

Emerging Trends in Contemporary Visual Art: A Case Study of Innovative Practices Among Nigerian Visual Artists

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Abstract

Contemporary visual art in Nigeria is experiencing a paradigm shift driven by digital innovation, global exposure, and hybrid media experimentation. This paper investigates emerging trends in Nigerian visual art through a case study of selected visual artists employing unconventional methods and materials, including Lucky James, Jacqueline Suowari, and Victor Ekpuk. By examining their practices and thematic directions, this study identifies how Nigerian artists are negotiating tradition, technology, and global relevance. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative approach involving interviews, visual analysis, and scholarly literature (Enwezor, 2010; Okeke-Agulu, 2015), the paper concludes that Nigerian artists are recontextualizing global art languages through indigenous motifs and local narratives, positioning themselves as active agents in the global contemporary art scene.

Keywords: Nigerian Visual Art, Contemporary Art, Innovative Practices, Hybrid Media, Digital Art, Cultural Identity.

Introduction

Visual art in Nigeria has advanced over the years from long-established forms and advanced ideologies to exploratory hardware studio engagements. This transformation is observed by Hassan (1999) expressed as the “aesthetic of the contemporary,” where African artists today like Lucky James utilize digital tools, Jacqueline Suowari delve into mixed media, and Victor Ekpuk use of codified story to reinterpret cultural identity, political unrest, and urban chaos. Enwezor (2010), expressed that Africa contemporary art is not imitation of Western archetype or standard, but a multidimensional response to both local and global transformations. This paper investigates these emergent directions using case studies of three Nigerian artists whose works exemplify such hybrid and conceptual approaches.

Statement of the Problem

Nigerian visual artists are widely known for their creative impetus, however there is no enough scholastic records concerning innovative methods in studio art practice in Nigeria context. Much of the existing scholarship (e.g., Ogbechie, 2008; Okeke-Agulu, 2015) focuses on earlier modernist figures or traditional forms, with limited documentation of the experimental and media-diverse practices emerging since the 2010s. Based on the aforesaid, it is imperative to bridge the gap by examining the emerging trends in Nigeria contemporary visual art practices.

Aim and Objectives.

The aim is to explore emerging trends in contemporary visual art: a case study of innovative practices among Nigerian visual artists. The study seeks to distinguish essential creative convention that is shaping Nigeria contemporary visual art and exploration of hybrid media employed by the artists. It will also investigate the digital and cultural influences their works exhibit in the social and political context through their artwork

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design centered on case studies and visual analysis. Selected artists-Jacquiline Suowari, Lucky James, and Victor Ekpuk were analyzed based on exhibitions, published interviews, and critical reviews. The data for this study is from both primary and secondary sources which include academic books and journal articles (e.g., Hassan, 1999; Oguibe, 2004; Nzewi, 2013). Artworks were examined using formal and contextual analysis methods to understand media, technique, symbolism, and socio-cultural relevance.

Also, random sampling of sites for trends, social networking sites like Facebook, search engine like Google, postgraduate projects, theses and dissertations in higher institutions were equally consulted to get sufficient background information.

Justification

This study conveys increasing academic need to put into record and investigate contemporary trends in Nigeria visual art practices. As noted by Njami (2021), African contemporary artists are pivotal in redefining global art narratives. By paying attention to all the artists under review this study broadens the field of studio art exploration, contributing to the emerging African art historiography.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study includes case studies of three Nigerian visual artists actively producing works of art from 1994 till date. These artists engage with digital media, experimental materials, and thematic concerns rooted in identity, politics, and tradition. The research excludes traditional sculptors and modernist painters who have not engaged with contemporary forms or technology.

Formal and Contextual Analysis

The artworks of Lucky James, Jacquiline Suowari, and Victor Ekpuk were investigated by the examination of the visual elements, and principles of design of their works: also is the exploration of the cultural significance, historical context and the artists' intentions of all the drawings. These give deeper understanding and help in the appreciation of aesthetic values, interpretation and meaning of the artworks.

