

RETHINKING LINEARITY OF FORMS AND NIGERIAN PERSPECTIVE: A DISCOURSE ON THEORIES AND CONCEPTS OF MODERNISM IN PAINTING

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Abstract

Clement Greenberg's Modernist theory influences contemporary visual arts in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. The dialectic discourse and its development are directly linked to reflective ideas in precolonial African art object or better known as ritual objects found in Africa environment, as seen in the works of early African pioneers such as Ben Enwonwu (1917—1994), Clara Etso Ugbodaga (1921—1996), Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and others during the movement's formative period. These artists drew inspiration from local art objects and created modernity through the fusion that occurred as their ideas transformed. This paper reviews the process and debates its relevance in today's art discourse. This clearly situates the story of African modernism, as told through the works of two prominent artists, as a leading force in the contemporary narrative of its emergence.

Keywords: African modernism, Gani Odutokun, Duke Asidere, Ibrahim EL Sallahi and contemporary discourse.

Introduction

Some precolonial African artworks are foundational in inspiring modernism in the visual arts. An artefact from the Sudanese region has sparked important debates about modernism, including within Bamigboye's works. The master sculptor draws on ancestral Yoruba objects, creating an aesthetic dialogue that influences the development of African modernism. It was clearly assumed that these precolonial African religious objects were among the major encounters that sparked modernism in the twentieth century and ended centuries of illusionistic design in pictorial composition. In contemporary Nigerian art, modernism is explored through the blending of traditional philosophy with postcolonial aesthetic objects, as seen in Bamigboye's pieces and reflected in Gbenga Offor's fusion of Yoruba anthropological objects and compositional design in European classical painting. The artist is one of the trained eyes in contemporary art education at Yaba College of Technology. This analysis aims to deepen the understanding of Clement Greenberg's modernism theories and their relevance to African and Nigerian art, especially in certain Nigerian practices. Scholars also note that post-colonial Nigerian art, exemplified by Ben Enwonwu, exhibits significant modernist traits. The early 20th century marked the early modernist period, and this piece seeks to analyse its key features.

In early European modernist painting, linearity is more than just a visual device; it is a contemporary visual language that reflects a way of thinking through paint rather than merely craftsmanship in creating images. It embodies a philosophical concept that often blends the old and the new in reinterpretation or, at times, challenges the existing order of thought. Artists such as Piet Mondrian (1872—1944) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) simplified visual forms to their basic elements, utilising lines and geometric shapes to convey metaphysical or experiential ideas. Artworks are entities that occupy space and time, whether they relate to hybrid musical or visual forms, such as improvisation or precise structure, or whether they are extinct or revived through active artistic resonance. From this perspective, the modernist approach shifts away from the resemblance or imitation of form towards a deliberate, boundaryless mode of expression.

Even in improvisation, numerous factors contribute to their distinctive status as autonomous entities, not merely mimicking their appearance or empirical timing, but more importantly, demonstrating objective, often conventional patterns. As artworks are objects in their own right, they are defined by their specific laws of form and existence. In this view, art exists independently:

in drama, not merely the text but the performance; in music, not merely the score but the emotion and sound it evokes.

Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, with its horizontal and vertical lines in primary colours, represents balance, order, and spiritual harmony, evolving from simple landscape sketches into the intricate restructuring of forms. His compositions evoke a contemplative process through disciplined simplicity. Likewise, Paul Klee (1879—1940) transformed the line into a playful, symbolic gesture, illustrating inner states and subconscious realms.

In modernism, the line often relinquishes its descriptive role and becomes an independent, rhythmic force, a reflection of thought, energy, or order.



Plate I: Artist: Piet Mondrian Year of production: 1912 Titled: The Grey Tree.
Medium: Oil on canvas, Source: Netherlands, Hague Gemeente museum

In 1908, Piet Mondrian became deeply engaged in the latest developments in the art world. Over the next ten years, he underwent a rapid evolution through various styles. He began to use pure, vibrant colours and expressive brushwork, drawing on pointillism and Fauvism, resulting in works reminiscent of Van Gogh's intensity and vividness.

One notable work, "Farm Near Duivendrecht," features strong lines that dominate the scene of a farmhouse at twilight. The diminishing light at the end of the day creates a vibrant orange halo around the interlocking branches of barren trees, emphasising the linear patterns they form. Mondrian frequently visited this farm near Duivendrecht, a small village near Amsterdam, and produced many paintings of the building and its surrounding trees.

