

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATIONAL STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN PAINTINGS OF EBENEZER AKINOLA AND SAM EBOHON

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the practice of Ebenezer Akinola born December 1, 1968, in Ibadan, Oyo state and Sam Ebohon, born November 30, 1970 in Lagos whose artistic production demonstrate an intentional and multilayered exploration of representational and abstract modes of expression. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this research integrates visual and semiotic analysis, supported by secondary literature derived from exhibition catalogues and critical essays. The theoretical approach draws on postcolonial theory, specifically Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, in combination with W.J.T. Mitchell's visual semiotics, to examine how these artists work to undermine conventional dichotomies between content and form. The findings reveal that figuration and abstraction are not only opposing strategies, but synergistic tools enabling Nigerian artists to convey ideas about identity, memory, and resistance to colonial narratives, Western aesthetic dominance, socio-political marginalization, and cultural erasure. Their vibrant, hybrid visual language reflect the intricacy of the modern Nigerian artistic experience.

**Keywords:** Figuration, Abstraction, Contemporary Nigerian Painting, Ebenezer Akinola, Sam Ebohon, Visual Semiotics

## Introduction

Modern Nigerian painting is characterized by a vibrant syncretism of visual idioms drawn from indigenous traditions, postcolonial histories, and global concerns. Abstraction and figuration in this context operate not as binary opposites but as complementary modes towards expressing complex personal, political, and cultural meanings. The conventional dichotomy between figuration - as clarity and representation - and abstraction - as ambiguity and conceptualism - proves inadequate in the Nigerian context, where both approaches engage deeply with memory, narrative, and resistance to post-colonial narratives. Nigerian artists do not merely follow global art trends but reinterpret them through local knowledge systems and lived realities. Figuration, especially of the human form, often becomes a means of articulating identity, reclaiming history, and documenting everyday experiences (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Abstraction, by contrast, enables a symbolic richness that invokes religious and cultural philosophies, offering meanings that resist simple interpretation (Enwezor, 2009). Artists such as Ebenezer Akinola and Sam Ebohon exemplify how figural and abstract approaches are not mere stylistic preferences but are rooted in deliberate cultural and intellectual engagement. Akinola's refined figuration dignifies Black subjects, imbuing them with emotional and psychological depth (Plate 1 and 2).



Plate 1: Ebenezer Akinola, *The type of Gal your Papa Warned you about*, 2023, Oil on Linen 40 1/5 × 34 3/10 inches. Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ebenezer-akinola>



Plate 2: Ebenezer Akinola, *Good Gal...I*, 2023, Oil on canvas 60 × 48 inches.  
Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ebenezer-akinola>

In contrast, Ebohon employs abstraction as a method of evocation rather than literal representation, leveraging line, texture, and form to allude to spiritual entities, environmental processes, and collective memory (Plate 3). Although their visual tactics diverge, both artists engage the broader inquiry of how form and content intersect in the postcolonial Nigerian imagination.



Plate 3: [Sam Ebohon](#), *Baba 70*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 inches. Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

This paper investigates the application of figuration and abstraction in recent Nigerian painting as a means of expression, critique, and identity construction. Using Homi Bhabha's (1994) theory of hybridity, this study understands these visual devices as not rigid categories, but as areas of encounter where meaning is negotiated and reconstituted. Bhabha's "Third Space" theory is central to an understanding of how Nigerian artists negotiate their colonial heritage of visual categorization, thereby producing hybrid genres expressive of their multi-layered socio-cultural milieux. Furthermore, W.J.T. Mitchell's (2005) theory of the "pictorial turn" alerts us to the necessity of engaging with images as something other than representation, but rather as semiotic and cultural phenomena expressing themselves in complicated, often non-verbal manners.

Using a qualitative approach of visual and semiotic analyses of chosen paintings by Akinola – *'Let us go beyond this moment'*, 2023 and Ebohon, *'A Man Must Hold His'*, 2022 is ideal for exploring nuanced meanings, symbolic content, and contextual interpretations in artworks as it allows for interpretive depth rather than empirical generalization. The semiotic analysis digs into the *signs* and *symbols* in the paintings for instance the clothing, objects, gestures, background elements to interpret culturally coded messages and ideologies. This study draws on exhibition catalogues and critical literature to contextualize the work of Nigerian painters within a broader aesthetic and political discourse. Its aim is to explore how Nigerian artists strategically navigate the boundaries between figuration and abstraction to engage both local and global audiences. Significantly, it presents this meeting as a manifestation of decolonial praxis, demonstrating how such visual practices are not simply copies of Euro-American modernity but are, indeed, intended challenges to Eurocentric notions of form and artistic priority. Through these strategies, Nigerian artists claim their visual sovereignty by locating their practices within local histories, cultural memories, and socio-political conditions. The development of figuration and abstraction in Nigerian painting is therefore linked to the general intellectual and political history of Nigeria, more particularly as a reaction to colonialism and as a struggle towards cultural self-definition. An important event in this process was the establishment of the Zaria Art Society in 1958 by artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Yusuf Grillo. Their "Natural Synthesis" ideology sought to synthesize Western art training with indigenous traditions as a deliberate decolonial gesture (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