Biographical Sketch of Jacquiline Suowari

Jacquiline Suowari is a multidisciplinary artist that explores the infiniteness of body language and identity and making her point in the art of drawing. She was born in Zaria, in 1990 and based in Nigeria. She holds a B.A.in Fine Art and Design and specialized in painting from the University of Port Harcourt. She is a full-time draughtswoman, ballpoint and mixed media artist. She combines ballpoint ink and acrylic to create dynamic and intricate drawings. She picked up interest in art at the age of five. And for many years, she had surprised her collectors with beautiful linear pieces. Jacquiline is indeed motivated with by the inherent power in the art of drawing and

illustration. The thousands of ballpoint pen strokes which produces every image of her artwork, reveals the many hours which it takes to achieve perfection in her eyes, with a single drawing taking many months to complete.

In each drawing, she combines various elements of design to share her thoughts, experiences and inspiration with the spectators. Suowari has took part in select group exhibitions in Nigeria and Miami and has some domestic publications that includes Chukwuemeka Ben Bosah's book 'The Art of Nigerian Women', which documented Nigerian best artists. As a drafts woman, exploring the frontiers that carve links into multiple human experiences through the lens of perceptions is vital because she believes that 'perception' is everything and human stories and experiences form the through which she understands life and human expressions.

In formal analysis of her works, it exhibits large-scale pen drawings combined with linear color markings, rich in texture and precise in details, often featuring principles and elements of the art with expressive facial compositions. In addition, in contextual analysis is the exploration of emotional depth, female identity, and the intersection of cultural storytelling and contemporary aesthetics. Her work addresses the power of vulnerability and introspection in African womanhood.

The works of Jacqueline Suowari:

Silence Will Uncover You (Figure 1) is visual expression of lines by Jacqueline Suowari depicted in ballpoint pen, ink, acrylic and gold leaf on archival paper (152 x 244 cm). The artwork was produced in the year 2020. However, the place of production was not mentioned. This is an image representation of a young lady, depicted from the trunk up, against a light azure backdrop. She put her hands under her jaws and looking straight at the viewer. She wears a pinafore on her partly exposed body and jewelry on her ear on the viewer's left and wearing a ring on her finger resting on her cheek on the viewer's right. She exhibits short black afro hairstyle while her left hand finds comfort on an object before her.

The elements of the work gave strength to this drawing composition. One of these elements is line which is has the ability to communicate in variety of ways. The organic and sensual use of line by the artist in this drawing is quite expressive with the use of contrast in thickness, length, and values. The characteristics of the sensual organic line in this work include the use of thick and thin, implied lines and light and dark values. The lines she used in this artwork is used to create shape of the subject, perspective and dominant directional line that produced a sense of continuance, value, density and texture in the composition. Furthermore, implied line is used to create shape in this composition with two-dimensions which are height and width. The shapes portrayed in this work are geometric, realistic, and abstract stylizations. Also the creation of form in this drawing is achieved through the combination of point, shape and line. The use of color in this drawing is to generate emotion within the viewer and create interest in the composition. The creation of value in this drawing which is the relative lightness and darkness suggests the depth of the subject.

This contrast between black and white are seen by the observer in all the tones between the shaded areas in this illustration. Also, the visual texture in this work is smooth as a surface the viewer can see and imagine the sensation the viewer can have if the surface is touched which is a visual phenomenon. In the use of space, this is the area between and around the subject or negative space in this drawing, the artist leveraged on it to create the positive space where the subject is positioned. In this drawing, the artist created the feeling of depth which the viewer sees as space.

The principles of the art are combined with the elements to produce this drawing. They are the guidelines which the artist used in the arrangement of the elements of the art. The artist made use of balance or the concept of visual equilibrium of similar, opposing or contrasting elements to create a unified whole in the composition. The artist appropriately organized the drawing to create the impression of equality in weight. The artist use of emphasis marks the location of the subject in this drawing which most strongly attracts the viewer's attention.

