

ENGAGING AN EPHEMERAL OBJECT LIKE SHADOW AS A PHILOSOPHICAL SUBJECT IN MODERN PAINTING

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Abstract

This paper was inspired by Paul Gauguin's theory on the inclusion of shadow in a painting. He occupies a prominent place within the history of painting and particularly in the history of Fauvism and Symbolism. The shadows in painting as an element of design, before this assertion and even after, had remained (and still do) appendages to figures and objects in paintings. Is it possible to separate the shadow from its subject material existence in paintings and create a total new concept of the shadow away from the previous idea for the aesthetic purpose in paintings? The aim of this paper is to advocate for the creation of paintings through the observation of images derived from the shadows and also, employing the thinking of Paul Gauguin and the phenomenological theories in the nineteenth-century philosophy ideas. Shadows were reconstructed in painting as independent images and not as appendages to any phenomenal object. The study was delimited to only human shadows; human form being one of the widest and attractive subjects in the history of art. The study established that the practices of painting and knowledge were inseparable, that, in fact, painting is a tactile knowledge. When studied it does reveal theories ordinarily hidden for common and untrained eyes. Painting is a visual narrative that could be read through careful contemplation. As Chirico states in Miller (2006), there are more enigmas in the shadow of a man who walks in the sun than in all the religions of the past, present and future.

Introduction

Perception and thought have a critical role in creating meaning and knowledge; they draw attention and a descriptive role in a human experience with an object or subject in painting as it relates to the perceived idea on a subject or an object in a self-inquiry. *Self-inquiry* has been a critical subject of discourse both by artists' and philosophers alike; ability to know and develop one's consciousness starts from self-inquiry within one whether it bothers on psychological or sociological issues that enables one to understand the mental or physical things around one and relate them in a clear discussion whether through text or visually. For example Heideggerian School on the issue of the truth in things or that the essence of the *being and truth* by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt in 2010 insists on

Therefore, everything hinges upon how we pose the question of essence, that is, what we really understand by the essence of something and what kind of understanding this is. This gives us a clear and simple indication of how we should proceed:

before we ask about truth in its essence, we should thoroughly and firmly establish how matters stand with the essence of essence.

The artist-writer engagement with shadow as a subject in the modern sense in painting is phenomenological in nature. It is different from the previous periods like the 18 and 19th centuries of European Art historic encounter with the shadow of an object of light and shade in painting. The idea is a reconstruction of a shadow as it confronts the perception and imagination of the artist-writer in painting. It is more of engaging *the thing in itself* according to the theories of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl in J.A. Smith, P. Flowers and M. Larkin (2012); this encounter with a shadow as a subject of inquiry became the central focus on the entire painting narrative. An experience with a perception of a shadow is the key in the development of this paper. However, not the physical appearance of a shadow that this paper would bother with, but the rich experience which engages the artist-writer in this context just like the saying of Dithery in Irokanulo (2014):

Whatever presents itself as a unit in the flow of time because it has a unitary meaning, is the smallest unit which can be called an experience. Any more comprehensive unit which is made up of parts of a life, linked by a common meaning, is also called an experience, even when the parts are separated by interrupting events.

This encounter created a rich, enduring experience within the *being* of the artist-writer, which artist constructs in painting to constitute this paper. The conceptualisations of these paintings in writing capture and narrate a personal artistic encounter with shadows as a source of inquiry in the painting as a mean of an academic thinking process. The argument is this, can't paint creates a process of thinking or *research* if that should be used as the contextual word? Shadow in this context is a process of revealing the hidden knowledge, like the earth in Heideggerian aesthetic philosophy. Which means the things one can see and deal with physically while the *world*, on the other hand, reveals things one feels but cannot see. This, perhaps, would create a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's *phenomenology of perception* within the context of creation and the artist-writer.

