
Towards Expansion of Sculpture Language: The Imperative of Research In Studio Exploration

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Abstract

This paper reports on the author's research exercise for studio practice at the National Museum of African Art in the Smithsonian Institution, USA. It discusses the need and processes of data collection for studio inquiry (with particular reference to fibre work), and the means to contextualize the available data into a metaphorical sculptural whole. It also stresses the relevance of a strong theoretical background that equips the artist with a good understanding of his materials and ideas for a creative enterprise. The paper concludes that studio exploration yields strong visual results and inspire a more sustainable and versatile way of production with a purposeful research.

Background

Between 1996 and 1998, I undertook MFA studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka under El Anatsui who holds the view that artists work better with what their environment gives them.¹ Anatsui joined the teaching staff of the University in 1975, after the Nigerian civil war. At that time, there was a shift from the stylistic and conceptual art philosophy of the Academy, which was initiated in the art department by Akinola Lasekan and Margaret Dunlap in the pre-war years of the university (1961-1967), to the cultural synthesis philosophy of the Zaria Art Society in which symbolism and formal simplification displaced naturalism.² This new artistic order, which favours the blending of ideas taken from outside with those gleaned from within, was introduced in the department by Uche Okeke who encouraged the students to draw inspiration from their traditional art forms. His experiments with *Uli* (traditional Igbo design motifs) eventually eclipsed the creative climate of the department thus defining what some scholars refer to as Nsukka Art School. Incidentally, Anatsui was a key player in this culturist try-out and struggle against rigid artistic conventionalities. Apart from coming to Nsukka with the treasure kit of his Ghanaian cultural background, he initiated his students into creative exploration of indigenous art materials, ideas, forms and techniques. His use of "the most common, easily accessible and dismissed materials" as well as his "willingness

to pursue diverse visual grammars ... (have) led to an impressive 'intertextual' practice"³ which immensely influenced the Nsukka Art School. Gradually however, the creative climate of the Art School became saturated with an exploratory spirit that has continued to affect both staff and students of the department.

Following my study in an art school that is oriented towards cultural synthesis (and particularly under El Anatsui at MFA Level), I developed interest in the exploration of local technique and material, especially fibre in recent times, for sculptural production. I am usually prompted by the desire to toy with the malleability of meanings in these materials and processes and with issues around me. There is also the urge to discover the creative potentials inherent in these materials and processes. Sometimes the materials, especially jute bags which have served out their utilitarian needs, are processed products used originally for packaging and storing grains. These are virtually reused and given a new value⁴ that is showcased in a woven visual format. The process of tearing them apart and shredding them into strips and strands lends to an extension of textile, though not as to their traditional usefulness and practicability but towards experimentation and spontaneity that tend to ground-breaking discovery in crafting visual metaphor.

My environment offers me a wide range of materials I need to get engaged in studio inquiries. Constructing eloquent statements with these materials require that I search out appropriate studio techniques and processes that can generate contextualised visual language invigorated with aesthetic backdrops. Coming up with a great idea in the studio is not just sufficient; sifting, manipulating and homogenising it with the expressive quality of the material, so as to produce a work that offers a metaphorical, historic, and formal banquet for every visually literate viewer,⁵ is crucial. In view of this, I look beyond my studio processes of dyeing, shredding, wrapping, tying, binding, and sewing to scout for inspirational lines that can provoke a dynamic and actively functional explorative spirit relevant in contemporary art world. This has led me into an inquiry that looks at nature and human inventions, recognition of dynamic and innovative design manifestations, and a re-examination of moribund textile ideas and norms. In fact it is those studio investigative expeditions that instigated this research at the United State's Smithsonian Institution, Washington D. C., which was undertaken with the hope of developing a new approach (after my critical study of the Smithsonian collections) that would engender novel artistic revelations.

