

CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN DRAWING AND STYLISTIC DIVERSITY: UDECHUKWU, OSONDU, EDEWOR, UKONU, AND NADAMA

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Abstract

Drawing occupies an important position in the development of modern and contemporary Nigerian art. Beyond its traditional role as a preparatory stage for painting or sculpture, drawing has evolved into an independent medium through which artists express cultural identity, social realities, and personal philosophies. This study investigates stylistic variations in contemporary Nigerian drawing through selected works by Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Garba Nadama. The research examines how these artists employ line, form, texture, composition, and symbolism to construct distinctive visual languages within contemporary Nigerian drawing practice. The study adopts a qualitative methodology involving formal visual analysis and contextual interpretation of selected drawings. Findings reveal diverse stylistic approaches ranging from expressive calligraphic linearity and symbolic abstraction to photorealism, narrative figuration, and expressive stylisation. Udechukwu's drawings demonstrate the influence of the Nsukka School and the philosophy of Natural Synthesis through the adaptation of Uli-inspired linear aesthetics. Osondu's works emphasise symbolic patterning and cultural motifs rooted in indigenous visual traditions, while Ukonu explores photorealistic representation through tonal precision and meticulous detail. Edewor and Nadama Garba employ expressive figuration, compositional distortion, and narrative symbolism to address cultural and social experience. The study concludes that stylistic diversity in contemporary Nigerian drawing is shaped by indigenous traditions, academic training, personal aesthetics, and socio-cultural realities, thereby reinforcing drawing as a dynamic medium of visual communication and cultural reflection.

Keywords: Contemporary Nigerian drawing, Uli aesthetics, Photorealism, Visual symbolism, Stylistic variation

Introduction

Drawing has historically remained one of the most fundamental forms of artistic expression across cultures. In the Nigerian context, drawing traditions can be traced to indigenous practices such as mural painting, body decoration, textile design, and symbolic systems, including Uli and Nsibidi. These traditions demonstrate how line, pattern, and symbolic imagery have long functioned as important visual languages for communication and cultural expression within African societies (Cole, 1989; Drewal, 1989). Such developments reflect broader trajectories in African modernist art, in which local traditions were continually synthesised with modern artistic ideas and techniques (Fosu, 1986).

With the emergence of formal art education in Nigeria during the twentieth century, drawing gradually evolved from traditional practice into a medium of academic and experimental exploration. Institutions such as the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, Zaria, alongside university art departments at Nsukka, Ife, and Ahmadu Bello University, played important roles in shaping modern Nigerian art practice. Artists trained within these institutions began to combine indigenous aesthetic principles with modern artistic methods, thereby expanding the visual and conceptual possibilities of drawing (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

One of the defining developments in Nigerian modern art was the emergence of Natural Synthesis, a philosophy associated with the Zaria Art Society and later developed within the Nsukka School. The approach encouraged artists to reinterpret indigenous visual traditions within contemporary artistic practice, particularly through the adaptation of Uli-inspired linear aesthetics (Ottenberg, 2002).

Within this artistic environment, drawing evolved beyond its traditional role as a preparatory tool and became an important medium for exploring themes of identity, memory, politics, and everyday experience. Artists such as Obiora Udechukwu demonstrated how expressive linearity could be employed to construct visually engaging narratives centred on social realities and historical consciousness (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

Contemporary Nigerian drawing continues to expand both stylistically and conceptually. While some artists maintain the calligraphic and symbolic traditions associated with the Nsukka School, others experiment with photorealism, expressive figuration, and abstraction. These varied approaches reflect the dynamic nature of Nigerian contemporary art and reveal the different ways artists negotiate relationships between tradition, innovation, and personal expression.

This study therefore investigates stylistic variations in contemporary Nigerian drawing through selected works by Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Garba Nadama. Through formal and contextual analysis, the study highlights the stylistic diversity, conceptual depth, and evolving visual language that characterise contemporary Nigerian drawing practice.

Aim And Objectives Of The Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine stylistic variations in contemporary Nigerian drawing through the analysis of selected works by five contemporary Nigerian artists. The study seeks to understand how different artists employ drawing as a medium of visual expression and how their stylistic approaches reflect broader cultural, artistic, and conceptual influences.

To achieve this aim, the study investigates the formal characteristics present in selected drawings, including the treatment of line, tonal values, composition, texture, and spatial organisation. It also explores the cultural and contextual factors that influence the artist's stylistic decisions. By examining these elements, the study aims to identify distinctive stylistic tendencies that differentiate the artists while also revealing shared thematic concerns.

Furthermore, the research seeks to compare the visual strategies employed by the selected artists in communicating narratives, social experiences, and cultural identities through drawing. Through this comparative analysis, the study aims to contribute to scholarly understanding of contemporary Nigerian drawing as an independent and evolving artistic practice.

Statement Of The Problem

Although Contemporary Nigerian Art Has Received Increasing International Recognition, Scholarly Research Has Largely Focused On Painting, Sculpture, And Installation Practises, Often Overlooking Drawing As An Autonomous Artistic Medium. In Many Art Historical Studies, Drawing Is Treated Primarily As A Preparatory Stage Rather Than As A Complete And Expressive Art Form In Its Own Right. Furthermore, While Significant Scholarship Exists On Artists Associated With The Nsukka School, Particularly Those Working With Uli Aesthetics, Relatively Few Studies Have Examined The Stylistic Diversity Of Contemporary Nigerian Drawing Across Artists And Artistic Traditions. As A Result, The Contributions Of Several Contemporary Artists Working Primarily Through Drawing Remain Under-Documented Within Academic Discourse.

