

STUDIO PRACTICE AS RESEARCH: ARTISTIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION FROM THE ZARIA ART SCHOOL TRADITION IN NIGERIAN ART ACADEMIA

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Abstract

Studio practice as research has emerged as a transformative methodological paradigm in contemporary art education, challenging conventional distinctions between creative production and scholarly inquiry. While practice-led doctoral programmes gained institutional legitimacy in Europe and Australia during the late twentieth century, their intellectual foundations in Nigeria can be traced to the pedagogical and philosophical innovations of the Zaria Art School at Ahmadu Bello University. This study critically examines the evolution of studio practice as research within Nigerian art academia and its role in shaping studio-based PhD programmes as alternative models of knowledge production. Using a qualitative interpretive framework that integrates art-historical analysis, visual hermeneutics, and theoretical reflection, the study examines how studio-based doctoral research evolved from Zaria's synthesis of indigenous cultural consciousness, modernist experimentation, and academic scholarship. The study demonstrates that studio practice functions as an epistemological framework through which artistic production generates, tests, and communicates knowledge. Ajayi's doodle-based experimentation explores subconscious image formation through Surrealist automatism and psychoanalytic interpretations of creative cognition, positioning drawing as a form of reflective inquiry. Conversely, Gbaden's kinetic wall installations employ material assemblage and movement to examine sociopolitical concerns relating to race, gender, and power, extending studio practice into critical cultural analysis. The findings indicate that studio-based research repositions artistic production from aesthetic expression toward conceptual investigation, reflexive methodology, and socio-cultural critique. Nigerian studio practice bridges indigenous pedagogical philosophies, locally grounded conceptual frameworks, community-responsive methodologies, and global practice-led research models, contributing to international discourse on artistic practice as scholarly research.

Keywords: Studio practice as research; Nigerian art education; Zaria Art School tradition; Cultural identity; Creative knowledge production.

INTRODUCTION

Art education globally has shifted from skill-based apprenticeship models toward research-oriented creative inquiry. Universities now recognize artistic practice as an intellectual

activity capable of generating original knowledge comparable to scientific and humanities research (Frayling, 1993; Sullivan, 2010). Oloidi (2008) informs that the evolution of modern art education in Nigeria is inseparable from the historical development of

the Zaria Art School, widely acknowledged as the intellectual nucleus of modern Nigerian artistic consciousness, established within Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The institution cultivated generations of artists who sought to redefine artistic identity in postcolonial Nigeria. The emergence of studio research as an academic methodology represents a continuation of this legacy. Historically, artistic training in Nigeria emphasized mastery of technical skills and aesthetic production. However, global academic changes aimed at enhancing professionalization in the creative arts in the late twentieth century introduced new expectations that required artists working within universities to engage in systematic research comparable to other academic disciplines (Sullivan, 2010). This shift became particularly significant when doctoral degrees became mandatory qualifications for university teaching positions in Nigeria.

Practice-based research therefore emerged as an option for academic institutions offering creative arts, and also a necessary bridge between creative practice and scholarly inquiry. According to Borgdorff (2012), artistic research produces knowledge embodied in artistic processes rather than solely textual argumentation. Nigerian art institutions adopted this paradigm to align local education with international academic standards while maintaining cultural specificity. The Zaria Art Society's philosophy of cultural synthesis, which advocates integrating indigenous traditions with modern artistic languages, provided the ideological groundwork for contemporary studio research (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Today, Nigerian studio PhD programmes represent an expansion of this philosophy into academic research methodology.

This paper examines how studio practice functions as research through the works of Wale Ajayi and Blaise Gundu Gbaden, two artists whose doctoral investigations

demonstrate the intellectual and activist potential of studio experimentation. Both artists are among the pioneering students of the PhD studio research programme of the Fine Art Department of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are centred on understanding the evolution and intellectual significance of studio practice as a form of research within Nigerian art education. First, the study examines the historical emergence of studio practice as research, tracing its development within the Nigerian academic environment and highlighting the pedagogical and philosophical foundations that shaped its acceptance as a legitimate scholarly method.

