



## **Charcoal Market: Palace of Oppression**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to explore charcoal market in painting using a restricted palette. The palette consists of gray and subdued primary colours employed to build up a structure in painting that evokes a somber mood and aesthetically document a charcoal market. The inspiration was derived from an environment that is overwhelmingly black and capable of absolving other colours thereby making them to lose their identity. Various aspects of the charcoal market were explored focusing on the activities of elements inherent in its different patterns. The paintings epitomize inquiry that embodies the processes which interpret and question social phenomenon through studio experimentation. It looked at the underlining aesthetics of charcoal market to capture the metaphor of the human spirit, of labour of ordinary people in an everyday situation. Thus open up a discourse on humans under extreme condition reflected in an activity created to show their resilience, putting so much labour but without proportionate result. These encapsulate the society in a whole of human struggle for survival. To achieve the set objectives, a conceptual framework was developed from the works of Piet Mondrian, Rick Stevens, John Virtue and Pablo Picasso to explore this pictorial design concept. The significance of this research describes visual experience from a charcoal market that can help probe more into colour relationships and design concepts. Findings reveal the development of conceptual allegories transmit cryptic content relating to the environment and create aesthetic space for multiplicity of reading. Therefore the tendency to interpret a work in different perspectives can be from social, cultural, economic and philosophical or peculiar visual understanding.

**Keywords:** charcoal market, painting, palace of oppression, colours, Neoplasticism

### **INTRODUCTION**

Charcoal market is a place of influence, metaphor and dynamics of colour relationships in pictorial illusion; an environment that is overwhelmingly black/dark and capable of absorbing other colours in a manner that makes them lose their original identities. In the colour field, black, according to J. Jari (personal communication, 2013, may 17), is the absence of colour. Oyedemi. J (Interviewer), and Buhari J.(Interviewee).(2013,march13) corroborates this position stating that it is the absence of light, adding that when there is no light, all colours will agree in the dark. That is, black absorbs energies of other colours without reflecting them. The value of a colour turns grey and subtle after coming in contact with the charcoal environment. Any charcoal market can be ignored at a glance but it has an aesthetic edge that can evolve into an orchestration of colour harmony and value. This reveals different realities that lie concealed in strange juxtapositions, each line portraying endless energy that exists in nature causing the viewer to ask, "What is this"? Two things are at play in this engagement: aesthetic reason describing human experiences and the force of nature. This is especially noticeable in the movement of values from light to dark in the charcoal market that epitomizes the interaction of elements of design for development of visual concepts. Aradeon (1997) sees a market as 'the meeting space for people between places, the living stage where a collage of scenes are acted and played out without a script'. Berthoud (1999) postulates that, in the minds of a growing number of decision- makers, it has become increasingly self-evident that the market should no longer be viewed as an institution which must be regulated by external

social forces, but on the contrary, that it should be used to regulate society as a whole. Market thus becomes the leading principle for guiding individual interaction and collective action.

Exploring the charcoal market in painting is therefore to create a conversation between an organized structure (mechanical) and organic (nature) spontaneous effect. This visual exploit can arouse different understandings of the subject. A market is interpreted in this paper under the theme “Palace of Oppression” (See Plates I-V) as a place of exchange of ideas based on mutual understanding and the recognition of individual differences. It is a melting point in which every participant hopes to return with an air of satisfaction. In charcoal market, black is a dominant factor that determines the state of other colours. One can argue that in an oppressive instance there is one whose image is larger than life, whose influence prevails, the boss, the one that collects all and does not give back. People of equal opportunities are by the tyranny of fellow humans. When black assumes the position of influence in the colour field, it controls the field to determine the value of a colour.

Humans become victims of the oppressive environment they created. Poverty becomes the order of the day in a society of inequality. When Poverty becomes the norm, the dignity of humans is eroded and makes them live a life of servitude. According to Oyedepo (2006), the world has no regard whatsoever for any input in world affairs from Africa, because of her poverty. He further asserts that Africa has no voting power at the United Nations Security Council, our large population notwithstanding. His thought is that ‘The harder men try to come out the deeper they are plunged into it. Poverty today seems to be the norm among Nations rather than the exception. It has no respect for sex, race, colour or creed’. The nations of Africa found themselves among the greedy nations of the world who subjugate themselves because they lack the know how to develop their potentials.