This gap in scholarship limits understanding of how contemporary Nigerian artists employ drawing to explore cultural narratives, technical experimentation, and personal artistic philosophies. The absence of comparative studies examining stylistic differences among contemporary Nigerian artists further contributes to this limitation.

This study, therefore, addresses this problem by examining stylistic variations in selected drawings by Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Garba Nadama, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of drawing in contemporary Nigerian art.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on Nigerian modern and contemporary art have increasingly examined the relationship between indigenous visual traditions and modern artistic practice. Earlier studies on African art focused mainly on traditional sculpture, ritual objects, and ethnographic interpretation, with limited attention given to modern artistic developments across the continent (Vogel, 1991). Later scholarship, however, shifted towards understanding how African artists negotiate local visual culture alongside international artistic influences within changing cultural and political contexts.

One of the major contributions to this discourse is the work of Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015), who examines Nigerian modernism as a process of artistic decolonisation through which artists redefined African art by reinterpreting indigenous aesthetics. Similarly, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir (1999) argues that African artists continually transform cultural symbols within artistic environments shaped by colonial history, globalisation, and evolving identities. These studies provide an important foundation for understanding the intellectual and cultural contexts surrounding contemporary Nigerian art.

Research on the Nsukka School has been particularly influential in discussions of drawing and linear aesthetics within Nigerian art history. Scholars such as Ottenberg (2002), Rice (2018), and Oloidi (2016) identify the adaptation of Uli aesthetics as one of the defining contributions of the movement to contemporary African art. Their studies show how artists transformed indigenous linear systems into contemporary visual languages capable of addressing postcolonial identity, memory, and cultural continuity. Abiodun (2014) further argues that African visual traditions should be understood as conceptual systems rather than merely decorative forms.

Although these studies have significantly advanced scholarship on Nigerian modernism, much of the existing literature remains heavily centred on the Nsukka School and its ideological

foundations. Consequently, Nigerian drawing is often discussed primarily through Uli aesthetics, Natural Synthesis, and postcolonial hybridity. While these frameworks remain important, they do not fully account for the stylistic diversity visible within current drawing practices. Artists working outside strict Nsukka-derived traditions, particularly those employing photorealism, expressive figuration, or fragmented narrative structures, have received comparatively limited analytical attention.

Furthermore, many previous studies focus mainly on painting and mixed media practices, while drawing is frequently treated as secondary or preparatory rather than as an independent medium deserving sustained critical analysis. Even where drawing is discussed, scholars often emphasise symbolism and indigenous influence without fully examining how formal elements such as line quality, tonal organisation, compositional fragmentation, spatial compression, and stylistic distortion function conceptually within the artworks. As a result, important differences in technique, visual structure, and conceptual orientation among Nigerian artists remain underexplored.

Another unresolved issue concerns the relationship between indigenous visual systems and globally informed representational strategies. Although scholars have extensively discussed hybridity in relation to Nsukka aesthetics, less attention has been given to how artists such as Oscar Ukonu negotiate photorealism within specifically Nigerian cultural contexts, or how Nelson Edewor and Mustapha Garba Nadama employ expressive figuration and narrative fragmentation in ways that differ structurally from Nsukka linearity. Existing scholarship therefore leaves unresolved questions concerning how diverse stylistic approaches coexist and diverge within contemporary Nigerian drawing.

This study responds to these gaps by moving beyond a singular focus on Nsukka aesthetics and undertaking a comparative examination of five contemporary Nigerian artists whose works represent distinct stylistic and conceptual positions. Rather than treating drawing merely as an extension of painting traditions or as a vehicle for cultural symbolism alone, this study examines the medium as a site where artists negotiate identity, realism, abstraction, memory, narrative, and contemporary experience. Through comparative formal and contextual analysis, the research demonstrates that Nigerian drawing is shaped by multiple evolving artistic strategies informed by differing cultural experiences, conceptual interests, and technical approaches.

In this regard, the study contributes to ongoing debates within African art scholarship by expanding discussion beyond the dominant Nsukka framework and foregrounding stylistic plurality as a defining characteristic of contemporary Nigerian drawing. It also contributes to scholarship on African modernism by demonstrating how artists continue to negotiate relationships between traditional artistic forms, global visual languages, and personal experimentation within an increasingly complex visual culture.

Studies on drawing as a medium emphasise its expressive potential. Arnheim (1974) explains that line functions as a dynamic visual element capable of conveying movement, emotion, and structural relationships within an artwork, while Edwards (2012) highlights the role of observational drawing in developing visual perception and artistic sensitivity. Contemporary Nigerian artists continue to explore diverse stylistic approaches: some adopt expressive linear styles influenced by indigenous traditions, whereas others experiment with photorealism and hyperrealistic representation. Photorealistic drawing, characterised by meticulous tonal rendering

and attention to detail, demonstrates the technical precision and observational skill associated with this tradition (Meisel & Chase, 1980).

One of the defining developments in Nigerian modern art was the emergence of Natural Synthesis, a philosophy associated with the Zaria Art Society and later developed within the Nsukka School. The philosophy encouraged artists to reinterpret indigenous visual traditions within contemporary artistic practice, particularly through the adaptation of Uli-inspired linear aesthetics (Ottenberg, 2002). Scholars increasingly recognise the significance of the Nsukka School in shaping modern African visual culture through its reinterpretation of indigenous aesthetics and engagement with contemporary realities (Rice, 2018; Oloidi, 2016).