Significance of the Research

The research has not only benefitted my practice, it also impacts positively my teaching strategies. It has repositioned me to educate my students better on a more challenging approach to studio production and projects conceptualization. Studio visits among the faculty members of my art department, as well as other artists, was initiated. Students was made part of this exercise with the hope that

it would create a forum for effective art critique sessions where students and emerging (or even established artists) would have opportunities to learn from one another. Between 2014 and 2015, I hope to show a body of work that will result from the research in an exhibition that will be held in Nigeria.

Exploring Materials and Forms

My studio exertion with fibre (principally jute) engages the technical processes of tying, wrapping, dyeing, bundling, sewing and weaving, which are helpful in configuring the materials into personal and political narratives. Fibre, because of its malleability, offers me greater flexibility in weaving visual imageries of my experience. Besides, those studio processes that I adopt subtly precipitate my creative faculty and thus providing ample opportunity for deep inquiry into different visual forms and patterns created by nature (particularly those having some visual reference to fibre). Also, I consider different inadvertent arrangements that resulted from man's activities in the weaving industries, cloth markets and fashion design houses. My encounter with these arrangements and patterns provoke a mental process that enables my mind to scan through the richly diverse and multifaceted nature and man-made objects as I seek for relevant organic and inorganic elements that I may adapt to artistic musing. For instance, the intertwining of branches and roots of the tree plant presents a subtle interlocking of forms that may be described as "fibrous." The twining animal hair, fur, veins, limbs, and entrails also suggest fibrous movements that inspire weaving with forms to create formal synthesis. Some discarded cut-outs from the tailor's bin, different shapes or parts of fabric to be sewn into a dress, and a seamstress' method and sewing styles are also sources of inspiration.

The above inspirational sources are still insufficient for strong creative ideas that can push the boundary of fibre art further in the direction of my aspiration. There is the need for some theoretical background that would equip me with some historical facts on fibre explorations, and knowledge of other fibre artists' and researchers' views and discoveries in the fibre art arena. There is also the need for some visual data which comes ready from viewing the actual works done by traditional and contemporary acclaimed fibre artists. To this regards, the National Museum of African Art in the Smithsonian Institution was made available to me. Running then in the museum was an exhibition of traditional and modern African art, a culmination of *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*⁶ project undertaken by the museum. Thus, I was given the opportunity of going through its library, rich with books and exhibition catalogues on the fibre art of Africa, and museum replete with collections of traditional and contemporary African art pieces, for my research.

The National Museum of African Art: The Library Search

I arrived in Washington DC on September 16, 2013 and my work started in the National Museum of African Art the following day. Janet Stanley, the Chief Librarian, opened doors of the library for me. There, I found useful materials on the history of textiles in Africa, which elaborately discuss the patterns,

patterning and functions of textile materials in the continent. Besides, I tried to look at the metaphors behind cloth in both the traditional and contemporary African societies. The fibres and textiles of other continents such as Europe and Asia as well were briefly examined. In fact many books relevant to textiles, including M. D. C. Crawford's *5000 Years of Fibres and Fabrics*, Irene Emery's *The Primary Structures of Fabrics: An Illustrated Classification*, Venice Lamb's *West African Weaving*, Anne M. Spencer's *In Praise of Heroes: Contemporary African Commemorative Cloth* and Peggy Stoltz Gilfoy's *Patterns of Life: West African Strip-Weaving Traditions*, were reviewed. Apart from the library search, there was also a tour of the African Art Museum collection, which enabled me to see and feel the textiles I have read about in the texts physically.

