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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### STUDIO EXPLORATION OF MIRRORS AND FABRICS IN CREATING ABSTRACT PAINTING EXPRESSIONS

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#### ABSTRACT

Artists react and re-present the existential realities that surround them in different ways. While some creatively and realistically present these realities as they are, others conceptualise these realities, in diverse artistic styles and orientations. In deviation from the prescriptions of authors such as Lamb (1976) who wrote an extensive exposition on the use of conventional materials in creating art works, unconventionality has, for a while now, permeated the world of art such that, virtually any solid entity can be used in creating artworks. It is on such basis that I chose to explore the possibilities of creating abstract paintings, using unconventional media, specifically mirrors and fabrics. In the paper's capacity to advance the exploratory possibilities in painting, Candy's (2006) opinion on the practice-based research methodology, was adopted as the paper's conceptual framework. The paper concludes by recommending that other artists should endeavour to explore and exploit other possibilities of creating paintings, through the adaptation of similarly unconventional media and procedure.

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## INTRODUCTION

Artists react and re-present the existential realities that surround them in different ways. While some creatively and realistically present these realities as they are, others conceptualise these realities, in diverse artistic styles and orientations. For instance, Aina Onabolu was known for his realistic paintings, while Yusuf Grillo is known to present his cultural and social realities through the stained glass medium. Jerry Buhari is also known to present his environmental ideas through installations and abstract expressions. The different styles of art, which have been evolved over the years, exemplifies artists' thirst and quest for diversity in creative expressions. As such, some artists like Piet Mondrian, have taken to expressing their ideas in total abstraction. That is, instead of re-presenting nature, or partially distorting it, some artists communicate their intuitions and ideas through the use of non-figurative patterns and expressions, which usually have no bearing or affinity with nature. As such, "natural appearances play little part in their designs, which reduce a view to a system of geometric shapes, patterns, lines, angles, and patches of colour.

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The artist's imagination and invention concentrate on pictorial mechanics and the arrangement of patterns, shapes, textures, and colours" (Marien and Fleming, 2005). In deviation from the prescriptions of authors such as Lamb (1976) who wrote an extensive exposition on the use of conventional materials in creating art works, unconventionality has, for a while now, permeated the world of art such that, virtually any solid entity can be used in creating artworks. In progression from the foregoing, artists have produced art on and using the human body, as well as, engaged in several forms of ephemeral creative expressions. It is on such basis that this paper chose to explore the possibilities of creating abstract paintings, using unconventional media, specifically mirrors and fabrics. Thus, the studio process, as well as, the works which were created during the exploration, are the concerns of this paper. Before embarking on the analysis of the studio process that led to the production of these works, a brief background on the artist is deemed necessary.

**Conceptual Framework:** Given that this paper is focused on an exploratory studio process, as well as, the creative products of such process, the idea being put forward in this paper is therefore, based on Candy's (2006) opinion on the practice-based research methodology, which states that practice-based research "is an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the

outcomes of that practice. Claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes which may include artefacts such as images.” In this case, the creative outcomes, which demonstrates the paper’s contribution to the already existing means of executing contemporary painting expressions, are the mirror paintings which are presented in this paper. The author further explains that a full understanding of such procedural and exploratory innovation can only be obtained with direct reference to those outcomes. As such, in presenting this studio process, as well as, the creative outcomes of the process, a descriptive approach will be adopted, in describing the exploratory procedure. The descriptive approach, according to Wyk in Onoja (2017), provides an accurate and valid representation of the factors or variables that pertain to, or are relevant to the study.

