

# Shadow As An Element Of Design In Painting: A Critical Phenomenological Assessment In Practice-Based Research

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## Abstract

This research was inspired by Paul Gauguin's theory on the inclusion of shadow in painting. He occupies a prominent place in the history of painting and particularly in the history of Fauvism and Symbolism. Shadows have been viewed as appendage and still remain appendages to figures and objects in painting. The question is however, is it possible to separate a shadow from its material subject that casts it for the purpose of painting? This study set out to create paintings through observation of images derived from shadows. Shadows were reconstructed in painting as independent images and not as appendages to any phenomenal object. The research was delimited to only human shadows; human form being one of the widest and attractive subjects in the history of art. The literature reviewed to show the dimensions on shadow have been in existence before the researcher took up this study. The study adopted the phenomenology and the intuitive inquiry method in qualitative analysis. The research established that the practice of painting and knowledge are inseparable and that painting, is a visual narrative that could be read through careful contemplation.

**Keywords:** Phenomenological perception, Transformation of shadow, Art practice and Empirical research ideas, Human spaces, Art theory and Realisation

## Introduction

The assessment of painting or any other form of visual arts as a process of research in the qualitative method is still a difficult task for some scholars to accept within the visual arts scholarship. What is fascinating to know is that, some of these scholars that disagree with this idea are teachers of theories in the visual arts too. How can *Painting* be subjected to measurement and systematic evaluations? How can we measure the variables and reliability in the process of visual arts which is subjective and full of emotional appeal? The Qualitative research techniques offer a platform to contextualise such understandings within the: Narrative research, grounded theory discourse analysis, narrative inquiry phenomenology and psychology. All these are the various fields where *the artist practice-based and practice-led research triangulate* their investigative techniques to create meaning-making ideas. The discourse of thinking, making and writing in the studio is far removed from the basic understanding of art history or sociology, rather the idea of its research process is triangulated in the various understanding of aesthetic theories and attempts to explain the human spaces through images, colour, and it contextualises space in a transcendental philosophy. The idea in this kind of research has to do with the artist-researcher's understanding of the word *phenomenology*. On the one hand the idea is an attempt to continually deny artist channel to express their ideas in writing. In another perspective, maybe, ignorance could be responsible. The word *phenomenology* is the study of one's experiences, according to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012) the author's personal encounter with shadow as an element of design in painting. Just like explaining the unexplainable use of the words of Robert Kaliva Carroll (2015) IDSV, in this sense it is not a process of measurement of data in the quantitative research but personal engagement with narrative of human spaces and its interpretation in colours and space. In the context of this misconception of research method in the visual arts, the artist-researcher's understanding of art practice as a form of research is better and has deepened now more than when the researcher encountered this theory as a form of research in visual arts, especially painting. Can art practice create knowledge? What kind of knowledge does painting as art practice create? There are three questions that bothers the author as an artist and a researcher. These are: (a) How to define and determine a research focus? (b) How to clarify the relevance of research in shadow as an image and a possible new syntax in painting? (c) How to develop an appropriate methodological thinking in order to select a specific method that would help in realising the research objectives? These questions are critical, since most scholars are yet to understand the context of research in the studio. Scholars like James Elkins in Katy and Holdridge (2006) refused to see or understand the type of knowledge produced by Pablo Picasso's (1907) painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. Yet, volumes of literature had sprung up because of it or better still, the *Monalisa* by Leonardo Da Vinci. For Elkins, it seems that his understanding of the word *knowledge* must come from scientific theory and

understanding, creating the *logo centric* position of the western knowledge and philosophy; ignoring perhaps the human perspective as a knowledge based on experiences that emphasises knowledge within the six cardinal points of knowing.

