

CHAPTER 13:

SCIENCE OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS: MATERIAL MANIPULATION, MEANING- MAKING AND MEDIA ADVANCEMENT IN PAINTING

Contributed by

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Introduction

Symbolism in visual arts is a stylistic thought pattern that communicates meaning using symbols, signs, allegory and metaphors. It is a potent and richly endowed platform where visual elements are used to give connotative depth to a work of art, to subtly convey messages or to communicate ideas. Most times, the more strange the imageries or materials contextualized as visual metaphors, the more interesting, deepening and captivating the work becomes. This explains the level of influence symbolic images can exert since they become far from ordinary especially when they already have attached strong meanings. From ages and locations, human civilizations have witnessed the presentation of messages in visual emblematic pictographs and ideographs. These are evidenced by the discovered cave arts which have pictures or symbols that have a semblance to what they represent. There are also local symbolic forms from diverse cultural locations which appear in intricate, linear, two-dimensional abstract, geometric shapes drawn from rich traditional life like *uli*, *ona*, *nsibidi* among others in the Nigerian cultural landscape. Similarly, the illusion of three-dimensionality on flat surfaces has been created using factory-based paints in liquid or paste states in realistic

interpretations, all these are geared towards effective meaning-making and resultant communication. Today, with advancements in all facets of human endeavours, pictorial depiction still holds a very strategic position, especially as an artist's platform for communication.

Visual art presentations in symbolic pictorial visual languages are interpreted by the viewers to figure out the hidden meanings for communication to take place. This therefore means that the art components ranging from its composition, materials, colours, forms, lines, textures shapes, and objects have symbolic tendencies that foster meaning-making, thereby promoting understanding and advancement in communication. Adewumi and Faida (2017) opine that:

...Every artwork has a symbolic essence embedded in it. Some forms and motifs in artworks are random while some whereas a result of the deliberate effort of the artist to pass a coded message to an unintended observer. Signs and symbols are therefore, incorporated into artworks from the strokes of the brush on the canvases, to the gorge of the chisel on wood...

This observation believes in the symbolic tendencies in the art of painting. A symbol is a signifier that stands in for the actual concept or idea (the signified). Adewumi and Fadia (2017:93) see it as "anything that is adapted to signify another thing or concept. They added that signs are often used as codes, while symbols expand the notions of signs...they are characterized by rich meanings..." Jerome (2008) clarifies further that symbols are anything that represents another by virtue of customary association due to a conceptual connection or perceived resemblance. Contextualizing the art of painting as a visual metaphor, Abodurin (2014:7) posits;

Painting as an aspect of visual art, is one form of art which expresses messages, codifies them and allows the spectator or viewer to decode and interpret the

hidden messages or its meaning. Therefore, painting is not only a tool of recording human history, but also a tool of conveying a wide range of stories, emotions, feelings, inner world symbolically or didactically or in a hidden mode.

In line with the above view, it seems pertinent that for a holistic understanding of the intention of painting as a form of expression, the material signification should have contributory role in meaning-making. In other words, for painting to effectively deliver on its mandate of conveying a wide range of stories, abstract conceptions, offering deeper and wider meaning in artistic discourse, wider range of materials need to be manipulated and contextualized. In return, it is hoped that more creative room and ideological insights will be created if tangible local materials are deemed fitting and appropriated to offer their visual voices in addressing societal issues.

