

ANALYSING A BURNT SITE IN PAINTING AS A METAPHOR FOR REBIRTH AND RESILIENCE

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Abstract

The imagery of a burnt site signifies destruction and loss, but it also presents an opportunity for transformation and renewal. The burnt soil is essentially heavy and sticky clay that has been heat-treated to change its structural properties. It is often combined with compost which forms the organic, water-retentive component of the growing mix. A growing mix made up of one part of burnt soil and one part of compost is ideal for growing plant. A burnt place provides one with a sense of destruction, disaster, loss, and, a place of an overwhelming black, subdual and societal 'extinction'. Jos main market got burnt on 12th February, 2002. The main market prided itself as the largest indoor market in West Africa. A twin bomb blast of May 20, 2014 further rocked the market vicinity, killing hundreds of people, while parts of the market were also razed in November, 2016. It was the economic centre of the state. 'In the aftermath of chaos, amidst the ruins and remnants, there stands a haunting symbol of resilience and destruction of the fallen walls of the Jos burnt market,' (Dankyes, 2024). Like a wounded warrior clawing against the ravages of time, these scorched remnants bear witness to the fragility of human endeavours, while whispering tales of loss, despair, and the potential for rebirth. There is also psychological impact of witnessing the destruction of a familiar and essential space such as the Jos main market. A viewer can emotionally connect with the artworks that portray the feelings of loss, desolation and hope in them. The burnt site of the market presents a disaster that has befallen the market, and has decapitated all existing glory and beauty that the market had. The burnt market now represents the destruction caused by the fire. The fallen walls in a deeper interrogation, symbolize the crumbling of structures and the breaking down of established systems. This metaphorically represents the loss of livelihood, community and stability of the economy.

Metaphorical Indices of a Burnt site

Destruction as a Catalyst for Change: The burnt site represents a moment of devastation where structures and landscapes are reduced to ashes. This destruction mirrors life's challenges and setbacks that question identity and purpose. However, through resilience and determination, this burnt site becomes a symbol of a fresh start and a catalyst for personal growth.



Figure 1. The hunt, Jacob Jari 2012, Fabric, Mixed Media on Canvas, 88.9x119.4cm

Jacob Jari (b 1960) is a teacher and a painter at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, where he has

taught art for more than three decades. Jari is aware of the "power of metaphor and conceptual art in social commentary", hence, "conceptual art stresses process over product and plays down the importance of conventional media". Jari therefore, "drifted into exploration with other media such as discarded cornstalk, fabric and paper". Jari says "things discarded can be reinvested with beauty; a symbolism for how discarded people can still be useful in society". According to John, (2016), Jari's work are mimes of the society projected through the restoration of the discarded to give them continuity. His philosophy is based on second chance. Inspiring to this paper is Jari's bullet holes style of painting. Jari burns his canvas by perforating it thereby creating bullet-holes spaces. The burnt holes are semblances of decomposition and ruination. Jari uses discarded or offcut fabrics and the bullet-holes to recreate a painting.

His works remind viewers that there is still hope where it appears all hope is gone. Discarded materials in painting have also been explored to suggest wastefulness, recycling, regeneration and restoration. Discarded things mean those things are no longer useful or desirable. Without product waste, discard practices, and creative conversion of

dormant materials into substances of benefit to end users, the entire society will be susceptible to environmental epidemics emanating from waste and rubbish. The paper explores the artistic symbolism, conceptually too, of the conversion of "waste" to "use" from discarded property.

The Cycle of Life and Renewal: Just as the forest rejuvenates after a forest fire, the burnt site in the painting signifies the cyclical nature of life. The painting in Figure.2 titled, 'Ghost History' represents the concept of rebirth and the resilience of nature. Similarly, individuals can find inspiration from this metaphor to rise from their ashes and rebuild their lives, embracing change and transformation.



Figure 2, *Ghost History*, Valerie Hegarty, "stretcher, canvas, papier-mache, acrylics, foam core, molding, 52.2"h x 39" w x 3d", 2016. Source. <https://valeriehegarty.com/artwork/4118664> Ghost%20of%History.html

Valerie Hegarty (b.1967)

Hegarty is an American Painter, Sculptor, and installation artist. She is known for irreverent, and often critical works that replicate canonical paintings. What inspires this writer about her works is her recreations in meticulously revised states of decay, ruins, or physical attack related to their circumstances. *Ghost History* examines American historical themes involving colonization, slavery, nationalism, art-historical movements and environmental degradation. According to Reisenfeld (2010), among other things, Hegarty's art is informed by the 19th Century American landscape painting as an expression of sublime, as well as by the manufacturing of two-dimensional master works to be destroyed in three-dimensional fashion in order to evoke entropic forces of growth and decay".