The use of shadow as a subject in painting creates focus in this visual inquiry. This process should not be confused with the context of narrative like fiction writers such as Achebe and Soyinka, who are the most popular literary artist in Nigeria and Africa at large their plot and character are viewed in certain literary ways, but this study focuses on construing aesthetic using colours, space and objects and its subjective character, which brush textures, bring to bear on the canvas to determine the shadow as a subject in aesthetic discourse. The argument has always been to what extent does art infer knowledge. The aesthetic theorists over time have argued at this point in various artistic discourses.

Problem of Visual Inquiry

The painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, through the nineteenth century, employed shadows in their various paintings. Shadows served as an

appendage in explaining the effect of light on objects within the environment. Artists like Caravaggio (1571-1610), and Rembrandt (1606-1669) and a host of other Dutch painters employed the effect of shadows in creating their paintings. In the nineteenth century, several of the artists, including Claude Monet (1840-1926) attempted to capture the illusion of time and its effect on the environment. Till date, that has been the effect of a shadow in painting. The thinking in this study is to look at the shadow differently from the previous ages. Attention is turned to the theory of Paul Gauguin (1848—1903), one of the most influential French artists and a scholar in the nineteenth century European art movement, who broke away from impressionistic style to create and make sense of the style of the symbolism. Unlike any other impressionist or the post impressionists, he did not employ shadows in his paintings, but saw them as separate entities that could manifest new thinking and idea. In his letter to Emily Bernard (1888) he affirmed that *...instead of a figure if you put the shadow only of a person; you have found an original starting point.*

He presented an idea that shadow, after being studied, can lead to new understanding and design in painterly composition. He persuaded us to consider composition where we have interactions between human figures with other elements of design. Instead of a human form, the shadow should be included in a composition. This was a new development which led to a current perspective in painting composition. The thinking of *the concept of a shadow* motivated by simulating and natural light effects, which create shadows of various kinds in real- life situation, and the images that it creates under the effects of light would be of interest because they bring us into reality with the Igbo mythology of multiplicity of the self, specifically, the *Onyinyo* philosophy of the essence of the *being*. *Onyinyo* is an Igbo word for an image or a shadow which construes likeness of an original source. It is a philosophy and mythology of the Igbo culture that explores the essence in everything.

As a child, the artist-writer often wondered about the mysteries of the *being* or the shadow in Igbo

mythology. The writer from childhood observed that the shadow has been always in the company of other individuals according to the source of light, be it natural or man-made. It is natural just like the biblical saying *I am always with you to the close of time*.

The way these images appear in our perceptual reality under induced light, and how the individual mind interprets them will be of interest to us and not necessarily the physical appearance of any shadow. Imagery derived from the shadow brings to bear on the critical contemplation and theorisation on the multiplicity of the self in Igbo metaphysical understanding. This is imitated by the multiple shadows cast from various light sources. One wonders if shadows in themselves could not be the major focus in painting as a narrative element included with or without objects or human images. Is it impossible for shadow from an induced or simulated light can create imagery that is quite challenging; should not relieving them from original objects that created the shadows become the concept of a painting? Could this concept develop into more complete images that represent visual thinking and perception of subjective reality? Is it possible to separate shadows from its material subject that cast it for the purpose of painting? The writer would see if this theory is realisable and tests its efficacy in painting composition.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the relationships between thought of a shadow and its subjective perception in reference to the modern practice of painting. In arguing that perception to be an expressive and creative agent, Maurice Merleau Ponty in Quinne Carolyne (2004), insists that it is intimately linked with artistic practice. This is clear in Ponty's (1952) essay *indirect language and the voice of silence*, he argues that it is the expressive operation begun in the least perception, which amplifies into painting and art.

Process and Procedure

In the present study, the artist-writer used reflective method in the practice-based research that has its root in the qualitative, performative and the action research method advanced by Gray

(2006: 34). This means that the artist-writer reflects upon his encounter with the research phenomena during the investigation process. The experiences of the encounter are transformed into the research procedure; the processes subsequently are divided into five steps of action that clarify the experiential knowing of the artist-writer. Each of these steps reflects on the others in cyclical form in a systematic development. It is supported by the conventional research methods, advanced by Gray (2006: 1-13) and Barrett in Irokanulo (2014: 78). The artist-writer started by re-examining a photograph of one of the sources of data in order to understand the primary focus which is the shadow and the processes of transforming it.