This is the focal point in this illustration. Out of the three stages of emphasis such as dominant (subject with the most visual weight), sub-dominant (The subject or element of secondary emphasis) and subordinate (The subject with the least visual weight) which is normally the backdrop; the artist portrayed only two of the stages of emphasis which is the subject with the most visual weight or 'dominant emphasis' and the subject with the least visual weight which is the 'backdrop' in the drawing.

In the visual flow or movement within the drawing, Jacqueline directed the viewer's eyes over the surface of the drawing along the edges, lines, shapes and colors to create unity the way the viewer's eyes travels. The way she used the elements in this work, she is able to control and enforce the movement of the viewer's eyes in and around the composition. In the use of proportion, she explored the comparative relationship in between two or more elements in the drawing between the whole subject and some of its parts.

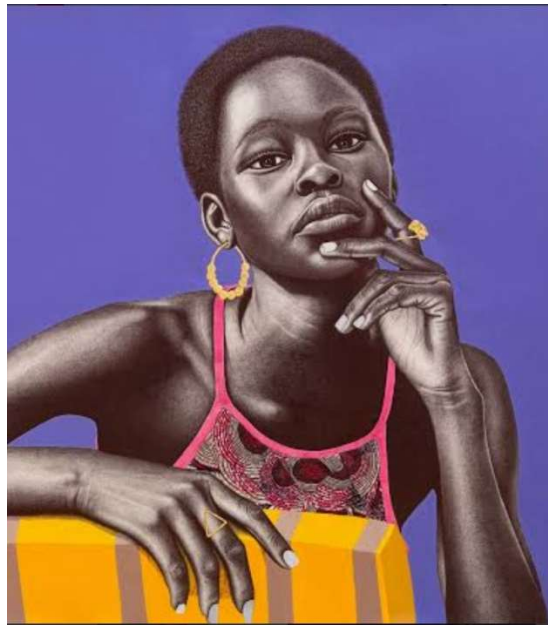


Figure 1: Title: Silence Will Uncover You; Artist: Jacqueline Suowari: Size:152 x 244 cm:
Year:2020 ;

Medium: Ballpoint Pen, Ink, Acrylic and Gold Leaf on Paper

The major purpose of the artist use of the principles of proportion in this work is to create a sense of order between the elements used and to have a visual construction. This she achieved harmoniously as elements in the subject are in proportion and there is no disproportion that is enforced in the entire composition. The artist also explored the Gestalt theory of visual perception and psychology which is unity as the work manifest sense of completeness having all the parts of the drawing belonging together. The artist used this principle of unity to describe the relationship between the individual elements and the whole of the composition. Jacqueline Suowari explored

three of the Gestalt concept of unity in this drawing which is: ‘the Closure’ that is the notion that the brain tends to fill in missing information when it sees an object is missing some of its pieces. The second concept is: ‘Continuance’ which is the concept that once the observer begin looking in one direction, he will continue to do so until something more important grabs the observer’s attention. The third is: ‘Similarity, Proximity and Alignment’ which is the idea that elements of smaller size, shape and color tend to be grouped together by the brain.

The subject in the composition is seen pondering and in deep thought in memory of Francisco de Goya y Lucientes’s drawing of ‘Seated Giant’ which is a giant dominating a desolate landscape captured in a moment of transition as he turns his head, aroused from deep thought, slumber or despondency. Goya explored the aquatint to achieve subtle effect of light and dark which is the technique for depicting a crepuscular atmosphere and conveying the sense of unease that pervades the composition. In addition, the researcher believes that this drawing by Suowari is intended to give a sense of subliminal human expression and human identity. This is indicated by the line of the composition, which draws the eyes of the observer within and around the composition. It is also suggested by the warm light coming from the observer’s left. Furthermore, the artwork is been judged on how well organized it is, how well done it is technically, and how successful it shows the deliberate mood. Besides, the researcher believe this drawing is successful because the use of shape, contrast, line and gesture all work together harmoniously to portray the mood of the subjects.