This thinking would engage our thoughts in this writing in a view to finding out what is really art practice as a form of research and its construction of knowledge as it borders on an academic process. Art practice as a form of research started some few years ago. According to Smith and Dean in (Irokanulo and Ndubuisi, 2013; Irokanulo, 2014 and 2015), practice –led and practice- based research are most times used interchangeably; meaning, the research is based on studio practice. However, practice-led originally means locating a problem in a practice that can lead to research and the original knowledge outcome can be presented textually without the support of creative practice, while Practice- based research is in the centre of constant exploration in the studio which eventually produces new knowledge and understanding.

This method (practice-based and practice-led research technique) emerged from the Australian Research Council which started in the 1970s and subsequently was adapted in the British Research for Humanities in the 1980s (Makela, Nimkulrat, Dash and Nsenga, in Irokanulo 2014). This research method most of the time, is called Art based research or creative art research process. The name embraces the wider concept of all the arts from the Performing Arts, to the Visual Arts. Researchers from other European countries apart from the U.K call it Artistic research. Whatever one calls it whether practice-led or practice based research, they all mean the same. It is about the self-reflective and self-critical processes of a person taking part in the creation of meaning within contemporary art (Irokanulo, 2014; Mafe, Hanads, Suorate and Vaden, 2005 in Irokanulo, 2014).

Another expectation from an artist-researcher is captured in the idea of creative discovery (Fleishman, cited by Farber & Makela, in Irokanulo (2014), an idea which underlines the importance of the two-fold process of making and reflecting. The process reveals the maker’s insights, knowledge, or understanding of their work. This research method is composed of three basic techniques from the conventional research method, which are qualitative, performative inquiry and the action research inquiry. An important dimension is the creative process of the practice based method that allows the researcher to use studio process as research method. Here the focus is on transforming a simple image of shadow into a complex and yet comprehensive art work in painting.

### **Statement of the Research problem**

It has been observed that painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, through the nineteenth century, employed shadows in their various paintings. Shadows served as appendages in explaining the effect of light on objects in the environment. Artists like Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Rembrandt (1606-1669) and a host of other Dutch painters employed the effect of shadows in creating their paintings. In the nineteenth century, several of the artists including Claude Monet (1840-1926) attempted to capture the illusion of time and its effect on the environment. Till date, that has been the effect of a shadow in painting. The thinking in this research is to look at the shadow differently from the previous ages. Attention is turned to the theory of Gauguin. Unlike any other impressionist or the post impressionists, he did not employ shadows in his paintings but saw them as separate entities that could manifest new thinking and idea. In his letter to Emily Bernard (1888) he affirmed that “...instead of a figure if you put the shadow only of a person; you have found an original starting point”. He presented an idea that shadow, after being studied, can lead to new understanding and design in painter’s composition. He persuaded us to consider composition where we have interactions between human figures with other elements of design. Instead of a human form, shadow should be included in a composition.

This is the new development which led to a new perspective in painting composition. This research was motivated by simulated and natural light effects that create shadows of various kinds. Images that shadows create under this effect of light would be of interest because they bring us face to face with the Igbo mythology of multiplicity of the self specifically, the *Onyinyo* (Igbo theory of image) philosophy of the essence of the being.

The way these images appear to the researcher’s perceptual reality under induced light and how the individual’s mind interprets it is of interest not necessarily the physical appearance of any shadow. Imagery derived from shadow brings to bear on the critical contemplation and theorisation on the multiplicity of the self in Igbo metaphysical understanding. This is imitated by the multiple shadow cast from various light sources. One wonders if shadows in themselves could not be the major focus in painting as a narrative element included with or without objects or human images. Is it not possible

that a shadow from induced or simulated light can create imagery that are quite challenging. Should not relieving them from original objects that created the shadows become the concept of a painting? Could this concept develop into more complete images that represent visual thinking and perception of subjective reality? Is it possible to separate shadow from its material subject that cast it for the purpose of painting? This study sets out to see if the theory (Paul Gauguin) is realisable and assess its efficacy in painting composition.

### **Aim and Objective of the study**

The aim of this study is to create paintings through the observation of images derived from shadows, where shadow imagery will be reconstructed in painting as independent images and not as appendages to any phenomenal object.