The relevance to this paper is the reusability of decayed materials and the narration of history, altering past art historical images to critique the present and imagine the future. Hegarty, wanted the painting to look damaged in some way, whether by fire or decay, altering George Washington and his horse to appear like a resurrected cadaver (like a zombie) that has been unearthed and roaming the post-apocalyptic American landscape. George Washington's head is missing through the imagined crisis that damaged the painting, recalling the story of the Headless Horseman, (which, in the American version of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, was a Hessian soldier whose head was decapitated by a stray cannonball during the Revolutionary War). Also, she tried to create an effect where the stretcher bars are being exposed through the painting to emphasize the idea of skeletons of the painting and of the bodies of George Washington and his horse. The exposed stretcher bars also hint at a carousel horse or scarecrow.

These political and social commentaries also address the interest of this paper as they work with reference to the burnt state of the Jos market, highlighting the idea of the past and its present state of decay. The decomposed landscape at the site of the market has served as manure to sprouting and renewing grasses each time the rains drop.

The Beauty of Imperfection: The burnt site, with its charred remains and scarred landscape, highlights the beauty that can emerge from imperfection. It teaches us that life's hardships can shape and refine us, making us stronger and more resilient. The painting thus portrays a profound sense of resilience and the ability to find beauty in the midst of adversity. The painting in Figure.3 explains the capacity of a people to stand and remain strong in the face of loss and disaster.

The painting shown in Figure.3 describes the damaged Jos Main Market structure. It is a replica of an ancient relic. As if damaged from war with a revolting impact on the environment. This damaged structure has remained until the time of this paper, it is now two decades. The aftermath of the inferno has dealt so badly on the structure itself. Represented in values of black, brown and highlights of yellow and white on the fascia boards, to exaggerate the rate of a devastation charred by fire, it also captured the rust of the metals on the damaged building. It is however, still being held by the solid structured pillars.



Figure 3. *Ruin and Relic*, Dankyes Ephraim. Acrylic on Canvas, 60.90 x 91.44cm, 2022

The greys at the bottom of the fascia indicate the overstressed environment which has undergone untold precipitated weather condition. Black mixed with yellow can give a dull and less fascinating green, which suggests mucky state of being. This is metaphorical of the relevant institutions under whose watch this condition has persisted. They have become nonchalant and “filthy” and politically corrupt, covered with dirt that they detach themselves from their responsibilities. There are figures at the foreground, some of the figures are with their helmets on. The figures represent the state government officials on routine supervision to site, which, of course, has only yielded muddy results.

This paper captured the site of the Jos burnt market, portraying the 'fallen walls', the essence and the character through an artistic medium of acrylic colours and the palette knife painting technique. It also captured the intricate details and unique textures of the 'fallen walls', revealing their aesthetic and symbolic qualities. It highlights the contrasts between their former glory and their current state of ruin. This showcases their 'beauty' in decay. The Direct (painting straight to canvas) and Indirect (making sketches before painting) painting approaches were used to achieve this objective. The artist explored a muted palette; the burnt market displayed a range of colours due to decay and weathering. The artist therefore, considered earth tones, greys and subtle hues to convey a sense of ruin and decay. The textured walls can also be seen through the exposed charred surfaces and crumbling pillars. The brush and painting knife technique employed added depth and tactile qualities to the works.

At this point, in Figure 4, the “yellow star shaped metals” of the market have vanished. The trademark (symbol) of the market no longer subsists on the structure because of the damage the fire has caused.

The arrangement of shapes and line pattern is not consistent. The subtle composition of colours in the sky further overlaps the connecting lines of the market's curvilinear triangles thereby making them invisible. The artist perceives the pillar shown in Figures 3 and 4 painted with a mix of black and red, to be the biblical interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream by prophet Daniel. In Daniel chapter 4 verses 1-18, Verse 14 says, “cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven, let him live like the wild animal.” By leaving the stump of the tree means that, his kingdom would be returned and restored to him. The pillar still standing represents that there will be a regeneration and a resuscitation of a better economic sustainability to the city.

The work shown in Figure.4 further typifies a high level of hope from the decay and rust from the rubbles of the market. The work is a composition of the building of the Jos burnt market made up of the various elements of design such as line, shape, colour and form. These elements are harmonised in balance and rhythmic rendition as seen in the wavy and undulating line movements. The painting is rendered from a restricted palette where colours are muted to convey a feeling of calm and rest. The Jos main market is burnt and property are lost as represented by the blackened-grey areas, remnants of fire, and signs of abandonment are represented by warm reddish orange and toned red. There are connecting beam-like rails that bine the arcs on the relic structure. The beam-like rails hold these skeletal building elements to suggest resilience and encouragement. At the centre of the composition are the yellow star metal motifs of the market. Although the colours at the bottom of the yellow star metal motif have been replaced by a sombre and greyish charred hue, the top part of it maintains the yellow hue. The contrasting yellow hue here is an amplified sense of optimism and hope from the futility of 'life'. The overall ambience of the work is that of 'muteness and hope' to the human soul.

Embracing Change: By examining the burnt site as a metaphor for rebirth and resilience, a painting encourages viewers to embrace change and not fear it. It symbolizes the possibilities that lie within the ashes and encourages individuals to navigate through difficult circumstances with courage, adaptability, and an optimistic outlook.



