

Conventional and Non-Conventional Materials in Conceptual Textile Art

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Abstract

Conceptual textile art comprises art made of fabrics, yarns/threads and fibres from animal, plant and synthetic sources, using techniques such as felt, appliqué, patchwork, quilting, embroidery, tapestry, dyeing, and painting, among others. The study explores the use of textile and non-textile materials in mixed-media techniques to produce conceptual textile art, giving more importance to the idea being expressed by an artwork. The research hinges on concept based art which focuses more on the language behind the art rather than its aesthetics. The study engages arts-based research (ABR) approach to define the presence of aesthetic qualities or design elements within both the inquiry process and the research work. It used conventional (fibre, sliver, roving, yarn, fabrics) and non-conventional (wood, cardboard, plastics, polythene) materials in conceptual textile art. The study revealed that quite a number of respondents are not aware of the term conceptual art and therefore do not practice it, giving little or no attention to textile art in the Ghanaian textile craft industry. The success of the research provides a good platform for textile artists to explore diverse materials and techniques to create conceptual textile artefacts.

Keywords: *Conceptual art, textile art, conventional and non-conventional materials, mix-media, artefacts, arts-based research*

Introduction

Over the years, weaving has been the major construction technique employed in textiles and the major raw material for production is fibre from natural and/or artificial sources. Textiles has gone through technological changes in the construction and decoration of fibres, yarns and fabrics (Willbanks, 2009). Fabric construction involves the conversion of yarns, and sometimes fibres, into a fabric, having characteristics determined by the materials and methods employed (weaving, knitting, crocheting, bonding, among others). Fabric decoration is the patterning of an essentially plain fabric to render it more appealing or to serve a particular purpose (Digolo & Orchardson-Mazrui, 2008). This is achieved by using techniques such as printing, dyeing, embroidery, appliqué, among others. Most of the products of these processes are geared toward clothing and furnishing. Acheampong (personal communication, September 14, 2012) of Ghana Textile Prints (GTP) and Sosavi (personal communication, September 14, 2012) of Akosombo Textile Limited (ATL), attested that most of their products are channelled into clothing, precisely apparels.

Conceptual art is an art form that tends to give more importance to the idea or meaning being expressed by a masterpiece rather than focusing on the product itself (Reyes, 2012). Conceptual art as a movement emerged to bring ideas or meaning of art rather than its aesthetics. It was

intended to convey a concept to the viewer, ignoring the importance of the creator or the skills employed, placing emphasis on the ideas behind the art rather than its execution (Roholt, 2013). Although pioneers of this movement were all into painting and sculpture, it was through this movement that conceptual textile art surfaced (Oyman, 2015).

Textile production line starts with fibre preparation through to fabric production, and the raw materials from any stage of the production such as lap, roving, card sliver, yarn, among others can be explored to produce textile artefacts such as wall hangings, scatter rugs, chair bags, and the likes. Art has been in the existence of mankind for a long time dating back from the Prehistoric Era through to the Middle Ages to today. Some even refer to God as a great artist in His creation of the universe. Bill (2008) and Maraviglia (2010) have asserted that art is the creation of something that conveys or renders an idea, meaning, and or feeling. Therefore, an art becomes a tool for communication. From the Worldwide Arts Resource (2009), conceptual art movement began in the 20th century, but was based on the European Dada movement and the writings of philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. It also had roots in the work of the father of Dadaism, Marcel Duchamp; who was the creator of the “ready-made” (everyday object selected and designated as art).

Conceptual art became an international movement. It began in North America and Western Europe and spread to South America, Eastern Europe, Russia, China, and Japan. It was a major turning point in the 20th century art, challenging notions about art, society, politics, and the media with its theory that art is about ideas. Specifically, art can be written, published, performed, fabricated, or simply thought. Exponents of conceptual art argued that artistic production should serve artistic knowledge and that the art object is not an end in itself (Delahunt, 2010). Marcel Duchamp best known piece is the “fountain” a porcelain urinal, purchased from a sanitary ware arranged and submitted as an artwork which he described that the piece was to shift the focus of art from physical craft to intellectual interpretation (Witham, 2013).

Art exists in time as well as space. Time implies change and movement, and movement implies the passage of time. Movement and time, whether actual or an illusion, are crucial elements in art although we may not be aware of it. An artwork may incorporate actual motion, that is, the artwork itself moves in some way, or it may incorporate the illusion of, or implied movement (Lamp, 2012). Contemporary artists have been exploring the concept of how a viewer experiences an artwork, and either forcing the viewer to become aware of their process of experiencing the artwork, or inviting them to become part of the artwork itself.

