

A CONCEPTUAL EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG FULANI WOMEN THROUGH PAINTING

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Abstract

Visual representations of Fulani women in Nigerian art have traditionally emphasised ethnographic documentation, pastoral identity, and cultural continuity. Comparatively little attention has been given to the visual interpretation of the cultural transformations accompanying changing patterns of livelihood, urbanisation, and material adaptation. This paper presents a practice-led conceptual exploration of cultural change among Fulani women through painting, focusing on the evolving identity of the Fulani milkmaid within selected contemporary contexts in Northern Nigeria. Field observation and photographic documentation informed a sequence of studio investigations that progressed from realist studies to conceptual and semi-abstract paintings. The study examines visible shifts in material culture, particularly the replacement of traditional carved calabashes with commercially manufactured plastic containers and sachets used in the sale of fura da nono. These observations were subsequently translated into paintings employing colour, line, silhouette, and expressive dripping techniques as conceptual devices for representing transition, displacement, and the gradual weakening of traditional visual markers. Drawing on aspects of Tyrone Geter's figurative treatment of Fulani subjects and Kenneth Blom's use of spatial ambiguity and psychological landscape, the study positions painting as both visual documentation and critical reflection. Rather than presenting cultural change solely as loss, the paintings interpret it as an ongoing negotiation between continuity and adaptation, demonstrating the potential of practice-led painting to investigate changing material culture through conceptual visual language.

Keywords: Cultural change, Fulani women, material culture, conceptual painting, practice-led

Introduction

Culture is neither fixed nor immune to change; rather, it evolves in response to shifting social, economic, environmental, and technological conditions. Within contemporary Northern Nigeria, many aspects of Fulani material culture continue to adapt as communities negotiate changing patterns of livelihood, urbanisation, and increasing engagement with commercial economies. Among the most visible examples of these transformations is the changing appearance of the Fulani milkmaid, whose traditional dress, utensils, and methods of trade increasingly reflect contemporary realities alongside inherited cultural practices.

Despite the long-standing presence of Fulani subjects within Nigerian painting, artistic representations have predominantly portrayed them as enduring symbols of pastoral identity and cultural heritage. Many painters have celebrated the Fulani milkmaid through realist and figurative approaches that emphasise beauty, dignity, and tradition. While these representations have contributed significantly to Nigerian art history, they seldom investigate the visible cultural transitions that have accompanied changing economic practices, migration, and material adaptation.

Existing scholarship has similarly focused more extensively on the historical, anthropological, and sociological dimensions of Fulani culture than on the capacity of

contemporary painting to critically interpret these transformations through conceptual visual language. Consequently, relatively little attention has been given to how practice-led painting can function simultaneously as documentation, interpretation, and critical reflection on evolving cultural identity.

This study addresses that gap through a practice-led artistic inquiry that combines field observation, photographic documentation, studio experimentation, and reflective visual analysis. Rather than treating painting solely as an illustrative outcome, the research positions artistic practice as a method of generating knowledge, enabling visual decisions to emerge through iterative experimentation with composition, colour, line, silhouette, and material handling. The investigation begins with realist studies that document observable changes in the material culture of Fulani milkmaids before progressively translating these observations into increasingly conceptual paintings. This progression reflects the understanding that visible objects, including calabashes, plastic containers, clothing, and landscape, function not merely as descriptive elements but also as cultural signs capable of communicating broader narratives of adaptation, continuity, and transformation.

Central to the study is the concept of absence, understood not as complete disappearance but as the gradual weakening of traditional visual markers within everyday life. Although many customary practices continue in adapted forms, their visible presence within contemporary urban and peri-urban environments has become increasingly fragmented. Through abstraction, silhouette, expressive colour relationships, and the dripping technique, the paintings investigate how cultural memory may persist even as familiar material forms undergo transformation.

The study therefore argues that painting can extend beyond visual documentation to become an interpretive framework through which changing material culture may be examined critically. By integrating realist observation with conceptual abstraction, the research demonstrates how practice-led painting can contribute to contemporary discourse on cultural change, visual representation, and artistic inquiry within Nigerian art.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore cultural change among Fulani women through a practice-led painting approach that combines visual documentation with conceptual interpretation.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Visually document changing material culture among Fulani milkmaids through realist painting studies.
2. Translate these observed cultural changes into conceptual and semi-abstract paintings using colour, line, and silhouette.
3. Employ dripping, abstraction, and material experimentation as conceptual strategies for evoking absence, displacement, and cultural transition within contemporary Fulani experience.

