow for a deeper reading of how artists make use of gestural and geometric forms, not as mere stylistic devices but as inherent carriers of cultural meaning and lived experience.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) focuses on the body as the central location of knowing and experiencing the world. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not so much cognitive as it is bodily; we perceive the world in gestures, sensations, and affective reactions. It is a foundational framework for examining expressionist tendencies in Nigerian painting, where brushwork, mark-making, and compositional energy serve as visual equivalents of emotional and experiential intensity.

In Chike Obeagu's and Odun Orimolade's work, for instance, the gestural use of line, fragmentation, and visual rhythm can be seen as extensions of the artists' embodied worldview, addressing socio-political anxieties or psychic states (Ibrahim, 2022; Center for Contemporary Art Lagos, 2019). The gestural aesthetic, therefore, is not only stylistic but phenomenological.

Conversely, the formalist aspect of Nigerian painting is revealed through the Yoruba aesthetic philosophy perspective, which prizes clarity, balance, repetition, and symbolic form. Rowland Abiodun (2014) explains foremost Yoruba principles like *iwà* (character), *àṣẹ* (vital force), *ojú-inú* (inner eye), and didactic clarity that govern how beauty and meaning are constructed in visual compositions. These principles do not discourage expressiveness but locate it within a moral and spiritual order that favours visual harmony and coded symbolism. Tola Wewe's mythic abstraction and geometric stylization can be examined within this local aesthetic paradigm. His works inhabit structured composition and schematic repetition not as a withdrawal into formality, but as means for spiritual invocation and cultural continuity (Akinbogun, 2021). This geometric sensibility is consonant with Yoruba epistemology, in which form cannot be separated from function, and beauty is for ethical or metaphysical ends.

Together, these frameworks allow the research to examine aesthetic dualities in Nigerian painting not merely as stylistic choices, but more importantly, as theoretical positions that arise from different modes of knowing, perceiving, and being. As such, the relationship between gesture and geometry is explored as a reflection of broader cultural negotiations in contemporary Nigerian art. Rather than considering expressionism and formalism as binary oppositions, the research demonstrates how Nigerian artists negotiate both realms to convey complex identities, renegotiate tradition, and participate in global art discourse.

This study is premised on an interdisciplinary theoretical model that draws on Gestalt theory, African aesthetic philosophy, and semiotics for exploring the formal and expressive binaries implicit in modern Nigerian painting. These theoretical paradigms cumulatively provide a lens for probing how visual elements function to embed aesthetic experience, cultural meaning, and conceptual intention in the works of the selected artists.

Gestalt theory, based on the discipline of perceptual psychology, emphasizes the holistic perception of visual stimuli, arguing that viewers are likely to perceive images as unified wholes instead of separate parts. It is an essential framework for analysing the function of compositional principles such as symmetry, balance, contrast, and rhythm in formalist art. For instance, Odun Orimolade's use of geometric abstraction and carefully arranged spatial composition aligns with Gestalt principles, including the figure-ground relationship and closure, where visual simplicity conceals deeper complexities (Arnheim, 1974). Gestalt's concern with formal unity makes it easier to understand more subtly how Nigerian artists achieve coherence through structure and order even within complex cultural narratives.

In support is the practice of African aesthetic philosophy that emphasizes relationality, symbolism, spirituality, and communicative meaning over simple appearance or visual pleasure (Abiodun, 2014). African aesthetic theory inherently challenges Western bifurcations of content and form, and expression and structure. Instead, it espouses

a fluid approach in which beauty is inextricably bound up with moral, metaphysical, and cultural significance. Tola Wewe's symbolic lexicon, rooted in Yoruba cosmology, demonstrates this amalgamation succinctly. His paintings blend symmetry and repetition with spiritual allusions to *orishas* and ancestral energies, suggesting that geometric form can be a vehicle for cultural meaning. This indigenous perspective challenges Eurocentric interpretations of abstraction and highlights the potential for formalism to exist alongside deep expressive intention.

Through Barthesian and Peircean models, the study expounds how visual codes are not just stylistic devices but means of communication. In the case of Chike Obeagu's work, for example, fragmented human bodies, incorporated textual components, and symbolic objects are all signs of psychological stress, historical remembrance, and political commentary. Semiotics provides the methodical framework for understanding how the gestural expressiveness within Obeagu's paintings resonates with larger societal scripts of trauma, urbanity, and identity. Each of the artists was picked based on their unique aesthetic approaches and critical reception in the Nigerian art scene. Their practices provide diverging yet dialogic solutions to the expressionist–formalist divide, and as such, are perfect subjects to investigate aesthetic duality.

Chike Obeagu: Expressive Gesture and symbolic fragmentation

Chike Obeagu's mixed-media collages dramatically inhabit the dialectic between expressive spontaneity and semiotic density that characterizes the aesthetic bipolarity of gesture and geometry. His work squarely situates itself on the expressionist end of the investigation, using gestural mark making, overlapping figures, and textual passages to invoke socio political commentary, personal memory, and states of mind.