Furthermore, the study situates the Zaria Art School within broader global developments in artistic research, comparing its theoretical orientations and studio methodologies with international discourses that recognize creative practice as a mode of knowledge production. By doing so, it establishes the relevance of Nigerian studio traditions within contemporary global art scholarship. The research also analyses selected artworks by Wale Ajayi and Blaise Gundu Gbaden, treating these works not merely as aesthetic objects but as research outputs that embody inquiry, experimentation, and critical reflection. Through visual and contextual analysis, the study demonstrates how artistic production functions as an investigative process. In addition, the study investigates how studio experimentation generates theoretical insights and cultural knowledge, emphasizing the role of materials, processes, and creative exploration in expanding academic understanding. Finally, it establishes the significance of artistic activism within doctoral studio practice, highlighting how artists employ creative expression as a tool for social engagement, cultural critique, and intellectual intervention within contemporary society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historiography of Nigerian modern art identifies Zaria as the birthplace of intellectual resistance against colonial artistic pedagogy. Members of the Zaria Art Society advocated a synthesis of Western modernism and indigenous cultural expression (Ottenberg, 1997). This ideological stance rejected imitation and encouraged experimentation grounded in local realities. Scholars such as Enwezor (2009) argue that contemporary African art increasingly operates within global networks while maintaining socio-political engagement. Nigerian artists, particularly those within academic environments, employ art as a tool for critical reflection on identity, power, and cultural transformation.

Practice-led research gained international legitimacy when art schools in Europe and Australia began recognizing artistic production as doctoral research output (Candy, 2006; Smith & Dean, 2009). Sullivan (2010) further emphasizes that studio practice constitutes a form of thinking where making becomes equivalent to theorizing. Within Nigeria, Oloidi (2010) observes that postgraduate studio programmes transformed artists into scholar-practitioners capable of articulating theoretical frameworks emerging from their own creative processes. Filani (2012) also notes that studio research strengthens the intellectual autonomy of artists within academia. Psychological and philosophical theories equally inform studio inquiry. Freud's psychoanalysis foregrounds unconscious processes as sources of creativity, while Surrealist artists translated these ideas into visual experimentation (Harrison & Wood, 2003). Such theoretical intersections are central to Ajayi's exploration of doodling. Meanwhile, installation and participatory art practices, as discussed by Foster et al. (2011), expand painting into spatial and social engagement, an approach evident in Gbaden's wall art installations.

Theoretical Framework:

Artistic research and studio practice.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded within the interdisciplinary field of artistic research, where creative practice is understood as a mode of scholarly inquiry capable of generating knowledge through artistic action. Rather than separating theory from practice, artistic research recognizes artistic processes themselves as investigative procedures that produce experiential, embodied, and affective understanding (Borgdorff, 2012; Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Within this perspective, the studio functions not simply as a production environment but as a reflexive research space in which experimentation, material engagement, and critical reflection operate simultaneously.

Practice-led research proposes that knowledge may arise through creative making rather than solely through discursive analysis (Smith & Dean, 2009). Artistic activity generates tacit and embodied knowledge embedded in sensory interaction, intuition, and material negotiation (Polanyi, 1966; Sullivan, 2010). The artist, therefore, assumes multiple roles, as practitioner, investigator, and analyst, transforming artistic production into an epistemological process where thinking occurs through making.

A key theoretical influence is Schön's concept of reflection-in-action, which explains how practitioners develop understanding during the act of creation through continuous cycles of experimentation, evaluation, and adaptation (Schön, 1983). Artistic decision-making becomes a cognitive and affective process that expands traditional academic definitions of research by validating intuition, emotion, and embodied cognition as legitimate forms of knowledge production (Bolt, 2007).

Within Nigeria, these theoretical positions resonate strongly with the intellectual legacy of

the Zaria Art School, whose philosophy emphasized cultural synthesis, artistic independence, and contextual relevance in modern African art practice (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). By integrating indigenous knowledge systems with modernist experimentation, Zaria artists anticipated contemporary debates on decolonial research methodologies and plural epistemologies (Abiodun, 2014; Oloidi, 2010). Nigerian studio practice therefore represents a culturally grounded research paradigm contributing alternative global perspectives on artistic knowledge production.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative interpretive research design** grounded in artistic research methodology, recognizing creative studio practice as a legitimate mode of scholarly inquiry and knowledge production. Within artistic research, the boundaries between theory, practice, and analysis are intentionally integrated, allowing artistic creation itself to function simultaneously as method, process, and research outcome (Borgdorff, 2012; Sullivan, 2010). The methodology therefore positions the studio as an investigative environment where artistic experimentation generates experiential, cultural, and embodied knowledge.