Nonetheless, available evidences have shown that though they have been indications of the practices of mixed media technique in painting by some painters, majority of these interpretable forms have been represented using conventional materials. Abokede (2021) in his research submits that through a search of related materials, practices, and extant literatures, the result show that only few known contemporary artists venture into the use of non-paint media (local materials inclusive). He added that, these non-paint media are far less expensive and introduce some new elements which are not possible with traditional paint media. Also expressing concern on the over concentration on oil colour by Nigerian painters from their research, Joshua and Onoja (2015:35) queried "...could it be that our institutions of art are not tailored towards postmodernist inclination"? The above concerns are raised to draw attention to the dynamics in painting which extends to its materiality. Envisioning the potentials and possibilities inherent in exploration and experimentations with

local non-conventional materials, they are interrogating the basis for this over-concentration despite its limitations, especially in the creativity of the painters. Oshinowo in Ikpakronyi (2017:79) explains that materiality forms the bedrock of many experiments embarked on by artists. He asserts that “experimentation generally is more on material exploration...because the joy of the artist is to discover a new approach. Sometimes, a new approach dictates even the theme of the artwork.” He recommends that an artist must experiment because an artist who does not experiment invites creative stagnation and professional oblivion. Corroborating this view, Cyril (2011:21) encourages the expansion of the stock of artistic media through the surveying of the environment when she asserts that “artists should expand their creative repertoire by experimenting with a vast array of unconventional surfaces, materials and tools as a way of pushing painting ground to take on a more active and visually expressive role in the cognitive interpretation of a work of art”. The scholar went further to counsel that artists just need to look around their environment and be open to what they see every day.

It is on this background that this study considers that beyond the use of conventional factory-based materials, it is necessary to explore the local environment and experiment as it is perceived as one of the cheapest alternative routes to materiality expansion and a means of widening painters’ creativity.

Aim of the Study

This study is intentional in the manipulation of local materials such as wood chippings, shells, canwood pigments, woven cane trays, raffia hats, and baskets; adapting their symbolic tendencies, physical characteristics, and significances as direct metaphors in the creation of symbolic mixed media abstract expressions for meaning-making in painting.

Literature Review

Signs and symbols embedded in a work of art can be presented using tangible materials or found objects by exploiting the room given by mixed media techniques in visual arts. This could be more embracing if the objects paraded in the work have some perceived connection with the targeted audience. In some instances however, artists can present objects or manipulate materials to create forms which have overt physical linking features with a concept (the signified) and the audience can still unravel the intention of the artist even when the said objects have no cultural undertone or meaning linking with the audience. Found object inclusion in art composition began to take shape in 1912 when Picasso made his *cubist* constructions from various scavenged materials, adding such things as matchboxes and newspapers. *Dada* and *Surrealist* artists then made extensive use of found objects (Stampington,2013). In recent times, found objects as visual vocabularies in art forms have continued to evolve and thrive among mixed-media artists... In a more advanced and conceptual manner, Imafidon (2015:8) gave a historical account of the influence and symbolic undertone in the materiality of European art at a time, when he explains, “In Europe in the 1960s, a group of Italian artists numbering about twelve staged an exhibition mostly sculpture pieces. The most distinctly recognizable trait of this group was their use of commonplace materials, such as earth, rocks, cloth, paper and rope. Their works marked a reaction against the modernist abstract painting that had dominated European art in the 1950s. This group was the most significant and influential *avant-garde* movement to emerge in Europe in the 1960s and this art movement was later referred to as *Arte Povera*—“poor art” or “impoverished art”. In agreement, Ditolla (n.d) emphasizes thus;

“Although *Arte Povera* is most notable for its use of materials, it however did not use these materials

exclusively on its own. Some of the group's most memorable work comes from the contrast of unprocessed materials with references to the most recent consumer culture. They believe that modernity threatened to erase our sense of memory along with all signs of the past, the Arte Povera group sought to contrast the new and the old in order to complicate our sense of the effects of passing time.”

Ditolla's account explains that materials aligned in the exhibited works were used metaphorically as protest tools. Arte Povera's interest in “poor”(ordinary) materials can be seen as related to Assemblage, an international trend of the 1950s and 1960s that used similar materials. Both movements marked a reaction against much of the abstract paintings that dominated art in the period. They viewed it as too closely linked with emotion and individual expression, and too confined to the tradition of painting. Instead, they proposed an art that was much more interested in materials and physical realities and borrowed forms and materials from everyday life (Imafidon, 2015). The above views have all pointed to the fact that the symbolic contents of a work of art if properly decoded, make it valuable and it has the power to draw attention, engage, transform and create a better atmosphere for social living, hence art can be deployed as a tool for protest and activism.