In the early post-independence period, Nigerian artists used figuration - recognizable human or symbolic forms - to counter colonial portrayals of Africa as primitive or static, affirming African subjectivity and historical presence. While abstraction was not the dominant style, it was embedded within figuration through stylized forms and motifs derived from indigenous visual traditions such as Uli, Nsibidi, Yoruba carvings, and Islamic geometric patterns. These symbolic abstractions, even within representational works, reflected indigenous epistemologies and laid the foundation for later artists to more explicitly engage the interplay between figuration and abstraction within a decolonial context. From the 1980s onward, during the postcolonial and late-modernist era, Nigerian artists increasingly engaged with global contemporary art practices. The economic liberalization of the 1990s and the rise of international biennales expanded opportunities for critical experimentation and contributed to a growing embrace of abstraction as a mode of conceptual freedom and transnational relevance (Enwezor, 2009; Oguibe, 2016). However, this did not signal a rejection of figuration; rather, artists often recontextualized it to create new dialogues around hybridity, spirituality, gender, and memory. Central to this artistic shift is an ongoing debate in art theory over how to define abstraction and figuration without reducing them to simplistic binaries.

Figuration typically refers to artwork depicting recognizable subjects, especially the human figure, while abstraction prioritizes form, colour, and composition over direct representation (Chave, 1990). However, as W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) and Kobena Mercer (2008) argue, both modes carry significant ideological and cultural significance. In African contexts, abstraction functions not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a continuation of symbolic and non-verbal communication traditions found in textiles, religious iconography, and oral cultures.



Scholarly discourse on African art has largely emphasized ethnographic readings of traditional forms or celebratory accounts of modernist pioneers, often neglecting contemporary painters who blend figuration and abstraction. Olu Oguibe (2004) underscores the global positioning of African artists but focuses primarily on installation and conceptual art, while Chika Okeke-Agulu's (2015) seminal work on postcolonial modernism concentrates on earlier generations. As a result, there remains a critical gap in the analysis of how today's Nigerian painters, such as Ebenezer Akinola and Sam Ebohon, utilize representational strategies (Plate 4 and 5). Their practices resist rigid classification, instead reflecting a fluid negotiation of indigenous heritage and global artistic discourse - highlighting the need for more nuanced scholarly engagement with contemporary Nigerian painting affirmation, identity construction, and political expression.



Plate 4: Ebenezer Akinola, *I am Invincible*, 2023, Oil on Linen 52 2/5 × 56 7/10 inches. Source: <https://www.artsy.net>



Plate 5: Sam Ebohon, *John 15:4*, 2022, Oil on canvas 60 × 36 inches. Source: <https://ebubay.com/>

This paper addresses this lacuna by exploring critically how contemporary Nigerian artists use figuration and abstraction not just as aesthetic tools, but as modes of cultural translation, decolonial intervention, and visual experimentation. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced appreciation of the strategies through which artists negotiate tradition, modernity, and globality in Nigerian visual culture. In Nigerian painting, hybridity occurs through the vacillation between figuration and abstraction that cannot be read as a lack of stylistic commitment but rather as a strategic move for cultural negotiation. Ebenezer Akinola and Sam Ebohon work in this "third space" to produce works of art that are simultaneously deeply rooted in local iconographies and engaged with international artistic languages. Their visual language thus holds the substance of postcolonial processes and potential for innovation.

Ebenezer Akinola's *Kids of Paradise II* (Plate 6) operates within Homi Bhabha's "third space," blending local African traditions with global artistic influences to create a hybrid visual language. The painting portrays children as symbols of innocence and cultural vitality, rendered with luminous skin tones that reflect Akinola's signature style. While drawing on European classical portraiture, the work resists imitation, instead focuses on African identities and experiences. This articulates a postcolonial vision grounded in resilience, cultural continuity, and optimism, syncretizing Western naturalist tenets with Yoruba metaphysical concepts to challenge simplistic oppositions between indigenous traditions and modernity.