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. access if Gauguin's claim that instead of a figure you put the shadow only of a person; you have found an original starting point, can be realised in painting;
- ii. manifest/develop new images in painting derived from the exploration of the imageries from shadows.

### **Methodological approach**

This study adopted phenomenology as its methodological approach. It is a process of inquiry that was championed by various philosophers conceptualising their ideas to finding out the best way to engage human experience from different dimensions. Such philosophers like: Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Gadamer. Each of these scholars point at a direction to follow for example Husserl the father of phenomenology wants researchers to go through the experience themselves and perhaps live within the experience themselves so that one would know and realise experience as a product of human spaces and psychology investigation. Heidegger insists on knowing the essence of being in a material world conceptualising on the existentialisms of the human space. Merleau-Ponty study suggests that, as humans, we see ourselves as different from everything else in the world. This is because of our senses of self is holistic and is engaged in the world, rather than being subsumed within it. Gadamer explores the diversification of history, truth and its interpretation. These authors drew from the complexity of human experience as a tool in understanding the subjectiveness of being in a material world, how they react and understand these basic elements rule and govern their entire lives. This understanding was brought to the fore to conceptualise researcher's understanding of nature of self and truth, which were embodied in the Phenomenological and intuitively constructed to assess the process of the researcher's personal engagement with shadow carefully. It is a reconstruction of a shadow as it confronts the author's imagination and understanding of the researcher in painting. The study captures and narrates a personal engagement with shadows as source of inquiry in painting. Shadow in this context is a process that was the perceptual theory of Maurice Merleau Ponty in phenomenology. The phenomenology and intuitive inquiry was brought to bear on this study. It is also used in this study as a hermeneutical research process that required five iterative cycles of analysis and interpretation.

### **Process of Conceptual Creation and Discussion**

#### **First cycle**

Cycle one clarified and reflected on the topic. The topic as the a phenomenological encounter with shadow as an element of design in painting, a cyclical process like the action research method but in this aspect the interpretative nature of the artefact from the primary data, which was the researcher's experience in terms of shadow as an ephemeral subject that engages the psychic of the researcher and translating them as painterly expressions in the case of the studio based research, was used in this creative process. This first cycle determined the ability of the author to explain sensation, feeling and emotional engagement with ephemeral subject like shadow and convey it as a vehicle of aesthetic in painting composition

#### **Second cycle**

The second cycle deepened the researcher's personal understanding of what the research topic was all about, by considering, phenomenological encounter with shadow as an element of design in painting which the basic word was the subject of transforming the aesthetics of shadow, an element of design in painting; Transforming is an active verb that construes a doing or a process of getting into the presence. Aesthetics construes the binary between the abstract quality of an object or subject and how the sensuous organ perceives it. Aesthetics constitute a metaphysical presence in a perceptual reality and subjective perspective. The predicate in this context was the shadow becoming the element of a

transformation that constructed a form of aesthetic in the painting. The predicate was the performance of a shadow from one stage to another in a manner that the independent variable continued to change according to the influence of the coding the researcher subjects it to.

The ability to interpret the primary data which was shadow was key following the understanding of Heideggerian theory of being and time, the translation and fusion of artistic imagination into the ephemeral subject like shadow and reconstruct and transform to aesthetic becomes the driving force of the author. Here, practice and development are interchangeable nature of the research which is explorative in context. The research is the theoretical understanding of the act while the practice is the action employed to explain the theoretical (which is research). The researcher discovered that a shadow has the capacity to create imagery for the purpose of painting.