In the African context, Siegman (1980), observes that African art is principally symbolic rather than representational. It is more concerned with visualizing rather than with accurately representing nature. It is therefore safe to say that the materials of African art are to a large extent symbolic. This is because in Africa, in the very beginning, local materials adapted as art materials were conceived of as having inherent life of their own, hence they are used for rituals as mediators between humanity and divinity. Wood, clay, stone, feathers, shells and other mediums partake of the energies of nature before they are converted into works of art.

This means that the life forces and life span of these materials when paraded as art forms, are extended even as artworks thereby provoking discourse and communicating with the audience as well as adding more to the stock of materials available for artists. Contextually, an artist's wide knowledge and in-depth understanding of the implications and signification of local materials and their potential in communication when creatively aligned in a work of art in contemporary times will instil in him a greater zeal for their usage.

Articulating the exploits and contributions of Nsukka Art School in materiality advancements, Onuzulike (2001) unequivocally submits that beyond the history and practice of *uli* emanating from the natural synthesis ideology of Zaria revolutionists, a good number of painting and sculpture students are slowly but steadily wading into the thick forest of conceptualization, exploration, experimentation and daring improvisation. He added that under the tutelage of Chike Aniakor (painting), Chijioke Onuora (painting and sculpture), Ernest Okoli (sculpture), Krydz Ikwemesi (painting) and El Anatsui (Sculpture), there is beginning to emerge a ground-breaking understanding as regards the students approach to the "Exploration of indigenous Materials", forms and idea courses. Agiotu-Kemmer and Adeleke in Onuzulike (2001) added that it is the down-to-earth search for new materials and fresh idioms that have been the hallmark of this new creative direction at Nsukka. These conscious and deliberate attempts in her creative ideology emphasize the exploration of the environment as a potent creative source of ideas, materials and forms since the 1970s. The school's unrelenting efforts have resulted in the appropriation of culture-based art forms as viable creative resources. Lending his voice in agreement, Anatsui in Ene-Orji and Eseyin (2018:165) admits that returning to the ancestral roots "offers artists the opportunity to source for and use materials from their own environment other than the

conventional ones to execute their arts, by so doing they reflect their immediate environment and culture using local resources”.

Among the Nigerian artists that have explored abstract expressionism in their use of symbolic local material in painting are Krydz Ikwemesi in his *Pot with Uli pattern*, a symbolic painting on a traditional earthen clay pot, Stanley Eze’s *Abstract and Conceptual*, a painting on clay pots, Chukwuemeka Okpara’s *African stories*, an Uli painting with sand colour pigment on earthen pots. Jimoh Buraimoh and his use of the symbolic beads inspired by the traditional Yoruba’s beaded crown and Jacob Jari’s corn stalk mosaic; Nsikak Essien’s infusion of the local basket in his mixed media painting and Olu Oguibe’s *National graffiti* on local mat among others.

Theoretical framework

In recognition of the significance of symbols in communication, Ofuafo (2013:396) explains:

Communication is simply the sharing of meaningful ideas, thoughts and feelings (information) through a channel between persons. This could be applied in the form of interpersonal communication which is the most important factor that generated the emergence of symbols. This is so because people do not only communicate their thoughts, feelings or experiences to others but also to themselves, and this is usually done through symbols. Through communication, symbols could help to maintain order and coherence and this is achieved largely by the use of art objects...