Now, the techniques of the interworking process which include looping, knitting, knotting, netting, braiding, plaiting and matting have become interesting exercises to observe in this research while seeking for relevant organic elements for adaptation to artistic musing. Irene Emery's work, *The Primary Structures of Fabrics: an Illustrated Classification*, has provided a detailed visual description and explanation of the fundamental technical processes involved in the making of fabrics. I have tried to look at some of her illustrations and description of fabric in reference to some non-textile objects that present as naturally interworked "ideas" and fibrous materials.⁷ They have in common some basic principles of design that radiate pleasantly from them. In fact, every movement in most of the weaving techniques illustrated in her book portrays visual rhythm that relates well with space, and many of the weaving techniques can inspire works that will be socially relevant. For instance, *Crotchet* and *Plant* (see figures 1 and 2 below) suggest entanglement, trap, obstacle and constraint, which can become themes that a fibre artist can adapt for his creative exploration, or investigate different formal possibilities they offer and see what he can arrive at based on the themes they suggest.



Fig. 1: *Crotchet* - Interlooped Structure Worked Vertically and Laterally in a Kind of Chain Formation. Photo - Irene Emery (1966).



Fig. 2: *Plant* - Naturally Interworked Stems of a Creeping Plant.

The creeping plant growing on a wall and El Antsui's metal sculpture installation (see figures 4 and 5 below) attempt to illustrate the point made above. One can see the relationship between the spreading leaves on the wall and the formal structure/display format of the installation. It appears the artist may have been probably inspired by stuffs like the plant, either in the making of the work or in its installation. In fact, I have gathered as visual data some technical illustrations (such as Irene Emery's) from different fields of practice and some certain plants species which have sparked my mind and generated several ideas to be tried on in the studio.



Fig. 3: Creeping plant growing on a wall, Jamaican Avenue, New York



Fig. 4: El Antsui's metal sculpture installation, Manhattan, New York

Tour of the Textile Collections of the Museum of African Art

In the museum, I was exposed to different weaving traditions and textile patterns among the African peoples, particularly the West African weavers. At the main storage section, I was shown costumes and textiles of the Gongon, Yoruba, Akwete (Igbo), Wukari, Benin, Asante, Bamun, Bamileke, Camerouns, Ethiopia, etc. It was observed that some of those costumes and textiles have trans-cultural features both in their manufacture and trade. For instance, some of the indigenous weavers combined imported materials like dye and fibre with locally sourced ones in their weaving. Also traditional woven fabrics were distributed across the continent through trade and this created a sort of influences in the types/patterns of textile designs in many different local communities in Africa. One can see the obvious relationship between the Wukari hand woven fabrics (patterned with sewn raffia and then dyed using resist method) and those produced by the Camerouns. The Bamileke merchants traded into the grasslands the Wukari woven textiles. There are also some similarities between the Igbo Ijere masquerade costume and the Gongon costume, the kente of the Asante people and Akwete woven textiles.

Of interest to my research in this section are the works of Yinka Shonibare and Sukari Douglas Camp. Shonibare utilised woven fabrics in a very different way that is detached from the traditional use of cloth as a material for body covering. He presents the aesthetics and identity associated with cloth as fashion. Projected in his work are the ego, pride, identity and beauty of a woven, printed and sewn dress as they are bestowed on a wearer rather than the wearer himself as an individual. Like Shonibare, Douglas-Camp also looks at cloth as referential imagery that describes the wearer. For her, cloth is much more than a piece of covering material which is worn for wearing sake; it is about the wearer as a person. What appears to be interesting about her work is that Douglas-Camp reverses the materiality of fabric from the usual natural softness of cloth to an unusual hardness of metal. Thus, her wrapper becomes metal which alludes to patterned woven fabric and the metaphors surrounding it.

And so, the works of these artists show, in two different ways, the potentials textiles hold as visual metaphors. Of course these are only two artists demonstrating two different ways of appropriating cloth for creative visual imageries. More approaches to the use of fibres and textiles for artistic musing abound and it requires some creative explorations to arrive at those ones that are yet to be established. This is the point where I got to and paused to ruminate over my work processes so far in fibre. And casting my mind back to my research in the library and reserved collections section of the National Museum of African Art, I recalled that *function* has often influenced the production (pattern, colour and form) of a woven textile and sewn dress both in the traditional and contemporary societies. Even the non-textile art forms have each a purpose and this is basically what makes them socially relevant. This I have to always bear in mind when exploring artistic ideas.