Traditionally associated with Igbo body and wall decoration, Uli provided contemporary Nsukka artists with a visual system grounded in fluid line, asymmetry, and symbolic abstraction (Ikwuemesi & Obodo, 2021). Artists such as Obiora Udechukwu adapted these principles into contemporary drawing practice, using expressive linearity to engage themes of identity, memory, and socio-political experience within postcolonial Nigeria. Ottenberg (2002) describes Udechukwu's work as a form of visual poetry in which line functions simultaneously as structure, symbol, and narrative device. Similarly, Okeke-Agulu (2015) argues that the adaptation of Uli aesthetics represents one of the most significant contributions of Nigerian artists to global modernism.

Beyond the Nsukka School, Nigerian drawing encompasses a wide range of stylistic approaches. Scholars such as Kasfir (1999) and Elizabeth Harney (2004) argue that African artists operate within complex cultural environments shaped by colonial history, globalisation, and evolving artistic identities. These conditions encourage experimentation that combines traditional motifs with modern visual strategies. Ogbechie (2008) further notes that African artists frequently employ figurative imagery to negotiate cultural identity within global artistic environments. Drawing therefore continues to function as a flexible medium for personal narration, social commentary, and cultural expression (Morgan, 2016).

The emergence of hyperrealistic drawing in African contemporary art also reflects the influence of global artistic movements. Photorealism emphasises meticulous observation and the careful reproduction of visual detail through traditional drawing techniques. Although the approach originated outside Africa, many African artists have adapted photorealistic methods to explore themes of identity, memory, and representation. Hertzmann (2020) further argues that line in drawing functions beyond mere representation, operating as a perceptual and expressive device capable of communicating form, depth, movement, and visual meaning. Taken together, these perspectives reveal contemporary Nigerian drawing as a plural and evolving field shaped by indigenous aesthetics, academic training, and global artistic exchange.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach grounded in formal and contextual analysis of selected contemporary Nigerian drawings. The qualitative method was considered most suitable because the study focuses on interpretation, visual meaning, stylistic characteristics, and the cultural contexts surrounding the artworks rather than numerical measurement or statistical evaluation. Through close observation and critical interpretation, the research examines how contemporary Nigerian artists employ drawing as a medium of expression, experimentation, and cultural communication. The study purposively selected five contemporary Nigerian artists,

Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Garba Nadama, because their works collectively represent significant stylistic directions within contemporary Nigerian drawing. The artists were selected based on several considerations, including their active engagement with drawing as a primary medium, their contribution to contemporary Nigerian visual culture, the diversity of their stylistic approaches, and the accessibility of documented artworks relevant to the study. Particular attention was given to artists whose drawings demonstrate clear differences in technique, conceptual orientation, and cultural influence, thereby enabling comparative analysis.

The selection of artworks was guided by specific criteria to maintain consistency within the study. Drawings were chosen based on their relevance to the research objectives, the visibility of stylistic features, the availability of reliable documentation, and their ability to reflect each artist's individual artistic tendencies. Preference was given to works that clearly demonstrate the artists' use of line, texture, composition, symbolism, tonal variation, and spatial organisation. In addition, the selected artworks were considered suitable because they reveal important relationships between indigenous artistic traditions, contemporary artistic experimentation, and personal visual expression.

The analytical framework guiding the interpretation combines formalist, art historical and semiotic approaches. The formalist aspect of the analysis focuses on visual elements such as line quality, composition, texture, rhythm, tonal treatment, and spatial arrangement to understand how meaning is constructed in the drawings. The art historical perspective situates the artworks within broader developments in Nigerian modernism and contemporary African art, particularly in relation to the Nsukka School, Natural Synthesis, indigenous aesthetics, and postcolonial artistic practice. Semiotic interpretation is also employed to examine the symbolic meanings embedded within motifs, figures, and visual signs appearing in the drawings, especially where indigenous visual systems such as Uli and Nsibidi influence artistic representation.

Although the study engages aspects of phenomenological interpretation through attention to visual experience and emotional response, its primary orientation remains formal and contextual rather than strictly phenomenological. The intention is not only to describe the artworks visually but also to understand how artistic decisions relate to cultural identity, historical memory, and contemporary social realities.

Comparative analysis within the study is operationalised through the systematic examination of similarities and differences across the selected drawings. The comparison focuses on recurring formal features such as linear treatment, compositional structure, textural effects, representational style, thematic focus, and cultural references. By placing the artworks side by side, the study identifies areas of convergence and divergence in the artists' stylistic approaches. This process enables evaluation of how each artist negotiates the relationships between tradition and modernity, realism and abstraction, and individual expression and collective cultural experience within contemporary Nigerian drawing practice.

Conceptual And Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on interconnected theoretical and analytical frameworks that provide a structured basis for examining stylistic variations in contemporary Nigerian drawing. To achieve conceptual clarity, the framework is organised into three related components: the theoretical framework, the analytical framework, and relevant stylistic paradigms.

1. Theoretical Framework: Natural Synthesis and Cultural Hybridity

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is the concept of Natural Synthesis, developed by Uche Okeke and associated with the Zaria Art Society in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Natural Synthesis emerged in response to colonial artistic education and encouraged Nigerian artists to integrate indigenous artistic traditions into contemporary artistic practice. Rather than rejecting modernism entirely or merely reproducing traditional forms, the philosophy proposed a creative negotiation between local cultural heritage and global artistic influences. Within contemporary Nigerian drawing, this framework remains important in understanding how artists reinterpret indigenous visual systems such as Uli and Nsibidi within modern artistic contexts.

The study also draws upon Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity. Bhabha (1994) explains that postcolonial cultural production often emerges through processes of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation between differing cultural systems. This perspective is particularly relevant to contemporary Nigerian drawing, where artists frequently combine indigenous visual traditions, academic training, contemporary media influences, and personal experiences to construct hybrid artistic identities. The selected artists demonstrate varying forms of hybridity through their negotiation of realism, abstraction, symbolism, figuration, and contemporary visual experimentation. Together, Natural Synthesis and cultural hybridity provide the theoretical basis for understanding contemporary Nigerian drawing as a dynamic field shaped by cultural continuity, artistic adaptation, and postcolonial visual negotiation.