Literature Review

Fulani Women, Material Culture and Cultural Transition

The cultural identity of the Fulbe has historically been shaped by *Pulaaku*, a moral and behavioural code emphasising modesty, patience, dignity, self-control, and social responsibility (Ahmadu, 2010). Beyond its ethical dimensions, *Pulaaku* has traditionally been expressed through visible material culture, including clothing, hairstyles, body adornment, domestic utensils, and

pastoral practices. These material forms have served both functional purposes and have also communicated cultural identity and social belonging. Among Fulani women, dress and material objects have long occupied an important place in everyday life. The traditional *Mudukare* blouse, woven by local craftsmen and often worn with protective amulets (*lohol*), formed part of a broader visual identity associated with pastoral life. Similarly, carved calabashes, gourds, woven mats, and other locally produced objects have historically been integral to the preparation, transportation, and sale of dairy products.

However, material culture is not static. As Markus (2006) observes, increasing urbanisation, commercialisation, and changing economic realities have contributed to a gradual decline in the everyday use of many handcrafted materials. Factory-produced textiles have become increasingly common, while traditional woven garments are more frequently reserved for ceremonial occasions. Likewise, commercially manufactured plastic containers have become more widely used in place of carved calabashes because they are relatively inexpensive, durable, and readily available. Within the observed context of this study, similar patterns were documented among Fulani milk sellers operating within and around Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The women observed continued to engage in the traditional trade of *fura da nono*, yet their methods of presentation reflected contemporary adaptation through the use of plastic buckets, bowls, and sachets. Rather than indicating the disappearance of Fulani identity, these observations suggest an ongoing negotiation between inherited traditions and present-day economic realities.

Consequently, this study approaches changing material culture not as evidence of cultural replacement but as an evolving visual record through which adaptation, continuity, and transformation coexist.

Representation of Fulani Women in Nigerian Painting

Fulani subjects have occupied a visible position within Nigerian painting for several decades. Artists have frequently portrayed Fulani women as symbols of pastoral beauty, cultural continuity, and national identity, often emphasising distinctive dress, hairstyles, ornaments, and dairy traditions. Among the most recognisable examples is Tyrone Geter's *Fulani Milkmaid from Southern Zaria* (1982), which employs refined charcoal draftsmanship and dramatic chiaroscuro to isolate the milkmaid against an uncluttered background. The composition elevates the subject beyond ordinary portraiture, presenting her as a guardian of cultural memory.

Similarly, Ben Enwonwu's *Fulani Girl* (1962) combines impressionistic brushwork with modernist sensibilities, celebrating indigenous identity while situating the Fulani figure within broader narratives of Nigerian cultural expression. Later artists expanded this visual vocabulary. Dennis Osakue's *Fulani Herdsmen* (2012) explores collective movement and market interaction through expressive colour, while Kolade Oshinowo's *Nomads* (1993) simplifies travelling families into rhythmic linear arrangements that evoke mobility and endurance.

Other artists increasingly adopted modernist and abstract approaches. Durotimi Babatunde integrates portraiture with decorative abstraction, whereas Jimoh Akolo simplifies Fulani women into flattened geometric compositions that privilege formal relationships over ethnographic description.

Beyond Nigerian practice, Kenneth Blom demonstrates how landscape itself can become psychologically charged through spatial ambiguity, translucent colour fields, and dissolving horizons. Likewise, Maria Onyegbule employs fragmented forms and gestural abstraction to communicate instability and transition.

Collectively, these works illustrate an evolution from descriptive representation towards increasingly interpretive visual languages. Nevertheless, comparatively few studies have examined changing Fulani material culture through a practice-led conceptual painting process that moves progressively from observation to abstraction. It is within this gap that the present study is situated.

Practice-led Painting as Visual Research

Practice-led research recognises artistic practice as a legitimate means of generating knowledge. Rather than treating the artwork solely as an outcome, the creative process itself becomes a form of inquiry through which questions are investigated, tested, and refined (Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan, 2010). Within visual art research, observation, sketching, material experimentation, reflection, and studio production operate together as interconnected forms of investigation. Decisions concerning composition, colour relationships, line, texture, scale, and medium emerge through iterative experimentation rather than predetermined illustration.

