

# Lines as Language: A Conceptual Approach to the Samaru Landscape in Contemporary Painting

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the role of line as a conceptual language in interpreting the Samaru landscape through painting. It explores the progression from realism to abstraction and conceptual reassembly, positioning line not merely as a structural device but as a medium of cultural and philosophical expression. Using a practice-based methodology, the research incorporates painting, drawing, and mixed-media explorations as both process and outcome. The objectives were to render the Samaru landscape in realistic depictions at different times of the day, abstract its key elements through line, reassemble them into conceptual compositions, and experiment with three-dimensional interpretations. The findings demonstrate that line operates as a visual language that transcends likeness, symbolising rhythm, communication, and identity. Within this framework, the Samaru landscape becomes both subject and catalyst for broader artistic exploration. The study situates itself in relation to Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Conceptual Art while contributing to contemporary African art by grounding global approaches in local contexts. It concludes that line serves as a bridge between realism and abstraction, tradition and innovation, locality and universality. Further cross-disciplinary exploration of line is recommended to strengthen dialogue between African art and global visual culture.*

**Keywords:** lines, Samaru landscape, realism, abstraction, conceptual painting, African art

## Introduction

Line is one of the most fundamental elements of art, serving historically as a means of structuring space, guiding the eye, and defining form. From the earliest cave drawings to the modern digital canvas, line has been indispensable in shaping human visual culture. During the Renaissance, line functioned as a scientific and mathematical device that guided artists in constructing perspective, proportion, and anatomy (Panofsky, 1991). In contrast, modernist movements radically redefined the line's function, positioning it as a tool for expression, philosophy, and conceptual engagement. For instance, Mondrian used vertical and horizontal lines to distill form into a universal harmony, while Van Gogh transformed line into an emotional force through expressive strokes (Silverman, 2000).

The Samaru landscape in Northern Nigeria provides fertile ground for interrogating this potential. A site of daily human interaction, commerce, and cultural exchange, Samaru market and its environs are visually rich with structures, rhythms, and atmospheres that invite reinterpretation. The forms of stalls, roads, electric poles, trees, and human activities create layered visual vocabularies that resonate with both lived experience and artistic imagination. Capturing these forms in painting provides an opportunity to engage in dialogue between local landscapes and global discourses of art.

In the Nigerian context, landscape painting has traditionally been viewed through either realist or decorative lenses. Pioneering modern Nigerian artists such as Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994) emphasised cultural identity through figural and symbolic representation, while Uche Okeke (1913-2016) and the Nsukka Group drew inspiration from indigenous motifs and Uli line systems to redefine modernism in an African context ( Okeke-Agulu, 2015). However, the idea of line as a conceptual and philosophical medium in African landscape painting remains under-explored.

This study, therefore, positions Samaru not only as a physical environment but also as a philosophical space where histories of trade, mobility, and exchange converge. By approaching line as a language, the research endeavours to interrogate, abstract, and reassemble the Samaru landscape, thereby expanding its meaning within both local and global artistic frameworks.

### **Problem Statement**

While African art history has emphasised motifs, patterns, and symbolism in traditional forms, limited scholarship exists on how line can serve as a conceptual tool in contemporary African painting. Much research highlights descriptive or decorative functions of line, rather than its potential as a philosophical and cultural language (Basu & Agbo, 2024). Consequently, the Samaru landscape offers a unique case for investigating how lines can shift from descriptive representation to conceptual expression, thereby contributing to broader discourses on contemporary African art.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the study are to;

1. identify and render key elements of the Samaru landscape in realistic depictions across different times of the day.
2. abstract landscape forms by reducing them to lines and simplified structures.
3. reassemble abstracted forms into conceptual compositions that transcends representation.
4. explore three-dimensional, mixed-media experiments that expands the role of line beyond the canvas.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study contributes to contemporary African art discourse by foregrounding the conceptual use of line in reimagining local landscapes. By situating Samaru within global artistic frameworks such as Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Conceptual Art, it demonstrates how local contexts can generate new aesthetic vocabularies. It also highlights the role of practice-based research as a methodology that not only produces artworks but also develops theoretical insights Visonà, (2022).

In addition, the research provides a bridge between indigenous African traditions of line use such as Uli, Nsibidi, and Adinkra and contemporary visual languages. This reinforces the relevance of local aesthetics in global contexts, affirming African contributions to on-going debates about abstraction, conceptualism, and the ontology of art.

## **Literature Review**

The review of literature is tailored along the following subheadings: Historical use of line in painting, Line in post-impressionism and abstraction, Conceptual art and African aesthetics, and African modernism and landscape.