2. Analytical Framework: Formal and Stylistic Analysis

The analytical framework guiding this study is primarily formal and stylistic analysis. This approach focuses on the close examination of visual elements within the selected drawings, including line quality, tonal variation, texture, composition, rhythm, spatial organisation, figuration, and material handling. Formal analysis enables identification of the distinctive stylistic characteristics that differentiate one artist from another while also revealing areas of visual convergence.

Stylistic analysis is particularly important because the study seeks to compare how individual artists manipulate drawing techniques to communicate cultural narratives, emotional intensity, symbolic meaning, and conceptual ideas. Following Gombrich's (1995) position that style functions as a visual language through which artists construct meaning, this study examines how formal decisions operate not merely as aesthetic choices but also as carriers of cultural and conceptual significance.

In addition to formal analysis, the study adopts a contextual interpretation to situate the artworks within broader developments in Nigerian contemporary art, African modernism, and postcolonial visual culture. This combined analytical approach allows the drawings to be understood simultaneously as visual structures and as culturally situated artistic expressions.

3. Relevant Stylistic Paradigms: Photorealism and Expressive Figuration

Two major stylistic paradigms are particularly relevant to the selected artists examined in this study: photorealism and expressive figuration.

Photorealism provides an important framework for understanding Oscar Ukonu's drawings. Emerging internationally during the late twentieth century, photorealism emphasises meticulous

observation, tonal precision, and the careful reproduction of visual detail (Meisel & Chase, 1980). Within Ukonu's work, the photorealistic technique functions not only as a technical display but also as a means of exploring psychological presence, identity, and visual immediacy.

Expressive figuration is equally significant in understanding the drawings of Nelson Edewor and Mustapha Garba Nadama, whose works prioritise gestural distortion, emotional intensity, narrative structure, and symbolic suggestion over strict naturalism. Through expressive figuration, the artists manipulate anatomical structure, spatial organisation, and line quality to communicate social experience, cultural memory, and psychological tension.

Although the selected artists employ different stylistic approaches, these paradigms collectively demonstrate the diversity of contemporary Nigerian drawing practice and reveal how artists adapt formal strategies to different conceptual, cultural, and expressive concerns.

Expanded Theoretical Discussion: Drawing As Visual Language

Drawing occupies a unique position within visual art because of its direct relationship to the movement of the hand and the immediacy of mark-making. Unlike painting or sculpture, which often involve complex processes of layering and construction, drawing allows artists to translate ideas into visual form through relatively simple materials such as graphite, charcoal, or ink. Art historians frequently describe drawing as the foundation of artistic practice. Gombrich (1995) argues that drawing plays a crucial role in developing visual perception because it requires artists to observe and interpret the world around them with careful attention to form, proportion, and spatial relationships.

Within contemporary Nigerian drawing, line functions not only as a formal element but also as a means of negotiating identity, symbolism, and visual communication. While some artists employ fluid, Uli-derived linearity to evoke cultural continuity, others prioritise realism, expressive distortion, or narrative figuration. These differences reveal the stylistic diversity that characterises contemporary Nigerian drawing practice and demonstrate how artists adapt drawing to different conceptual and cultural concerns.

Formal And Contextual Analysis Of Selected Drawings

Obiora Udechukwu

Obiora Udechukwu's drawing style is deeply rooted in the visual philosophy of the Nsukka School and the aesthetic traditions of Uli body and wall painting. His drawings are characterised by fluid calligraphic lines that flow rhythmically across the pictorial surface, creating compositions that balance abstraction and figuration. The line in Udechukwu's work functions not merely as an outline but as an expressive element that conveys emotional intensity and narrative meaning. In the selected drawing, the composition portrays a dancing figure rendered with continuous sweeping lines, creating a sense of movement and dynamic rhythm. The spatial arrangement of the figure suggests interaction and narrative tension, drawing the viewer into the visual story unfolding within the artwork. Udechukwu's use of negative space is particularly significant. Rather than filling the entire pictorial surface with detail, the artist leaves large areas of space visible. This strategy reflects the aesthetic principles of uli design, where minimalism and asymmetry play important roles in achieving visual balance.

Contextually, Udechukwu's drawings often address themes related to social justice, human suffering, cultural memory and political struggle. His experiences during the Nigerian Civil War significantly influenced his artistic development, leading him to explore themes of displacement,

resilience, and collective memory. The integration of indigenous visual traditions within modern artistic frameworks demonstrates Udechukwu's commitment to the philosophy of Natural Synthesis.



Fig.1: Title: Dancer. Artist: Obiora Udechukwu. Size: 22.8 x 16.7cm, Year 1973. Medium: Pen and Ink on Paper: Picture credit: Ko Artspace, 2024.

Ben Onuorah Osondu

Osondu's drawings are meticulous linear meditations deeply rooted in Igbo cultural heritage. His practice foregrounds the expressive potential of line, which he deploys with remarkable precision and rhythmic sensitivity to construct visually compelling compositions. Drawing inspiration from the curvilinear elegance of traditional Uli body and wall painting, as well as the symbolic graphic language of Nsibidi, Osondu synthesises indigenous visual systems with contemporary artistic experimentation. The resulting works are characterised by intricate networks of lines, stylised figurative forms, and ornamental motifs that create a dynamic interplay between abstraction and representation. Rather than pursuing photorealistic representation, Osondu privileges the symbolic and expressive capacities of drawing, allowing line to function as both a structural and narrative device.