Qualitative Interpretive Analysis of Studio Practice and Artworks

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive analytical framework that examines studio practice and completed artworks as visual and cultural texts open to critical interpretation. Rather than positioning artistic production as research in itself, the studio environment is approached as a site of meaning-making in which artistic processes and visual outcomes reveal conceptual, psychological, and sociocultural narratives embedded within creative expression (Sullivan, 2010). Artistic activities such as drawing, painting, material experimentation, and installation are analyzed

as expressive actions through which symbolic meanings and aesthetic intentions become perceptible and interpretable (Rose, 2016).

Within this framework, the artist's engagement with studio processes is examined through reflective interpretation, enabling analysis of how artistic decisions evolve through cycles of experimentation, reflection, and revision consistent with reflective practice theories (Schön, 1983). Emphasis is placed on interpretive readings of visual form, compositional structure, material selection, and gesture as carriers of meaning shaped by cultural context and individual experience (Barrett, 2011). Studio materials, including sketches, preparatory studies, material trials, and conceptual notes, are treated as qualitative data that illuminate the developmental trajectory of artistic ideas and creative intentions (Gray & Malins, 2004).

The analysis recognizes tacit, embodied, and intuitive dimensions of artistic activity as interpretive phenomena rather than methodological generators of knowledge, drawing on Polanyi's concept of tacit knowing and embodied cognition in creative processes (Polanyi, 1966). Through close visual analysis, contextual interpretation, and reflective hermeneutic engagement, the study investigates how artworks construct meaning, negotiate identity, and participate in broader artistic and cultural discourse (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Consequently, studio practice is understood as an interpretive field through which artistic expression can be critically examined, contextualized, and theoretically articulated within qualitative research traditions.

Formal Visual Analysis

In order to examine how artistic meaning is visually constructed, the study incorporates formal visual analysis. This analytical method evaluates compositional organization, spatial relationships, colour interaction, texture, material handling, and stylistic articulation

within selected artworks. Formal analysis enables interpretation of visual language as an active communicative system rather than merely aesthetic decoration (Elkins, 2003). Through close visual examination, artistic elements such as rhythm, balance, abstraction, symbolism, and gesture are interpreted as carriers of conceptual intention and emotional expression. The analysis also considers how material experimentation contributes to affective responses, reinforcing the understanding of artworks as sites where aesthetic experience intersects with psychological and cultural meaning.

Contextual and Art Historical Interpretation

The research further employs **contextual art historical interpretation**, situating artistic production within broader socio-cultural, historical, and institutional frameworks. Artistic practices of the two Zaria-trained artists are analyzed in relation to Nigerian modernism, postcolonial artistic discourse, and the intellectual legacy of the Zaria Art School, which advocated the synthesis of indigenous cultural traditions with contemporary artistic experimentation (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Abiodun, 2014). Contextual interpretation allows the study to examine how artistic expression responds to social realities, cultural memory, identity formation, and sociopolitical experience. By linking artworks to historical developments and cultural narratives, the research demonstrates how studio practice operates as both aesthetic production and critical cultural commentary (Olodi, 2010).

Research Materials and Data Sources

Primary research materials consist of selected artworks produced during the artists' doctoral studio investigations. These works are analyzed as visual research documents reflecting sustained experimentation and conceptual development. Analytical focus includes:

- compositional structure,
- symbolic imagery,
- material exploration,

- spatial configuration,
- conceptual intention.

Studio documentation, exhibition installations, and reflective commentary supplement visual analysis, allowing artistic processes to be examined alongside completed artworks.

FINDINGS

The qualitative analysis of the selected artworks and studio practices of Wale Ajayi and Blaise Gundu Gbadem reveals five major findings regarding studio practice as research within the Nigerian academic context.

1. Studio practice functions as a legitimate process of knowledge production.

The analysis demonstrates that artistic production extends beyond aesthetic creation to become a systematic mode of inquiry. In both artists' doctoral investigations, knowledge emerged through sustained experimentation with materials, reflective engagement, conceptual development, and iterative studio processes. Rather than illustrating pre-existing theories, the artworks generated new understandings concerning creativity, cultural identity, spirituality, and sociopolitical realities. The studio therefore functioned as an epistemic environment in which artistic thinking, making, and reflection occurred simultaneously.