A key work, *Peaceful Demonstrations* (2021), is a representative example of this expressive genre. The large-scale mixed-media collage presents chaotic crowds, distorted bodies, and superimposed images, thus creating a disorienting spatial composition charged with emotional urgency. Rather than using geometric precision, Obeagu's composition uses visual chaos as a means of semiotic narration, where fragmented form and texture represent episodes of civil unrest and social tension. The viewer interacts with not just figures but also metaphors, masks, eyes, and limbs that function as symbolic articulations of collective strife.



Plate I: Chike Obeagu, *Peaceful Demonstrations*, 2021. Mixed media collage. 79 1/10 × 115 2/5 inches. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/chike-obeagu-peaceful-demonstrations>

Chike Obeagu's *Peaceful Demonstrations* (2021) provides a compelling visual framework for discussing the tensions and intersections embedded in the title *Aesthetic Dualities: Gesture, Geometry, and the Divergence of Expressionist and Formalist Practices in Nigerian Painting*. The mixed media collage synthesizes expressive emotionality with geometric organization, positioning the work at the intersection of Expressionist urgency and Formalist structure. Through fragmentation, distortion, repetition, and rhythmic spatial construction, Obeagu transforms the language of protest into an aesthetic negotiation between chaos and order.

At the level of gesture, the work is deeply expressionistic. The exaggerated mouths, distorted faces, aggressive bodily movements, and overlapping limbs communicate psychological intensity rather than anatomical realism. The figures appear caught within a moment of violent confrontation or social unrest, their open mouths suggesting screams, chants, or collective anguish. Gesture here functions as emotional evidence. The bodies bend, twist, and collide in ways that privilege sensation over naturalistic proportion, echoing Expressionist tendencies in which subjective emotion overrides objective representation. The raised clubs, clenched hands, and compressed spatial arrangement heighten the sense of anxiety and instability, creating an atmosphere of social tension that reflects the precarious realities of public demonstrations in contemporary Nigeria.

Simultaneously, the painting demonstrates a rigorous formalist sensibility through its geometric construction. Obeagu organizes the composition through angular segmentation, flattened planes, and interlocking shapes that resemble cubist fragmentation. The human body is reduced into geometric units—triangles, rectangles, and polygonal forms—which stabilize the otherwise chaotic emotional content. This geometric ordering prevents the composition from collapsing into visual disorder. Instead, rhythm and balance emerge through repetition of shapes, directional diagonals, and carefully distributed colour blocks. The dominant blue background functions as a unifying field, while the contrasting reds, yellows, whites, and browns establish compositional tension and visual movement.

The duality between gesture and geometry becomes central to interpreting the work. Expressionist practices in Nigerian contemporary painting often emphasize emotional immediacy, social critique, and spontaneous mark-making, whereas Formalist approaches privilege compositional harmony, structure, and the autonomous qualities of visual language. In *Peaceful Demonstrations*, these approaches do not exist independently; rather, they collide and coexist. The emotional violence of the scene is mediated through calculated formal arrangement. The work therefore exemplifies how Nigerian contemporary painters increasingly merge affective storytelling with sophisticated structural design.

The collage technique itself reinforces this duality. Collage introduces fragmentation as both a material and conceptual strategy. By layering textured surfaces and assembled forms, Obeagu creates visual disjunctions that mirror fractured social realities. The fractured bodies may symbolize the fragmentation of civic unity, political trust, or collective identity during moments of protest and unrest. Yet the careful orchestration of these fragments into a coherent composition suggests resilience and continuity within disorder. Thus, geometry becomes a stabilizing mechanism for emotional turbulence.

Furthermore, the ironic title *Peaceful Demonstrations* intensifies the conceptual complexity of the work. Although the title implies nonviolence, the imagery suggests aggression, panic, and confrontation. This contradiction reveals another aesthetic duality: peace versus violence, civility versus chaos, and collective activism versus social breakdown. Obeagu appears to critique the fragile nature of democratic expression in postcolonial Nigerian society, where peaceful civic action can quickly devolve into conflict due to political tension, state response, or public frustration.

Within the broader discourse of Nigerian contemporary art, the work reflects how artists negotiate inherited modernist formalism alongside socially engaged expressionism. Obeagu's stylized distortions recall aspects of African modernist experimentation, while his emphasis on sociopolitical narrative aligns with contemporary activist art practices. The painting therefore becomes an important example of divergence and synthesis in Nigerian painting practice: a work where expressive gesture communicates trauma and urgency, while geometric formalism imposes rhythm, coherence, and aesthetic control.

Consequently, the painting can be understood as a visual embodiment of aesthetic duality itself. It demonstrates that Expressionist and Formalist tendencies in Nigerian painting are not always oppositional categories but often operate dialectically. Obeagu uses geometry to discipline emotion and gesture to destabilize formal order, producing a complex visual language that reflects the contradictions of contemporary Nigerian social experience.