Within his compositions, line operates not merely as contour but as a carrier of meaning and cultural memory. The dense layering of patterns, textures, and flowing contours produces surfaces that appear simultaneously decorative and conceptual. These formal qualities evoke the aesthetic principles associated with the Nsukka School, particularly the emphasis on reinterpretation of indigenous design systems within contemporary visual practice (Okeke, 1982; Oloidi, 2016). At the same time, Osondu's work demonstrates a highly personal visual language, one that extends beyond direct quotation of traditional motifs to explore themes of beauty,

spirituality, imagination, and communal identity. His drawings often present figures and symbolic elements arranged in complex spatial configurations that invite prolonged visual engagement, encouraging viewers to decode the layered meanings embedded within the composition.



Fig. 2: Title: Umu Ada; Artist: Ben Onuorah Osondu:
Standard-size: Year: 2018; medium: Pen and Ink on
Paper: Picture credit: Artsy, 2025.

Consequently, each drawing functions as a visual archive of cultural knowledge and lived experience. Through his meticulous manipulation of line and pattern, Osondu constructs images that bridge the past and present, reinforcing the continuity of Igbo visual heritage while situating it within contemporary artistic discourse. His work, therefore, contributes to broader conversations within Nigerian modernism concerning the reinterpretation of indigenous aesthetics in contemporary art practice (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Kasfir, 1999). By transforming traditional graphic forms into complex contemporary drawings, Osondu affirms the enduring vitality of indigenous visual languages and demonstrates how drawing can operate simultaneously as an aesthetic exploration, a cultural statement, and a vehicle for philosophical reflection.

Nelson Edewor

Nelson Edewor's drawings reveal a strong commitment to expressive figuration and narrative representation. Unlike the highly stylised linear aesthetics associated with the Nsukka School or the technical photorealism evident in Oscar Ukonu's drawings, Edewor's work occupies a middle ground where expressive line, tonal modelling, and compositional dynamism combine to produce visually compelling narratives. His drawings often explore themes of African identity, social relationships, and everyday experiences in Nigerian society. In the selected drawing analysed in this study, Edewor presents a figurative composition in which human forms dominate the pictorial space. The figures are rendered through confident, gestural lines that suggest movement and emotional intensity. Rather than relying on smooth tonal transitions to achieve realism, the artist employs varied line weights and directional strokes to define form and volume.

This technique creates a lively surface texture that enhances the expressive qualities of the drawing.



Fig. 3: Title: The Boy is Now Man; Artist: Nelson Edewor: Standard-size Year: 2003; Medium: Charcoal pencil on Paper: Picture credit: Provided directly by the artist (personal communication), 2024.

The composition demonstrates a careful balance between structural organisation and spontaneous mark-making. The figure within the pictorial space creates visual rhythm, guiding the viewer's eye across the composition. Overlapping forms generate spatial depth, while areas of tonal shading provide contrast and emphasise particular focal points within the image.

Another significant aspect of Edewor's drawing practice is his deliberate manipulation of anatomical structure and proportional balance. Rather than pursuing the fluid calligraphic linearity associated with the Nsukka tradition, Edewor constructs figures through angular fragmentation, gestural distortion, and compressed spatial organisation. These structural tensions create psychological intensity within the composition and shift attention away from naturalistic representation toward emotional and symbolic expression. The exaggerated limbs, fragmented bodily relationships, and directional mark-making serve as conceptual visual metaphors for instability, social pressure, and the complexities of contemporary African experience. Unlike Nsukka's linearity, which often privileges rhythmic continuity and symbolic elegance, Edewor's figuration is more confrontational and structurally dense, producing compositions that emphasise tension, immediacy, and emotional weight. His drawings, therefore, occupy an important position between abstraction and figuration, where visual distortion becomes both an aesthetic strategy and a conceptual tool for negotiating memory, identity, and social reality.

Edewor's compositional structure also differs significantly from the spatial restraint commonly associated with Uli-derived aesthetics. Instead of allowing empty space to function as a balancing element, he compresses forms within the pictorial surface, creating crowded visual environments that intensify narrative urgency. This density contributes to the emotional atmosphere of the drawings and reinforces their socially engaged character. The compositions

often resist visual calmness, suggesting a deliberate rejection of aesthetic detachment in favour of experiential immediacy and human vulnerability.

Contextually, Edewor's drawings can be understood within the broader tradition of socially engaged African art. Many contemporary Nigerian artists employ figurative imagery to comment on social realities such as migration, community life, cultural transformation, and political struggle. Through his expressive drawing style, Edewor participates in this tradition by using visual storytelling to reflect aspects of contemporary African experience.

The drawing also demonstrates the continued relevance of figurative representation in contemporary Nigerian art. While abstraction and conceptual art have gained prominence in global art discourse, many African artists maintain a strong commitment to figurative imagery because of its communicative power and accessibility to diverse audiences.

Overall, Nelson Edewor's drawing style represents an important strand in contemporary Nigerian drawing practice. His works combine expressive linearity, narrative figuration, and thematic engagement with social realities, thereby contributing to the stylistic diversity that characterises contemporary Nigerian drawing.

Oscar Ukonu



Fig. 4. Title: Lady With The Braid. Artist: Oscar Ukonu. Size: 18 x24inches, Year: 2020; Medium: Ink on matte paper: Picture credit: Corey Helford Gallery, 2024.