Figure 4. *Ruin and Relic*, Dankyes Ephraim. Acrylic on Canvas, 87 x 102cm, 2023



Figure.5. *Sprouting Petal I*, Acrylic on Canvas, 60.90 x 91.44cm, 2022

The artist adopted the yellow colour, this is not because it has an absolute symbolism and because it is to be the colour of the 'sun', it brings hope. Yellow it is that grabs attention with positivity. The warmth in yellow excites the nerves. Yellow works well with a soft blue, which is its complementary colour on the colour wheel.

Figure.5 shows an abstraction of the structure of colours: daubs of dark green, ochres, luminous yellow (cadmium yellow pale), with a deliberate distribution to stimulate an emotional composition. The colours are vividly 'impastoed' on the canvas. The vivid and spontaneous action of white at the top midpoint of the work is to create harmony and a meeting point between the existing dark left side of the painting and the blue right side of the painting. The green shade represents new life sprouting and evolving from the previously abandoned environment. The white is equally an illusion in the painting. The surrounding yellow distributed across the painting gives a feeling of gait and gaiety, the warmth can be felt even in the greens. It is beginning

to go against the odds, it is building up a momentum to assume a position of a new start. Apparently, there is a hope from a place of 'death', a relic can even be maintained as treasured site for tourism in saner climes, where governance is deliberate about implementing her policies selflessly. The greens in their shades are applied to form structures that appear like a city scape against a calm and peaceful environment of blues. The path is clear and the coast is limpid.

The greens are treated like the *sfumato*, producing softened, yet bold highlights, allowing other colours to gradually shade into another. Green, like yellow, is a colour that evokes emotions. It is a dominant colour in nature that makes you think of growth. Yellow and green in nature give an incredible variety of shades, expressing renewal and life. Green evokes a feeling of abundance and completeness. The lost glowing glory associated with the burnt market, as objectified by this research, shall be returned in a more vibrancy of strength, quality and a clear position of progressive vision.



Figure 6. *Sprouting Petal II*, Dankyes Ephraim, Acrylic on Canvas, 60.90 x 91.44cm, 2022

The painting as shown in Figure. 6 depicts this feeling of calm. There are two colour schemes of dark bluish purple shade and yellow. It is a simple perception of the artist's idea of a contrasting night, a comparison to the night the market got burnt. This was a calm, serene and peaceful dawn. A close up view provides the eye with varying shapes that look like a panoramic view of umbrellas from the top of a position. The forms are in shades of purple and magenta and in different patterns. Then spider-web like image, like a patch of yellow umbrella shape, was painted above the dark purple shade of the umbrellas.

The yellow typifies the hope and the new life springing and spreading. It also means that no matter the gloomy and sorrowful state the condition had been, there is a band of hope and resilience to emerge. It also shows that even when both humans and their environment have been adversely affected by the prevailing circumstance that was beyond human intervention, the artist was presented with a case and reality to bring out a mode of expression that depicts a metaphor for a regenerated and transformed state of mind



Figure 7. *Sprouting Petal III*, Dankyes Ephraim, Acrylic on Canvas, 60.90 x 91.44cm, 2022.

Figure.7 presents a painting with high feelings of zest and exhilarating composition. The painting was painted in vibrant yellow hues, warm orange and yellowish soft greys, up to the half of the canvas. There are massive brush strokes evenly spaced across the canvas, magenta-blue complement the warmth in the exciting yellows. There is also a shape like the Nigeria's map, abstracted in red and dark brown in the centre of the canvas. Specks of choky white are painted in few places. The researcher was creating a life bubbling stage with an energy and a purpose driven activity within the environment in a

positive manner. The expression created is like that of a little child, when presented with their favourite chocolate. Here, the use of colour and texture preoccupies the artist's mind and senses, the energy and emotions of creating a visual dream unto a canvas to convey a true essence.

Using vibrant colours, the artist incorporated uplifting colours to symbolise a renewal and rejuvenation. Bright colours can evoke a sense of hope, optimism and a fresh start. The sprouting petals signify a new life and growth emerging from the decay and the burnt. This is metaphor for capacity to rebuild and a regeneration from what was fallen. The artist also focused on light and contrast in the execution of these work. The light and dark areas as seen in the paintings symbolise the contrast between the past and the future, with light representing new possibilities and bright future. The greys in the paintings symbolise a rise from ashes. The plants growing in a muddy space or areas convey the idea that out of destruction comes a renewal and the opportunity for a fresh start. There is a place for human resilience as shown in 'Sprouting Petals'.

Conclusion

Analysing a burnt site in a painting as a metaphor for rebirth and resilience presents a powerful message of transformation, renewal, and the ability to find strength and beauty in the face of adversity. It inspires individuals to navigate through life's challenges, reminding them of their innate resilience and the potential for personal growth that arises from difficult experiences.

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