**The Studio Procedure:** The major highlight of the studio procedure was the process of desilverization which the mirrors were subjected to. For a clearer understanding of this process, an explanation on the silvering method is required. Silvering is a chemical process whereby glass is coated with a reflective substance. As explained by Mahajan (2008) “in the process, silver ammonia compounds are reduced chemically to metallic silver, which is deposited on a suitably shaped glass surface. Modern processes may utilize silver solutions and reducer solutions...sprayed above clean glass, travelling on a conveyor; as the spray falls on the glass surface, metallic silver is deposited.” Desilvering on the other hand, can be understood to be a reverse process whereby the reflective backing is removed from the mirror. Having chosen to explore the possibility of fusing mirror and fabrics together in a painting composition, the desilvering process became necessary, so as to remove some of the reflective portions of the mirror, for the fabrics to be mounted on. In desilvering the mirrors, so as to create spaces for the fabrics to be mounted on the mirrors and as well maintain the reflective quality of the desired portions, the researcher attempted removing the silver backing by scraping with razor blades. This was a long and tedious process, which resulted in scratched and defaced mirrors. Consequently, Nitric Acid became the chemical of choice, as it is fast, effective and gives a clearer working surface without cracks and scratches to the surface of the mirror. Nitric acid, according to Sampaolo (2018), “decomposes into water, nitrogen dioxide, and oxygen, forming a brownish yellow solution. It is a strong acid... and a powerful oxidizing agent.” Here, the desilverization process has been segmented into ten (10) stages. To further demonstrate this process, a catalogue of pictures, illustrating the ten (10) stages of the process is presented here. Firstly, the mirrors are placed on a table, with the reflective sides facing downwards and the non-reflective sides facing up. Next, they were dusted and then a good quantity of water containing detergent was poured on to the backs. Thereafter, bookbinder’s transparent film was stuck on to the surfaces. To remove excess water and flatten the film unto the mirrors, a squeegee was used. Then, the mirrors were placed vertically leaning against a wall to allow any remnant of water, drain off. This allows the bookbinder’s film to adhere completely onto the back of the mirrors. That done, different designs are then incised onto the film and negative spaces to be desilvered are then cut out. Nitric acid is then applied to the exposed portions, from where the bookbinder’s films were removed on the mirrors.

It must be mentioned that the Bookbinder’s film prevents any spillage of the acid into unwanted areas. A chemical reaction takes place as the acid comes in contact with the mirrors, causing a fuming, boiling and bubbling effect that burns off the exposed areas of the mirrors. Thereafter, water is used to wash out the residue; the rest of the film is then manually removed. Fabrics possessing the artist’s choice of colours and patterns are then mounted on the desilvered portions of the mirrors, thereby creating the required compositions. The artist and studio assistants were kitted with chemical resistant hand gloves, respirators or breathing masks. They were also on the alert to avoid accidental spillage of acid and resultant injuries. The works that were produced from this experiment are quite experimental in nature. A major characteristic of their experimental nature lies in their capacities to interact with any environment in which they are placed. That is, the silvered part of the glass on which the composition is made, reflects the activities in its fore. For instance, in Fig. 1, titled *Unhidden Truth*, the painting exposes the context within which the painting was installed – studio. Alongside, the painting also exposes the identity of the photographer – Alice. These would not have been achievable if it was a painting done on a canvas.



Fig. 11. *Unhidden Truth*. 2018



Fig. 12. *Mimi kalwanger(Light)*

Coincidentally, the painting's ability to project these facts which would have ordinarily be hidden, is in line with its title *Unhidden Truth*; that is, nothing stays hidden. Another feature, which demonstrates the painting's ability to interact with its environment is in its source of illumination. In some of the paints, for instance Fig. 2, where the colour of the fabrics collaged on the mirrors are not so bright, then the reflective portion of the painting becomes the brightest part of the composition, thereby creating contrast. However, this is largely dependent on the quality of illumination in the area where the painting is installed. If this painting was placed in a dark or poorly illuminated room for instance, the reflective portions go dark. This is as a result of the fact that a mirror has no light of its own; it only reflects what the environment projects, as such, it is dependent on the environmental illumination as its lighting source.

### Conclusion

In this studio experiment, the artist premised most of her creations on the exploration of the human facial forms; as such all the paintings possess this attribute. The use of plain coloured fabrics also helped in the simplistic orientations of the paintings produced. In line with artists' search for diverse personalised ways of conceptualising and presenting their creative ideas, the artist has chosen the unconventional mode of painting, using mirrors and fabrics, as opposed to the use of conventional materials such as oil or acrylic on canvas, enamel, gouache, water colour, amongst others. In line with the dictates of the practice-based research as postulated by Candy, this exploration has expanded the scope of experimental possibilities in painting and the resultant paintings, which are presented in this paper, are testaments to the viability of the studio exploration.

Although it is possible that the techniques used in this exploration have been in existence before this studio exploration, the use of such technique in art is however unpopular and unconventional. As such, this exploration draws the attention of artists to such creative possibilities. Thus, the artist recommends that other artists should endeavour to explore and exploit other possibilities of creating paintings, through the adaptation of similarly unconventional media and procedure.

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