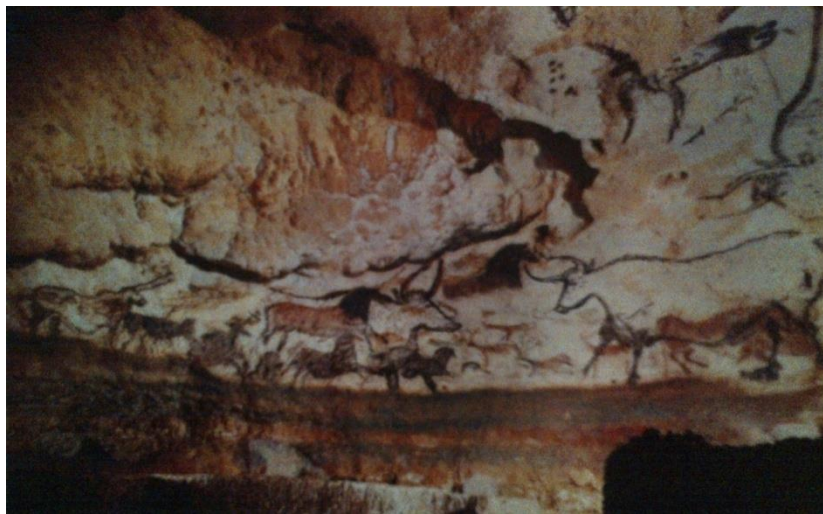
Another very important aspect in the palace of oppression is the political flavour added to it. The pursuit of materialism/greed has left the people in gloominess with few dominating others. Most colours are lost in obscurity in the world of black. Colours affected by the activities of black in the colour field here represent majority of the people who are lost in obscurity. They are all in ignorance. It is the absence of light that can keep a people bound without knowing their right

A variety of new configurations in the elements of design are emerging from these quagmire which makes an artist to start looking for concepts that have bases for visual interpretation from equally new sources of interest. This brings a new imaginative dimension to visual experience in a given space. The experience can be derived from two sources. The first is based on cognitive experience. Arnheim (1969), in Constantino (2007), defines ‘cognition as a process of active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating and putting in context’. Visual thinking, as this is known, is the ability to see and process information in mental reasoning through identifying, categorizing and generating images as foundation for a piece or body of work. Arnheim further states that these images which are directly encountered, as well as generated are referred to mean some kind of quality of object stored in memory as visual concepts. The second experience is based on a sense of nostalgia and that is familiarity with certain forms and colours in the environment which helps in visual concept development, making it easily sustainable in a studio practice research. This multiplicity of concepts are developed using various associations put together to express aesthetic experiences that challenge our emotion. Visual concepts could be objective or subjective depending on the simplicity or complexity of the message they carry as they open up interactive space.

According to Fosu (1986), creative expressions are not controlled by strict duplication of the exactness of nature. It is the idea rather than the object purely perceived in its natural state which determines the nature, meaning and function of the work. Babalola (1995) corroborates this by stating that artists are not only merely concerned with the expression of their nationality or traditional ideologies but the intrinsic value of art which lay in its universal and timeless element. It is this search for concepts that draws artists to familiar areas in the visual field in which relationships and interaction of elements of design influence each other. Selz (1981) observes that the fascination with patterns in nature brought about an intellectual interpretation that creates lively dialogue among objects, words, painted imitation and pasted reality.

Lawal (1984), notes that artists like Obiora Udechukwu (b.1947) have transformed the *Uli* from mere body decoration into an aesthetic hot-line for communicating human emotions and aspirations. His concepts developed from lyrical inscription on the body to an aesthetic cultural identity.

Artists over time are therefore guided by certain perceptions in articulating a position when exploring a concept using a restricted palette. An early attempt of the use of a restricted palette in developing a concept is shown in Fig.1,a wall painting in Chauvet Cave, Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, Ardeche, France, ca.30,000-28,000 or ca.15,000-13,000BCE (Kleiner and Mamiya, 2006). The significance of this philosophy of using a restricted palette with bold black lines to define each animal brings out artistic idioms that can help probe into elements in nature. The images are easily recognisable animal forms engaged in common activities for their every day survival.They are depicted to show three-dimensionality with a use of expressions of bold lines,colour,texture and sensation of perspective.A sense of overlapping is created in this work.According to Hodge (2011) 'pre-historic art are found to reveal various social systems and religious ideas that were probably generally understood thousands of years ago...'