This understanding aligns with conceptual art, which privileges ideas and critical reflection over purely descriptive representation (DeGuzman, 2022). Within conceptual painting, formal elements such as colour, line, texture, gesture, and material processes function as vehicles for communicating complex cultural, psychological, and social experiences.

Accordingly, this study employs painting as both a documentary and interpretive practice. Initial realist studies establish a visual record of observable cultural changes before subsequent paintings progressively transform these observations through abstraction, silhouette, and expressive material handling. In doing so, the studio becomes an active site of knowledge production rather than simply a place of image-making.

Conceptual Framework

This study is situated within the understanding that culture is dynamic rather than static, continually evolving in response to social, economic, and environmental conditions. Material culture, comprising clothing, utensils, domestic objects, and everyday practices, serves as a visible expression of these transformations. Among Fulani women, objects such as carved calabashes, woven garments, hijabs, plastic containers, and dairy-selling implements function not only as utilitarian items but also as cultural signifiers through which identity is communicated. As these objects change over time, they provide visual evidence of broader processes of cultural adaptation and continuity. Consequently, the study approaches material culture as a means of examining how visible changes in everyday life reflect evolving relationships between tradition and contemporary realities.

The study further adopts the concept of absence as an interpretive lens for understanding cultural transition. Absence is not regarded as the complete disappearance of Fulani identity or cultural practices but rather as the gradual weakening of traditional visual markers within everyday experience. While many customary practices continue in adapted forms, aspects of dress, utensils, and pastoral settings have become less prominent within the urban and peri-urban contexts observed during this research. The notion of absence therefore refers to the changing visibility of these cultural markers rather than their eradication. This perspective enables the paintings to explore transition as a process in which traces of cultural memory coexist with adaptation and transformation.

Within this conceptual orientation, painting functions as more than a medium of representation. Through a practice-led approach, the studio becomes a site of inquiry in which observation, experimentation, and reflection generate new understanding. Rather than only illustrating field observations, the paintings progressively reinterpret them through formal visual elements. The movement from realist documentation towards conceptual abstraction mirrors the research process itself, allowing visual decisions to emerge through sustained experimentation with composition, material handling, colour, and line.

Colour and line therefore operate as conceptual devices rather than solely formal elements of design. Line is employed to suggest movement, migration, fragmentation, and spatial relationships, while colour functions as an expressive vehicle through which memory, environmental conditions, and emotional atmosphere are communicated. As the paintings become increasingly abstract, these formal elements assume greater conceptual significance, enabling the works to investigate cultural change beyond literal representation. Through this framework, the study positions painting as both a form of visual documentation and a means of critically interpreting the evolving material culture of Fulani women.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a practice-led qualitative research design, in which studio practice functions as the principal mode of inquiry. Practice-led research recognises artistic production as a means of generating knowledge through iterative making, experimentation, reflection, and evaluation (Sullivan, 2005; Sullivan, 2010). Within this approach, painting is not regarded solely as the final outcome of research but as an investigative process through which cultural observations are examined, interpreted, and translated into visual form.

The study combines field observation, photographic documentation, visual analysis, and studio experimentation to investigate changing material culture among Fulani women. Observable cultural changes informed the development of realist studies, which subsequently evolved into conceptual and semi-abstract paintings through successive stages of studio exploration.

Field Observation and Photographic Documentation

Primary data were collected through direct observation and photographic documentation of Fulani women engaged in the sale of *fura da nono* within and around the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, environment. Observations were conducted over multiple visits between 2023 and 2025, focusing on women encountered in public spaces, including areas surrounding the university gymnasium, departmental buildings, car parks, and adjoining roads.

The observations concentrated on visual characteristics relevant to the objectives of the study, including:

- clothing and dress adaptation;
- methods of carrying and displaying dairy products;
- the use of traditional and contemporary utensils;
- spatial relationship between the milk sellers and their environment;
- evidence of continuity and change in everyday material culture.



Figure 1: Photograph of a nomadic modern Fulani woman(i) Basheera Ohuni Abdulsalam, 2023 Author's Collection

The photographs served as visual reference material for studio development rather than as documentary evidence requiring sociological interpretation. Their primary function was to record observable material conditions that informed the subsequent painting process.