### **Historical Use of Line in Painting**

In classical antiquity and Renaissance Europe, line was central to visual representation. Linear perspective codified by Renaissance thinkers created a rational, measurable way to represent space (Panofsky, 1991). Artists like Leonardo da Vinci demonstrated how line could map both the natural world and the human body, merging observation with geometry. His sketches, for example, reveal line as analytical and poetic, capable of capturing motion, structure, and spirit.

The 19th century disrupted this reliance on rigid linearity. Impressionist painters, such as Claude Monet, de-emphasised line in favour of colour and atmosphere, prioritising light and mood over structural clarity (House, 1986). Yet, line never disappeared; instead, it evolved. Line was reinterpreted as rhythm, movement, and force rather than as boundary alone.

### **Line in Post-Impressionism and Abstraction**

Post-Impressionist artists revisited the expressive and structural potential of line. Van Gogh employed swirling, directional strokes to communicate turbulence and emotion (Silverman, 2000). Cézanne's treatment of line dissolved traditional contours, giving way to color modulations that structured form. Mondrian later pushed this further by reducing representation into orthogonal lines and geometric planes, pursuing what he described as "pure reality" through abstraction (Blotkamp, 1994).

This Universalist approach to line influenced modernist abstraction across Europe and America, shaping the works of Kandinsky, Malevich, and the Bauhaus. However, the question of whether such universality could integrate non-Western perspectives remained open. African artists entering the discourse of modernism often negotiated between inherited traditions of linear motifs and imported modernist languages.

### **Conceptual Art and African Aesthetics**

The rise of Conceptual Art in the 1960s repositioned line as a vehicle for thought rather than representation Lippard, (1973). Drawing became less about mimicking reality and more about manifesting an idea. This aligns with African traditions where line and motif have long been communicative, symbolic, and performative. This example is seen in the Adinkra symbols of Ghana, where graphic signs represent proverbs and philosophies (Ross, 1998). The Nsibidi writing systems of southeastern Nigeria, which use abstracted symbols as codes of communication and authority (Asogwa, 2021). The Uli body and mural painting traditions, where fluid lines expressed femininity, ritual, and community values (Willis, 1987; Odoh, 2019).

Contemporary African artists extend these traditions. Victor Ekpuk, for instance, transforms Nsibidi scripts into expansive paintings and drawings that function simultaneously as cultural

memory and global visual language (Sytsma, 2021). Similarly, El Anatsui (b.1944) employs line through fragmented bottle tops and fabric-like installations, where repetition and rhythm evoke both textile traditions and global consumerism. Thus, African artists demonstrate that line is not simply aesthetic but communicative, political, and spiritual. This provides an important foundation for interpreting the Samaru landscape not as a static scene but as a living text.

### **African Modernism and Landscape**

While Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Conceptual Art provide valuable global frameworks, the African context requires particular attention. Nigerian and West African modernists from the mid-twentieth century played a crucial role in reinterpreting line and abstraction. Ben Enwonwu, (1917-1994) for instance, developed a modernist idiom that merged figural representation with rhythmic linear stylisation, demonstrating that African art could inhabit both modern and traditional spaces (Okeke-Agulu, 2015). His depictions of dancers and landscapes foregrounded motion and spiritual vitality through line, anticipating later explorations of line as a cultural signifier.

The Zaria Art Society of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly Uche Okeke, (1933-2016) advanced the philosophy of “Natural Synthesis,” which called for blending Western techniques with indigenous African visual traditions such as the Uli. Okeke’s line drawings distilled form into fluid, symbolic marks, transforming indigenous motifs into a modernist vocabulary. Similarly, Yusuf Grillo (1934-2021) introduced geometric abstraction and stained-glass-like colour systems, where linear divisions structured the canvas as both design and philosophy. These precedents illustrate that the conceptual use of line in African modernism has historical roots, even if under-theorised in relation to landscape painting.

Furthermore, artists like Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1932) employed line in printmaking and relief to embed narrative, myth, and cosmology into visual forms. His experiments with plastocast techniques emphasised repetition and incised line, connecting material innovation with storytelling. This resonates with the current study’s use of rods and fabric to reimagine Samaru’s visual vocabulary. Likewise, El Anatsui transformed discarded materials into monumental wall hangings, where linear rhythms evoke textiles, trade, and postcolonial economies (Visonà, 2022).

The literature also highlights on going debates about landscape in African art. Unlike European traditions that often treat landscape as aesthetic scenery, African contexts position landscape as socially and spiritually charged. Scholars argue that African landscape depictions are inseparable from histories of colonialism, urbanisation, and cultural identity Basu & Agbo, (2024). The Samaru market, therefore, is not merely a subject but a site where memory, labour, and community intersect a living archive translated into painting through the language of line.