Oscar Ukonu's drawings represent one of the most technically sophisticated developments in contemporary Nigerian drawing. Known for his hyperrealistic ballpoint pen works, Ukonu has gained international recognition for drawings that closely resemble high-resolution photographs. His approach demonstrates how drawing can achieve extraordinary levels of visual accuracy while still retaining the tactile and expressive qualities of hand-rendered imagery. In the drawing selected for this study, Oscar Ukonu presents a portrait rendered with remarkable precision and

attention to detail. The subject's facial features are carefully constructed through delicate tonal gradations created with a ballpoint pen. Rather than relying primarily on contour lines, the artist builds the form through subtle transitions between light and shadow. This method creates a convincing illusion of three-dimensionality, allowing the figure to appear almost sculptural within the pictorial space.

One of the most striking aspects of Oscar Ukonu's drawing technique is his mastery of tonal value. Through the careful layering of ballpoint pen, he achieves a wide range of tonal variations, from deep shadows to luminous highlights. These tonal contrasts are essential for creating the illusion of depth and realism that characterises photorealistic drawing. The rendering of textures in the drawing further demonstrates Oscar Ukonu's technical skill. The artist captures minute details such as skin pores, hair strands, and fabric folds with exceptional accuracy. Each texture is differentiated through subtle variations in mark-making, allowing the viewer to perceive the tactile qualities of the depicted surfaces.

Compositionally, Oscar Ukonu's drawings often focus on a single subject, emphasising psychological presence and emotional intensity. The close framing of the figure draws the viewer's attention to the subject's facial expression, encouraging a deeper engagement with the portrayed individual. In this way, Oscar Ukonu's drawings function not only as technical demonstrations of realism but also as powerful studies of human identity and emotion. The emergence of photorealistic drawing in contemporary Nigerian art reflects broader global developments in representational art. Photorealism, which originated in the United States during the late twentieth century, emphasises the meticulous reproduction of photographic imagery through traditional artistic media (Meisel & Chase, 1980). By adopting and adapting this approach, Ukonu demonstrates how Nigerian artists participate in international artistic dialogues while maintaining their own distinctive perspectives. Through his extraordinary technical mastery and commitment to representational drawing, Oscar Ukonu expands the possibilities of contemporary Nigerian drawing. His works illustrate that drawing can rival photography in its capacity for visual realism while simultaneously preserving the expressive intimacy associated with hand-drawn imagery.

Mustapha Garba Nadama

Mustapha Garba Nadama's drawings demonstrate a narrative approach to contemporary Nigerian drawing, emphasising cultural storytelling and social observation. His works frequently depict scenes of everyday life, reflecting the rhythms, relationships, and cultural practices that shape human experience within Nigerian society. In the selected drawing analysed in this study, Garba presents a drawing derived from the Hausa royal court motifs, like the turban of the Zaria and Kano emirates, with two rabbit-ear-like protrusions visible. The drawing is constructed primarily through confident contour lines that define the shapes of the figures and surrounding objects. These lines are occasionally reinforced with areas of tonal shading, which help to establish depth and spatial relationships within the composition.

Unlike the highly controlled realism associated with Oscar Ukonu, Mustapha Nadama adopts a stylised visual language grounded in expressive simplification and structural reduction. His figures are intentionally fragmented into essential forms and emphatic contours, allowing line to function less as a descriptive device and more as a carrier of rhythm, movement, and emotional immediacy. This stylisation reflects an ideological preference for communicative directness over optical realism. Rather than attempting to reproduce physical appearances with photographic

accuracy, Nadama prioritises symbolic suggestion, narrative accessibility, and cultural atmosphere. The resulting compositions retain a raw expressive quality that reinforces the oral and performative dimensions often embedded within African visual traditions.



Fig. 5: Title: Sarki: Artist: Mustapha Garba Nadama: Size:99 x 27 cm: Year:2020: Medium:Charcoal.
Picture credit: Exhibition Catalogue on Conceptual Drawings by Mustapha Garba Nadama, 2024

The compositional fragmentation visible in Nadama's drawings functions conceptually as a strategy for constructing layered cultural narratives rather than unified illusionistic space. Figures, motifs, and directional lines are arranged in shifting spatial relationships that encourage the viewer to move through the composition gradually, almost as if reading a visual narrative. This fragmented organisation resists the stability commonly associated with academic realism and instead foregrounds the fluidity of memory, performance, and communal experience. Through this approach, Nadama transforms drawing into a participatory visual field where meaning emerges through movement, association, and symbolic interaction rather than through strict representational coherence. Overlapping forms and directional lines establish a dynamic relationship between foreground and background elements.

Thematically, Nadama's drawings often explore cultural traditions, social interactions, and communal activities. By depicting scenes of everyday life, the artist highlights aspects of Nigerian culture that might otherwise remain undocumented within visual art.

From a contextual perspective, Nadama's work aligns with broader traditions of narrative art within African visual culture. Historically, African artists have used visual imagery to record events, communicate moral lessons, and preserve cultural memory (Vogel, 1991). Garba's drawings continue this tradition by transforming everyday experiences into compelling visual narratives.

Aesthetically, Nadama's drawings reflect a position that values expressive spontaneity and cultural immediacy over technical polish. The rough textures, assertive contours, and shifting

spatial structures suggest an artistic philosophy rooted in experiential narration rather than formal perfection. His stylisation therefore operates not merely as a visual preference but as a conceptual rejection of rigid naturalism. In this regard, Nadama's work aligns more closely with expressive African modernist tendencies that privilege cultural resonance, performative energy, and social communication over illusionistic accuracy.

Through his emphasis on storytelling and cultural observation, Nadama Garba contributes to the diversity of contemporary Nigerian drawing. His works demonstrate how drawing can function as a medium for documenting social realities while simultaneously celebrating the richness of everyday life.