This artwork showcases his keen attention to the nuances of light, shadow, and reflection. It also indicates the artist's growing interest in flattening forms and linear structures that would characterise his later, entirely abstract works. The main point from this development is a gradual shift from basic representational forms to more linear, abstract styles. It was widely believed that European encounters with African ritual objects influenced this development; however, it is difficult to accept that the influence originated in Africa, as European art concepts were evolving at the time, indicating change. The development of modern painting in Africa marks a significant shift in the continent's artistic history. Rather than merely diverging from indigenous traditions, it represents a

dialogue between African visual heritage and Western academic conventions introduced during the colonial era.

The African version of modernism is, of course, the revival of precolonial aesthetic objects, transformed into a quasi-European form and fused with African indigenous forms, as we witness in many Ben's works. This paper examines the location and timing of art historians' perceptions regarding the rise of modern painting in Africa. It underscores specific factors that influenced its early growth in Nigeria. Modernism in painting arose as a radical departure from traditional Western art conventions. Emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it stressed innovation and abstraction. This paper explores how artists from a colonial background employ form, medium, and perception in art within the context of fine art education. The concept has gradually gained traction worldwide through various art forums, and the African perspective presents a compelling opportunity to reassess and redefine contemporary painting practices. This is especially relevant when considering modernists such as Gani Odutokun and Duke Asdiere, among numerous other notable artists.

Early Developments in Modern African Painting

Art historians generally attribute the origins of modern African painting to the early twentieth century, when colonial education systems introduced formal art instruction. The development of institutional art education in Ghana and Sudan is particularly significant in this process. Similarly, in Sudan, the known Khartoum, or Sudanese, School emerged in the 1930s, when artists such as Ibrahim El-Salahi began to blend Islamic calligraphy and African design principles with the spatial ideas of European modernism. The western art critic finds it difficult to recognise modernism as a universal visual language. They believe only Europeans have the capacity for modernism, its practice, and its theories. Despite its aesthetic potential, the Western critic refused to acknowledge Salahi. Despite these odd regional developments, these are among the earliest moments in art-historical literature in which African artists deliberately experimented with modern pictorial languages, both self-aware and institutionally supported. The Nigerian Context: Beginnings of Modern Painting

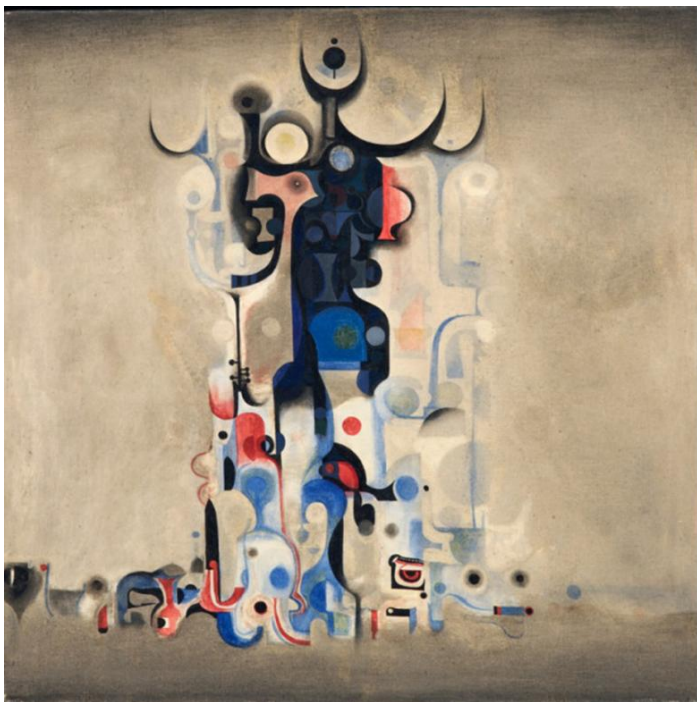


Plate II: Artist, Ibrahim EL Salahi: Titled: Vision of the Tomb Year: (1965)
Medium: Oil on Canvas

In the Nigerian context, the emergence of modern painting is typically dated to the early twentieth century, when Western academic systems of drawing and oil painting first took root in Lagos. Aina

Onobolu (1882–1963) is widely credited as the pioneer. Having studied at the Académie Julian in Paris, Onobolu returned to Lagos in 1909 and began teaching students to paint in oil and to draw using Western realist techniques. His works, including portraits of Lagos social elites, are regarded as the first examples of modern Nigerian painting.