Discussion

The artist-writer works in this context are the product of the critical thinking process based on Gauguin's theory in his letter to Emile Bernard referred to earlier. This study was also inspired by Gani Odutokun (1987): *The King Addressing his Subjects*. It forms the background to the development process of this body of works in order to add to the quest of new knowledge that this practice might bring about the understanding of painting in general.

In practice-based research the outcomes that emerge from the alternative logic of practice are not easy to articulate and can be difficult to discuss objectively given the emotional and subjective dimension of the artistic process. The ability of the artist-writer to shift emphasis from the evaluation of art works as products, to an understanding of both studio inquiry and outcomes of a process in creative inquiry, is the key to this writing. The emphasis is laid on an essential dialogue of the studio inquiry as a product of knowledge not art criticism. An art object is composed of elements, which include aesthetic qualities, intentions and persuasiveness, narration or historical relationship with the art object in question. This is also the basic principle that guides the explanations of this artist-writer's paintings.

Philosophical hermeneutics stand on the assumption that art addresses us. If artworks address us, they address us about something; our experience and engagement with art is fundamentally dialogical. This is not a matter of reducing art to the spoken word, but of recognising that the event of art is in many ways analogous to the event of conversation: both are occasions in which something happens or is brought to mind. At the root of the term, dialogue is the Greek term *logos* meaning *the living word*. Art creates a conversational effect in our daily lives each time we engage an art object in dialogue. Each person draws an object in a conversation in accordance to one's understanding of the subject matter and the interpretive ability of one's position.

The word *sache* means *the matter at hand*. An artist's approach to its subject matter needs are not relativistic. Different works can share the same subject matter and each can address different aspects of their content and context. The *sache* or the subject field of work (utterance) addresses are always more than any individual expression of it. It follows that if, like concepts, the subject matter of an artwork is always more than it seems to offer, an artwork can in this respect never be finished: all encounters with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event. Pablo Picasso in Irokanulo (2014:43) affirms that:

A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While [it does], it changes as one's thought changes. And when it is finished, it still goes on changing, according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man who is looking at it.

One aspect of structuralist theory and criticism has been concerned with questioning notions of the author or painter as the originator of meaning within a given work Bakhtin in Irokanulo (2014: 87) considers the subtle relationship between the authorial word, which directly embodies semantic and axiological intention of the creator. He

emphasises dialogue as an inevitable and necessary aspect of art. Art objects are developed from the outset in tandem with textual research and there is an inevitable and necessary interplay between the activities of thinking, reading, writing and making.

One important factor in order to understand the motivation of this study is the issue of critical theory. It is the platform on which the artist-writer emphasises three philosophical issues, which include the theory of image which, according to Mitchell (2010) is that image in short, as the site of special power that must either be contained or exploited. These three factors are the criticality of visual perception and the mental process of images, the function of the mind that can be found in the thesis of a perceptual nature of the being in the world by Heidegger in Thompson (2006); and the deconstructive position of the artist-writer.

The emphasis of the writer is to realise the objectives of the paper through the creation of imagery of shadow that would answer the fundamental questions about the writing. The idea is to clearly show how the chosen artistic methodology has enhanced and quickened the creation of these paintings as a body of theory that answered the objectives of the research, without having a single viewpoint of discussing the realised works. The artist-writer instead, allows the works to assume a position where everybody participates in the discourse, since image appeals to people differently and it means different things to different individuals.

Findings

Before now the understanding of the structure of the painting is that a shadow is always shown by the material evidence of what created the shadow. The study has been able to sustain shadow alone in painting without its material evidence and still create a narrative in painting. It could be seen in plates I, II and III

The study is in line with earlier mentioned three basic factors that constitute an Art object. These are intention, persuasiveness, narrative or historical significance of an art object. These three factors produced effects of spontaneity in the process of creation of these artworks.