**Fig: 1. Hall of the Bulls, Lascaux,Dordogne, France, ca.15, 000-13,000BCE.**

Gimenez (2012) confirms that Paleolithic artists developed a primal visual language using charcoal and simple pigments to express and document their way of living. Most of the works created are in a wide range of sizes from tiny figurines painted on walls and ceilings to over-life-size animals, as in the cave at Lascaux. The influence of this is evident in the work of Picasso's exploration with a limited palette,Marie-Therese, Face and Profile, Paris 1931.These instances cited so far, have shown that sometimes, artists therefore adopt a limited palette to interpret different phenomena in simple decipherable ways.

Olive (2008), writing on issues like species extinction, pollution and deforestation, holds that artists are challenged to create works that promote greater awareness on environment and bring about the renewal process of depleted environment around the globe. He further reveals that there are four categories of understanding that artists have delved into on environmental issues through their works which include, Restoration, Mediation, Integration and Reflection. The concern in this research is Integration, where artists use imagery and metaphors to reveal patterns and relationships that exist in nature. In Nigeria, foremost artists whose works are a synthesis of elements in nature include Jerry Buhari (b.1959), Burns Effiom (b.1965), Kolade Oshinowo (b.1948).These artists remind the society of the hazards of environmental degeneration by depicting the environment that is devastated, deforested and exposed to heat (sun), and thereby causing global warming. Also, other artists around the world depict issues of life and the environment using allegory. These allegories created are interpreted in socio-cultural parlance as

the futile attempt of our system to solve the issues of energy demand and societal tension. To this Eze (1995), states that the

... artist clothes his concepts with such aura of factuality that the object being represented seems uniquely actual and at times not exactly the same thing, they become complex of the symbolic dimension of the social events they reflect, like the psychological or the metaphysical, and not abstractable from those events to which they refer.

These artists develop a visual concept that represents an idea and not necessarily representing actual things. This makes us to reflect on how common issues in nature can represent human conditions. Artistic dialogues are interpreted in ideas based on a wide range of engagements with elements in nature. With lines and colours, artists create discursive platforms that question global phenomena on social, political and economic matters such as Picasso's "Guernica" in 1937.

#### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Artists have painted markets as they perceived them in terms of colour, lines and forms. They employ colours that depict the interaction in a market setting, depending on the article of trade making the market recognizable. Using grey and a restricted palette to portray charcoal market scenery has not been the concern of artists. It is anticipated that contemplation with the usage of grey to develop a body of paintings would result into possible allegories. Kleiner and Mamiya (2005) opine that rather than simply describe nature, poets and artists often use nature as allegory. In this manner, artists make spiritual, moral, historical and philosophical commentaries.

#### **Aim and Objectives of the study**

The aim of this study is to explore charcoal market in painting using a restricted palette to create allegories through a combination of various elements in the market.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. use a restricted palette largely consisting of grey and subdued primary colours to build up a structure in painting that evokes a sombre mood,
- ii. develop paintings that encompass abstraction, quasi-figuration and landscape that have a multiplicity of reading,
- iii. explore the possibilities of creating a body of work that is imbued with philosophical issues relating to the environment,
- iv. portray and document aesthetically a charcoal market,
- v. create paintings that mimic the structure of Piet Mondrian's Neoplasticism.

#### **Justification of the study**

Expressions of a market in painting especially of vegetables (tomatoes and onions) and clothing may easily elucidate a joyous mood that can inspire artists to explore. Danjuma (2010) observes that "the environment of such markets is usually charged with a lot of movements, noise, and clashing of colours..." A direct engagement with the charcoal market could however stir emotion of gloom, poverty, and chaos. This is partly due to its prevalent environmental influence on other colours. (See figs.2-5). The aesthetic possibilities in a charcoal market can represent a metaphor of the society. With this understanding, perhaps artists will look into harmonizing their work, not only to celebrate beauty but also create works that reflect societal issues.

#### **Significance of the study**

The significance of this study hinges on the development of Painting concept from a charcoal market that speaks to us directly or indirectly. The simplicity and complexity of every design is not only to pass a message but to also make an aesthetic statement. It is hoped that the engagement with the charcoal market will assist in developing visual symbols necessary to communicate ideas and messages advocating for change concerning the environment.