Institutional support for modern art expanded considerably in the 1930s with the establishment of Yaba Higher College (later the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology). This was the first official tertiary institution in Nigeria to offer structured art education. By the late 1950s, Zaria Art School had emerged as a vital centre of experimentation, where a new generation of Nigerian artists, including Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, and Bruce Onobrakpeya, began to develop the idea of Natural Synthesis.

This concept encouraged the fusion of indigenous visual elements with modernist forms, becoming the philosophical foundation of modern Nigerian art. This concept seems to emerge from the philosophy of Negritude, which originated in Senegalese modernism. The origins of contemporary painting in Africa lie in the early twentieth-century introduction of Western art education and the subsequent reevaluation of indigenous visual heritage. Ghana and Sudan were among the first places where African artists began exploring modern art forms under institutional guidance. In Nigeria, modern painting originated in Lagos, thanks to the pioneering efforts of Aina Onobolu, and later developed within the academic environments of Yaba and Zaria. Rather than simply adopting foreign techniques, these artists engaged in a deliberate synthesis of styles, ultimately laying the foundation for the diverse and vibrant modernist traditions in contemporary African art.

The discussion of the modernist approach to creating tangible aesthetics, especially in painting, emphasises how linearity expressed through African perception and ideation in forms, as well as through the European concepts of lines, colour fields, and spatial relationships, serves as both a meditative tool and a conceptual anchor for modernist artists. The linear form emerged from a derivation of African forms in the early nineteenth century, marking a turning point in European art, shifting from pictorial to conceptual ideation and giving rise to nineteenth-century modernism. The idea of “meditating through linearity” suggests a contemplative engagement with visual elements in which form and meaning are intricately interwoven. Additionally, we will critically analyse Gani Odutokun's exploratory language in painting to understand the dialectics of phenomenology in fine arts and its representation of an idea of form. This inquiry seeks to illuminate the African concept of modernism within the aesthetic discourse among African and European-trained artists on the continent. To fully capture the African idea and spirit of modernity reflected in these artists' works, we must return to the origins of modernism and explore how certain Western ideologies have influenced their creations from an African perspective.

The awareness of modernism developed in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century. For modernist artists, 'modern' often aims to capture the images and deep emotions of their age. Modernism goes beyond merely addressing contemporary issues; it involves a critical examination of the nature of art itself. This movement raises specific concerns about art and aesthetics inherent in the process of creating art, whether or not the artist depicts scenes from contemporary social life. Gani Odutokun and Duke Asidere, the main focus of this discourse, after a careful review of a solid background to modernist culture in painting, it is important to examine their contributions to the Nigerian perspective on modernism. Both are graduates of the renowned Zaria Art School, yet they represent different generations and philosophies.

Research focus

This writing seeks to thoroughly examine the history and significance of lines and colours in shaping form and space in twentieth-century modern Nigerian art, while framing modernist culture in painting from a Nigerian perspective, particularly among artists such as Gani Odutokun and Duke Asidere. In this context, the two artists discussed demonstrate how linearity plays an important role

in expressing their personal experiences on painting surfaces and within the discourse of modernism. Both artists are linked to the Zaria School of Art. For the authors of this essay, these artists offer a theoretical basis for a hypothesis concerning the second phase of the Zaria Art School.

The Objective of the Essay

This discourse will reevaluate the works of Gani Odutokun and Duke Asdiere, with a particular emphasis on the drawing and the influence of line and space in capturing the essence of the human figure in their selected drawings and paintings. Furthermore, the essay will examine the main themes of Gani's painting, including accident, design, and the painterly phenomena that characterise his works. These are the key features of discourse analysis.

Colour as Emotion and Abstraction

Modernist painters liberated colour from its purely descriptive role to one that is more expressive or suggestive. Gani Odutokun and his student Duke Asidere share similarities with the Fauves in their use of vibrant, non-naturalistic colours to emphasise emotional impact rather than visual accuracy. Colour became a direct reflection of feeling. Gani integrates design with painterly ideals in his artistic expression, while Asidere employs masquerade as a satirical critique of societal ills.