As the photographs were taken in public spaces for academic and artistic research, emphasis was placed on documenting visible cultural features rather than identifying individuals. The analysis therefore focuses on material and visual characteristics instead of personal identities.

Secondary Sources

Secondary data were obtained through books, journal articles, exhibition catalogues, theses, online museum collections, and published artworks relating to Fulani culture, Nigerian painting, conceptual art, material culture, and practice-led research.

These sources provided contextual understanding of Fulani material traditions, previous artistic representations of Fulani subjects, and methodological approaches to studio-based research. They also informed the comparative analysis of selected artworks by Ben Enwonwu, Tyrone Geter, Jimoh Akolo, Dennis Osakue, Kolade Oshinowo, Kenneth Blom, Maria Onyegbule, and Durotimi Babatunde.

Studio Process and Visual Experimentation

The studio process constituted the central investigative component of the research. Rather than executing predetermined images, the paintings developed through iterative experimentation in which visual decisions were continuously reviewed in relation to the research objectives.

The process comprised seven interrelated stages:

Stage One: Field observation and photographic documentation of Fulani milk sellers and their changing material culture.

Stage Two: Preliminary graphite and charcoal sketches exploring proportion, posture, composition, and characteristic objects observed during fieldwork.

Stage Three: Development of realist studies documenting traditional and contemporary utensils, dress, and visual relationships between the milkmaid and her environment.

Stage Four: Extraction of recurring visual motifs, including the calabash, plastic container, hijab, milkmaid silhouette, roadway, rainfall, and horizon, for conceptual exploration.

Stage Five: Compositional experimentation using colour fields, silhouette reduction, spatial ambiguity, and simplified linear structures.

Stage Six: Material experimentation through layering, thinning, glazing, and controlled dripping of acrylic paint to investigate ideas of transition, environmental change, movement, and cultural trace.

Stage Seven: Reflective evaluation of completed paintings against the research objectives, allowing each work to inform subsequent studio decisions.

This cyclical process enabled observation and studio experimentation to inform one another throughout the investigation.

Materials and Studio Procedures

The principal materials employed in the study included acrylic paint, oil paint, watercolour, stretched canvas, acid-free paper, graphite pencils, charcoal, brushes, palette knives, and various painting mediums.

The selection of multiple media enabled different stages of investigation. Graphite and charcoal facilitated observational drawing and compositional planning. Watercolour was employed during exploratory studies because of its fluidity and responsiveness to atmospheric effects. Acrylic paint provided flexibility during repeated layering and experimentation, while oil paint supported more sustained investigations of colour relationships and surface development. Material handling also formed part of the conceptual inquiry. Layering, transparency, opacity, controlled thinning, and gravity-assisted dripping were explored not simply as technical procedures but as expressive devices through which ideas of transition, movement, instability, and cultural memory could be communicated.

Analytical Approach

The completed paintings were analysed through formal visual analysis supported by reflective studio evaluation.

Each painting was examined according to six interconnected criteria:

- composition and spatial organisation;
- colour relationships and symbolic associations;
- line quality and gestural mark-making;
- material handling and surface treatment;
- recurring cultural motifs;
- conceptual relationship to the corresponding research objective.

Reflective notes produced during the studio process assisted in evaluating how successive visual decisions strengthened or redirected the conceptual development of each work. Rather than measuring success solely by technical execution, the analysis considered the extent to which each painting communicated changing material culture through increasingly conceptual visual strategies.

Relationship Between Methodology and Research Objectives

The methodology was structured to correspond directly with the three research objectives.

Field observation and realist studies addressed the first objective by documenting observable changes in Fulani material culture.

Conceptual abstraction, silhouette, and colour experimentation fulfilled the second objective by translating these observations into expressive visual language.

Finally, the exploration of dripping, spatial ambiguity, and material layering addressed the third objective by investigating absence, transition, and cultural trace as conceptual themes within contemporary painting.

Analysis of Studio Works



Plate I: *The Milkmaid of Years Past*, Basheera Ohuni Abdulsalam, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 120cm
Author's Collection

Plate I: *The Milkmaid of Years Past*

The Milkmaid of Years Past establishes the visual foundation of this study by documenting aspects of traditional Fulani material culture through a realist approach. The composition is organised around the centrally positioned milkmaid, whose upright posture and balanced stance direct attention towards the decorated calabash and woven mat, emphasising their cultural significance as much as the figure herself. Rather than functioning as a conventional portrait, the painting records material practices that have historically characterised Fulani women's dairy trade.