Biographical Sketch of Victor Ekpuk

Victor Ekpuk

Victor Ekpuk is a Nigerian artist in diaspora that became popular in his style of drawing that show indigenous African philosophies of the nsibidi and uli art forms from the southeastern Nigeria. Born in 1964, his work frequently explores the human condition of identity in the society. His drawings picks upon a variety of meaning which is deep rooted in African and global contemporary art discourses. He first explored the aesthetic philosophies of nsibidi from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife, Nigeria where he got his first degree. Its economy of lines and encoded meanings encouraged him to further explore drawing as writing, which led to his own invention of Glyphs or visual representation of a character, letter or symbol.

His unique style consisted of political cartooning and his own unique nsibidi inspired illustration (Sytsma, Janine 2021). As an artist working at the government-owned *Daily Times* of Nigeria Limited (DTN) in the period between 1990 to 1998, the artist traversed a delicate political terrain of the second military government in Nigeria where press freedoms was clamped down by Babangida and his military junta Sani Abacha for eight years as they engaged in an aggressive systematic attack on the media. Victor Ekpuk took a calculated risks as a staff within the highly regulated space of DTN, in many illustrations and drawings he produced, he brought into play cutting visual satire, metaphor and irony to criticize the corrupt politicians and apparatus of the second military government..

In the formal analysis is the exhibition of abstract linear composition using stylized *Nsibidi* script and *Uli* motifs to evoke a strong visual presence, while in contextual analysis, he explores memory, identity, and diaspora consciousness. His work aligns with Oguibe’s (2004) concept of the “culture game,’ where African artists navigate identity through symbolic reinvention.

Victor Ekpuk's work:

Drawing Memories (Figure 2) is a linear passion of pictograms and symbols by Ekpuk depicted in chalk on wall in the year 2015. However, the size and place of production was not stated. This is a large-scale drawing of ancestral past, against a dark background. The work is depicted in ancient Nigeria's sacred *nsibidi* script, using graphics and gestures. On the spectator's left is an object used to articulate the artist's ideas, the object displays one eye on the left side of the composition and the artist's expressive, abstract script, which he employs to address historical narratives.

Victor Ekpuk draws inspiration for his abstract works from '*nsibidi*' and *uli* symbols and motifs which is local Nigerian communication system which conveys ideas through graphic signs and drawings. The artist explores the relationships, challenges and responses to changes that characterize the human condition. His works are unique because of his use of *nsibidi*, an indigenous African system of writing that employs graphic signs and code to convey concepts.

He combines *nsibidi* signs with cotemporary symbols to tell visual stories through his drawings. his art form include manuscript and drawings, using the following media, chalk, pen, ink, paper, poster marker, graphite pencil and wall surface to elicit and represent emotion. The main inspiration of his style is reducing forms or ideas to their linear essence. His compositions evoke the idea of writing using script like style of drawing to tell a codified story Furthermore, he explored human milieu of identity and emotional expressions in his drawings. Nonetheless, his drawing explores ancient African writings and graphics systems, not necessarily for their literary meanings, but essentially for their visual aesthetics as abstract forms.