Conceptual art discourse further illuminates this project. African diaspora artists, including Julie Mehretu, (b.1970) employ dense linear systems that evoke urban maps, migration, and layered histories. Mehretu’s abstract cartographies parallel the way the Samaru works condense market forms into rhythmic line fields. In addition, South African artist William Kentridge (b.1955) has shown how drawing, erasure, and line animation embody memory, trauma, and historical continuity. These examples situate the Samaru project in dialogue with broader African and global practices where line exceeds representation and becomes metaphor, critique, and philosophy. By weaving these African modernist and diaspora practices into the literature, it becomes clear that

line operates simultaneously as material, sign, and idea. This positions the present study not as isolated experimentation but as a continuation and expansion of a lineage that redefines African modernism within global conceptual frameworks.

## Conceptual Framework

The study draws on three key frameworks; Impressionism where capturing atmosphere and mood in realist depictions of landscape. Post-Impressionism/Abstraction allows for the breaking down forms into lines, planes, and simplified structures. Conceptual Art, privileging the idea of line as cultural language, philosophy, and communicative tool.

This framework is further informed by Ingold's (2016) reflections on the cultural significance of lines and Sullivan's (2010) articulation of art practice as a form of research. In addition, postcolonial discourse (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2022) provides critical grounding for situating local landscapes within global conversations.

## Methodology

The study adopts a practice-based research methodology, combining painting, drawing, and mixed-media exploration. The process was structured in four stages:

1. Realistic Depictions; capturing Samaru scenes at different times of day (e.g., Kasuwan Jumma).
2. Abstraction; reducing landscape forms into vertical and horizontal lines (Break of Elements I).
3. Conceptual Reassembly; recombining forms into symbolic compositions (Break of Elements II).
4. Multi-Dimensional Explorations; extending line into space through rods, wires, and fabrics, creating collapsible installations (Time Change).

## Stage 1: Realistic Depictions

This stage, represents the realistic presentation of the Samaru village. Capturing the interplay of light, colour, and atmosphere across different times of day. Morning scenes are painted with cooler tones, suggesting freshness and clarity, while afternoon works depicted density and activity, while evening scenes conveyed closure and fading light.

These works demonstrated how local landscapes could be positioned within Impressionist modes of observation. Yet, they also moved beyond European precedents by foregrounding African urban rhythms: the market stalls, electric poles, and bustling crowds that define Samaru. Realism here was not an end in itself but a point of departure for abstraction.

“Kasuwan Jumma” Plate I, presents a vivid depiction of a bustling market, situated in Samaru, Zaria. At first glance, the viewer is drawn into the broad, dusty street that cuts through the centre of the composition, framed on either side by makeshift stalls, fabric displays, and low-rise buildings. Figures populate the scene in various positions, rendered in simplified strokes that emphasise collective activity over individual detail. The cart in the foreground, with its angular

structure and bright canopy, immediately commands attention, symbolising both the mobility and impermanence that characterise much of urban street commerce in Northern Nigeria.



Plate I: Daniel Saleh Title: Kasuwan Jumma (Friday Market), Media: Mixed

The researcher employs a warm, earthy palette dominated by ochres, soft browns, and muted pinks to evoke the dry savannah atmosphere. Strong directional lines lead the eye towards the vanishing point, where a single tree rises amidst the background of clustered figures and buildings. This tree, central to the spatial arrangement, serves both as a compositional anchor and as a metaphorical reminder of continuity and rootedness within an environment of constant change. The brushwork is loose and gestural, privileging rhythm and atmosphere over precise detail, thereby transforming the market into a dynamic field of movement and energy.

The work functions as more than a simple record of daily activity. Markets are not only economic hubs but also cultural spaces where social identity, tradition, and modernity converge. By situating the viewer in the midst of Samaru's urban environment, the painting highlights the vibrancy of communal life and the resilience of informal economies that sustain local populations. The presence of clothing stalls, roadside vendors, and groups of people in conversation evokes a sense of collective participation, aligning with African philosophies of communalism.

Kasuwan Jumma resonates with global traditions of market imagery found in Dutch genre scenes or French Impressionist urban views, yet it reinterprets them within a distinctly Nigerian context. It also recalls, as mentioned earlier, the legacy of Nigerian modernists such as Ben Enwonwu (1917-1994) and Yusuf Grillo (1934-2021), who drew upon indigenous subjects to articulate cultural identity within contemporary art discourse. The expressive brushwork and abstraction of detail connect the painting to post-Impressionist strategies, yet its cultural grounding situates it firmly within African modernist thought. Furthermore, it may be read as both a realistic document and a conceptual landscape. While it faithfully represents a familiar Nigerian urban setting, its abstraction of form and rhythm elevates the scene into a symbolic reflection on commerce, community, and cultural memory. The cart in the foreground suggests transience and mobility, while the road itself becomes a liminal corridor between tradition and modernity. In this way, the painting transcends description to become a philosophical meditation on place and identity.