In *The Witness* (2020), Chike Obeagu's *The Witness* (2020) demonstrates his gestural collage technique, employing layered painted and photographic fragments as expressive marks suggestive of intimacy and psychological complexity. Exaggerated, distorted forms are in line with expressionist priorities of emotional truth over realism. From a formalist perspective, the composition is achieved through the stabilizing red couch, geometric patterns, and restrained colour harmony, set against the irregular outlines of the figures - echoing Obeagu's concept of human nature's "complementary and contradictory dualism." Symbolically, the stretched shadow introduces motifs of observation and presence, linking to Nigerian collage traditions of social commentary

and activism. The domestic environment is comfortingly familiar, yet the fragmentation of the figures suggests underlying tensions.



Plate II: Chike Obeagu, *The Witness*, 2020 Mixed media collage. 67 × 84 2/5 inches.
Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/chike-obeagu-the-witness>

Working on formal and expressive levels, *The Witness* combines structural exactness with symbolic richness, encapsulating the aesthetic dualities of current Nigerian painting. Theoretically, Obeagu's approaches align with semiotics - specifically, Barthes's concept of multiplicity of signifiers, in which meaning lies in the web of visual signs and not in individual symbols (Barthes, 1977). His gestural forms are indexes of emotional experience, while textual and figural allusions are symbolic metaphors. In doing this, his aesthetic disrupts anticipated formal order, embracing expressive rupture. From an African aesthetic philosophy perspective, Obeagu's work aligns with values of polysemic visuality - visual forms that convey several levels of meaning at once, reflecting cultural memory, politics, and spiritual resonance (Abiodun, 2014). His fragmented figuration and layered surfaces imply hybrid epistemologies, grounded in postcolonial subjectivity and collective histories. Obeagu's oeuvre thus illustrates the expressive half of the aesthetic duality in question. His art highlights gesture as an instrument of social commentary and introspection, yet his symbolic structures, albeit non-geometric, convey profound cultural reference. The fact that there is no formal geometry in his art is itself a declaration: that meaning may arise from rupture, layering, and destabilized form.

Chike Obeagu's *The Witness* (2020) offers a sophisticated exploration of the tensions between emotional expressiveness and compositional order, making it highly relevant to the thematic concerns of the paper *Aesthetic Dualities: Gesture, Geometry, and the Divergence of Expressionist and Formalist Practices in Nigerian Painting*. Through its carefully staged domestic setting, distorted figuration, and geometric spatial arrangement, the work demonstrates how contemporary Nigerian painting negotiates the coexistence of Expressionist psychology and Formalist design principles.

At the core of the composition is an intimate yet psychologically unsettling scene. A seated male figure cradles a reclining female figure on a red sofa within a carefully constructed interior environment. Although the scene initially appears calm and domestic, the exaggerated facial features, asymmetrical eyes, and distorted bodily proportions disrupt any sense of emotional comfort. Obeagu employs Expressionist distortion not merely for stylistic effect but as a means of exposing hidden emotional tension. The figures appear emotionally burdened, detached, or psychologically fractured, suggesting themes of trauma, secrecy, vulnerability, or silent observation implied by the title *The Witness*.

Gesture plays a central role in communicating emotional ambiguity. The embrace between the two figures suggests intimacy and protection, yet the awkward positioning of limbs and the strained facial expressions create uncertainty rather than reassurance. The male figure's enlarged hands and fixed gaze intensify the psychological atmosphere, while the reclining figure appears passive, exhausted, or emotionally withdrawn. Unlike naturalistic representation, Obeagu's gestural distortions emphasize internal states over physical accuracy, aligning the work with Expressionist traditions that privilege emotion, subjectivity, and psychological depth.

However, beneath this emotional intensity lies a highly formalized compositional structure. The painting is meticulously organized through geometric spatial divisions and carefully balanced forms. The room is constructed

from angular planes, flattened surfaces, and patterned textures that establish a strong sense of Formalist order. The tiled wooden floor creates perspectival rhythm, while the arrangement of furniture—the circular tables, vertical lamp stand, framed paintings, and curved rocking chair—produces visual balance across the composition. These geometric relationships stabilize the emotional instability of the figures, demonstrating Obeagu's ability to merge expressive figuration with controlled spatial design.

The use of colour further reinforces this duality. Warm yellows, reds, and browns dominate the interior, creating an atmosphere of domestic familiarity, while the contrasting grey and red wall in the background introduces psychological unease. The shadowy red silhouette near the doorway becomes especially significant within the narrative structure of the work. This ambiguous figure may symbolize memory, fear, surveillance, absence, or the unseen presence of violence. Its flattened and simplified form contrasts with the central figures, creating a tension between visibility and concealment that deepens the conceptual meaning of the title.