2. The Zaria Art School tradition provides the philosophical foundation for Nigerian studio-based doctoral research.

Historical and contextual analysis indicates that the philosophy of Natural Synthesis developed by the Zaria Art Society anticipated many principles now associated with international practice-led research. Its emphasis on cultural relevance, experimentation, artistic independence, and the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern artistic language established an intellectual framework upon which contemporary studio PhD programmes have evolved. Nigerian artistic research therefore represents an indigenous extension of

global artistic research rather than a direct adoption of Western methodologies.

3. Artistic experimentation generates embodied and culturally situated knowledge.

The study found that studio experimentation enabled both artists to investigate ideas that could not be fully communicated through conventional textual analysis. Ajayi's transformation of spontaneous doodles into symbolic painterly compositions revealed subconscious processes, memory, intuition, and metaphysical inquiry, while Gbaden's kinetic installations explored social realities through material interaction, movement, and spatial experience. In both cases, knowledge was embedded within artistic processes and visual forms rather than solely within written explanation.

4. Artistic research strengthens critical social engagement through visual inquiry.

The findings indicate that studio practice functions as a vehicle for critical cultural investigation. Gbaden's installations on race, gender, and political power demonstrate how artistic production interrogates systems of oppression and social inequality through symbolic visual language and participatory installation strategies. Likewise, Ajayi's paintings examine philosophical and spiritual dimensions of human experience through metaphorical representation. Consequently, studio practice serves both reflective and activist purposes, positioning artists as cultural commentators and public intellectuals.

5. Studio-based doctoral research expands conventional academic understandings of scholarship.

The study reveals that artistic knowledge is communicated through multiple forms, including visual symbolism, material experimentation, spatial organization, embodied practice, and exhibition. These modes complement rather than replace written

scholarship and challenge the long-standing dominance of text as the primary medium of academic knowledge production. The findings therefore support broader recognition of exhibitions, studio documentation, reflective journals, and artistic processes as valid research evidence within doctoral education.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the study establishes that studio practice within the Nigerian university system has evolved into a rigorous form of scholarly inquiry rooted in the intellectual legacy of the Zaria Art School. The research demonstrates that artistic production can generate original knowledge through creative experimentation, reflective practice, and cultural interpretation. The works of Wale Ajayi and Blaise Gundu Gbaden illustrate how studio research integrates artistic innovation with theoretical reflection and social engagement, thereby contributing significantly to contemporary debates on artistic research, decolonial knowledge production, and practice-led doctoral education in Africa.

DISCUSSION AND ARTWORK ANALYSIS

Wale Ajayi: Subconscious Exploration Through Doodling

Ajayi's research investigates doodling as a legitimate source of artistic innovation. Often dismissed as casual mark-making, doodling becomes, within his study, a psychological archive revealing subconscious impulses. Freud argues that unconscious memories influence conscious behavior through symbolic expression (Freud, 1915). Ajayi extends this premise visually, translating spontaneous doodles into complex painterly compositions, and at the same time, converting casual gestures into intentional artistic language. McLeod (2013) describes the subconscious as a repository of memories and experiences, reinforcing Ajayi's belief that artistic inspiration resides within internal cognitive spaces (Ajayi, 2015)

Message from Above (2014)



Figure 1. Wale Ajayi, *Message from Above*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm. Photo: Wale Ajayi

Message from Above (2014) (see fig. 1): The painting showcases a contemplative engagement with spirituality, revelation, and divine communication. The palette emphasizes luminous tonal contrasts that integrate lighter hues that equally evoke celestial light. Such colour treatment creates a visual atmosphere associated with transcendence and sacred presence. African cosmology frequently conceives reality as interaction between spiritual and physical worlds (Abiodun, 2014). Ajayi's stylized figures embody receptivity, suggesting humanity is positioned to receive metaphysical guidance. Rather than literal religious imagery, the artist employs symbolic abstraction, aligning with modernist explorations of spiritual expression found in global art traditions (Foster et al., 2011). The painting therefore operates simultaneously as an aesthetic object and a philosophical inquiry.