The above excerpt explains the position and importance of semiotics in meaning-making and communication. This study is, therefore, derivative of semiotic philosophical preaching in the use of signs and symbols in communication. Semiotics theory according to Ferreira (2007) is the study of signs and symbols,

either individually or grouped in a sign system that can give more insight from the work source and meaning. He further explains that while symbolism is the use of signs to communicate, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no natural meaning and become signs only when we provide them with meanings. Signs and symbols and the tendencies for unravelling hidden messages are the major components of semiotic theory. This position, therefore, aligns with this paper's approach in contextualizing forms, patterns or iconic imageries, that are generally accepted within a particular group, and the creation of forms with physical features that can enable viewers to decipher their inherent meanings. These patterns or emblematic visual codes have inherent physical interpretable features, especially in the context where they are being used. It is necessary to note that in some cases where these objects are used, and to have a deeper understanding of the symbolic forms, icons, colours, arrangements and the overall composition of pictures created in painting expressions, viewers are provided with further analysis through description and interpretation either during an open exhibition or in written texts as is the case of this paper.

Generating symbolic forms through Manipulation, Deconstruction, Reconstruction and Arrangement of local materials

The conscious efforts to bend materials to a form, compose to a pattern, and arrange found objects to connotative structures or shapes to resemble or be associated with an idea is referred to in the context of this paper as material manipulation. Also, the symbols generated in the studio work for this paper, appear in forms, colours, allegorical objects, and forms composed or constructed as inspired by geometric shapes and lines of *Uli*, *Ona* and *Nsibidi* motifs.

As apparatus for communication, some materials which have previously attached meaning by certain groups like cowrie shell, white chalk (*nzu*), and camwood pigment among others as presented by Ofuafo (2013) are aligned and metaphorically contextualized in this paper while some are abstract motifs which are generated by the artist through skillful re-construction of existing materials. In the studio exploration, such local materials like woven trays, jute fabric, baskets, raffia hats, hand fan cane trays, camwood, charcoal, shells, and wood chippings are explored and manipulated to create symbolic patterns and structures that can contribute to meaning-making.

Production Stage: Ideation to work process



Plate 1. Nsibidi Symbols
 Courtesy: zetaboards.com (2023). Nsibidi motif which stands for Congress was picked and amplified

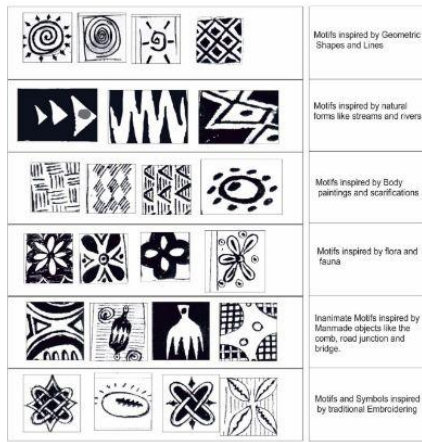


Plate 2. Selected hand-drawn symbols are often used in Ona and Ara painting. Courtesy: Adeyemi, 2012 in zetaboards.com (2023)

+ symbolic motif that symbolizes body scarification was picked

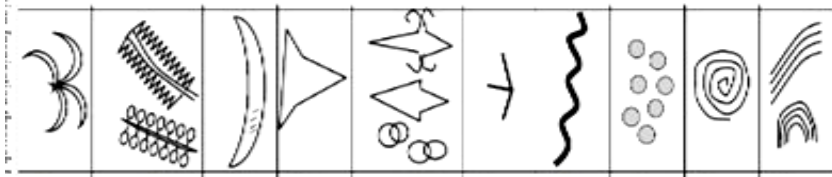


Plate 3. Design Inspiration through Uli, pen on ink, Courtesy Chukueggu C. C. (2003), *Nku Di na Mba*: Uche Okeke and Modern Nigerian Art in zetaboards.com

Agwolagwo and Ntupo motifs derived from Uli symbols are used.