**Fig.2. Charcoal Displayed in containers.**  
Source: Kosoko, 2010



**Fig.3. Charcoal environment**  
Source: Kosoko, 2010.





**Fig.4.Woman Selling Charcoal.**  
Source: Kosoko,2010



**Fig.5.Charcoal Market (bagging the future)**  
Source: Kosoko, 2010

### **Scope of the study**

Based on the study carried out by observatory method of various charcoal markets in Jos, these markets have prevalent similarities in terms of the effect of charcoal on the environment. However, the scope of this study covers a charcoal market at Tafawa Balewa Street charcoal market in Jos, Plateau State Nigeria, that represents the observations made in other charcoal markets. The choice of this market is because of the aesthetic configuration it offers this research in terms of various patterns of trees, women, charcoal, and bowls and muted colours that co-exist in an entity.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The use of different motifs, symbols and icons by artists are guided by a trend of events in the articulation of dynamic elements that reflect on the environment and human existence in an interrelationship of

colours. It presents us with the basis for philosophical research in painting. Eastern religious philosophy (Theosophy) and 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic philosophy had influenced artists to develop a unique way of expression far from nature. They developed works that were devoid of emotion and realism. Artists who were influenced include Piet Mondrian who co-founded an art journal, “De Stijl” (the style), where he published the manifesto and philosophy of Neoplasticism, a rigid and extreme form of abstraction which involved the depersonalization of art, abstracting natural phenomena, and making no reference to any recognizable entity. This allows a canvas to be subset into rectangular, horizontal and vertical lines and colours using a limited palette of black, grey, white and primary colours.

Piet Mondrian postulated a ‘purities’ (pure reality) approach to art because he felt that Cubism had not separated art from nature. He felt that Cubism had not accepted ‘the logical consequences of its own discoveries; it was not developing abstraction towards its own ultimate goal’. At that time Mondrian was set to depart from nature, to create a new construct based on his understanding of ‘opposites’. Selz (1981) states that Mondrian’s highly disciplined works of pure geometric precision do achieve the state of perfect and unalterable equilibrium for which he strove. In view of Mondrian’s Neoplasticism, this study is restricted to partial visible orientation in representing subjects or elements from the charcoal market including tree trunks, women, colours, textures and lines, boldly and loosely defined in grid form bearing semblance to Mondrian’s line structure. By exploring organic lines, the researcher reinforces the flatness of colour in one instance and yet attempt to create illusion of depth in another. This, in essence, is to push further the Neoplasticism theory of Piet Mondrian and Rick Stevens’ exploration of symbolic associations and organic lines derived from nature. These combined with the fragmentation of forms as in Picasso’s (1908) Cubist movement into another platform of illusionistic rendering. The intention is to achieve aesthetic independence which reflects analysis of forms in a simple plane of gray shades. The limitation of this schematic method or palette renders the motifs subjective within the flow of space.

#### **Visual interpretation of ‘Palace of Oppression’ I-IV**

The paintings started as experimentation with black and other colours until they turned out to be adventures into the world of black. Black creates a protective barrier as it absorbs all the energy (colours) next to it. It influences all colour associations by devaluing their intensity. The struggle that ensued on the canvas ( Plate I), turned out to be experiential for the researcher. Every attempt to ‘marry’ all colours to agree, as black dominated other colours, reduced their values and stripped them of their dignity. The colours were assimilated by black in a manner that the colours turned gray and frustrating. It is a conceptual market on canvas where trading was expected to take place in a colour relationship using each colour’s negotiating power. Patches of other colours resulted from the effect of black on other colours during application.

#### **THE PRELIMINARY STUDIES FOR PALACE OF OPPRESSION**

The sketches were done as a daily notation of what goes on in the charcoal market. These preliminary sketches serve as a metaphoric encapsulation of market forms and studies which translated into the Palace of Oppression.



**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Woman  
**Medium:** Pencil on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm.



**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Woman  
**Medium:** Pencil on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm



**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Contemplation on Pattern in Nature  
**Medium:** Charcoal on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm.

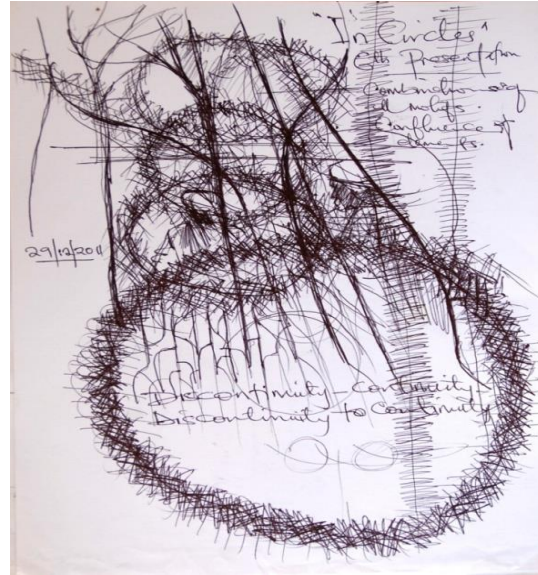


**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Contemplation on Pattern in Nature  
**Medium:** Watercolour on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm





**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Palace of Oppression  
**Medium:** Pencil on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm.



