

## **PRACTICE-BASED METHODOLOGY: A MEANS TO EXPLORE CHARCOAL MARKET IN PAINTING USING A RESTRICTED PALETTE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at practiced-based research method to explore painting of charcoal market forms with a restricted palette. The inspiration for this study was derived from the researcher's expedition to understand natural relationship of form and colour in an environment that is overwhelmingly dark. Different stages of execution were outlined and followed with the aim of developing works. The sequence started with ideas/interrogation, design/sketches, critical process/exploratory and development and visual practice. Different methodologies that were adapted as a conceptual framework resulted into abstract linear orientations, oscillating movement and homogeneous composition on canvas. The composition shows dynamic organic crescendo of shapes, lines, textures, and spackles of light revealing the overlapping patterns of a tight grid. The dense buildup of lines in these paintings drawn against a dark saturated ground creates visual effects.

**Keywords:** Methodology, Charcoal Market, Environment, Painting, Exploration and Development

### **Introduction**

The studio-based or practice-led methodology adopted in research of this nature is performed through multiple inquiries. The research takes the form of action in which cultural pursuit is carried out within the domain in which it is found. In this research, the action undertaking makes the researcher becomes an active participant. This is in tandem with positions of Tripp (2005), Candy (2006) and Bergold, J and Thomas, S. (2012). The researcher adopts an existing paradigm based on the qualitative method of research that gives detail description of events. The event captured in this methodology is gotten from a charcoal market environment. There exist aesthetic possibilities in a charcoal market which can represent a metaphor of gloom in the society. Artistic dialogues of this kind are interpreted in ideas based on a wide range of engagements with elements inherent in the market. The research is situated on a pattern in which outcomes are not predetermined on any template that could lead other researchers to achieve the same result but on a perimeter of personal interpretation of the encountered event. Practice-based research in painting is seen as a study undertaken in order to expand the frontier of knowledge through practice (Candy, 2006). Neo (2000) in Leavy (2009) posits that art can be an effective tool for phenomenological research (a perspective that places experience at the center of knowledge building). For a research of this kind, Neo said our socialization brings out an experience which occurs within a visual landscape. This experience is embedded within its visual context.

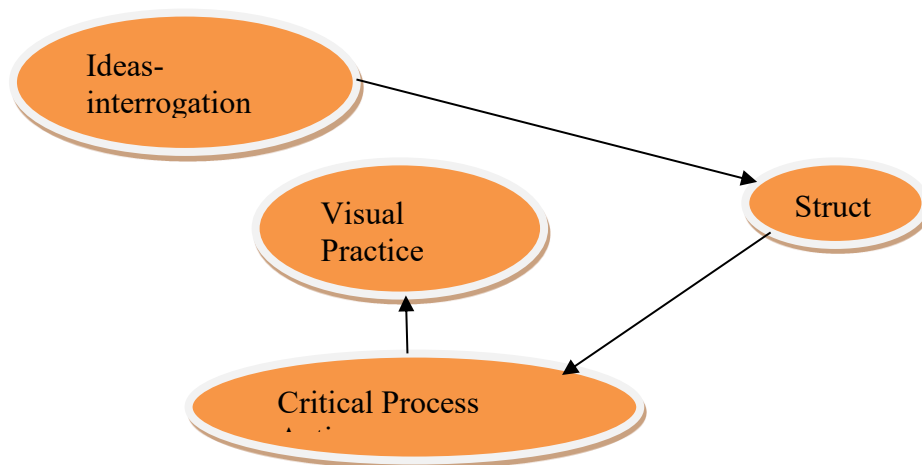
To Johnson and Edmonds (2007), there are three key features of any creative research proposal:

1. It must define a series of research questions or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions or problems to be addressed.
2. It must specify a research context for the questions or problems to be addressed. It must specify why it is important that these particular questions or problems should be addressed, what other research is being or has been conducted in this area and what particular contribution this project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in this area.
3. It must specify the research methods for addressing and answering the research questions or problems. In the course of the research project, how to seek to answer the questions, or advance available knowledge and understanding of the problems must be shown. It should also explain the rationale for the chosen research methods and why they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions.