Artist	Stylistic Approach	Key Formal Features	Concept / Focus	Media / Technique	Cultural Influence
Obiora Udechukwu	Hybrid line-based	Delicate, rhythmic lines; layered	Socio-political, cultural memory	Ink, pen, mixed media	Uli motifs; Nsukka philosophy
Ben Onuorah Osondu	Narrative abstraction	Stylised figures; dynamic rhythm	Personal & communal narratives	Pen, and ink	Nsukka storytelling
Nelson Edewor	Figurative abstraction	Figurative + abstract; textured	Historical reflection, identity	Pencil, ink, mixed media	Local-modern synthesis
Oscar Ukonu	Photorealism	Highly detailed, precise lines	Cross-cultural dialogue	Ballpoint pen	Technical virtuosity; global context
Mustapha Nadama Garba	Expressive line	Bold, dynamic, energetic	Emotional intensity; social commentary	Charcoal, Pencil, Chalk	Reinterpreted motifs; expressive

Table 1. Comparative analysis of selected contemporary Nigerian artists

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that contemporary Nigerian drawing is far more than a technical exercise; it is a deeply reflective and culturally grounded artistic practice. The selected artists, Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Garba Nadama, approach drawing from different stylistic and conceptual positions, yet their works collectively demonstrate how contemporary Nigerian artists continue to engage with cultural heritage while exploring new visual possibilities.

Contemporary Nigerian Drawings Comparative Interpretation

The comparative matrix demonstrates that contemporary Nigerian drawing cannot be reduced to a unified stylistic category. Although all five artists employ drawing as a medium of cultural and conceptual expression, their approaches differ significantly in formal structure, visual language, and ideological orientation. Udechukwu and Osondu maintain stronger connections to Nsukka-derived linear aesthetics, yet their applications of line differ considerably: Udechukwu employs restrained rhythmic linearity to construct reflective socio-political narratives, whereas Osondu uses dense ornamental patterning to create symbolic and culturally layered compositions.

Edewor departs from the lyrical continuity associated with Nsukka linearity by introducing gestural distortion and compressed figuration that intensify emotional and psychological tension within the pictorial space. Ukonu, in contrast, minimises expressive line almost entirely, relying instead on tonal modelling and meticulous realism to establish psychological depth and visual immediacy. Nadama Garba adopts a more expressive and narratively fragmented approach in which bold contours and shifting spatial arrangements reinforce storytelling, communal memory, and performative energy.

Artist	Dominant Style	Use of Line	Cultural Reference	Conceptual Orientation	Spatial Strategy
Obiora Udechukwu	Hybrid linear abstraction	Fluid, rhythmic, calligraphic line derived from Uli aesthetics	Igbo Uli tradition; Nsukka philosophy; postcolonial experience	Socio-political reflection, cultural memory, identity, migration	Open spatial arrangement with controlled negative space and asymmetrical balance
Ben Onuorah Osondu	Narrative abstraction	Dense patterned lines, ornamental contours, symbolic linear repetition	Uli and Nsibidi symbolism; Igbo cultural motifs	Cultural continuity, spirituality, communal identity, visual storytelling	Layered compositions with interconnected motifs and compressed decorative surfaces
Nelson Edewor	Expressive figurative abstraction	Gestural, fragmented, and structurally distorted line	Contemporary African social experience; local-modern synthesis	Emotional intensity, social tension, identity, historical reflection	Compressed and dynamic spatial organisation emphasising tension and movement
Oscar Ukonu	Photorealism / Hyperrealism	Minimal visible contour; tonal modulation replaces expressive line	Contemporary African identity within global visual culture	Psychological presence, realism, representation, technical virtuosity	Illusionistic depth with concentrated focus on singular figures and tonal realism
Mustapha Garba Nadama	Expressive narrative stylisation	Bold, simplified, energetic contour lines	Hausa cultural motifs; communal and performative traditions	Storytelling, cultural immediacy, social observation	Fragmented and shifting spatial relationships encouraging narrative movement

Table 2. Comparative Matrix of Stylistic and Conceptual Approaches in Selected

Taken together, these variations reveal how contemporary Nigerian artists adapt drawing to different cultural, conceptual, and aesthetic concerns. The matrix, therefore, strengthens the comparative framework of the study by clarifying how line, spatial organisation, symbolism, and stylistic orientation operate differently across the selected artists while still contributing to broader conversations within Nigerian contemporary art. Although all five artists engage contemporary

Nigerian realities through drawing, their stylistic approaches differ significantly in both technique and conceptual orientation. Udechukwu and Osondu rely heavily on rhythmic linear organisation and symbolic abstraction rooted in Nsukka aesthetics, whereas Ukonu prioritises optical realism and tonal precision to achieve psychological depth and visual immediacy. Edewor and Mustapha Nadama occupy an intermediate position, combining figurative representation with expressive distortion and narrative structure. These distinctions demonstrate that contemporary Nigerian drawing is not defined by a single stylistic tradition but by multiple artistic strategies shaped by cultural experience, material experimentation, and individual artistic philosophy.

The formal differences among the artists become especially visible in their treatment of line, space, and composition. Udechukwu's drawings employ restrained but rhythmically organised lines that evoke reflective and socio-political narratives, while Osondu's densely patterned surfaces create layered symbolic compositions rooted in cultural memory. In contrast, Ukonu minimises visible lines in favour of tonal modelling and photorealistic illusion, thereby shifting emphasis from symbolic abstraction to psychological presence and technical realism.

In contrast, Oscar Ukonu's photorealistic approach exemplifies a contemporary internationalism, combining technical mastery with narrative subtlety, thereby expanding the boundaries of Nigerian drawing beyond hybridised indigenous forms into global visual dialogues (Meisel & Chase, 1980; Morgan, 2016). This underscores a critical distinction: while Nsukka-inspired artists such as Udechukwu and Osondu employ hybridised, culturally anchored line work, Ukonu demonstrates how photorealism can negotiate African subject matter in a contemporary global context.