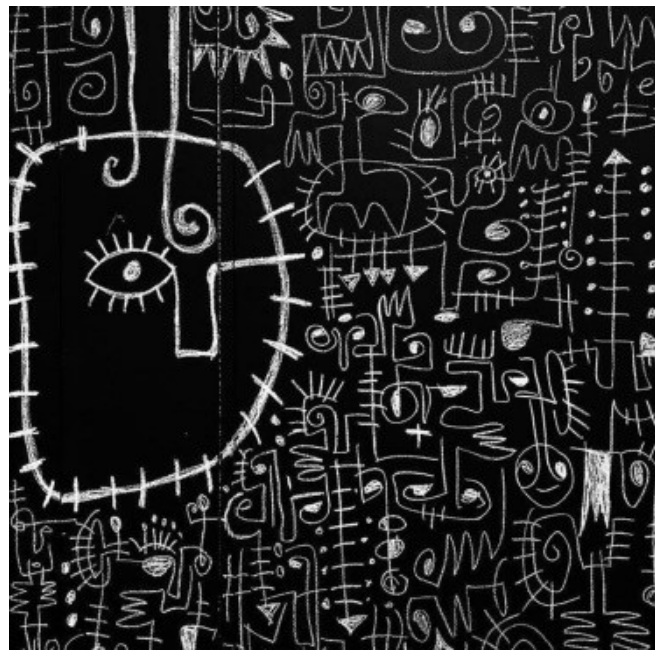


Figure 2: Title: *Drawing Memories*; Artist: Victor Ekpuk. Size: Not stated, Year 2015; Medium: Chalk on Wall.

He employs some visual elements in production of these artworks. These include lines which are elemental strokes that he used to create forms, shapes and texture in the images. He applied thin lines, bold lines and contour lines which are precise, well-defined lines to create sharp contrast. Additionally, these lines are also used to show strength, emphasis and dominance in the drawing. These thin lines which are used to create fine details and are used to evoke a sense of softness and

creation of strong visual presence. He also used straight lines that have consistent direction and not bend. They move from one point to the other, creating boundaries and defining spaces. Based on their orientation in these images, they suggest calmness (horizontal), strength (vertical) and movement (diagonal). The artist employed it to create stability, structure and clarity in the works. More importantly, he used it to create a sense of dynamic movement and energy, which leads the viewer's eyes to a particular direction. He applied wavy lines which are calming and organic to suggest gentle, fluid movement in the composition.

More so, a spiral line which represents expansion and progression is used to draw the attention of the spectator inward or outward and suggesting the process of change in the composition. Zigzag lines which are characterized by sharp angles and abrupt changes in direction convey both positive energy (excitement) and negative energy or anxiety in the illustration due to the orientation it has in the pictures. Furthermore, there is the application of hatching and cross hatching-lines that intersect, creating a mesh-like pattern to convey a sense of dimension and form. He also applied intuitive and scribble lines that he made through instinct and feeling rather than strict planning. Additionally, the scribble lines he used are made by loose, rapid and repetitive movements of the hands, which result in scribble appearance. Its usage creates a sense of untamed energy and disorder. These lines in this drawing are drawn spontaneously expresses the artist feelings, creating vibrant and dynamic composition there is the inclusion of dotted lines made of series of dots that are evenly or irregularly spaced. This line in this drawing indicates a path, a boundary, or a non-continuous connection and suggests a sense of lightness.

Victor also used broken lines which are made up of dashes or short segments that are spaced apart to suggest something that is interrupted and not fully connected, in this abstract drawing it create a sense of movement and tension, which represent fragmentation and disconnection. In this drawing it evokes feelings of chaos and emotional struggles, making the viewer reflect on the nature of the composition.

He applied the principles of balance in all the images under review which is the harmonious arrangements of components, ensuring that no single element overpowers another in terms of visual weight or dominance. He applied symmetrical balance in all the images because of the arrangements of the elements on either side of the centre of the pictures in an equally weighted manner. He did this to achieve balance of the visual weights while keeping a sense of clarity, consistency, order and unity in the works.