The collage medium itself is integral to the work's aesthetic language. Obeagu's layered textures and fragmented surfaces create tactile complexity while simultaneously emphasizing constructedness. The assembled visual fragments mirror the fragmented emotional realities of the characters depicted. In this sense, collage functions both materially and metaphorically: it reflects how personal experiences, memories, and social identities are pieced together within contemporary existence. The visible segmentation of forms also aligns the work with Formalist concerns for surface organization and compositional unity.

Within the context of Nigerian contemporary painting, *The Witness* exemplifies the evolving relationship between narrative expression and formal abstraction. Nigerian artists increasingly combine sociopsychological storytelling with modernist structural experimentation, moving beyond rigid distinctions between Expressionism and Formalism. Obeagu's work illustrates this convergence effectively. The painting communicates emotional vulnerability and psychological tension through distorted gestures while simultaneously maintaining visual coherence through geometric precision and spatial control.

The title itself introduces another layer of duality. A "witness" implies observation, testimony, memory, or silent knowledge. Yet the work does not reveal exactly what is being witnessed. This ambiguity transforms the painting into a meditation on hidden trauma, domestic tension, or social silence. The viewer becomes implicated in the act of witnessing, drawn into the emotional uncertainty of the scene. Thus, the work operates not only as a domestic interior but also as a psychological theatre where visible calm conceals deeper emotional fractures.

Consequently, *The Witness* can be interpreted as a powerful embodiment of aesthetic duality in Nigerian contemporary painting. Obeagu juxtaposes expressive distortion with formal balance, emotional tension with compositional restraint, and narrative intimacy with geometric abstraction. The work demonstrates how gesture and geometry can function simultaneously rather than oppositely, revealing the complexity of contemporary Nigerian artistic practice where emotional content and formal design continuously negotiate meaning.

Odun Orimolade: the depiction of the abstract using geometry

Odun Orimolade's artwork is an example of how geometry is expressive architecture - a formal approach inextricably linked with spiritual, metaphysical, and cultural resonance. Her installations and drawings employ structured motifs and spatial layering to invoke unseen realms and imbued presence.

Within the framework of Aesthetic Dualities, Odun Orimolade's *Infinitum* (2021) positions itself at the convergence of formalist geometry and expressionist representation of the unseen. The primary structure of the artwork, an undulating white shape enveloped in elliptical loops, implies mathematical exactness while simultaneously preserving an organic fluidity. These loops and spirals resonate with orbital trajectories and motifs of infinity, materializing ideas related to continuity, cyclicity, and perpetual motion. This amalgamation of scientific form and instinctive rhythm illustrates the tension present between structural clarity and emotive resonance. From a formalist viewpoint, the composition attains visual coherence through the reiteration of elliptical forms, the equable distribution of light and shadow values, and the deliberate expansion of radial lines against a black backdrop. The meticulous organization of these geometric elements imparts a sense of order and stability, comparable to the foundational principles observed in architectural or mathematical frameworks. Nonetheless, *Infinitum* functions equally within an expressionist context. The gentle gradations and organic transformation of the central shape defy strict geometric limitations, permitting the imagery to allude to intangible realities such as the stream of thought, spiritual energy, or the cyclical essence of time. The black void serves both as a spatial depth and as a metaphor for the unknown, positioning the radiant form as a signal of perception within an immaterial realm. This dual characteristic - where geometry expresses invisible or metaphysical conditions - reflects the broader aesthetic dualities prevalent in Nigerian contemporary art: the union of logical precision with

the instinctual, the quantifiable with the mystical. Thus, Orimolade's *Infinitum* metamorphoses geometry into a conduit for probing intangible truths, underscoring the potential of visual art to connect material form with immaterial significance.

Odun Orimolade's *Infinitum* (2023) presents a compelling synthesis of gestural abstraction and formal geometric organization, making it highly relevant to the conceptual framework of *Aesthetic Dualities: Gesture, Geometry, and the Divergence of Expressionist and Formalist Practices in Nigerian Painting*. Unlike narrative-based figurative compositions, this work operates within the realm of abstraction, where movement, rhythm, and spatial relationships become the primary carriers of meaning. Through monochromatic contrasts, looping linear formations, and organic abstraction, Orimolade explores the tension between emotional spontaneity and compositional discipline.

At first glance, the work appears fluid and improvisational. The central form twists dynamically across the picture plane, producing a sense of suspended motion and continuous transformation. The elongated white loops and spiraling extensions create rhythmic movement that guides the viewer's eye through the composition. This gestural quality aligns the work with Expressionist abstraction, where the physical act of mark-making becomes an expression of psychological energy and emotional intensity. The sweeping curves and pulsating forms evoke movement that feels organic, almost bodily, suggesting life, growth, vibration, or transcendence.