**Artist:** John Oyedemi  
**Title:** Study for Palace of Oppression  
**Medium:** Pen on paper  
**Size:** 29.5 x 21cm



**Plate 1. John Oyedemi, Market on Canvas (Palace of Oppression I) 2012 ,Oil on Canvas.183 x 153cm**

Plates.II-IV examined and explored the palace of oppression with circular forms to represent circles of life under oppressive situations. The colours are muted with black delving into possibilities which exist in the colour field. These paintings depict conditions that arise from on the subject of oppression. The circular lines are represented in stitch-like patterns in the picture plane. The dominant lines are randomly

composed to create effect of motion on the overall expression of the works. The different combination of overlapping web of curvilinear patterns on each canvas is tangled in a loose orientation. In the three pieces presented, the researcher made no attempt at representing natural forms except where a woman form is seen in the web of lines (see Plate I). The concentration here is to build tones that provoke aesthetic moods yet depicting human conditions. These dark canvases are also set to evoke contemplation on patterns experienced from a charcoal market and from the environment. The patterns from natural falling of climbers in a forested area from one tree to the other offers the possibilities for adaptation for creating paintings in this series. The curvilinear forms are interlocked and repeated to evoke an expression of oppression in this research. Quiller (2009) holds the opinion that a curvilinear line can depict a carefree, lighthearted, or fantastical mood, but it can also suggest haunting or wild expressions. Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch, and William Blake are a few great painters who frequently used this form of composition. The processes of achieving these paintings were through series of thumbnail sketches put together to develop each piece.

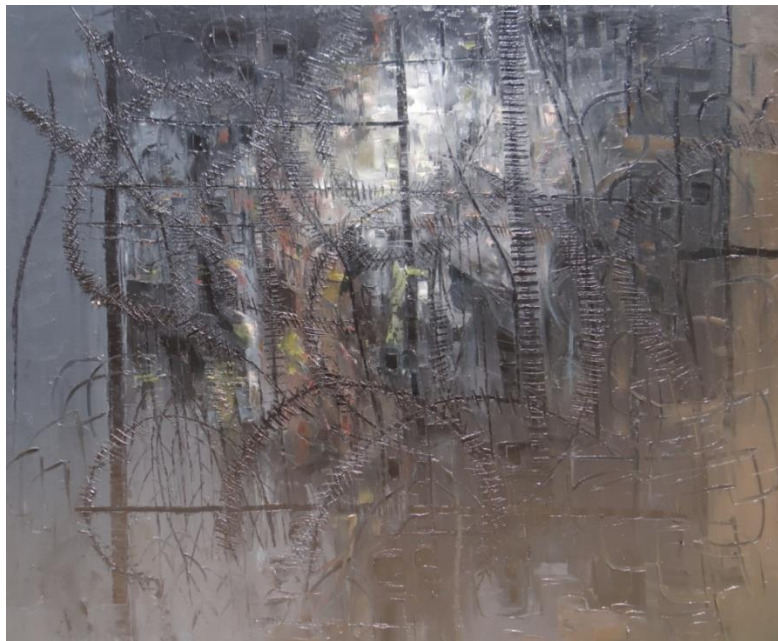


**Plate II: John Oyedemi , Market on Canvas (Palace of Oppression 11) 2013,Oil on Canvas.122x 122cm**





**Plate III: John Oyedemi, Market on Canvas (Palace of Oppression 111) 2013, Oil on Canvas. 122 x 122cm**



**Plate IV: John Oyedemi, Market on Canvas (Palace of Oppression IV) 2013, Oil on Canvas. 152 x 122cm**

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Charcoal market conveys visual expression which is effective with complex and significant content. The market suggests a restricted palette for artistic probe in expressing thoughts on human conditions like satire, gloominess, war, and catastrophe. The modulation of these colours though limited, addresses spatial relationships of objects in a composition with wide range of gray tones. These findings are reflective in the context of this exploration as the outcome of the study of a charcoal market. Findings have shown that charcoal is a product which has attracted global attention in recent times because of its negative consequences on the environment. However, looking at the platform on which charcoal thrives,

the market, it thus serves as a discursive path for artistic inquiry. An abstract visual mark characterized by lines in varying sizes is visible in all the painting series of this research to communicate meaning which is imbued with cryptic content. The findings are categorized under the following in line with the objectives of the study;