Visits to Other Museums and Galleries

Two weeks after the commencement of my programme in the Smithsonian, all the offices in the Institution were forced to close down due to the Federal Government Shutdown, and the closure lasted for three weeks. (But my supervisor, Karen Milbourne, as well as the Chief Librarian of the National Museum of African Art, Janet Stanley, were always available to me with suggestions, guidance and encouragement.) Within this period of closure, I visited the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), several galleries and museums in Washington D.C. and New York. At MICA I was conducted round the textile, fashion and sculpture studios. Students from different sections of the department and faculties corroborate in their search for fresh discoveries. I was excited to see students exploring fibres in unimaginable directions. For example, some of the art students collaborated with engineering students to come up with luminous outfits. There were also others whose fibre installations are practically and conceptually unique. At the Museum of Textiles, I met a show of the Museum's Southeast Asian batiks and brocades collections juxtaposed with four contemporary textile artists' works from that region. Verna Bogren Swift's fine prints appear painterly with flowing intricate design motifs. I find them refreshing. Viewing from afar, one would think that there are fresh warm colours dripping from certain outlining motifs over others, creating some visual effect similar to that left on a wall when watery paint is splashed against it. This effect has left me thinking of an appropriate method I can use to introduce pigments, other than dye, onto my work particularly for the purpose of tuning it up or down, as the case may be. AgusIsmoyo and NiaFliam (couple working together) activate their batik with an overlay of carefully cut-out layers of a different batik, which are meticulously sewn together with a needle as in appliqué technique. Every piece of cloth used in the work is made into batik before the needle work on them commenced. The cut-outs followed the elaborate patterns already created on the batiks, and with hand-stitching method they were used to create new patterns on other broader cut-outs, which also got stitched up against other ones. Looking at the work, one sees layers of convoluted resist patterns bound together and complemented with intricate stitching lines that traverse the surface of the work.

In other galleries and museums within and outside Washington D.C., I was exposed to the works of early masters from the Classical period through the Renaissance to the contemporary era. For instance, the National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Art Museum, Hirshhorn Sculpture Museum, the Phillips Collections, Morton Gallery, etc. (all in Washington D.C.), and Stricoff Fine Art, CRG Gallery, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, Hauser & Wirth, Skoto Gallery, etc. (all in New York City) have rich and diverse collections of works produced by artists of different times, movements, identities and ideologies. I also had informal talks with some of the gallery owners.

Of interest to me also were works mounted in public places. Some of them were more inspiring than many of those found inside the galleries. An example is a restaurant's three dimensional posters designed with glass rods and mounted on the outside walls of the restaurant along the 34th Street (Manhattan), New York - one on the north side; the other on the west. Each of these posters has several square glass rods of different lengths arranged vertically in rows along the wall. Coincidentally, facing each of the posters strategically was a large electronic billboard, which keeps flashing series of images in different colours on the posters. As the electronic billboards play their advertising role, they flash colourful lights repeatedly, in a revolving manner, against the crystal posters which in turn reflect variegated fleeting colours randomly along different lengths of the rods. As the rods reflect the fleeting lights, they break them up and distribute them unevenly along the row thereby creating somewhat an array of dramatic colourful firework. This, in a way, reminds one of Sergei Jensen's 'chromatically muted aesthetic' which he achieves with a method he described as 'painting without paint'⁸.

On some occasions (after the end of the government shutdown) I had the opportunity of looking through the National Museum of Natural History. At the Botanical Department, I saw different plant species that are inspiring. Remarkable were several species among many in the cactus family. There I met Alice Tangerini, the Department's illustrator, who took me through all the copies of her 4777 botanical illustrations, and whose series of detailed study, particularly *A Classification of Spore Ornamentation in the Pteridophyta*, were naturally well patterned and creatively inspiring. Tangerini illustrated different *Pteridophyta* spores and grouped them in an arrangement that make them suitable for use as patterns and motifs for weaving or printing on fabrics (see figs 5, 6 and 7).