The title *Infinitum* reinforces this interpretation. Derived from the concept of infinity or endlessness, the work suggests continuity without fixed beginning or end. The looping forms appear to expand infinitely beyond the frame, creating a visual metaphor for perpetual motion, spiritual continuity, or cosmic energy. Rather than depicting a recognizable subject, Orimolade uses abstraction to communicate experiential and metaphysical ideas, allowing gesture itself to function as meaning.

Despite its expressive fluidity, the work is also deeply formalist in structure. The composition is carefully controlled through balance, symmetry, and contrast. The monochromatic palette of black, white, and grey establishes a rigorous visual economy that emphasizes form over narrative distraction. The dark radial background creates a structured spatial field against which the luminous white forms emerge dramatically. These radiating linear patterns stabilize the composition and direct attention toward the central abstract figure, creating visual cohesion and compositional unity.

Geometry operates subtly but powerfully throughout the work. Although the forms appear organic, they are organized through repeated circular and elliptical motifs that establish rhythm and repetition. The loops surrounding the central structure resemble modular units that recur systematically, creating a sense of order within apparent spontaneity. This relationship between repetition and improvisation reflects Formalist concerns with harmony, pattern, and compositional organization. Orimolade therefore demonstrates how abstraction can simultaneously embody emotional freedom and structural precision.

The spatial ambiguity of the work further contributes to its aesthetic complexity. The absence of a defined environment or recognizable setting removes the composition from literal reality, allowing viewers to engage with pure visual sensation. The floating central form appears suspended within an undefined cosmic or psychological space. This ambiguity aligns the work with modernist abstraction, where visual elements such as line, shape, contrast, and rhythm become autonomous aesthetic entities independent of representational function.

Within the context of Nigerian contemporary art, *Infinitum* reflects an important divergence from overt sociopolitical figuration toward introspective abstraction and metaphysical exploration. While many contemporary Nigerian painters employ narrative imagery to address identity, politics, or social realities, Orimolade explores the expressive possibilities of nonrepresentational form. Yet even within abstraction, the work remains connected to broader African aesthetic traditions through its rhythmic linearity, symbolic fluidity, and emphasis on spiritual dynamism. The composition recalls indigenous visual philosophies in which cyclical movement, continuity, and interconnectedness hold symbolic significance.

Importantly, *Infinitum* demonstrates that the duality between Expressionist and Formalist practices is not necessarily oppositional. The gestural energy of the composition is contained within a highly calculated visual structure. Emotional spontaneity is disciplined through repetition, symmetry, and tonal contrast, while geometric organization is animated through fluid movement and expressive line. This interplay produces a visual tension that becomes central to the painting's aesthetic power.

Consequently, *Infinitum* can be interpreted as a sophisticated embodiment of aesthetic duality in contemporary Nigerian art. Orimolade merges expressive gesture with formal abstraction, creating a work in which emotional movement and geometric order coexist dynamically. The drawing reveals how contemporary Nigerian artists continue to expand the language of painting and drawing beyond representational narratives, engaging abstraction as both an emotional and intellectual mode of artistic inquiry.



Plate III: Odun Orimolade, *Infinitum*, 2023. Mixed media drawing on paper, 18 1/10 × 24 4/5 inches. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/odun-orimolade-infinitum>

The Fire of the Sun in the Sea (2014):

Presented as an undirected illustration within CCA Lagos's "1Work" initiative, the artwork is characterized by an absence of formal boundaries, implying that the creative expression transcends conventional containment. A spectator who interprets molten magma submerged in water may metaphorically reflect indigenous concepts of fluidity, transformation, and interconnectedness, which resonate with contemporary Nigerian issues regarding identity and perception. *The Fire of the Sun in the Sea* (2014) advances this investigation by presenting spirals, cellular formations, and radiant cloud-like shapes suspended within a profound black abyss. The composition's lack of a distinct beginning or conclusion imparts an impression of infinity, thereby allowing geometry to serve as a living, evolving metaphor (CCA Lagos, n.d.). These biomorphic motifs, reminiscent of both deep-sea phosphorescence and celestial constellations, imply an underlying order amid visible chaos. In this context, geometry emerges as a visual language representing intangible forces such as memory, spiritual energy, and cyclical transformation thereby situating the work within the broader discourse of Nigerian contemporary art that engages with metaphysical dimensions (Art Twenty-One Lagos, n.d.). From a theoretical perspective, Orimolade's visual configurations resonate with Yoruba aesthetic philosophy, wherein geometry transcends mere form and acts as a conduit for spiritual significance and dynamic relationality. Furthermore, Gestalt principles such as figure-ground interaction and closure are relevant here, as elementary components coalesce into holistic perceptions of infinite cosmic order. Her artistic output embodies the formalist continuum in Nigerian painting, illustrating how minimal structural elements can evoke expansive significance. Odun Orimolade's 2014 work, "The Fire of the Sun in the Sea," unfolds as a profound exploration of the tensions inherent in contemporary Nigerian art. The piece serves as a visual manifestation of the "Aesthetic Dualities" between gestural expressionism and formalist structuralism. The work begins with an elemental paradox suggested by its title: the impossible coexistence of celestial heat within an aquatic abyss. In this visual story, the dark, expansive background functions as a formalist "sea," a void that is not merely empty but acts as a heavy, pressurized container. This darkness represents the disciplined side of the duality, establishing the boundaries and spatial logic required to ground the composition.