### Third Cycle

The third cycle bears witness to the understanding of the primary data, which is artist-researcher's experience. The experiences with this natural element *Onyinyo* (Igbo mythology of shadow or imagery) reveals authors childhood understanding of nature as a critical element in design becomes the basis upon which to explore and interrogate artistic practice. The study transformed the artist-researcher engagement with elements of shadow and its subsequent coding and analysis to realise an understanding of aesthetics with the imagery of shadow in painting surfaces. This was the beginning of visual and material thinking of shadow as a vehicle of painterly metaphor. Plate I depicts the primary material shadow. It shows the basic understanding of the elements one can call shadow as a material thinking process. It presents the first and second stage of the phenomenological and intuitive inquiry cycle. The basis of these images was to liken them to the qualitative methodology, in order to establish that artistic knowledge can be compared to the humanity research process and results can be achieved using this process. Plates I shows the researcher's initial basic understanding of what shadow means devoid of what cast it. As the researcher progressed with this thinking, the idea began to take shape and the text that inspired this study gave it more life and challenge.



Plate I, photograph, by Professor Mu'azu Sani 2010

One of the characteristics of a complete research according to Grey in Irokanulo (2014), is to use a wide range of methods, mostly visual, derived from practice, or adapted from other research concepts on a practice- based research context. The fourth and the fifth stages are the personal positions the researcher voiced (means personal interpretation) in the interpretation of research data which, of course, was the primary study experienced in the given subject matter or topic. This stage represented the developmental period of this research and the philosophy embedded in its transformation from primary data into a completely new language of painting. What the researcher did was to show the primary understanding of what shadow was to the study and the general understanding of people on what shadow is all about. The pictures in Plate I represents this understanding of the general perception, one of the objectives; which is to assess if shadow, devoid of its cast, can construct a pictorial image that can be used as an object of narrative element. These ideas represented the first and second of the five cycles of interpretation of the multiplicity, participation, and unity in the qualitative research and practice- based process.

The first and the second context of these cycles of interpretation show the ability to assess that shadow can be a metaphorical idiom of expression in painting. It also proves that shadow can create a synergy between the human figuration in the construction of reality. This also confirmed that the second objective of the research could be achieved. It is not the intention of the researcher to define the story, content or meaning of works. This study tried to explore the translation of shadow from the basic ephemeral stage to the fantasy of the researcher's imagination and understanding into painting. Through this means the artist-researcher believes that the viewer of these images has the

understanding to relate them to the element of design and compositions in painting. The images created as a sequence of research are in themselves reality not imitation of reality; this reality assumes life and place of thought for whoever that beholds them.

In theory, the researcher likened the paintings to the conception and the birth of a new baby to a family. No matter the name the parents gave to that baby, it would grow and assume their place in the society. Though the society would have their understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the child different from the parents, the child remains the same. In the same vein, these images would assume their rightful position in any given context that they are examined.

#### **Fourth cycle**

In the fourth cycle, the phenomenological and intuitive inquiry presented an interpretation of the third cycle's lenses. The empirical and theoretical text reviewed at the start of the study is drawn from theoretical refinements and thinking based on the speculation of Gauguin in 1888. Hermeneutical process of the first stage through to the third and the fourth gave a clear transformative process. The fourth cycle was the presentation of the researcher's voice which one could call the construction of the researcher's idea toward personal voice which found expression in the fourth and fifth cycles. This perhaps explains the Arnheim's (1997) theory of thinking with pure shape.

#### **Fifth cycle**

The researcher presented a final set of interpretative lenses which have been transformed by personal engagement with the data gathered in the third stage and provided detailed comparison of the second and the fourth lenses. The fifth stage was the final attempt to contextualise the final creative voice of the researcher. Finally the imageries derived from the entity became a vehicle of painterly expression.



**Plate II: Artist: Irokanulo Emmanuel, title: Light and Passage, year of production: 2012 Oil on canvas Size 120x120cm**

How does image derived from shadow become the focus and the central issues in the practice –based research in painting? The central idea is to create knowledge from yet an old idea of Paul Gauguin some years ago, which is the manifestations of this explorations in painting. The thinking is to see how new ideas that would command new colour space and fusion of images of natural element of design into new imagination and understanding. The Plate I and Plate II show the study of shadow under simulated light and imagined colours into them removing them into another concept of reality in the painting experience.