From a different perspective, figurative abstract expressionists like Duke Asidere elevate colour to almost a sacred status. His expansive, hazy colour fields create immersive and contemplative experiences. Asidere's paintings serve as visual meditations, designed to evoke profound emotional and spiritual responses to a world portrayed as a masquerade in which everyone plays a part, and no one is truly authentic. For Asidere, the only genuine elements in existence are his colours, lines, and the enigmatic illusion of the canvas.

Through these methods, the colour and lines employed in surface-as-space in modernist painting become a meditative tool, not merely something to be seen, but something to be felt. The artist uses rich colours to suggest empathy and to highlight the distortion of reality created by the pretenders represented in the masquerade of his paintings.



Plate III: Artist: Gani Odutokun, titled 'Dry earth'. Oil on Canvas, 1994, size: not supplied



Plate IV: Artist: Duke Asidere, Title: Untitled, Medium: Oil on canvas, Year: 2010, Source: Hourglass Gallery.

The colouring techniques employed by these two artists are distinct, and their use of lines highlights the messages they aim to communicate. Both artists approach painting and drawing from an abstract figurative perspective, critically engaging with the concept of precolonial African art. This engagement transforms the figure into a tool for philosophical expression, showcasing a new culture of pictorial uniqueness. The idea of linearity is one element borrowed from precolonial African art, as evidenced by Picasso's development of cubism. Linear lines and the utilisation of space are the two artists' main strengths in our discussion.

Space: From Illusion to Flatness

A critical shift in modernist painting is the redefinition of pictorial space. Traditionally, painters employed perspective to create an illusion of depth. Modernists rejected this, emphasising the flatness of the canvas and the autonomy of the painted surface. In this regard, both Gani Odutokun and his former student Duke Asidere employ a high perspective that expresses a linear experience of colour and space, opening a new way to reframe nature. The process of drawing and painting aligns with Paul Cézanne's destabilised single-point perspective by depicting multiple viewpoints. Cubists such as Picasso and Braque further fragmented space to convey the multiplicity of perception. Later, artists such as Barnett Newman embraced flatness, aligning with Clement Greenberg's formalist theories that advocated foregrounding painting's two-dimensional nature. This emphasis on flat space invites a different kind of meditation, not into illusion, but into the essence of the medium itself. Greenberg's theories became the basis for modernist and postmodernist visual culture and will underpin our critique of these artists. Modernism is a philosophy that is closely associated with new ideas and ways of thinking.

Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775—1854) viewed natural science as an ongoing exploration where each discovery prompts new questions, preventing full understanding. He believed art illustrates contrast through the interplay of two creative forces: the artist's conscious effort and the

unconscious genius behind the work. Thus, art lacks an external purpose; instead, its creation has an inherent purpose that we can only grasp intuitively, not intellectually. This concept is similar to Kant's idea of the purposiveness of the purposeless in living beings. An artwork influences viewers by showing that its true purpose lies in combining subjective and objective qualities that connect them. While Schelling highlights art's dominant role in his philosophy, it remains relevant to early twenty-first-century philosophy and aesthetics. His main inquiry is how to understand the unity of subject and object from the viewpoint of our limited, striving, and divided human nature.

Theoretical philosophy cannot fully explain how to overcome our sense of division, which manifests in art as an object of reason that appeals to the senses. This division, as a unified body of knowledge, is inherent in our need for incompleteness within the discourse of art as an alternative to scientific cognition; art, or the artist-philosopher, provides initiation into this understanding. Of course, previous philosophical discussions addressed such questions within dogmatic theology.

After examining the two major influences in Duke Asidere's art, especially his drawing, which is central to this discussion, one is encouraged to carefully chart his drawings and their creative core within aesthetic discourse. Criticism can be challenging to articulate, especially to someone outside the subjective perspective. Art knowledge differs from empirical reality; it is a subjective construct, whether or not it is grounded in empirical analysis, but it entails a deep understanding of the core phenomena that shape it. For those working within the quantitative realm, understanding the construction of knowledge involves constant variables and assumptions that lead to a comprehensive grasp; however, the experience of expertise in the visual arts differs from scientific theories. Irokanulo (2015) clearly states this perspective. Knowledge in art is highly subjective: for example, history can transform particular cultic objects into pieces of Fine Art, while some objects previously recognised as art may later be discredited as cultural artefacts. When attempting to articulate such knowledge, it must be from one's own perspective of observation.