Against this stoic silence, the "fire" emerges as a series of luminous, ethereal gestures that disrupt the stillness of the dark plane. These white trails record the physical energy of the artist's hand, reflecting a move toward an expressionist practice where the act of creation is as significant as the result. Unlike the rigid figurative traditions often associated with earlier Nigerian modernism, Orimolade's marks are intuitive and fluid, suggesting a divergence into a purely emotive language. This is the "Sun" of the work - a raw, flickering energy that asserts the artist's subjective presence against the cold, mathematical vastness of the dark canvas.

However, the power of the work lies in the fact that this chaos is never truly unanchored. Beneath the swirling trails of light lies a hidden geometry. The placement of the light clusters follows a rhythmic, almost calculated progression that prevents the viewer's eye from falling into total disorientation. This structural balance reveals the artist's formalist sensibilities; she exerts a high degree of control over contrast and figure-ground relationships.

The "sea" exerts a visible pressure on the "fire," forcing the gestural marks into specific spatial arrangements that honour the two-dimensional limits of the painting's surface.

Ultimately, "The Fire of the Sun in the Sea" functions as a resolution to the divergence mentioned in the paper's title. It suggests that in the landscape of Nigerian painting, gesture and geometry are not opposing forces but are instead interdependent. The fire is given meaning by the darkness of the sea, just as the sea is only made visible by the presence of the fire. Orimolade's work argues that the true "Expressionist" must still master the "Formalist" vessel, creating a synthesis where the heat of human emotion finds its home within the cool, geometric structures of the medium.



Plate IV: Odun Orimolade, *The Fire of the Sun in the Sea* (2014)

Source: <https://ccalagos.org/the-fire-of-the-sun-in-the-sea-by-odun-orimolade/>

Tola Wewe: Symbolic geometry and cultural aesthetic from the Ona movement

Tola Wewe, an original Ona movement member, connects formal aesthetic exactness with intensely expressive cultural symbology. His work is a living testament to the ways in which geometric design, based in Yoruba cosmology, is transformed into an ordered language of metaphysical and communal significance.

Ancestral Forms (2017) presents a mixed-media composition characterized by shrouded figures and obscured faces, exemplifying the use of stylized geometry. The arrangement of shapes and patterns resonates with Oni cosmological themes, resulting in a spiritual architecture that integrates cultural recollection with formal precision.



Plate V: Tola Wewe, *Ancestral Forms* 2017, 34 x 24 inches mixed media on canvas

Source: <https://www.purelagos.com>

Visual and contextual analysis of Tola Wewe's Ancestral Forms (2017)

Aesthetic Duality: Geometry with Expressive Symbolism

Ancestral Forms is representative of Tola Wewe's matured visual vocabulary, combining ordered geometry and ritual abstraction. The painting comprises modular grids, rectilinear shapes, and sequential patterns, rendered in earth tones of ochre, red, and yellow colour choices inextricably tied to Yoruba cosmology. Such formalist structures are tempered by an array of textures and gestural inflections, imparting the composition with spiritual dynamism. While the painting is subdivided into geometric compartments, it resists a reading as purely minimalistic. The geometric planes recall shrines, doors, and facial masks, invoking the ancestral presences inherent in the spatial structure. The gestural brushwork, layering, and rough textures impart the work with a tactile depth, visually evoking the *oriki* (praise poetry) of Yoruba oral tradition.

Indigenous Modernism and Symbolism

Informed by Yoruba visual epistemology, the symbols in the painting - such as triangular motifs, vertical bars, mask-like faces, and zigzag lines function as visual incantations. They are not just design elements but cultural signifiers, carrying ancestral wisdom, protection, and ritual knowledge. This situates the work within the trajectory of African Indigenous Modernism, where artists such as Wewe recover traditional symbols and recontextualize them in modernist abstraction. His methodology is less Western formal abstraction and more aesthetic spirituality informed by local knowledge systems (Oguibe, 2004).