**Plate III: Artist: Irokanulo Emmanuel, title: Corridor of Power, 2010 Oil on canvas 120x120cm. Year of production: 2010**



**Plate IV Artist: Irokanulo Emmanuel, title: Expression, year: 2010 Oil on canvas Size 120x120cm**



**Plate V: Artist: Irokanulo Emmanuel, Title: Unconcealment Oil on Canvas, year of production 2011 Size 150x150cm**

Plates IV and V from the author's personal observations and engagement with shadow have created yet another idea of painting using the practice-led or perhaps the practice-based method to create knowledge. The fifth cycle of this study shows clearly that the theory of Gauguin could be realised in painting and it could also infer knowledge in a clearer understanding. The strength of imagination and mental understanding of the artist-researcher has shown that sensuous perception could construct knowledge against perhaps the understanding of Plato. These images derived from the imagery of shadow, bring us back to the question of how we can create knowledge through practice. First what is knowledge? Can practice create knowledge?

The response to the above questions is motivated by the researcher's personal thinking of alternative ways of using shadows in painting different from the previous approaches which masters of painting had engaged in. There are notable groups which showed considerable influence on the use of the shadow as a powerful vehicle of expression in pictorial painting. These are the Dutch painters of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the Impressionistic group of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Dutch painters employed artificial light to create the effect of shadow in their paintings. Most of these artists created paintings that are masterpieces which can be seen in museums today. The 19<sup>th</sup> century art movements brought Impressionism to the spotlight, and created shadows to capture the passage of light. The study is aware of the paintings of Gani Odutokun (1946-1995). Artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century also employed the use of shadow to create a new thinking deviating from that which was in existence before then. Odutokun's *The King addressing his Subjects* creates the situation half way because the researcher is actually mediating on total absence of material objects leaving shadows to constitute the picture.

This research is based on the creative imagination of the researcher in producing new alternative ways of reasoning in that sense creating new knowledge in the practice of painting. This answers the questions of Elkins in Katy and Holdridge (2006), if the Picasso's painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907) has created any form of knowledge and the answer is yes indeed. Pablo Picasso was able to change the course of the European painting technique of illusionistic to flat design that's knowledge in the visual sense of it. With these instances, this study believes that knowledge has been created; the question then is what knowledge is and what type of knowledge exists?

According to Webster Leonard and Markova Patricia (2007), modernism has its philosophical origin at the time of the reformation around 1600s. Modernism draws its origins from the works of philosophers, such as Descartes, the seventeenth-century Roman Catholic philosopher, who was seeking a tool to define truth and knowledge in terms of a belief in God and Christianity. He premised I think therefore I am and suggested that knowledge is from the stream of human spaces and its understanding. He insisted that truth and knowledge took on a scientific proof-based logical form, however, Carson (1996) posit that method derived from this philosophical perspective were claimed



to be trans-cultural, trans-racial and trans-linguistic, he simply put, any knowledge produced by these methods was held to be true for all cultures, all races and language. In this vein, art practice has captured truth in the context of humanity without using the true proof-logic of science.

### **Critical discourse**

What is painting and what is knowledge? The author likes to think that two things are involved in this context; one the chemical component which is the paint, the little substance that occupies the mind. The other component is the active verb which is painting, makes one think and loose oneself in contemplation in front of a painting. This verb brings thought process and perhaps imaginations of the body of an artist moving across the canvas creating this object of thought. In this vein, the researcher argues that; painting is a process which could be seen as a thinking space, in this sense the artists bring their thoughts to bear on the canvas and they manifest in symbols and images in space through line, colours and space. Innis in Langer (2009), and aligns with Gregory J Blair (2014) that:

Place has been a central consideration in much philosophical discourse since at the ancient Greeks. This Dissertation will argue, however, that in certain instances in the history of thinking, place has played a significant and unique role, one beyond consideration.