Plate I, Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, **The Delinquent**, 2010, oil on canvas,

The study has also been able to use element like shadow to create pictorial harmony within the imageries structure in painting and in the same vein has employed shadow within another context to bring to the fore, shadow in another understanding. Contextually *emotion* was deployed as a basic tool of creation, understanding and advancing new knowledge in painting. It is quite clear to see in paintings and other form of Artworks. The artist-writer's idea is to use shadow as an inquiry tool to explore a philosophical context of the *being and truth*, what is a *being* and what is the theoretical understanding of the word *truth*? What again is the Fundamental purpose of *philosophy* and its relationship to painting?

Permit the writer to look at the history and meaning attached to the painting over time. First, philosophy is not science, neither is it personal opinion of the world-wide around us; it is an attempt to interpret the concept of what we refer to as the *Truth* from

phenomenological perspective and the cognitive viewpoint. These facts emerge from the Greek understanding of the conception which has two converging points. These points are *truth* as unconcealment or truth as correctness; it is however, difficult to decide further ado, whether it was the inner superiority of the latter conception which is *correctness*. The ordinary conception as *unconcealment* gave way to more understandings and acceptance of the word *Correctness*. Painting as it were, is the construction of this correctness through drawing and painting, in a way, interpreting a phenomenological idea rather than a cognitive concept of knowledge. The idea in painting is like the strength of the narratology theory that appeals to the mind to conquer the thought. Painting as a methodology of knowledge should be viewed in this way, for the author, truth is a sociological acceptance of an element that unconscious the mind, and situations of a given person.

The idea of using the word paint as a noun and painting which of course a verb as a medium of contemplation is a huge challenge if one's mind-set sees painting as a skill production in the early and late fifteenth century in the context of European Art. However, painting has moved on, in the broadest sense of the word, away from the mannerism which the artists during the Renaissance period were preoccupied with to a more intellectual point that the artist in the modernism and postmodernism finds themselves in.

How does painting infer new knowledge? The masters of Flemalle in the Renaissance period, in the acute representation of objects, initiated a trend in realism that spoke volumes of intelligence of the artists these characterised Flemish paintings for scores of years thereafter. They exemplify at its zenith the use of symbols as a form of literary exposition. The sweet domestic interior of the Annunciation includes lilies in a jug symbolising Mary's purity: their white petal encloses a golden heart representing Christ in her womb: a polished vessel hanging in its niche symbolises Mary as the vessel most clean. An extinguished candle from the table, its wick still smoking symbolises the Divine light; its extinction at the moment of Annunciation means that God, in the person of man, has become flesh. These artists were vastly knowledgeable in the literary meaning to people within their time obviously indicating that they must have been well schooled people to do what they did then.

These days painting has assumed a cultural diversity, reflecting global contemporary positions that look at modern thematic issues and scholarship and contextualises the sociological and psychological situations that combat the man today in every sense of the word. Unfortunately, people think an artist operates through emotion that manifests only through form and colour and cannot be associated with the word knowledge in the present times. But paintings, according to Nochlin (in Alpers 1992), the making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more-or-less

dependent upon (and free from giving temporality) defined conventions, schemata or systems of notation, which have to be learned and worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship or along individual explorations. If this is true, then there is a meaning and understanding in the world of art. We make meaning of an artwork the same way we make meaning of the elements of the world and yet the world is unconsumed in our act of imagining and constructing meaning out of her.

Each of this meaning brings forth new knowing and present entirely new understanding as Eco in (Maclean and Holdridge 2006) asserts: Art suggests a way for us to see the world in which we live, by seeing it, to accept it and integrate it into our sensibility. The open work [I. e. An art work anchoring multiple meanings] assumes the task of giving us an image of discontinuity. It does not narrate it; it is it. The art of painting has continuously shown that the images therein have the capacity to propel knowledge in every sense of the word. How then do we assess paintings as a form of knowledge? In this context, how does painting relate to the concept of *truth and being*?