In view of this; a research methodology was explored to reflect actions taken at different stages and the outcomes of this practice. Thompson (2006) states that, in the tradition of all good qualitative methodologies, art-based research is malleable in concept and method. It assumes many forms. It may expand the resources we draw upon in the act of making sense of events and situations, allowing us to recognize works of art in and of themselves as ways of representing human life.

To Sambo in Mathew (2010), a qualitative research method describes social phenomena of events or things so as to understand the effect such events or things have on the lives of individuals, groups, societies, or cultures. The experiences from the environment serve as stimulus while undertaking research in the studio. Leavy (2009), argues that, such human experiences cannot be understood separately from the environment in which they occur. It is well accepted that we live in a visual world with a historically specific multitude of visual stimuli in our daily environment. From this perspective, the process of carrying out a practice-based research can be enhanced by the appreciation of its nature. The method used in articulating and achieving this research is to employ an approach that is suitable and flexible. It includes the method adopted in the exploration and development of concepts from the charcoal market.

The diagram below shows a research model involving the practitioner through performative action, reflection stage and processes adopted in the execution of the body of work.



**Fig 1, Diagram Patterned after Graeme Sullivan's framework of Visual Arts Research Projects.**

**Source; Art Practice as Research, Inquiry into Visual Arts, Sullivan, G. (2010)**

The above visual structure/model explains four stages of action that are based on studio experimentation.

- i. Ideas/interrogation/Dialogue/Engagement/Encounter
- ii. Structure/Design/Sketches
- iii. Critical Process/Exploratory and Development
- iv. Visual Practice/Catalogue/Exhibition

### **The Studio Based Research Outcome**

Each of these stages suggests the action/process adopted in this research. Here the researcher is engaged in a dual role as a practitioner and a theorist that create a convincing interpretation of works conveying a specific understanding. Sullivan (2010) asserts that, studio research relies on plausibility, not resting on generalization of result but on differences in kind. He further contends that it is important to acknowledge that research findings grounded in observation of real world action, events, and artifacts rely on the acceptance that outcomes can be interpreted as connections between the specific and the vague.

### **Ideas/Interrogation Stage**

Each painting starts with perceptual encounter with the subject in an environment. Various patterns are noted each day to establish how colours, line and form interweave in the environment. At this first stage, ideas are explored and interrogated to ascertain their suitability and sustainability over a period of time. The way to understanding an object is to concentrate on it, fixing it in the mind and the idea realized through this exercise is subjected to analytical judgments.

### **Structure/Design Sketches**

Several "thumbnail sketches" that is, small drawings on paper were made at the early stage of the study from direct observations of charcoal markets and from photographs. These sketches served as the

preliminary notes for the main drawings produced towards achieving a suitable composition for each canvas before the execution of the body of work. Various elements were interpreted to develop a structure into pictorial painting compositions. Udechukwu (1984) posits that, "sketches provide glimpses, the invisible sweat of the creative mind that often has to work in solitude, wrestling with fundamental aesthetic..." Oxman in Rust and Wilson (2001) proposes that "a sequence of sketches can act as record of reasoning processes which can be inferred from transition states from one representation to a subsequent representation". Other researches and concepts developed through sketches like in the works of John Virtue shown in fig.2. Oxman further states that, drawing is the compost from which a painting develops. It assumes the key to developing one's depth of observation in the visual field. The researcher used sketches to gain understanding of the environment and to develop a design concept, with each sketch serving as a sequel to the exploration and development stages. Drawing is also used as a mode of investigation to gain full grasp of various elements reminiscent of the Renaissance artists.



**Fig.2, John Virtue: Study from the roof of the Somerset House looking East, 2003/04. Source: <http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/archive/2005/Vrtue>**

The drawing was done as a preparatory sketch for a series of monumental paintings of the London skyline, which John Virtue made during a two-year associate artist appointment at the National Gallery, London.