This is because the surface of painting or the narrative space is a place of thought that accumulates into images and symbols which is a product of thoughts that bring forth knowledge through philosophical discourses (Langer, 1967; Sullivan, 2010 and Irokanulo, 2014). Images beyond our thoughts are called aesthetics because they possess that metaphysical presences which is beyond a common place in a thing. Can aesthetics construct knowledge outside visual arts and in the field of academic research? Knowledge can be viewed from two perspectives: the scientific and the tacit modes. Art knowledge is a tacit form. It is suggested, (Polanyi in Webster and Mertova, 2007) that accurate human knowledge is a personal knowledge or knowing, which can be validated based on its content and context. Scientific knowledge is knowledge that is testable and validated by scientific measurement. Tacit knowledge is the type of knowledge that emerges from personal motivation of learning but which can be shared with others. A huge influence has been Karl Popper's (1902 -1994) view of a right to be sure expressed in his description of scientific enquiry. His key- point is that we cannot know any general truth about the world for sure. Many, for instance Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), have pointed out that we can only observe a finite number of events, that, for all we know, the next observation will contradict any theory we have based on the earlier ones.

### **Conclusion**

This study was undertaken on the basis that the theory of Gauguin can lead to the development of an alternative thinking process whereby shadow, without the object that cast it, can lead to the development of visual language. After studying the elements of design that constitute the body of every given art work, it reflects the theory in the interpretive strength of the viewer. Sullivan (2010) stresses that, the post discipline feature of the visual arts means that theories and practices are regularly embraced and reworked. For different purposes, an artist explores creative practice. The basis of this body of work is to respond to the understanding that shadow could create new ideas and contribute to the body of knowledge on a new visual language; a critical starting point in looking beyond what is known. Irrespective of whether the origin of knowledge is stable or shaky, there is always the need to move beyond prevailing attitudes, assumptions and assurances. This study attempted to x-ray what we think we know and move it to an entirely unimaginable level from what we know to what we do not know and make a comparison of both, to see if we could find something new. The study therefore is a timely contribution to new knowledge through painting.

The belief that epistemological knowledge cannot be justified through the positivist test modes, should have a re-think because in this study the observation of shadow and its sequential transformation from ephemeral object to aesthetic object in painting is an example of human experience and its realisation in painting. The thinking that physical skill only exhibits craft, not understanding and knowledge is best exemplified by the statement of Michael West dictionary in the early 1950s that states that artists are people who use their hands to work not their brain, a position that is deemed unsatisfactory and unacceptable in to this study. For positivists, or the science based scholars, knowledge comes from mental processes devoid of art or physical activities. If knowledge comes from human activities and humans are subjective beings, then art is in the centre of human creative activities and can generate knowledge. One fact, which the researcher argues is that art forms are largely generated by emotions. We seek out the arts in order to take a ride on the wings, which its

forms provide. The arts are ways to get a natural high. The height is secured largely through our sensory response to the way sound is arranged, as in music; to the way colours are composed, as in visual arts; and to the ways in which the movement of the human body excites us as we experience its motion in time and space as in dance.

The sensory side of human experience is primary in the arts, or so it is believed. Plato regarded the senses as impediments to the achievement of that exalted state in which forms could be known. The weights and chains of the prisoners incarcerated in Plato's cave were really surrogates or proxies for the distractions that our senses imposed upon whatever our rational mind could possibly muster. Put most simply, the sensory systems that were stimulated through the arts were misleading; they lead one away rather than toward that form of critical rationality upon which truth depends. The understanding of truth or the search of it is quite individualistic and subjective, truth most often represents our subjective differences in given matters and ideas; art develops the imagination that allows the subjectiveness of individuals to accept the concept of truth. The art shows contrarily to understanding of Plato employs imagination and understanding to reach the height of all time realities, it is here that art practice could be said to construct knowledge. To this end, it is an undecidable that art practice assumes a platform of scholarly investigation in painting whether using images in painting or just text, art practice is a method that can answer all the thinking in the visual arts and perhaps other disciplines too.

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