Plate 7 shown above depicts Akinola's painting titled '*The Kind of Gal Your Papa Warned You About*', 2023 is an example of his use of Bhabha's "third space" via the synthesis of local Nigerian iconography and global art influences to venture into hybrid postcolonial identity. The artwork displays a self-assured and assertive woman who challenges patriarchal values, recasting a morally stigmatized individual into one of complexity and empowerment with a synthesis of structural complexity and African cultural themes. By incorporating elements taken from Western portraiture and photography, Akinola contests binary understandings. traditional norms and contemporary influences. Thus, the painting emerges as a significant location of visual resistance and identity negotiation in contemporary African art.



Plate 6: Ebenezer Akinola, *Kids of Paradise II*, 2023, Oil on Linen, 63 4/5 × 57 1/10 inches. Source: <https://www.artsy.net>



**Plate 7: Ebenezer Akinola, *the kind of gal your papa warned you about*, 2023, oil on linen, 38 1/5 × 32 7/10 inches.**

**Source:** <https://www.artsy.net>

Ebenezer Akinola's '*Merry Lady*' (Plate 8) is a fine illustration of Bhabha's "third space," in which the African identity is reconstituted in an amalgamation of local traditions and international influences and aesthetics. The piece combines Yoruba visual culture with contemporary fashion - cobalt blue hair, yellow hues, and bold red lips - conveying a strong woman who challenges stereotypic representations of African womanhood. Set against a bright yellow background, the portrait combines classical oil paint techniques with Afrofuturist and editorial styles embodying a dialogue between African self-portraiture and European portraiture. The subject's fashionable and assertive demeanor deconstructs patriarchal and colonial discourses, representing her as a symbol of urban modernity and cultural empowerment.



Plate 8: Ebenezer Akinola, *Merry lady*, 2023. Oil on canvas, 30 7/10 × 30 7/10 inches.  
Source: <https://www.artsy.net>

Rather than overt political commentary, Akinola's postcolonial critique lies in how he reclaims representation. By focusing on a vibrant, self-styled African woman, he asserts aesthetic and cultural autonomy. '*Merry Lady*' (2023) thus, becomes a celebration of hybridity, identity negotiation, and the evolving image of Nigerian womanhood in the global age.

Mitchell (2005) in his concept of the "pictorial turn" advances the understanding of visual art by regarding images as active participants in cultural dialogue, rather than passive representations of reality. He argues that images possess an inherent logic and rhetorical force, capable of developing meaning independently of the text. Such an approach proves particularly useful for analysing abstraction (Plates 9 - 11), whereby meaning is conveyed by such things as texture, rhythm, and spatial distortion, along with the knowledge of figural compositions that look real but are embedded with culturally distinctive gestures, costumes, and visual codes. In this context, visual semiotics, enables a closer reading of how Nigerian artists express meaning through formal and aesthetic decisions.





Plate 9: Sam Ebohon, Wilderness of physical sensation. Oil on canvas, 2021, 50 × 57 inches. Source: <https://ebubay.com>



Plate 10: Sam Ebohon, Finding balance 1. Oil on canvas, 2022, 50 × 57 inches. Source: <https://ebubay.com>



**Plate 11: Sam Ebohon, Wings of entwined souls. Oil on canvas, 2024, 50 × 57 inches.**  
Source: <https://ebubay.com>

The point of convergence between visual semiotics and postcolonial hybridity enables a more nuanced conception of representation in Nigerian painting, effectively dismantling simple natural binary oppositions. Furthermore, it illustrates how figuration and abstraction are not divergent paradigms; but they are complementary strategies by which artists negotiate identity, history, and power. This is particularly applicable in a postcolonial African situation in contexts where visual practices have conventionally employed both representational and symbolic modes, for instance, masquerades, mural painting, and textile design - to portray religious beliefs and social values (Drewal, 1992).

### **Case Study Analysis**

#### **Ebenezer Akinola: Figuration as Cultural Assertion**

Ebenezer Akinola's work is strongly rooted in figuration, using the human body as a medium of cultural reclamation and identity assertion. His figural representations exceed depiction to act as political statements, embodying resistance to the erasure of colonial and postcolonial history of African corporeality. Based on Homi Bhabha's (1994) hybridity theory, Akinola's representations could be interpreted as existing within a "Third Space" - a cultural hybrid realm where African customs crossover with modern culture. His integration of rich, vibrant colours with conventional African designs creates a visual vocabulary that manifests the local cultural identity and engagement with contemporary global modernist discourse. Akinola also highlights the socio-historical conditions of the Nigerian people. His painting '*Let Us Go Beyond This Moment*' (2023) exemplifies these concerns, offering an examination of memory, identity, and hope in postcolonial Nigeria (Plate 12). Utilizing the conceptual framework established by Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, the work demonstrates how individual memories are formed through and embedded with broader cultural, ethnic, and national narratives.