Although realism informs the treatment of form, the work moves beyond simple documentation. The restrained palette of earth tones and muted greens evokes the pastoral environment traditionally associated with Fulani life, while the loosely rendered background avoids locating the figure within a specific setting. This spatial ambiguity shifts the painting from straightforward representation towards visual remembrance, suggesting that the work serves as both documentation and archive.

The traditional blouse, carved calabash, and woven mat function as visual indicators of continuity, preserving material forms that have become less common within the urban contexts observed during the study. Controlled brushwork and clearly modelled forms reinforce this documentary intention by presenting these objects with clarity and permanence. In doing so, the painting fulfils the first objective by providing a visual record of traditional Fulani material culture that forms the basis for the conceptual developments explored in the subsequent works.

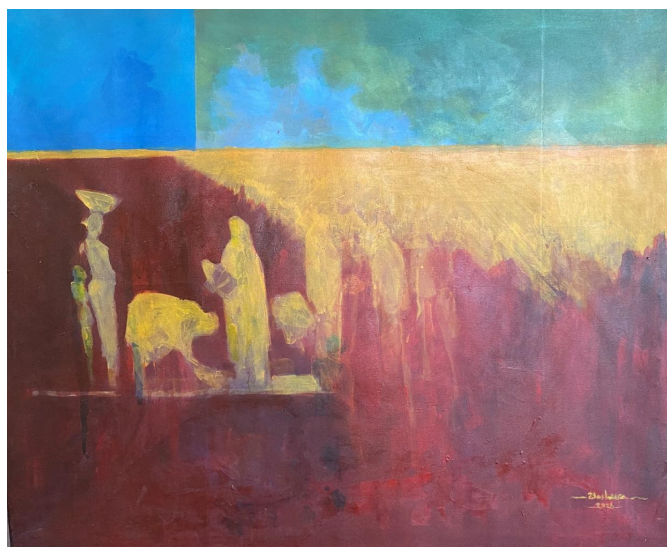


Plate II: *Then and Now*, Basheera Ohuni Abdulsalam, 2023, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm Author's Collection

Plate II: *Then and Now*

While Plate I documents material culture through realism, *Then and Now* translates those observations into a conceptual visual language. The painting abandons descriptive detail in favour of colour, silhouette, and simplified line, allowing cultural transition to be communicated through formal relationships rather than literal representation. The composition is structured through horizontal bands of colour that suggest different temporal and emotional spaces. Cooler blues and greens evoke continuity with the pastoral landscape, while saturated reds and purples introduce visual tension associated with contemporary social and economic realities. Separating these fields, the yellow band functions as a threshold through which past and present visually intersect.

Silhouetted figures appear across the composition without individual identity, representing collective cultural memory rather than portraiture. Their coexistence within the same pictorial space reflects the study's understanding of cultural transition as adaptation rather than replacement. Roads, linear markings, and rain-like vertical gestures further reinforce movement, migration, and environmental change, while simultaneously disrupting spatial stability.

The painting therefore demonstrates how colour, line, and silhouette can communicate changing cultural identity beyond descriptive realism. By transforming field observations into symbolic visual relationships, the work fulfils the second objective of the study and marks the transition from documentation towards conceptual interpretation.

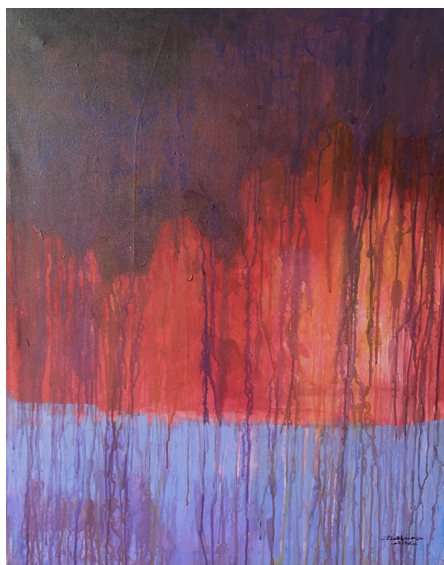


Plate III: The Search, Basheera Ohuni Abdulsalam, 2025, Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 100cm Author's Collection

Plate III: *The Search*

The Search represents the culmination of the studio investigation, employing abstraction and the expressive dripping technique to explore cultural transition through the concept of absence. Unlike the preceding paintings, recognisable figures and objects are largely eliminated, encouraging viewers to engage with atmosphere, movement, and material process rather than identifiable imagery. Broad horizontal fields of deep maroon, crimson, violet, and muted blue establish a layered spatial structure that suggests both landscape and emotional terrain. Across these colour fields, elongated paint drips interrupt the composition, introducing movement and instability while recalling rainfall, erosion, migration routes, and the passage of time. Rather than functioning as decorative effects, the drips become conceptual marks that communicate environmental dependence and cultural transformation.