### Study Sketches

The following study sketches below were done from a charcoal market. They are shown from 1-6, to illustrate preliminary studies for this research. All these sketches are a sequel to series of paintings



1



2



3



4



5



6

### Critical Process/Exploratory and Development

This stage is the process of critical thinking and in-depth study of various materials (photographs and sketches). The information garnered is turned over and over and processed for exploration in studio practice. It is necessary to explore this gathered information to establish the size of the support to be used and the colour scheme. Gray and Malins (2004) posit that, "critical thinking is the process of effectively applying sound intellectual standards to thinking. It involves 'meta-thinking' and self-evaluation ' Critical thinking is creative thinking'. They also argue that, in the domain of visual practices, there are no certainties, no 'right' answers, no simple solutions, no absolute objectivity...many interpretations are possible, different 'ways of seeing' are encouraged". In view of this, an abstract generalization is made at this stage in terms of various associations that are present for contemplation. In this research, dominant units that repeat themselves which include charcoal, women, bowls, wood/trees, polythene, and fire, determine the characteristic forms. Critical thinking is required to select elements for exploration and development because of different possibilities and dynamic qualities of the organic structures in the charcoal market. This expands the perspective of the researcher's perception to challenge entrenched views and methodologies in works of influential artists like Piet Mondrian, illustrated in *Composition 11*(1930) and *Flowering plant* (1912) as well as Pablo Picasso's works exemplified in *Marie-Therese* (1931). The process of critical thinking also helped in translating ideas and images in the charcoal market into actions. These actions are categorized into Exploratory and Developmental stages.

### Exploratory Stage

The exploratory stage involves the preliminary studies of the market activities. Each theme grows out of a place of information which makes the outcome assume a sense of reality. A study of the interactions that exist in form and patterns is undertaken. The exercise in exploration and experimentation results into discoveries of new patterns and symbols. Different images are broken into a variety of abstract relationships. They are subjected to a series of additions and subtraction as in Cubism. These basic elements are broken and segmented. The researcher occasionally overlaps them and applies dark areas to develop a path towards abstraction.

### **Colour Sketches**

The first series of the market were explored in coloured sketches to capture women in the business of charcoal (See Plates I- IV). They represent the experimentation with gray values leading to subsequent developments. At this point, the interaction of elements was studied and rendered in simple expression. The abstract qualities were systematically analyzed in colour rendering below.



**Plate. I, Colour sketch, 2010**  
**Oil on Canvas. 76 x 64cm**  
**Development Stage**



**Plate. II. The Market Colour, 2010,**  
**Oil on Canvas. 86 x 101 cm**

Sketches served as the bases for this stage and reinforced by the introduction of bold lines that runs in horizontal and vertical orientation. A new structure was arrived at through drawings and the understanding of changes that occurred in the market each day. The lines were made bolder and the structure and methodology of the works of Mondrian were prevalent in all the works. Lines were defined with a painting knife using dark tones (a derivative of charcoal appearances). Flashes of light with the use of white vibrate into a field of gray creating an agitated effect. The image on each canvas is sparsely distributed with dot-like patterns in a random order to create contrast.

The reduction of chromatic scale is rendered in subtle gradation of black and grays. The cluster of interacting forms is linked by bands of irregular organic lines supporting the vertical orientation.



**Plate. III, Selling the Future, 2012, Oil on Canvas. 130 x 110cm**

In the course of sketching at the charcoal market, most of the women were found to be under cover of the umbrella ( **Plate III**). On one part to the right are two women facing other women to the left. At the

background is a tree trunk without leaves. This is repeated all through the works in this research. The irony is that in a place where the charcoal market is located, trees serve as shades from the sun though the branches have been cut down to create what they are trading with. The lines show humanity depicted in an impressionistic approach caged by its own choices while the patterns in the foreground are derived from bowls. Charcoal is represented in conceptual form to capture the contrast in planes to achieve a market concept. Each segment typifies gradual value change in colour which diminishes through the use of light.



**Plate. IV, Harmony of Line and Colour, 2012, Oil on Canvas. 130 x 110cm**

The cluster of interacting forms in *Harmony of Line and Colour* (**Plate IV**) is linked by bands of irregular organic lines supporting the vertical orientation. It is one of the paintings at the developmental stage that reveals how the research transits from natural representation to almost total abstraction. Expressions with thick and thin lines are emphasized and become dominant all through the research. The segments of the canvas are interwoven and connected by stitches to symbolize the wretched of the earth, the poor whose outlook is full of stitches. The structure of this painting is organized in relationship with flat compartments of colour and forms. Various lines criss-cross in an alternate manner forming other geometric patterns that were not part of the original sketch. At the top, spiral and curvilinear lines create rotating motion stretching from edge to edge in vertical orientation. At the centre of the canvas, dot like dabs represent cluster of figures.