Plate 12: Ebenezer Akinola, *Let us go beyond this moment*, 2023. Oil on Linen - 43 3/10 × 63 4/5 inches.  
Source: <https://www.artsy.net>

According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is inherently social, and Akinola's work reflects this by transcending individual biases to arrive at a shared sense of collective historical awareness. The title '*Let Us Go Beyond This Moment*' heralds a shared urge to transcend beyond pivotal experiences, for example, colonialism, ethnic conflict, or civil conflict in Nigeria. Akinola's Afrocentric figuration, symbolic compositions, and narrative style place the canvas in the role of space for constructing and reactivating cultural memory. As a mnemonic image, the painting not only recalls the past but also makes possible its reinterpretation.

The figures represented, regardless of being solitary or subtly animated, serve as representations of the larger social collective, suspended between remembering and imagining. This agrees with collective memory's dual role both as a continuity of history and as a tool for cultural revitalization. Akinola's work is a type of visual resistance, highlighting the importance of recalling marginalized histories. By his portrayal of shared suffering, resilience, and hope, he contributes to both preserving and reshaping collective memory. Like Halbwachs' theoretical model, Akinola's canvas underscores the need to remember the past while also reinterpreting it through collective experiences and artistic practice.

### **Sam Ebohon: Abstraction as Memory and Spirituality**

On the other hand, Sam Ebohon's paintings are abstract in nature, using non-representational form and texture to explore notions of spirituality, memory, and the fragmented nature of postcolonial identity. Ebohon's '*A man must hold his*' (2022), with gestural marks, organic forms, and layered texture, brings to fore the fragmented nature of history and memory when considering the African diaspora (Plate 13).





Plate 13: Sam Ebohon, *A Man Must Hold His*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 48 × 48 inches,  
Source: <http://facebook.com/thefyxx>

Mitchell (2005) perceives Ebohon's abstraction as a pictorial language that communicates intricate socio-political and historical discourses. Although his forms are not immediately recognizable, they call upon viewers to interact with the painting's symbolic depth. This process of interpretation captures the postcolonial subject's existence in fragmented and often conflicting cultural identities. In sum, abstraction serves as a medium where Ebohon addresses historical trauma and navigates the complicated interactions of identity within a globalized world.

#### **Intersections and Divergences: Abstraction and Figuration as Complementary Strategies**

Akinola and Ebohon's work reveals that figuration and abstraction are not opposing but complementary methods to examine cultural identity, history, and memory. Akinola uses figuration to affirm cultural and historical continuity, whereas Ebohon utilizes abstraction to explore the spiritual and psychological dimensions of life after colonialism. Both artists affirm African identity and become involved with decolonial discourse, mediating between tradition and modernity.

Figuration and abstraction are revealed to be fluid and hybrid, rather than fixed categories. Akinola sometimes introduces abstraction in his representational work, whereas that of Ebohon's abstraction tends to maintain figural elements, insisting on merging indigenous and global influences on modern Nigerian painting. Together, their practices illustrate how these visual modes serve as tools of resistance, cultural negotiation, and artistic innovation (Plate 14 and 15).





Plate 14: Ebenezer Akinola, *Dreams in Red I*, 2023, Oil on canvas 23 3/5 × 23 3/5 inches Source: Latitudes.  
<https://latitudes.online/ebenezer-akinola-dreams-in-red>