Plate II: Artist: Daniel Saleh Title: Break of Element I, Media: Mixed Media, Year: 2024

## Stage 2: Abstraction through Lines

Abstraction through lines constitutes the second phase of the paper, introducing the utilisation of lines to establish a fragmented grid of intersecting lines that divide the composition into angular segments, thereby generating a rhythm of planes and facets. While the buildings, roofs, and open spaces remain discernible, they have been refracted through a geometric lens that prioritises structure and form over naturalistic accuracy. Consequently, what emerges is not a literal depiction of place but a conceptual interpretation of architectural market space.

Plate II, titled “Break of Element I” is the fragmentation of Samaru landscape forms into vertical and horizontal lines. While reminiscent of Mondrian’s universal abstractions, these lines retained rhythm and cultural specificity, echoing the geometry of stalls, poles, and urban patterns in Samaru. The paintings positioned abstraction not as an escape from reality but as a distillation of the lived environment. This process reflects what Nzegwu (2013) calls the “politics of heritage,” where African modernism negotiates between inherited forms and contemporary strategies. By breaking down the Samaru landscape into lines, the artist recast market rhythms as both visual and philosophical order. Unlike Mondrian’s pursuit of universal harmony, these abstractions resist detachment from context. They are rooted in the lived geometry of Samaru, a reminder that abstraction in Africa often negotiates between universality and locality.

### Stage 3: Conceptual Reassembly

This stage highlights the idea and possibility of using African landscapes as conceptual texts. It is created on different panels; these panels do not merely depict; they encode temporal, social, and cultural rhythms into abstracted forms. In this way, they parallel Uli and Nsibidi traditions, where line communicated ideas beyond representation. Break of Element II, Plate III is made of four panels, consisting of fragmented forms which are reconstituted to generate layered meanings.

The four panels symbolise different times of the day and their philosophical associations: morning as renewal, afternoon as productivity, evening as closure, and night as reflection. This cyclical temporality resonates with African philosophies of time, where existence is viewed as continuous recurrence rather than linear advancement. The panels thus become both temporal markers and communal metaphors, reminding viewers that markets are not simply spaces of commerce but also cultural theatres of exchange, memory, and resilience.



Plate III: Artist: Daniel Saleh Title: Break of Element II, Media: Mixed Media, Year: 2024

### Stage 4: Multi-Dimensional Exploration

In this section, the artworks blur the boundaries between painting, sculpture, and installation, creating immersive experiences where line is both a material and a metaphor. The artworks can be viewed in a circular manner, as both sides of the panels are painted, forming an integral part of the narrative. Plate IV: “Time Change”, is a collapsible multi-facet panels. It is made up of four panels and eight painted sides. Lines in this artwork are not bound within a two-dimensional domain but are expanded into space as iron rods, wires, and fabrics. This expansion resonates with contemporary global practices in “expanded painting” (Haus der Kunst, 2019), yet its grounding in Samaru’s visual and material vocabulary marked it as distinctly local. The poles of



**Plate IV: Artist: Daniel Saleh Title: Time Change, (Multi-Dimensional Panels)  
Media: Mixed Media, Year:2024**

the market became metal rods; the fabrics of commerce became surfaces; the rhythms of trade became spatial structures.

Placed in dialogue with global installation practices, the work echo strategies used by Olafur Eliasson, who creates immersive environments, and El Anatsui, whose monumental wall hangings encourage spatial dialogue. Yet the Samaru works remain grounded in local materials and references rods as echoes of electric poles, fabrics as reminders of commerce. In this sense, the panels enact what Okwui Enwezor described as “the postcolonial constellation,” where local materialities engage with global forms (Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu, 2009).

### **Summary of Findings**

The research achieved a sequential movement from realism to abstraction to conceptual reassembly, culminating in three-dimensional explorations. Line emerged not only as a structural device but as a visual language imbued with cultural, symbolic, and philosophical significance.

### **Contributions to Knowledge**

Provides a framework for integrating local African landscapes into global discourses of abstraction and conceptual art.

Demonstrates practice-based research as a valid methodology for generating both artworks and theoretical insights.

Highlights the potential of line to bridge realism and abstraction, tradition and innovation, local and global contexts.

## Recommendations

1. Further cross-disciplinary studies should expand the role of line into architecture, design, and digital media.
2. Exhibitions should foreground line-based African conceptual painting as part of global dialogues.
3. Art education in Africa should integrate indigenous uses of line with contemporary practice, enriching pedagogy.

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