Theoretical framing: Postcolonial critique and African Phenomenology

Ancestral Forms can be interpreted by using Mudimbe's (1988) decolonial critique: the painting withstands Eurocentric models by generating an autochthonous modernism, employing geometry not as cold reason but as sacred diagrammatic. The painting also fits into Okeke-Agulu's (2015) theory of "postcolonial subjectivity in African art," in which artists resist the colonial visual regime by reaching out to indigenous ideograms, mythic abstraction, and memory as source. Wewe's painting is part of redefining the geometry in Nigerian art as a form of cultural encoding, rather than mere design. His hybrid practice embodies modern Yoruba metaphysics, coupling materiality (canvas, pigment, texture) with metaphysical resonance (ancestry, spirit, history). In *Ancestral Forms*, Wewe constructs a visual shrine, in which the geometry is a container for ancestral invocation. His combination of symbolic abstraction and measured composition is at the heart of aesthetic dualities engaged in contemporary Nigerian painting. In this acrylic painting, stylized figurative details merge into a rhythmically organized composition. Symmetrical patterns allude to communal unity and metaphysical bond. Formal repetition and balance are put to symbolic purposes - evoking ritual gathering, ancestral continuity, and cultural cohesion.

Tola Wewe's *The Great Gathering* (2024) serves as a striking visual representation of the aesthetic dualities that are pivotal to the theme of this analysis, particularly emphasizing the interaction between gestural expressionism and formalist geometry. This artwork effectively connects the visceral dynamism of spontaneous mark-making with the systematic rhythm of symbolic structure. Upon initial observation, the painting's rich surface texture, fluid painterly strokes, and the profound, atmospheric blues impart a powerful emotive ambiance. The expressionist inclination is apparent in the unrefined vigour of the brushwork and the stratification of pigments that both obscure and reveal anthropomorphic forms. The faces, depicted in semi-abstract representations with luminous red eyes, convey a spiritual or ancestral presence. This instinctive, nearly trance-like depiction resonates with Wewe's Yoruba cosmological principles, particularly concerning concepts of *òrìṣà* communication, collective memory, and unseen energies. The gestural aspect of the paint application underscores the artist's physical involvement, resonating with Robert Farris Thompson's (1983) concept of "flash of the spirit" in African art, an invocation that spiritually and performatively animates the visual landscape. Notwithstanding its expressive intensity, *The Great Gathering* simultaneously exhibits a distinct geometric foundation. The composition is formed through recurring shapes, rectangular segments, triangular patterns, vertical lines, and stacked ovals that establish structural equilibrium and visual rhythm. These formalist techniques are grounded in Yoruba design frameworks such as *àròkò* (symbolic communication) and *òna* (patterned aesthetics), which emphasize symmetry, balance, and codified symbols (Drewal, 2014). The incorporation of textile-like motifs on the figures' bodies and garments further indicates a formal rationale, implying the impact of *adire* or *aso-oke* textile traditions. These visual signifiers extend beyond mere decoration; they serve as vessels of cultural narratives, aligning with semiotic traditions within African art.



Plate VI: Tola Wewe, *The Great Gathering*, 2024. Acrylic on canvas, 16 × 20 inches.
Source: <https://www.artsy.net>

Visual and conceptual reality

What is especially pertinent about *The Great Gathering* to this study is the way that it does not reconcile the opposition between gesture and geometry but permits them to subsist together. The figures arise out of a matrix of symbolic abstraction - at once intuitive and cerebral, chaotic and orderly. This dual nature speaks to the artist's involvement with both conventional Yoruba spiritual frameworks and modern art lexicons.

Wewe's practice defies binary interpretation by proposing that geometry can be expressive, and gesture can be imbued with profound symbolic meaning. It is this mixed aesthetic - half modern, half ancestral - that characterizes the postcolonial nuance of current Nigerian painting.

The Great Gathering is a quintessential example of this study's thematic concern in its synthesis of gestural spontaneity and formalist lucidity. Tola Wewe's work, and especially this painting, confirms that Nigerian painting is not determined by any single direction but by an intersection of indigenous philosophies, modernist aesthetics, and individual vision. Through the emotional presence of the figures and the coded structure of the forms, the painting is a visual conversation between intuition and structure, spirit and system, gesture and geometry.

Wewe's art is in line with Yoruba philosophical aesthetics, specifically the theory of *àṣẹ* (spiritual energy) and *ojú-inú* (inward sight), wherein geometric shape embodies spiritual energies and purposeful cultural insight (Abiodun, 2014). His ordered visual grammar demonstrates that formalism need not be abstract but can be expressive and spiritually meaningful.

Together, these artists - Odun Orimolade and Tola Wewe represent the formal pole of your aesthetic duality model. Orimolade's geometrically minimalist, spatial paintings showcase how geometry by itself can convey metaphysical expansiveness. Wewe's symbolic geometry shows formal order as a vessel of cultural narrative and spiritual identity. Their paintings are different from Chike Obeagu's gestural, expressive manner, creating a rich continuum where geometry and gesture meet and part in Nigerian painting.