#### **Visual Practice/Catalogue/Exhibition**

Sullivan (2010) argues that visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio-based. The engagements in the studio practice in this research were done in different stages. This section documents the sequence of activities in the studio and the arrangement of the paintings in a catalogue. The works catalogued are put up for exhibition as a component part of this research.

#### **Translation of Ideas**

The concept for the body of work is derived from perceptual experience from the charcoal market. Ideas are generated from sketches, photographs and intuition to create interaction of planes and configuration of



space. The intricate and interwoven lines are derived from the environment. In translating the concept of charcoal market, the statement by Hollebach (2009) is of importance as he states:

All art is basically abstract; I begin a painting as a composition of abstract shapes and develop them until recognizable forms are visible. But stop before they become too realistic, because obvious realism will rob the painting of certain aesthetic values: simplicity, visual attractiveness and even a sense of mystery.

(Hollebach, 2009 .<http://www.artnetwork.com/articles|artist-interviews-rofiles|serehollerbach>)

In the course of exploration, the researcher borrowed from existing culture in painting and subsumed them into this research to create a new thinking. Every aspect from design to finish was done in stages. This was achieved by spontaneous free-flow of figures connected by agitating expressive thin and thick lines to depict everyday human experience in grays with drops of muted primary colours. Also the energy of movement is captured by small flat patterns that create a decorative component. This interaction of line and pattern further create a vibration of interlocking energies on the surface plane which results into broken forms fragmented by lines identifiable only through close observation. All the paintings were achieved with the use of a palette knife.

### **Reference to Established Movement**

Established movements referenced in the course of this research were adopted to develop basic structures which enriched this study. Some of these movements dwell on free expression of concepts using geometry, organic lines, broken forms, unconventional combinations, concentric circles, non-pictorial style to manipulation in technique processes. Artists make aesthetic statements of everyday realities to represent their thoughts in a subjective manner. Unlike other art movements, Selz (1981) states that the avant-garde experiment with art did not tie them to traditional constructs but created their own constructs. Animate surfaces and structural qualities pre-dominate their works especially in Ad Reinhardt's, *Abstract painting, Red* produced in 1953, Barnett Newman's, painting *Onement VI* in 1953, and Yves Klein's, *IKB 48* produced in 1956 amongst others. Sharpe and Hyland (1991) see aesthetics as concerned with the analysis of concepts within art: the concepts of the work of art itself and the concept of meaning, intention, representation and illusion within the arts. Symbolists, colour field artists, Expressionists, Fauvists, Constructivists and Abstract expressionists operated within the framework of thought of the researcher. All these movements portray an international ideological trend.

### **Adapting a Variety of Methodologies**

#### **Technique**

Read (1961) affirms that, a work of art is a construction of concrete elements of form and colour which become expressive in its synthesis or arrangement. Two techniques were adopted here in the application of colours, the use of lines as in Stevens, *Floating Dream* 2007 and the structure of the work of Mondrian's



*Composition II, with Red, Yellow and Blue*, 1930; as well as the fragmentation of forms of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, painted between 1906-7 through direct and indirect techniques of painting .

### **Direct Painting**

This infers transfer to the scale of the final work. It involves direct and spontaneous execution especially of abstract painting such as in Fig.3, *Number 1* (1950) by Jackson Pollock, Fig.4, *Townscape with Strange Figures* (1993) by Gani Odutokun and Fig.5, *Spillage with foot motif* (2014) by Jerry Buhari among others. These artists executed their works using the direct painting technique. Some colour sketches were carried out by the researcher in this mode.



**Fig 3, Jackson Pollock, Nurnber 7, 1950 (Lavenrfer Mist), 1950. Oil, enamel, and aluminum paint on canvas, 7'3 "x 9'10. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Atlas Mellon Bruce Fund). Source: Art through The Ages, Twelfth Edition, vol.11**



**Fig. 4. Gani Odutokun. Townscape with Strange Figures 1993. Oil on Canvas. ' 91.4x91 4cm'**  
source: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/gani-odutokun/past-auction-results>