Nelson Edewor and Mustapha Nadama further illustrate stylistic diversity. Edewor's compositions synthesise visual abstraction with figurative elements, creating a dialogue between personal experience, historical reflection, and communal identity. His work highlights how contemporary Nigerian drawing can mediate between abstraction and representation to communicate complex cultural narratives (Okeke, 1982; Beier, 1960). Nadama Garba, on the other hand, employs bold lines, texture, and dynamic spatial arrangements to convey immediacy and emotional intensity, reflecting a distinctly expressive approach that complements the analytical tendencies of the other artists.

The comparative analysis carried out in this study shows that stylistic differences in contemporary Nigerian drawing extend beyond visual appearance alone. The variations observed in the selected works are closely connected to the artists' intellectual positions, cultural experiences, and individual artistic concerns. Among the Nsukka-oriented artists, there is a noticeable commitment to experimentation, particularly in the reinterpretation of indigenous visual traditions and the adaptation of local symbols to contemporary realities (Okoro & Agujiobi-Odoh, 2024; Adedokun & Osiboye, 2024). Their drawings reveal an awareness of social and political conditions while still maintaining strong links with inherited artistic systems.

In contrast, the highly detailed photorealistic approach associated with Oscar Ukonu reflects a different artistic direction. His technical precision and close attention to detail demonstrate engagement with broader global developments in contemporary art, yet the works remain rooted in experiences and narratives that are culturally familiar. These contrasts among the artists highlight the richness and diversity that define contemporary Nigerian drawing today. Rather than operating within a fixed stylistic tradition, the artists adopt flexible and context-driven approaches that respond to their environments, materials, and conceptual interests (Ikwuemesi & Obodo, 2021; Rice, 2018).

Finally, this study highlights the pluralism of technique and expression within contemporary Nigerian drawing. While some artists, like Udechukwu and Osondu, foreground culturally grounded line work, others, such as Ukonu, leverage photorealism to achieve cross-cultural dialogue. Edewor and Garba occupy an intermediate position, balancing figurative representation, abstraction, and expressive intensity. Together, these approaches demonstrate that Nigerian drawing cannot be reduced to a singular style; rather, it represents a spectrum of creative possibilities, where formal decisions are inseparable from conceptual and cultural concerns (Beier, 1960; Edwards, 2012; Willett, 2002).

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the stylistic variations in contemporary Nigerian drawing through the works of Obiora Udechukwu, Ben Onuorah Osondu, Nelson Edewor, Oscar Ukonu, and Mustapha Nadama. The study demonstrates that contemporary Nigerian drawing encompasses multiple stylistic directions shaped by differing artistic philosophies, technical approaches, and cultural experiences. While Udechukwu and Osondu employ line-based abstraction associated with Nsukka aesthetics, Ukonu adopts photorealistic representation grounded in tonal precision and observational detail. Edewor and Nadama combine elements of abstraction, figuration, and expressive narrative, thereby occupying transitional positions within contemporary Nigerian drawing practice.

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study reveals that formal elements such as line quality, spatial arrangement, rhythm, and texture are closely tied to the cultural ideas and conceptual intentions behind the drawings. In the works of the five selected artists, these visual elements do more than organise forms within a composition; they serve as important means through which personal experiences, cultural memories, and social realities are communicated. The study shows that drawing, within the context of contemporary Nigerian art, serves as a flexible medium through which artists negotiate relationships among tradition and modernity, individual expression and collective experience, and local identity and broader global artistic influences.

The findings also support earlier discussions in African modernist scholarship, which argue that contemporary African art continues to evolve through experimentation, adaptation, and cultural reflection (Fosu, 1986; Morgan, 2016; Okoro & Agujiobi-Odoh, 2024). Across the selected drawings, there is clear evidence that Nigerian artists are not confined to inherited conventions; rather, they continually reinterpret materials, forms, and visual languages in ways that remain relevant to contemporary realities.

Ultimately, this study highlights the continuing importance of drawing within contemporary Nigerian and African art practice. Beyond its formal qualities, drawing emerges as a significant medium for critical thinking, visual storytelling, and cultural expression, allowing artists to engage meaningfully with both their immediate environments and broader artistic conversations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **For Artists:** Contemporary Nigerian artists should continue to explore the dynamic interplay between indigenous visual systems and global artistic practices, using drawing as a tool for both personal expression and socio-cultural commentary. Experimentation with hybrid techniques, photorealism, and abstraction can further expand the expressive potential of the medium.

2. **For Art Educators:** Curricula in art schools, particularly within Nigeria, should emphasise the study of indigenous visual traditions such as Uli alongside contemporary methodologies. Encouraging students to critically engage with cultural heritage while exploring new forms and techniques will cultivate innovative approaches in drawing practice.
3. **For Researchers and Scholars:** Further research should examine emerging Nigerian artists and their contributions to contemporary drawing, with a focus on underrepresented regions and media. Comparative studies across African countries could provide deeper insights into transnational artistic dialogues and the evolution of stylistic practices.
4. **For Cultural Institutions and Galleries:** Exhibitions and collections should actively showcase the diversity of contemporary Nigerian drawing, highlighting both hybridised line work and photorealistic approaches. Curatorial practices that contextualise artworks within cultural, social, and historical frameworks will enhance public understanding and appreciation.
5. **For Policy Makers:** Support for arts funding and documentation of contemporary drawing practices is essential to preserve and promote Nigeria's rich visual heritage. Policies that recognise drawing as a critical medium within national cultural narratives can strengthen the visibility and sustainability of artistic practice.

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