Asidere's drawings establish a foundation for our understanding of the modernist approach to art: rather than copying the modernist, they recreate what they see anew from a new perspective, here drawing without employing illusion as a new form of knowledge in contemporary Nigerian art. We hope these drawings will clearly demonstrate the limitless power of art objects, much as modernism or the modernist approach, to which Greenberg belonged, is read. We believe his drawings reflect his cultural perception of the objects around him, blending the European classical art instruction he received at Zaria Art School. His technique continually explores lines, similar to those in his mentor Odutokun's drawings and paintings. There is no attempt to create illusions in his work; instead, he explores pure linear lines that embody the essence of being, as we interpret here.

The artist's articulation of form is fluid, meaning it does not possess any fixed intention beyond the feelings that perhaps enabled the artist at the time of encountering the emotion to create or re-create his observations in drawing. When one examines the drawing illustrated in Plate III below, it becomes evident that Asidere does not aim to produce an orderly composition; instead, the arrangement of the images appears randomly conceived on the surface, just as can be observed in Osaghae's understanding of the language of form and drawing.

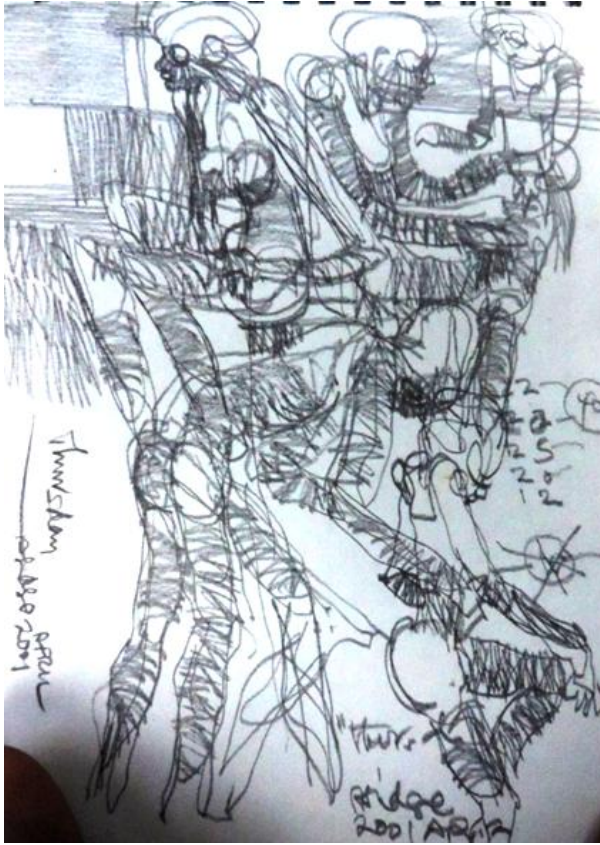


Plate V, *Untitled I*, Lead on Paper, 2015 (Source: The artist's sketch pad) Source: The Artist

The entire surface of his drawings is aesthetically aligned with lines, reflecting his perception of social disorder in the society we live in. The drawings (depicted in Plate I, above, and Plate II, below) constitute the artist's personal narrative of his understanding of life as experienced in busy city centres such as Lagos, where he resides and works. The drawings also adopt the theoretical stance of Heidegger's philosophy regarding the three temporalities of the universal rule, which are past, present, and future, united as the core of time.

Asidere's drawings are, of course, not necessarily a literal representation of Lagos, but rather a presentation of his subjective understanding of its reality through artistic interpretation. Asidere aims to express the inner reality that exists solely in his imagination. For instance, the image in Plate II demonstrates that the artist is more focused on imposing images than on creating a formal, organised composition. This style was also evident in Odutokun's drawing and painting abilities.

Asidere's drawings also appear to share a narrative technique closely connected to Ben Osaghae, his Auchu contemporary. The two artists taught drawing and painting simultaneously at the school. Asidere's drawings seem to reflect Arnheim's (1997) idea of images of thought, relating to mental processes, especially those of an artist. Arnheim states thus,

an artist who makes a drawing of something he knows from memory... If you ask him from what model he is drawing, he may deny convincingly that he has anything like an explicit picture of the animal in his mind. However, as he works, he constantly judges the correctness of what he is producing on paper.