In terms of artistic direction, the work reveals a synthesis of spiritual symbolism and expressive painterly technique. The artist's brushwork and compositional structure emphasize emotional resonance over strict realism. By blending abstraction with symbolic figuration, the painting situates itself within a broader tradition of contemporary art that explores spirituality through modern visual language.

Form in Expression (2014)



Figure 2: Wale Ajayi, *Form in Expression*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 122 x 122cm, 2014.

Photo: Wale Ajayi

Form in Expression (2014) (see fig. 2) demonstrates a compelling exploration of visual structure as a vehicle for emotional and intellectual communication. The palette, carefully moderated, relies on an interplay of warm and cool tonalities that allow the composition to breathe while maintaining visual tension. Subtle tonal transitions suggest an interest in mood rather than pure representation, allowing colour to function as an expressive language rather than merely descriptive surface treatment. Ajayi's chromatic restraint directs attention to the structural relationships within the painting. This painting foregrounds form as language. Rather than strictly adhering to naturalistic representation, the artist manipulates shape, contour, and spatial arrangement to generate a dynamic compositional rhythm. Forms are either stylized or abstracted, emphasizing gesture and movement. This approach creates a sense of fluidity where the boundaries between subject and surrounding space become porous. The composition balances density and openness, guiding the viewer's eye through a layered visual narrative. Langer (1957) argues that art objectifies subjective feeling, transforming internal experience into perceptible form. Ajayi's manipulation of contour and spatial relationships exemplifies this concept.

The balance between abstraction and figuration situates the work within modernist discourse while maintaining cultural identity. Through disciplined painterly experimentation, Ajayi demonstrates that formal investigation itself constitutes research.

Between Heaven and Earth (2014)



Figure 3: Wale Ajayi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 2014, Oil on canvas, 122 cm by 132 cm. Photo: Wale Ajayi

Between Heaven and Earth (2014) (see fig. 3) explores the metaphysical tension between the spiritual and the material. The palette plays a symbolic role in establishing this duality. The use of luminous highlights against deeper tonal fields evokes the contrast between transcendence and earthly existence. Soft atmospheric colour transitions reveal the vastness of the sky, while grounded tones anchor the composition within the terrestrial realm. Such chromatic interplay allows the painting to operate on both emotional and symbolic levels, while this thematic engagement reflects postmodern African artistic tendencies to merge philosophy with visual experimentation (Ukadike, 2014). Form within the work reveals a carefully orchestrated compositional balance. Figures or symbolic elements are arranged vertically or diagonally to imply a connection between upper and lower spatial zones. This structural organization reinforces the thematic dialogue implied in the

title. The forms themselves are either stylized or semi-abstract, enabling them to function simultaneously as recognizable entities and as symbolic archetypes. Ajayi's studio research thus expands painting beyond representation into metaphysical inquiry, reinforcing Sullivan's (2010) assertion that artistic practice produces knowledge through experience.

Blaise Gundu Gbaden: Installation as Social Research

Gbaden's doctoral practice redefines painting through kinetic wall hangings. The number of artworks produced covers the following social themes: *Race, Gender, Power, Religion, Ethnicity, Politics, Poverty, Illiteracy, and Class*. Beyond this, another wall, a finite one, which the artist called *the mother of all walls*, was created. These works reject static display, embracing movement, environmental interaction, and viewer participation. Installation art theorists note that contemporary artworks increasingly operate as spatial experiences rather than isolated objects (Bishop, 2005). Gbaden's hangings embody this transformation.

The works considered for this study interrogate social realities through thematic "walls" specifically, addressing race, gender, and power. This wall features a culmination of the experiences garnered during the period of research in terms of design, materials, ideas, and themes. The artist attempted to resolve the conflicting social issues that were interrogated during the practice schedule" (Gbaden 2014).

Wall of Racism (2010)



Figure 4: Blaise Gundu Gbaden, *Wall of Racism*, 2010, hanging, canvas, acrylics and ropes, 305cm x 550cm. Photo: Blaise Gbaden.