Synthesis of findings

This study demonstrates that contemporary Nigerian artists such as Chike Obeagu, Odun Orimolade, and Tola Wewe practice a conscious interplay between expressionist methods and formalist structures, yielding a bifurcated aesthetic vernacular resistant to straightforward categorization. Obeagu's art yields emotional complexity and postcolonial issues through distortive expression and narrative stratification. Conversely, Orimolade uses painstaking geometrical configurations and ethereal forms to investigate metaphysical subjects based on Yoruba cosmology. Wewe's paintings emphasize order, repetition, and cultural import, invoking the systematic spiritual codes intrinsic to the *Ona* tradition while allowing for a measure of intuitive expression.

Together, these artists challenge the binary opposition between emotion-driven spontaneity and intellect-driven design. Instead, their processes suggest a hybrid aesthetic practice where gestural and geometric coexist not in opposition but as interdependent aspects. This synthesis aligns with broad poststructuralist understandings of African art, where identity, form, and meaning are in constant flux and negotiated through multiple frameworks - local and global, spiritual and political.

The discoveries occasion a rethinking of the ways in which Nigerian painting has frequently been explicated using foreign formalist or primitivist frameworks that compress the sophistication of its visual tactics. Conventional art historical models, particularly those based on Euro-American modernism, are prone to categorize African painting as instinctual or derivative. Yet, as this research demonstrates, the dialectic between gestural expression and geometric restraint is not a stylistic happenstance but rather a considered conceptual and cultural strategy.

The works of these three artists place Nigerian painting as a field in which formal considerations are balanced with emotional resonance, and in which established ordering systems, like the design principles of Yoruba tradition, are put to work in contexts open to postmodern dislocations. This revaluation argues against the assumption that African art must be held to linear narrative or monolithic identity and asserts instead a complicated and dialogical structure.

Implications for contemporary African and global art

The significance of this study goes beyond the Nigerian situation. Firstly, it adds to a broader appreciation of African aesthetics as it documents how indigenous philosophies like *àṣẹ*, *ojú-inú*, and *Ona* continue to influence visual expression in modern situations. Secondly, it places Nigerian artists as theorists of form, who are able to reimagine global art vocabularies through locally inflected but globally relevant aesthetics.

More broadly, the synthesis of gesture and geometry in Nigerian painting illustrates the global postcolonial condition, with its simultaneous experience of identity dispersal and the recuperation of indigenous meaning practices. In the global art world where debates on decolonization, authenticity, and hybridity remain ongoing, these paintings constitute an important fusion of expression and form that resists the entrenched hierarchies of modernist discourse. Finally, this discussion underscores the imperative of recognizing African artists as not just producers of culturally oriented imagery, but also as important contributors to the conversation of global aesthetic theory and criticism.

Conclusion

This research explored the aesthetic dichotomies of contemporary Nigerian painting, highlighting the dynamic tension and dialogue between gestural expressionism and formalist geometry. Through the study of the artworks of Chike Obeagu, Odun Orimolade, and Tola Wewe, the paper demonstrated that Nigerian artists employ a hybrid visual vocabulary that simultaneously invokes personal, cultural, and philosophical contexts. Expressionist modes are used to convey socio-political urgency, individual memory, and emotional intensity, while formalist strategies signify intellectual rigor, spiritual balance, and traditional design principles. Theoretical insights drawn from visual semiotics, Yoruba aesthetics, and postcolonial theory enabled an examination of how such dualities coexist without functioning as oppositional forces.

This research contributes to the fields of African art history and global aesthetic theory in several ways. Firstly, it expands discussions on Nigerian painting beyond style-based classifications by investigating the conceptual and cultural motivations behind artistic decisions. Secondly, it demonstrates the continued relevance of indigenous epistemologies such as *àṣẹ*, *ojú-inú*, and *Ona* in shaping contemporary artistic practice. Thirdly, it positions Nigerian painters as active participants in global postcolonial art discourse, thereby enriching debates on hybridity, identity, and decolonization. The study also bridges the divide between Western formalism and African expressive conventions by demonstrating how both coexist within the same artistic practices.

Despite its contributions, the study is limited by the number of artists examined and by its reliance on secondary literature and a limited number of exhibition reviews. Although visual and semiotic analyses provided rigorous interpretive models, a broader data set incorporating studio visits, face-to-face interviews, and a wider selection of artists from different regions of Nigeria would provide a more nuanced understanding of the range of formalist and expressionist engagements. Linguistic and archival limitations also restricted access to certain indigenous aesthetic materials that could have further strengthened the theoretical framework.

Recommendations for further Research

Future studies should undertake comparative research across different African countries to analyse how the interaction between gesture and geometry manifests within different cultural and artistic systems. Longitudinal studies of the stylistic development of individual artists can offer deep insight into how aesthetic dualities unfold over time. Moreover, there is a need for interdisciplinary scholarship that combines art history with cognitive science, philosophy, or performance studies to understand the embodied nature of gestural painting and the metaphysical implications of geometric design in African contexts. Further research efforts should also investigate audience reception of such dualities in local and international exhibitions to allow for a better understanding of how such artworks are received both on and off the continent.

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