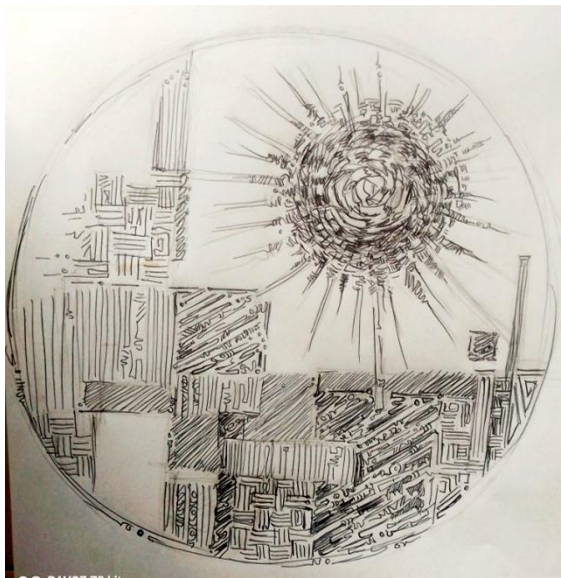


Fig.1 Preliminary drawing for *The Abuja conference* derived and formed from a combination of *Nsibidi*, *Ona* and Uli motifs, Photo by Ukwa, Job N.

Work Stage



Plate 4. Transferring of sketch to the painting ground. Photo by Okechi Benard



Plate 5. Ukwa, Job N. Exploring the possibility of using gumming technique to fasten jute fabric on woven cane tray. Photo by Okechi Benard



Plate 6. Using the mixture of Acrylic gum and camwood as paint on the support. Photo by Okechi Benard



Plate 7. Ukwa, Job N. Painting of the adapted symbolic basket form to be fastened on the re-contextualized support. Photo by Okechi Benard



Plate 9. Placement and attachment of the deconstructed and painted symbolic basket form



Plate 10. Ukwa, Job N. *The Abuja Conference*, 2021, mixed media, (Locally woven cane tray, shades of wood debris, flattened basket, red and yellow camwood, jute fabric), 72cm x 71 cm. Photo by the artist

Discussion

The Abuja conference is 72cm x 71 cm in measurement. It is a mixed-media painting that has art elements in full interaction. Such shapes like circles, rectangles, squares, thick and thin lines, a darkly painted foundational structure of basket using a charcoal pigment with its spread out strands, shades of brown, oranges, ochre and varied textures, all unified to announce the emergence of the work. The painting is asymmetrically balanced with the juxtaposing lines and a dark swirling flattened basket with its outstretched strands. It engaged the circularly shaped woven cane tray as its support. The composition is made up of interconnecting and overlapping patches of colours and varieties of lines, and shapes. The painted cut outs of flat jute fabric are in squares and rectangles which help in creating overlapping partitions. The colours are red and yellow camwood as well as white clay (nzu) and kaolin mixed with gum. The bold shape at the base tilting to the right, is painted with a slightly tinted Ox blood with patches of dark red; a mixture gotten from red camwood (uhie), white clay (nzu), yellow camwood and gum on a jute fabric. To show contrast, the researcher creatively revealed and infused the natural network of the vertically and horizontally interwoven background of the cane tray. Also in this half are thin overlapping lines of different shades of earth colours like black directly on the woven background structure.

Two styles of painting from two different backgrounds fused together to form this art piece. Inspiration from the Russian, Wassily Kandisky (1866-1944)'s non-objective geometric abstract painting style and the researcher's mosaic and minimalist use of materials from his accustomed African environment as well the *Nsibidi* inspired spiral motif all collaborated to produce the mixed media painting.