Further, he also explored principles of emphasis in the artworks which is the strategy the artist aimed to draw the viewer's attention to a specific design element. He achieved this in all the drawings by centrally placing the subjects in the drawing space. Nsibidi, which is a pictographic and abstract signs that define aspect of Igbo visual aesthetics, is executed on a drawing space. This space could be positive and negative. Most time, the use of space is crowded like '*Drawing Memories*' (Plate 2) and exhibits positive space where the point of focus are positioned and the empty spaces around the focal point are negative space. However, all the subjects are the positive shapes while all the empty spaces around the focal points are the negative shapes. He also introduced texture in the illustrations which is the surface quality of artworks. Texture could be tactile, visual or implied. The artist used implied textures on these two-dimensional surfaces to make the drawings more realistic, immersive, and engaging.

More so, to add sense of physicality to the drawings by creating an illusion of three-dimensional surfaces and shapes that can be seen.

Biographical Sketch of Lucky James

Lucky James is a versatile practitioner in the realms of design, art and academia, with a keen focus on exploring creative methodologies and leveraging digital technology to tackle emerging challenges. Holding both a Master's and Bachelor's Degree in Industrial Design, specializing in graphics, multimedia design and product design from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. James also earned a Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) with a Double Major in Fine and Applied Arts from the Federal College of Education Yola, Adamawa State-Nigeria. In addition, he obtained an Advanced Diploma in Theology from the Lifestyle International Christian University, Italy, in 2015, and is currently pursuing a Doctoral degree. With nearly two decades of experience in both practice and teaching, James has showcased his work in numerous local and international exhibitions.

He actively engages with communities, particularly focusing on empowering teenagers and young adults through technical and vocational skill development. James has a rich portfolio of commissioned projects and designs for governmental, corporate, and private entities. His current research endeavors revolve around digital storytelling, cultural sustainability and innovative product design solutions. James is dedicated to pushing the boundaries of creativity and technology to address contemporary issues and contribute to positive societal change. As a visionary artist committed to transforming culture and society through innovative creative and design solutions, his works serve as a catalyst for meaningful dialogue and transformation. He draws inspiration from the intricate tapestry of human experience, blending traditional artistic techniques with cutting-edge design principles and tools. His multidisciplinary approach allows him to explore the complexities of contemporary issues, offering fresh perspectives that challenge societal norms and provoke thought. He stands as a beacon of creativity, challenging the world to reimagine the world around us and to forge a brighter, more inclusive future through the power of art.

In formal analysis, he combines elements and principles of the arts with digital enhancements to create a dynamic visual presence. While in the contextual analysis, he explores socio-political critique in Northern Nigeria, including themes of insecurity, displacement, and cultural resilience. His visual vocabulary reimagines realism through a digitally-inflected lens, aligning with trends noted by Nzewi (2013) in postcolonial African visual languages.

Work of Lucky James:

Helping Hands (Figure 3) is a linear impression by Lucky James using digital illustration technology as part of the creative processes (52cm x 42cm). It is produced in Maiduguri in the year 2024. This is the digital illustration of two figures shown in full page, against a light backdrop. As one of the figures trudges and slogs along the way and looking towards the viewer's right. With both hands, one under the victim's knees and the other under the victim's armpit, he carries an unconscious casualty whose head is tilted backward, arms dropping downward, hands in palm down position as the unconscious victim looks straight to the sky.

The components and the visual elements of the art used in producing this artwork gave structure to the composition. One of these elements is line which is the elemental strokes the artist applied to create forms and shapes in this drawing. He used hard lines to show emphasis, dominance and strength in the work. This linear impression is bold and impactful and used to draw attention to the key elements and also to captivate the observer's attention because of the strong visual presence it created. He also used curve lines that form gentle and flowing curves, which mimic natural curves seen in nature. The artist used this curvilinear impression to convey the consciousness of

movement, sensuality and comfort because of its fluidity. Another element of art he explored is space which is the distance around or the area between the subject and elements.



Figure 3: Title: Helping Hands: Artist: Lucky James: Size:52cm x 42cm:Year:2024; medium: Digital Illustration

This space is both negative and positive. He also made use of both negative and positive space to in this drawing. Positive space in this drawing is the area of interest in this composition which is the figure rendering helping hands, while the negative space is the space around the focal point in this work. He used space to emphasis the subjects and their position in the drawing space.