### **Findings of This Study**

#### ***Colour***

- Charcoal market reflects the complexities of the structure of the society and form a design modality for exploration in painting. It also represents shifting values in terms of colour relationships, a transition of colour from one point to another. A colour value is altered /changed to assume another. An example is red with a drop of black in the ratio of 3:1; the result is a devalued red in intensity and luminosity. A high keyed colour becomes low key.
- The techniques employed depict elements and forms borrowed from academic conventions in Europe in the organization and use of colour. This is incorporated into our cultural milieu in terms of theme and expressions, which can contribute to the growth of painting in general. This has shown that, a particular colour from a charcoal market could be used to freely explore metaphoric issues.
- These paintings so produced in muted values are found to be dark. They evoke emotional or specific moods. They capture the mood of a charcoal environment. The abstract relationships; interaction of shape, pattern, and colour reflect somber mood in the entire project.

#### ***Artists referenced***

The artists referenced have developed various innovative ways of articulating pictorial space keeping with the times. These innovations often relate to design elements that are structured to accommodate the thoughts of spatial relationships. The conceptual framework in this research encompasses concepts of other artists such as Piet Mondrian who postulated the theory of Neoplasticism. This theory depends on the principle of equilibrium of two opposites, vertical and horizontal forces and the use of flat primary colours subset by lines in right angles. The use of organic association as in Rick Stevens combined with John Virtue exploration of black and white and Pablo Picasso's fragmentation on canvas, can result into advancing Neoplasticism of Piet Mondrian. This occurs when elements of different cultures are interwoven on the same surface plane to make aesthetic statements not necessarily associated or traceable to any nationality. Selz (1981) states that Robert Rauschenberg included common objects in his "combined paintings" partly to illustrate his idea that the environment is a tableau of scattered objects and meanings that collide haphazardly. The exploration of a charcoal market using a restricted palette can bring about a new aesthetic configuration in painting with multiplicity of reading.

#### ***The Social question***

There exist the possibilities of creating a body of work imbued with philosophical issues relating to the environment in painting. The demand for wood fuel in the absence of affordable alternative has made charcoal popular even in modern Nigerian cities, boosting its uncontrolled production. The trend has gone unchecked, making it an activity that is depleting the forest reserve and spelling disaster for the future. Butler (2005) states that, Nigeria has world's highest deforestation rate of primary forests, in the revised deforestation figures from the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The themes that result from this research reflect all aspects of our living, the concepts of social existence in relation to nature. They are represented in the series of 'The Heads that Labour, Selling the Future, Grays of Life, and Contemplation on the Patterns in Nature, Woman and Palace of oppression'.

#### ***Cultural and symbolic value***

Paintings on charcoal market are found to express the illusion of social disconnects and strata that exist in the society. The paintings dramatize an immense image and features of a depleted landscape because of the empty spaces. The aesthetic (natural beauty) of the environment is altered resulting to gloominess. The lines interrogate and explore the continued impact of the trade in charcoal on the environment. The surfaces evoke conceptual images of dreamlike subjects which serve as a vehicle for allegorical narratives. Each canvas projects an event that forms a structure in a colour field. Symbolically, a



restricted palette is modulated into a compositional orientation of a charcoal market to achieve a unifying order across the picture plane.

**Methodical progression**

The body of work progressed in a methodical order from traditional representation of a charcoal market to semi- abstraction through careful layout of subtle notes and blending of grays. It progressed from visible defined female figures to partial pictorial vocabulary of lines and from limited dark value to state of no colour (black). Also methodological interrogation of charcoal market led to poetic geometric surfaces in dynamic interaction of planes. This can be referred to as a conversation between organized structures (mechanical) and organic spontaneous effect as in nature.

The paintings can arouse different understanding and aesthetic signal because of the subject or theme of the work that is generated from this exploration. It is this progression that led to an outcome which mimics the structure of Piet Mondrian’s Neoplasticism.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to interrogate charcoal market in painting, creating allegories through a combination of various elements in the market using a restricted palette. From the research carried out, a new vista is opened in painting for other artists to advance. It can be concluded therefore that the entire project is a synthesis of different artistic currents following the Postmodernist approach to creating pictorial illusion in space. Every aspect of this work provides the researcher with a new mode of expression by using charcoal market to depict issues of life.

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