The Abuja Conference: A symbolic interpretation of Security intervention

Unlike the Berlin conference of 1885 which was a platform for partitioning and scrambling for Africa by the European powers and the USA, the Abuja conference was a programme strategically positioned to proffer solutions to insecurity in the educational sector in Nigeria. *The Abuja conference* is an overview of an international virtual conference held in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, targeted on saving schools from attacks, on October, 25-27, 2021. In the socio-political context, the work is drawing the viewer's attention as a reference point to, the Nigerian government's hosting of an international conference on insecurity. Oliver Mawhinney, a policy and Advocacy Advisor to the International Parliamentary Network for Education, in his 2021 report titled "Safe Schools Conference takes place in Abuja" gave an insight on the conference. He x-rayed that in her effort to address the crisis and incessant attack on Education in Nigeria, where more than 1,400 students have been abducted since December 2020, the government explored the option of calling for and virtually hosting the Fourth International Biennial Conference on the Safe Schools Declaration, the first in the African continent in collaboration with the government of other nations. This programme amidst other things, was to galvanize actions against attacks and abductions of children, parents and educators and to proffer lasting solutions to the growing out-of-school child population which before now were mostly localized to the northeast but has degenerated to many other parts of the country.

Among the countries invited according to him, were Argentina, Norway, Spain, the African Union and representatives from UN member states and agencies, communities affected by conflict and civil society-including the International Parliamentary Network for Education. In the end, some far-reaching resolutions were reached which included collaboration across ministries,

building on alternative and distance learning programmes, including low-tech solutions as it were during the COVID-19 pandemic and empowering and listening to children and communities among others.

To analyze the structural visual elements in the composition and their communicative tendencies, the study takes it as an artist's social responsibility, as a reviewer and an interpreter, to ruminate on the basic role of artworks in communication. He opted to holistically engage both the cultural imports of materials and as well the quest to advance materiality in arts. In *The Abuja Conference*, the painter assembled readily available materials within reach to metaphorically direct the viewer's thoughts on the necessity of dialogues, cross carpeting and hybridity of ideas for a better living; a character synonymous with the family and communal town hall meetings in Igbo cultural space. It is a platform he consciously created to visually represent a group of people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds interacting, dialoging, weaving together ideas, sharing knowledge and experiences, disseminating information and proffering solutions. It seeks to bring into focus the concept of a collaborative effort for a common goal, the experiences, evolving cultural implications and the overall development among other things. The researcher's use of different materials with connotative implications to cohesively form a whole especially (*Nzu*) White chalk and *Nkata* (Basket), explain this.

The flattened basket with its spread-out strands is a motif inspired by the inorganic nsibidi motif and geometric shape. This form combines irregular shapes, spiral and straight lines. It is derived from woven baskets, cut-out gummed patterns from jute fabric and shades of wood particles and it stands for convergence, togetherness and unity in diversity. Considering the fact that abstraction or symbolism in art can reveal and conceal at the same time, creating a platform for multiple meanings, *Nkata* can also symbolically be interpreted as basket/conversation/technology in

the context of entrepreneurial engagement for economic growth and as dialogue, conspiracy, evil plan, as well as technology today (nka taa) respectively.

Also, there are patterns from woven structures created from plaited backgrounds of cane trays and cut-out patterns of jute fabric. These overlapping patterns are adapted to metaphorically point to the concepts of interconnectivity, protection and mutual understanding a symbolic pattern that connotes security

In *The Abuja Conference*, the translation of cultural relations is depicted through the interconnection of the design elements such as lines, textures, colours and shapes. It is meant to bring to the audience's consciousness the need to imagine life beyond confinement but rather to enable fragmented parts to be part of a larger whole. This, the artist's views will give enough room to live out lives with a considerable level of rapport instead of fear and to choose understanding (peace) in place of division. *Nzu*, one of the earth-appropriate pigments used in some of the partitions is recognized in the Igbo cosmology as a signifier of purity, peace, innocence and wisdom. Symbolically, the significance of *Nzu* comes into play here as the violated purity and innocence of the vulnerable school children is contextualized and interpreted. The needed wisdom on the handling of insecurity as can be offered through this platform is represented via the use of *Nzu* and the symbolic basket with stretched-out strands. The varied textures of the different partitions represents the diverse cultures of the world while the similarity of the materials and the connecting lines indicate that the emergence of technology (virtual presentation) has offered a common ground to make decision on the way forward in the contemporary society; an enabling environment to build an indivisible global community that is connected in the development of one another thereby ensuring the progress of humanity. The gloomy burnt sienna generated from the mixture of camwood and charcoal represent the sad tales of

abductions of young pupils in Nigerian schools, however, the rays of hope that the conference promises is represented by the red-orange and light yellow colours of the camwood.