Wall of Racism, 2010 (see fig 4): This hanging consists of multicoloured fabric strips symbolizing global ethnic diversity. Textual inscriptions replace illusionistic imagery, foregrounding language as an ideological construct. Identical humanoid figures positioned at both ends reinforce shared human origins. The kinetic movement of fabric destabilizes fixed identity categories, aligning with postmodern critiques of race as social construction (Enwezor, 2009). Describing the creative experience, Gbaden (2014) relates:

The raw colours of the canvas parchments represent ethnic groupings, tribes, nationalities, races and the confused inclinations of even the mixed-breeds. No effort is made at illustrative rendition; instead, *textual* intervention almost dominates the schema. The words: *Black, White, Indian, Asian*, etc., are boldly written. The lyric of a tune from Bob Marley's music is paraphrased around a yellow foot. Some feet are striding the stripes of canvas as if leaping from one ethnic reality to another. At both ends of the *hanging* are two identical stencil-like flat humanoids that stand sentry as if menacingly declaring with their outstretched hands

that there is no escape; we have to embrace ourselves across the gulf we have created. They look like twins to show that no matter the race we belong to, we are from the same genetic stock.

The artwork therefore functions as visual sociology, transforming aesthetic space into ethical reflection.

Wall of Gender (2010)



Figure 5: Blaise Gundu Gbaden, *Wall of Gender*, 2010, hanging, canvas, acrylics and ropes, 336cm x 503cm. Photo: Blaise Gbaden

Wall of Gender (see Fig. 5) is dominated by green tonalities, which the artist interprets as *fertility*; the work examines gender politics through fragmented female imagery. In this work, the *woman* is she who is the progenitor, the fertility conduit, the mother, the wife, the lover, the mistress, the Jezebel, a whole mix-up she is. Two women are shown in this hanging; one is fully draped, while only a head and breasts represent the other. One suffers enclosure and disclosure, while exposure describes the second. This trivial facial expression shows that at various stages of the woman's life she experiences imprisonment, liberation, or suppression. There is no finesse in brutality and injustice; it confounds us (Gbaden 2014). The juxtaposition of enclosure and exposure reflects societal contradictions surrounding womanhood. A dominant masculine foot intrudes violently, symbolizing

patriarchal authority. Raw textual intervention rejects decorative aesthetics, emphasizing emotional urgency. Feminist art theory recognizes such strategies as resistance against aestheticized oppression (Foster et al., 2011). Gbaden's work transforms installation into advocacy, positioning art as a catalyst for social awareness.

Wall of Power (2010)



Figure 6: Blaise Gundu Gbaden, *Wall of Power*, 2010, hanging, canvas, acrylics and ropes, 386cm x 450cm. Photo: Blaise Gbaden

Wall of Power (see fig. 6) was originally conceived as a forest region where the Lion holds sway as king of the animal kingdom. The image of the lion was to be painted striding across the canvas to show its agility and control of the forest zone. Imagine a lion roaring in the evening after a meal. Gbaden (2014) continues, “the metaphor of a terror of the forest seemed to fit the power structure of Nigeria where greedy leaders amass wealth at the expense of the people. They feed on helpless victims, seize their rights, belch and blow the stench in their faces.”

The forest metaphor reflects political structures characterized by dominance and exploitation. Power operates invisibly, shaping society without direct representation. It also reveals environmental elements surrounding the installation that reinforce themes of decay and regeneration. Here, silence replaces text, suggesting that power exceeds linguistic articulation. This strategy aligns with conceptual art practices where its absence

communicates meaning (Bishop, 2005). Through this work, Gbaden demonstrates how studio practice becomes political investigation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that studio practice operates not merely as aesthetic expression but as an investigative process through which artists interrogate personal experience, cultural memory, and sociopolitical realities. Through subconscious exploration, symbolic representation, and critical engagement with social issues, the works of Wale Ajayi and Blaise Gundu Gbaden exemplify how artistic practice functions as research. Their artworks reveal layered meanings that address philosophical reflection and social critique, positioning the artist simultaneously as creator, researcher, and cultural theorist. In this context, the studio becomes a laboratory of experimentation where intuition, material engagement, and reflective practice generate new theoretical insights. Artistic processes, including material manipulation, visual symbolism, iterative experimentation, and reflexive documentation, produce forms of knowledge that are experiential, embodied, and culturally situated. The incorporation of artistic knowledge into academic discourse expands conventional epistemological frameworks by recognizing non-verbal, sensory, and embodied modes of understanding as legitimate forms of inquiry. Artistic research challenges the historical privileging of written language as the dominant vehicle of knowledge production by demonstrating that visual, material, and performative practices can generate insight inaccessible through textual analysis alone (Sullivan, 2010). In visual art, meaning is often communicated through colour, form, gesture, spatial arrangement, and material presence, enabling artists to articulate complex emotional, cultural, and experiential realities that resist purely linguistic representation (Elkins, 2005).