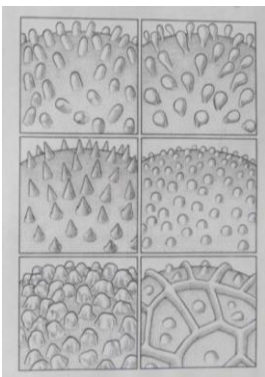


Fig. 5: Alice Tangerini, *Classification of Spore Ornamentation in the Pteridophyta* (30 Nov. 1994), pen and ink

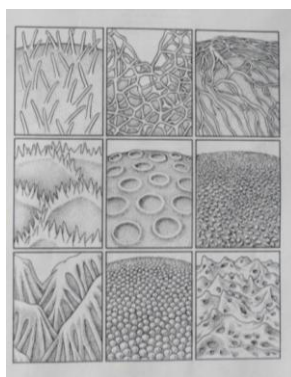


Fig. 6: Alice Tangerini, *Classification of Spore Ornamentation in the Pteridophyta* (21 Nov. 1994), pen and ink

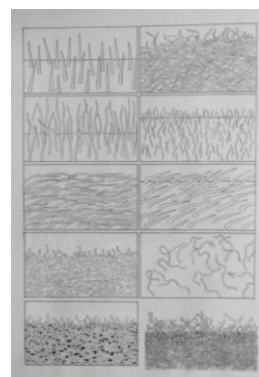


Fig. 7: Alice Tangerini, *Untitled*, (n.d.) pen and ink

New Studio Approach

My search through the Smithsonian collections, private museums and galleries, and through the streets of Washington, Baltimore and New York has generated some ideas that have been highlighted in the body of this presentation. Pieced together, I proposed a modified approach towards sculpture production, particularly from my exploration with fibre. In fact I have realised that the idea of collaborating with other artists, architects and engineers would be rewarding in the execution of some of my fibre art projects. This would impact positively on my new way of re-thinking fabric and fibre beyond their visual forms to its manufacture as well. *Processes* of looping, knitting, knotting, netting, braiding, plaiting and matting were interesting exercises observed in this research, and taking these as well as *patterning* (which also is a textile technique) into consideration would, hopefully, inspire a wide range of compositional possibilities. Besides, the library research has revealed that from the traditional period to present *function* has often influenced the form, pattern and colour design of woven materials. So, to yield strong visual results and inspire a more sustainable and versatile way of production in the fibre art, there is the need for me to take into account, in addition to collaborative studio effort, the nature of material, meanings attached to it, studio processes involved, and the purpose of the work.

Towards Practical Studio Project: A Conclusion

The Manhattan three dimensional crystal posters prompted me to thinking of fibre sculpture and installation ideas that could result from engaging the approaches observed above in practical studio explorations. Adopting an *interdisciplinary studio approach* (which will involve electronic technicians/engineers and a weaver as part of my studio team) and exploring the interworking processes of looping, knitting, knotting, netting, braiding, plaiting and matting, I intend to explore fibre, fabrics, pigments, foam, mirror/metal reflector and led lights to create indoor soft sculpture and outdoor installations. Besides, the visual data collected during my research here at the Smithsonian will form a reservoir of reference from where artistic ideas will always be generated when necessary. Adaptations from organic objects such as those seen at the National Museum of Natural History, Botanical Garden and Greenhouse will be an important studio exercise, and these especially are to be effectively achieved by sifting carefully the visual data I gathered to reflect the modern man in his environment. In other words, the Smithsonian research provided me with a data bank on which I depend when making visual statements that relate to the experiences I had and the information I collected during my research in the Smithsonian Institution.

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