The work therefore is a pointer to the importance and metaphorical explanation to the outcomes of the conference. Among them includes investing in alternative learning programmes such as e-learning, collaboration among ministries, among other resolutions reached on the way forward for human and material. This in other words, reflects on the fact that globalization has been enabling the contemporary society to learn more about other cultures and the fact that the understanding of cultural evolution, relations and connections has proven to bring great and rapid development. The different colours, arrangements and sizes of rectangle and square shapes represent the typical visual or pictorial formats as seen in virtual screen presentations during e-conferences. The spread out hands of the dark coloured basket and the multi colored wood chippings that congregate at the centre represents Africa's openness, acceptance, magnanimous and collaborative spirit even in resource sharing with other continents for a better future for all though she has been exploited.

While appreciating this collaborative effort, the questions still itching for answers are: From the series of attacks recorded so far on schools in Nigeria, have there been any arrests? If yes, who are they, who are the financiers or sponsors? Have there been trials, what were the penalties? If there are none, why? What has been the work of the security personnel? Has the security architecture of the country been compromised? Also elusive is that despite the intervention, the impact seems not to have been felt as there have been consistent reports of attacks even after the conference, almost on a daily basis. It seems to be suggesting that there are beneficiaries with serious strategic gang-ups in the dark who are determined to frustrate every effort no matter the extent of international collaborations. It, therefore, recommends that it is

only sincere and well-thought-out national strategic plans within the nation-states that are needed to address these internal problems.

With the above excerpts, the researcher has demonstrated how the potential qualities of the physical features and tactile makings of local materials within the environment can be used as symbols and be maximized fully to connotatively drive home intended points.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Significantly, the ingenuity of the studio outcomes in this study has proven that within the local environment, there are a lot of potentials from materials that can be explored in the symbolic representation of ideas and concepts, hence contributing to materiality expansion. From the findings, some of these materials are presented in abstract visual forms which are the personal philosophies of the artist-researcher and their physical structures give the viewers insights or clues on the intended meaning(s) in the context where they are used. This means that though different social groups have their generally accepted codified signs and symbols which help them in communications, there are still some inherent characteristics in the formal physical structures of objects which can be created, adapted and metaphorically contextualized in painting and the audience can easily relate or have a clue to its in meaning-making. The study, therefore recommends that artists can creatively contextualize objects or materials that have physical features that can metaphorically provoke deep reflections on societal issues from the environment

This research will equally open up another phase of enquiry into the relevance of exploiting and aligning certain symbolic materials with attached cultural myths and values to a painting discourse. It equally draws the attention of the public to the conversion of waste to meaningful arts as a way of sanitizing the environment. It will also aid in awareness creation amongst

painters that paint does not reside only in tubes and cannot only be applied with brushes, instead, there are other avenues that can be explored to achieve the same result.

It has established that certain cultural heritages are embedded with a lot of underlying connotations which with active in-depth reflections, enquiring, and interpreting its historical connotations have the potential for further innovative tendencies for knowledge generation. For example the *Ikpu isi ugwu* passage rite of the Ikwo clan in Ebonyi state

Finally, the study recommends that to ensure permanence and long-lasting bonding of the found objects on the support, a good quantity of glue, acrylic gum and wood dust mixture should be applied to hold hard materials to avoid falling off and for a better binder for camwood pigments, acrylic gum is recommended.

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