Asidere documents events he encounters, much like Osaghae, but he presents them in a distinctly different manner. The event reflects the artist's thinking and interpretation. This is evident in Duke's drawings. The drawing functions as a narrative, crafted by the artist in his pursuit of a clear artistic language to express his discontent with society, particularly concerning the aims of corrupt

politicians. His approach to drawing mirrors his ongoing quest for new ideas within the framework of traditional elements, including those rooted in his cultural heritage.

Theorisation of Asidere's Drawings

This section explores the art object, which includes two of Duke Asidere's drawings, in relation to his cultural influence. We assess whether this influence surpasses that of Odutokun and Osaghae, one of whom is his mentor and the other a colleague. Artists from the Delta region demonstrate a profound understanding of spiritual elements in their work. For example, Bruce Onobrapeya's images, when presented through his installations, appear to emerge in Asidere's drawings. It is important to consider George Smith's Theorisation of the artist philosopher as an embodiment that makes abstract philosophical concepts visible as tangible evidence of knowledge, and we suggest that Duke Asidere's works possess such potential. The drawings' ability to depict multiple attempts to engage with the discourse of his native cultural influences and to explore the cross-influence of European art techniques learned at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, is essential, as is the philosophical insight they generate. Practically, the aim is to combine visual artworks with a hermeneutic reading of Gadamer's philosophical text to develop a comprehensive discourse.

Duke's drawing achieves this goal. This study primarily examines the relationship between philosophical hermeneutics and visual art; it is not a study of Gadamer's interpretation of the 'poetic word', which has been extensively analysed by other scholars. What is attempted here is a Gadamerian 'poetics' of the visual, examining the cultural and historical contexts that allow an image to communicate effectively. While this poetics must identify the elements within an artwork, it must also explore how these elements interact to make the work an effective means of communication. The principal value of this hermeneutical poetics lies in the answer it offers to a question posed in Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art': how do artworks 'work' and how should this 'working' be understood?

The answer addresses the core of Gadamer's aesthetics: how do silent images communicate? If the response succeeds, it can validate the central claim of his magnum opus: that art indeed has a demonstrable cognitive content. Two themes guide our reflections: what does it mean to be addressed by a speechless image, and what are the formal conditions for receiving that address? In a post-modern context, Gadamer's 'The artist's intention' may aim to employ figurative concepts to unveil the non-conceptual with concepts, revealing his ideas and perspectives on issues such as refugees and crises in the Arab world today, the unstable Syria, and armed conflicts worldwide—viewed as philosophical material that his drawings seem to disclose through arrangements of design elements and vigorous, contemplative lines.

Asidere's drawings serve as a basis for philosophical reflection. They embody Heidegger's view that the traditional philosophy of God, being, and object can be revealed through figurative symbolism, transforming the abstract into something understandable. Without a philosophical understanding of these drawings, their true significance would be diminished, and they would seem without potential; the principle of identity would be a blind fate forever prone to consuming non-identity, and the work of art would be reduced to mere clusters of lines in space, attempting to identify with material images in today's world.

Plate II may serve such thinking. There appears to be some distortion of forms to create a perfect image for the artist's understanding. From this knowledge, we discern the artist's mindset and intentions regarding his drawings. Image, according to Rudolf Arnheim (1997), is

A faint subjective representation of a sensation or perception without an adequate sensory input, present in waking consciousness as part of an act of thought. Includes memory images and imagination images; may be visual, auditory, or of any other modality, and also purely verbal.

This idea aligns with the artist's drawings and his presentation of subjective reality through linear lines that interact with space, time, and imagined forms. Recognising that the linear images Duke presents might be an unconscious flow from his native Delta region in Nigeria, and that they could offer viewers a hybrid of ancestral aesthetics and the European artistic culture under which the artist gained his degrees. This reflects the essence of modernism, which is often conflated with contemporary art practice. Duke Asidere's drawings carry a wealth of creative and theoretical energy for thinkers to reflect upon.

Conclusion: Meditation through Modernist Form

Modernist painting's emphasis on abstraction, linearity, and flatness invites a contemplative mode of viewing. By stripping away narrative and representation, modernist artists created visual environments that encourage introspection and meditative stillness. To meditate through linearity is to engage deeply with the spiritual and philosophical ambitions of modernism. These visual strategies, rooted in formal innovation and theoretical rigour, continue to shape contemporary artistic practice and viewer experience.

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