This plate construes the synthesis of a human form and a shadow in a composition. The idea is to create a balance between the human form and the shadow to access how these two components create dialogue in painting. The aim of the study is to explore the *shadow* different from how the master of the nineteenth European artist did and to follow, as it were, the theory of *Paul Gauguin* on the concept of shadow.

Plate II shows shadows cast on a concrete wall and also on the floor to create the effect of a feeling of people standing before a wall in anticipation of something. The vigorous effect of brush strokes on the surface of the canvas creates a feeling of anxiety over a nation in which her people worry over shelter, food, and security. From this point the artist-writer has begun to show a good understanding of shadow alone without a human

figure in a composition. The context of creating aesthetic is trusted the use of colours, space and shadow as a form of experience and contemplation.

The paper has also used the shadow in creating a visual motif in painting that is entirely new in this part of the world. It can be seen in plate III that the imageries derived from the shadows of a reflected light source become a motif in the painting. They can be compared to imagery of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and Aaron Douglas (1899-1979). The derivation of the imagery is in fulfillment of one of the objectives of the paper.

The paper has been able to access and also discover that the claim of Gauguin (1888 in Herschel B. Chip with contribution by Peter, S and Taylor, C 1968:

59-67) in his letter to Emile Bernard is true and can be achieved in painting. This may be the first time to the best of the researcher's knowledge that this theory is explored and carried out in a doctoral research in painting in a Nigerian University as portrayed in plate II in this paper. One important factor of the aesthetic component of this research is the use of heavy brush strokes to create a feeling of restlessness of a country like Nigeria; where there is an uneasy economic hardship.

Generally, the palette of the artist-writer constitutes warm hues that construct the thought of the author. The brush strokes are spontaneously realised creating a feeling of agitation that runs through the study process.



Plate II, Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, **Corridor of Power**, 2010, Oil on canvas, 120x120cm

The perception and the thought process towards the shadow gradually begun to form the abstract aesthetic quality of the shadow as a form of inquiry in a contemporary practice of painting, and developed conscious perceived world by the artist-writer into the foundation of rationality in conceiving ideas towards certain basic understanding of the material world. The imageries of shadow as a vehicle of painterly expression began to construct a visual expression of some sort in constructing the subjective illusion where only shadows exist and constitute the material element of creation.



Plate III, Emmanuel Ikemefula Irokanulo, **Conference**, 2010, Oil on canvas, Size

Finally, this study has proven that painting or art practice can be contemplated theoretically and realised in practice using triangulated methodology adopted in this research procedure. It justifies the process of painting as a source of knowledge that gives better understanding of an experience, (Sullivan 2010: Arnheim 1997: 152), particularly using the imagery derived from the shadows as a form of study in the visual Arts.

Conclusion

If we have to come to accept that philosophy and painting are indeed cousins in nature from the

various citations in this paper, then the questions that construes the essence of truth, in the context should be curiously re-examined to contextual painting as it were as a mode of knowledge giver. In this understanding the practice of painting and knowledge are inseparable. Painting is a visual knowledge that can be read through careful contemplation. The framed images, time and place constitute a shrine on thought that creates knowledge within the body of the painting. This paper has shown that truth which is core to philosophy and painting rest on the concept of

interpretation of the given idea and situation like the illusion of the *allegory of the cave* by Plato (427-347 B.C.E.), is one of the world's best known and most widely studied philosopher.

The paintings created from the shadow become a shrine of contemplation, and thought is constructed within the minds of the observers. The philosophical object of shadow is very rich; and could still be taken by other artist-scholars that might want to look at the possibilities of its metaphysical nature; or even its social and cultural context, from various ethnic groups see a shadow as a spiritual object, as Chirico states in Irokanulo (2014).

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