**Fig 5, Jerry Buhari spillage with Foot Motif, 2014, Enamel on Canvas. '153x92cm. Source: The artist**

### **Indirect Painting**

This involves the stage by stage approach requiring initial drawings made from the charcoal market and from other reference materials as processes in the final execution of a painting. Feldman (1971) posits that, with "Renaissance artists", drawing was not only a way of making visual

notations...it was also a means of studying things they would later paint". This is referred to as "studies". Feldman (1971), argues that, so long as 'painting is regarded as elaboration of drawing, the indirect method prevails. According to him, if painting is seen as the application of colour to a scheme which has already been worked out, it makes sense to employ the indirect method. This method was exploited by the researcher in some of the works. One of the most magnificent sketches by Michelangelo (Fig.6) shows one of his male studio assistants who posed for the anatomical study as foundation for a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican between 1508-12. Sketches like this are well detailed to capture the energy of the work. It is an example of how the Renaissance artists used the indirect technique.



**Fig.6, Studies for the Libyan Sibyl (recto); Studies for the Libyan Sibyl and a Small Sketch for a Seated Figure(verso), 1508-12 Michelangelo Buonarroti (Italian, 1475-1564) Red chalk (recto); charcoal or black chalk (verso) 11 3/8 x 8 7/16 in. (28.9 x 21.4 cm)**

#### **Systematic Illustration of Process/Procedure**

**Colour Scheme and Palette:** The choice of colour is not based on any scientific theory but on observation, feeling and nature of each experience in the environment. Collier (1967) describes colour as a powerful symbol corresponding to the human state of joy or gloom, tranquility or restlessness, love or hate, spiritual or physical, passion and so on. As a result of human sensibility to the visual field, colour becomes a vehicle of expression depicting mood and creating aesthetic order. The colour scheme for the research is derived from the environmental effect of charcoal and the overwhelming effect of black on other colours reducing visual facts to patches of grey in the colour field.

#### **Composition**

Each series of work starts with perceptual encounter with various elements and patterns in the charcoal market. Notations were made in form of thumbnail sketches before rearranging them in the studio. The process of execution is grouped into stages following the indirect technique of painting adopted in this research. All the sketches at the exploratory stage were carried out on a smaller scale to ascertain the effect before transferring to a larger scale. This is to achieve a suitable composition that interprets shifting socio-cultural experiences and relating them to aesthetic issues on each canvas. The researcher engaged a variety of patterns in the charcoal market. They are scrawled on canvas in loose geometric and organic shapes.

The geometric patterns are then embodied in entities with lines that make the viewer pre-occupied with searching for meaning and familiar forms.

### **Process**

The researcher sees a charcoal market as a conglomeration of patches of muted colours blending together in a composite whole. Expressing this requires a process in order to explore the energy of the subject. The studio process takes into consideration the following stages.

### **Size/Dimension**

The size of each canvas varies, depending on the composition. The dimension of support can help in the freedom of expression on each canvas. These dimensions were considered, 110x130cm, 140x110cm, 122x153cm and 152x183cm as suitable for the main body of works.

### **Media**

Different media were explored for execution from the sketches and colour studies through various stages of execution at exploratory and developmental stages. The media used include: Artist oil colour (Winsor and Newton), Watercolour, Pencil (2b-6b), paper (watercolour), 1901b and A4 sheet, charcoal (local) and canvas (100% cotton).

### **Transfer of Sketches**

Sketches were transferred from an A4 size sheet of paper to the already primed (prepared) canvas using charcoal to draw. This is where the composition for each theme is studied. At this stage decisions concerning placement of different motifs and structure of each canvas is contemplated from different studies. Also the decision about colour scheme based on a restricted palette is taken in terms of value and colour. Changes were made in the course of paintings that were essential to the success of the over-all composition. Sometimes on a particular work, two techniques were used, the direct and indirect application leading to the build-up of pigment on the canvas.

### **Conclusion**

The methodology for studio based research on charcoal market is found to assume a form which suggests its adaptability in systematic concept development. The processes are in two stages of exploration and development which involves direct and indirect technique of painting. The result is exemplified in the paintings generated from charcoal market. The paintings are found to evolve a new understanding of charcoal market. In conclusion, this methodology has examined practical view points in the studio in which each of these stages resulted into understanding of how certain phenomena can be exhaustively researched into using a research paradigm that describes the event in ways that can be read. This thus made Charcoal market becomes a central focus that open up issues relating to the environment.

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