He also explored shape one of the components of art. Just like space, it is both negative and positive. The positive shape in this composition is the shape of actual subject while the negative shape is the area between these subjects. He also investigated the principle of balance in this illustration which is the way visual aspects and elements are distributed in this artwork. The artist used symmetrical balance in this drawing which he achieved by giving equal weight to elements across the center-point of the drawing. This central axis is vertical and the result is repetitive or mirrored (referred to perfectly symmetrical) image that appears to be completely equaled in balance. He also used texture which is the surface quality of any object. It could be tactile or physical; it could also be visual or implied sense of texture. He used smooth visual texture in this artwork which is level, flat plane without irregularities.

The focal point of this drawing is the general composition with special emphasis on the curvilinear expression to convey energy, portray curves of the subjects with sensual quality and softening effect on the composition. The purpose of this artwork is hinged on the flooding disaster which displaced people, lives were lost and properties destroyed. Also, the Boko Haram crisis inspired the production of this drawing. The importance of giving helping hands to the society and the provision of quality support and care during these crisis enable people thrive positively in the society. Helping others, especially those in need, can bring joy, friendship, and happiness into our lives.

The mood of the work is hinged on its simplicity, clarity and comprehensibility of the mood of the composition in remembrance of Attabeira's *'Single Line Drawing Technique'* which challenges the artist to distil their subject into its most basic form, focusing on the essential shapes and contours. The process of simplifying the image often brings out its core beauty, leaving space for interpretation and inviting viewers to engage their imagination.

In addition, the researcher believes that this drawing is intended to give a sense of helping those in need. This is indicated by the line of the composition, which draws the observer's eyes within the composition. Furthermore, the researcher is judging the artwork on how well organized it is, how well done it is technically, and how successful it shows the planned mood. Additionally, the researcher believe this work is successful because the use of shape, space, texture, balance and line all work together harmoniously to portray the mood of the subject.

Findings

The study revealed several important developments shaping contemporary Nigerian visual art. First, it discovered that artists are combining traditional media with digital technologies to produce categories of visual storytelling, which allows the artist to pass information on their cultural heritage and identity. In addition, many artists are using art to question political and social issues. Even so, subject matter such as displacement, cultural stability, and postcolonial bequest feature prominently in their various compositions. All the artists under review have worked assiduously to preserve their cultural heritage by employing Uli and Nsibidi motifs in evolving Nigerian art identity that is both local and global in its orientation.

Conclusions

As supported by scholars such as Okeke-Agulu (2015) and Enwezor (2010), this hybridized and politically conscious art form reveals the dynamic nature of Nigerian identity and creativity in the 21st century through the creative works of Lucky James, Victor Ekpuk, and Jacquiline Suowari visual art exploit. By engaging with local traditions and global techniques, these artists exemplify how visual art in Nigeria transcends regionalism and asserts itself in global discourse.

Recommendations

1. The study suggests the intersection of contemporary art practices into the art education curricula in Nigeria institutions to sustain the evolving creative landscape. This can be achieved by the combination of mixed media, digital art, installation art and performing art, which are essential weapons in global art practices.
2. Government, private organizations and cultural institutions should provide enough support to up and coming artists in the country, through the provision of grants, the young ones will be encouraged to take creative-risk and help Nigerian art to evolve.
3. Contemporary visual arts practices should be documented and archived for Nigeria cultural development, preservation of narratives and research.
4. Traditional visual elements, indigenous contents and modern media and tools should be combined together in studio art practices to preserve cultural heritage.
5. To foster world dialogue, international exchange programs and cross-cultural intersection should be encouraged to expand the creative space of Nigerian artists.

6. Contemporary art must be recognized by cultural policy makers as important part of national cultural economy as this will give support to innovation which will protect intellectual property.

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