Practice-led inquiry therefore enriches interdisciplinary scholarship and contributes to the diversification of research methodologies within the humanities. As Nigerian universities continue to expand postgraduate and doctoral programmes grounded in practice-led research, studio-based inquiry is poised to play an increasingly central role in shaping contemporary African art discourse. These programmes not only validate indigenous artistic epistemologies but also position Nigerian artists within global conversations on artistic research, creative knowledge production, and cultural activism. Consequently, studio research will remain a vital intellectual force, bridging local artistic traditions with international scholarly frameworks and ensuring that African perspectives contribute meaningfully to global artistic scholarship in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

Establish Rigorous Documentation Standards for Studio Doctorates: Doctoral programmes in art should adopt structured documentation systems that treat artworks as primary qualitative data rather than supplementary creative outputs. Documentation should include:

- Process journals capturing conceptual evolution and reflective interpretation
- Sequential photographic records of studio development
- Material experimentation logs explaining artistic decision-making
- Exhibition documentation as analytical evidence
- Artist statements framed as interpretive narratives rather than technical reports

Scholars of artistic research argue that artistic knowledge often emerges through embodied, tacit, and visual cognition that cannot be fully articulated through text alone (Borgdorff, 2012; Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Systematic documentation enables examiners to interpret

how meaning unfolds within artistic processes, aligning studio work with accepted qualitative research standards such as reflexivity, transparency, and interpretive coherence. Within Nigerian contexts, such documentation also preserves culturally embedded knowledge systems that have historically been transmitted through apprenticeship and studio interaction, thereby extending indigenous artistic epistemologies into doctoral scholarship.

Position Artworks as Sites of Interpretive Inquiry: Doctoral supervision should emphasize qualitative interpretive analysis of artworks rather than framing artistic production solely as “practice-based research.”

Supervisory models should guide candidates to:

- Interpret symbolism, materiality, and spatial relationships within artworks
- Analyze visual metaphors as socio-cultural texts
- Situate studio outcomes within historical, political, and philosophical contexts
- Articulate meaning through phenomenological and hermeneutic interpretation

Artistic research theorists maintain that artworks function as epistemic objects that produce knowledge through sensory engagement and interpretive dialogue (Sullivan, 2010; Bolt, 2007). In this framework, knowledge is generated through interpretation of artistic outcomes, not merely through the act of making.

Expand Examiner Criteria Beyond Written Thesis Dominance: Assessment frameworks should recognize multiple modes of scholarly articulation:

- Exhibitions as analytical arguments
- Installation design as theoretical positioning
- Visual sequencing as narrative construction
- Material experimentation as methodological inquiry

Artistic research scholarship confirms that non-verbal forms of knowledge challenge academic hierarchies privileging textual discourse (Borgdorff, 2012). Evaluating doctoral work through multimodal criteria aligns art PhDs with qualitative disciplines where meaning arises from diverse evidentiary forms.

Institutionalize Reflexive Writing Instead of Conventional Exegesis Alone: Rather than demanding purely explanatory writing, doctoral programmes should encourage interpretive reflexivity, including:

- Critical reflection on artistic intuition
- Analysis of failure and experimentation
- Cultural positioning of the artist-researcher
- Ethical and social implications of artworks

Sullivan (2010) argues that reflexive interpretation bridges studio experience and academic discourse, enabling artistic knowledge to enter scholarly debate without reducing art to illustration of theory.

Build Archival Systems for Nigerian Studio Scholarship: Universities should establish digital repositories documenting studio doctoral outputs, ensuring:

- Long-term preservation of artistic research
- Visibility of African studio epistemologies
- Comparative scholarship across institutions
- Development of locally grounded doctoral standards

Such archives extend the intellectual continuum initiated at Ahmadu Bello University, transforming studio production into sustainable academic heritage.

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