Within the context of this study, absence does not signify the disappearance of Fulani identity but the diminishing visibility of certain traditional material markers within contemporary life. The removal of recognisable forms therefore invites viewers to consider what remains after visible cultural signs have been transformed. Colour and material handling assume the communicative role previously occupied by the figure, allowing memory, transition, and continuity to be expressed through abstraction.

Accordingly, *The Search* fulfils the third objective by demonstrating how expressive material processes can function as conceptual strategies for representing cultural transition. The painting completes the progression established throughout the study, moving from realist documentation to conceptual abstraction while maintaining continuity with the visual themes developed in the earlier works.

Findings and Discussion

- i. The study demonstrates that observable changes in the material culture of Fulani milkmaids can be effectively investigated through a practice-led painting process. Field

observations revealed that, within the locations documented around Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, traditional utensils such as carved calabashes increasingly coexist with commercially manufactured plastic containers and sachets used in the sale of *fura da nono*. These observations informed the realist approach adopted in Plate I, where painting functioned as a visual record of changing material practices.

- ii. The progression from observational studies to conceptual paintings further revealed that cultural transition extends beyond changes in physical objects. Through the use of silhouette, colour fields, and spatial ambiguity in Plate II, the study interpreted changing material culture as a process of continuity and adaptation rather than abrupt replacement. This approach enabled visible observations to be translated into broader reflections on cultural identity and memory.
- iii. Studio experimentation also demonstrated the potential of abstraction to communicate aspects of cultural transition that are not readily represented through realism alone. In Plate III, the dripping technique, layered colour fields, and absence of recognisable figures shifted attention from documentary representation to conceptual interpretation, allowing ideas of environmental dependency, movement, and cultural trace to emerge through the material qualities of paint itself. Collectively, these findings indicate that practice-led painting can function simultaneously as documentation, interpretation, and critical inquiry into changing material culture.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to contemporary art practice by demonstrating how practice-led painting can serve as a mode of visual inquiry into changing material culture. Through the integration of field observation and studio experimentation, the research illustrates how realist documentation may be progressively transformed into conceptual visual language without losing its connection to observed cultural realities.

The study also provides a visual record of contemporary Fulani milkmaids observed at selected locations in and around Zaria, highlighting changes in dress, utensils, and modes of trade in the context investigated. Rather than treating these observations as ethnographic documentation, the research interprets them through painting, expanding discussions of Fulani representation beyond descriptive realism.

Finally, the study proposes the use of silhouette, abstraction, and expressive dripping as conceptual strategies for examining cultural transition within contemporary Nigerian painting. In doing so, it demonstrates the capacity of painting to engage critically with evolving cultural identities through practice-led research.

Conclusion

This study explored cultural change among Fulani women through a practice-led painting approach that combined field observation with conceptual studio practice. Beginning with realist documentation of changing material culture and progressing towards abstraction, the research demonstrated how painting can function both as a visual record and as a means of interpreting cultural transition.

The three objectives of the study were achieved through a sequential studio process. Realist painting documented observable changes in material culture, conceptual painting

translated these observations into expressive visual language, and abstraction employed colour, line, silhouette, and dripping to investigate absence as a condition of cultural transition rather than cultural disappearance. The resulting works illustrate that changing cultural identities may be communicated through formal visual elements without relying exclusively on descriptive representation.

The study is limited to observations made within selected locations in and around Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and therefore does not claim to represent the experiences of all Fulani communities. Future research may extend this investigation by examining changing material culture among Fulani women in other regions of Nigeria or by comparing painting with other contemporary visual media, including photography, installation, and mixed-media practice. Such studies would further expand understanding of how artistic practice can contribute to the visual interpretation of cultural transformation.

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