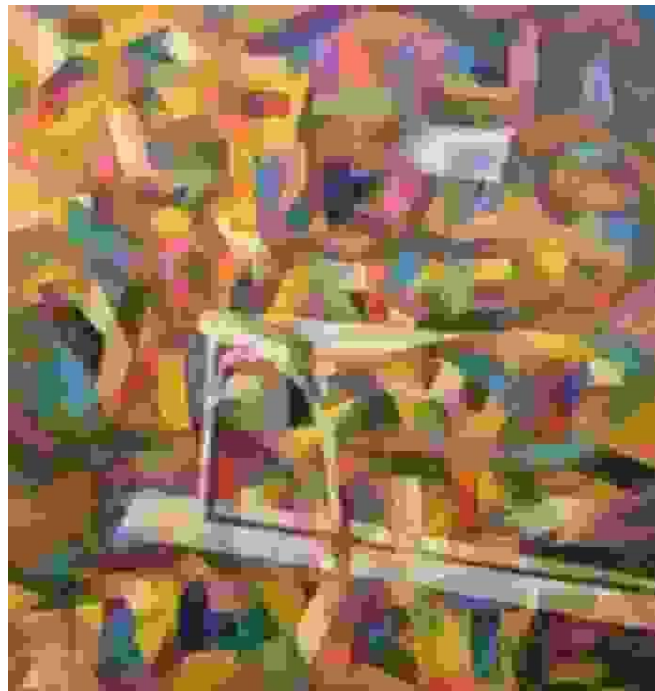


Plate 15: Sam Ebohon. *Feel at home na aim dey make visitor spoil remote*, 2022, oil on canvas, 48 × 44 1/10 inches. Source: <http://www.artsy.net>

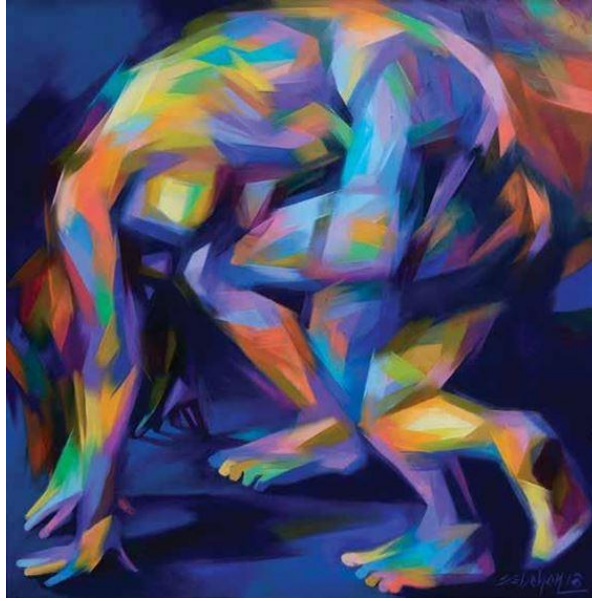


Plate 16: [Sam Ebohon](#), *flexibility*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 50 × 50 inches.  
Source: <https://www.mutualart.com>

Collectively, these artists illustrate the vibrant and multifaceted personality of modern Nigerian painting, where figuration and abstraction are not binary opposites, but rather complementary approaches through which artists negotiate the complicated realities of cultural identity, memory, and history in a postcolonial context. The case studies of Sam Ebohon and Ebenezer Akinola reveals how figuration and abstraction function as complementary and interwoven strategies in contemporary Nigerian painting. Akinola uses figuration to affirm cultural identity and historical continuity, while Ebohon's abstraction engages with memory and identity on a personal and spiritual level. Rather than operating in isolation, their creative approaches reveal a fluid quality and dynamism, integrating traditional motifs, expressive realism, modern abstraction, and symbolic imagery into cohesive visual languages. The artistic practice of these individuals demonstrates the conscious integration of indigenous and external influences. Akinola integrates naturalistic portraiture with African iconography, and Ebohon combines abstract forms with cultural narrative inspired by indigenous histories. Through these strategies, both artists forge adaptive strategies for surviving postcolonial realities and hybrid identities. They transcend binary oppositions between tradition and modernity, figuration and abstraction, local and global by transforming art into a cultural convergence zone where evolving African identities are not only depicted but actively shaped.

## Conclusion

This project explored the dynamic relationship between figuration and abstraction in the practice of modern Nigerian art, in the case of Ebenezer Akinola and Sam Ebohon. It showed how both artists employ these visual strategies to engage with and operate on notions of postcolonial identity, memory, and historical representation. Akinola employs figuration to stake claims of cultural continuity, while Ebohon employs abstraction to engage the psychological and spiritual facets of the postcolonial situation. Collectively, their works demonstrate that abstraction and figuration are not contradictory but rather complementary modes that respond to the complicated realities of African existence. Beyond visual choice, their paintings constitute a strong practice of resistance and decolonization, questioning colonial legacy while claiming visual sovereignty. Ultimately, Akinola and Ebohon demonstrate that Nigerian art of today is making a significant contribution to the global cultural discourse, and that the tension between figuration and abstraction will persist as a vital strategy in expressing postcolonial complexities of African art.

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