According to Wikipedia (2009), space and time function together in that both are necessary before anything is perceived. For their synthesis to be carried out in the imagination, space and time make human knowledge possible. Actually, space and time can only be determined one from the other. Although event and object exist in time, time cannot be perceived without resorting to space. Poe (1948) and Wells (1995) share the same view that space and duration (time) are one and “there is no difference between time and any of the three dimensions of space except that our consciousness moves along it”. Space and time are the arenas in which all physical events take place; an event is a point in space and time specified by its time and place.

In the works of art, there is also an interlocking of time and space, however, it must be made clear that it does not involve problems of relativistic physics. Nevertheless, to speak of ‘arts of space’ and ‘arts of time’, as if time was not required to look at a picture or as if space was not implied when listening to music, is not satisfactory (de Bertola, 1972).

The concept was derived from the various fabric construction methods in textiles. With these, a yarn or thread which is the raw material is subjected to movement within time creating space.

The intersecting, interlacing, interloping or interlocking of the yarns creates a space. The spaces created are in the form of closed or compacted space, loosely or slack space, parallel space, vertical space, diagonal space, and so on. For instance, the various weave structures in textiles are typical examples of spaces created during fabric construction. The plain and twill weave structures illustrate compact, dense or closely packed spaces and is observed by the number of points at which each yarn intersect. In every weave structure, there are variations and therefore, a plain weave structure may have a different interlacing order depicting the warp and weft yarns. The knowledge of yarn movement within a particular time to create spaces during fabric construction is metaphorically employed in the research to explore different aspects of human settlement.

Textile art is a derivative of Textiles that is composed not necessarily for direct human use as conventional textiles but for the aesthetic appreciation that it conveys. Any art that uses textile materials and techniques to make artwork is referred to as textile art (Schofield, 2011). Textile art uses various techniques to create works of art using fibres, yarns, threads, and fabrics, among others (Ulzen-Appiah, 2009 and Reynolds, 2004). Hergert (2013) records that textile art encompasses countless techniques ranging from quilting, embroidery, collage, weaving, spinning, knitting, crocheting, macramé, distressing fabrics to achieve specific textures, recycling fabrics and even incorporating paper. In the above discussion, it can be established that the techniques and materials employed in textile art are countless and there is no limit on the number of techniques or materials that are employed in a textile art piece.

In Ghana, it has been observed through this study that weaving, printing, dyeing and embroidery or applique, are the few aspects of Textiles being practiced. The most practiced forms of Textiles in schools and colleges are weaving and fabric decoration such as printing, dyeing and stitching. Textile art as a component of textiles has not been fully explored by researchers and students because they are confined to weaving, printing or dyeing. However, other areas such as fibre or yarn art could be explored to create concepts to bring about variety in the kind of textiles produced in Ghana. These were survey findings, it was conducted to know the aspects of Textiles practiced and their related raw materials, and also an in-depth knowledge of conceptual art. The survey covered textile practitioners such as teachers/lecturers, students and technicians in the local industry in Kumasi Metropolis. In all, forty (40) respondents were randomly stratified out of a population of eighty (80). This project seeks to develop the concept of movement in time and space in relation to human settlement using conventional and non-conventional textile materials in textile art. This is due to the various stages an individual goes through as he/she moves through the ladder of life.

Materials and Methods

The study employed art based research (ABR), and it depended on studio activities which required the use of materials, techniques, tools and aesthetic analysis (Greenwood, 2012). Leavy (2014) notes that ABR adapts the tenets of the creative arts in social science research projects. ABR was used to evoke, to inspire, to spark the emotions, to awaken visions, and to use aesthetic form and expressive language in the studio art and discussion of the artefacts. It was also used to illuminate untold stories about movement in time and space. Techniques employed were embroidery, appliqué, knotting, quilting, collaging, painting, and others. Materials used were cotton fibre, yarn, fabric scraps, plastics, wood, leather, polyethylene, buttons, cord, twine and acrylic paints, among others. Tools used were cutting instrument, tracing wheel, needle, thumb nails and bodkin, among others. Some of the materials were collected as scrap or waste from the garment producers and carpentry workshops.

Results and Discussion

The main findings revealed that printing and dyeing are the most practised components of Textiles. It became evident that fabric was the most commonly used raw material in their endeavours for clothing. However, the study also revealed that quite a number of respondents are not familiar with the term conceptual art and therefore, do not practice it. From the findings, conceptual art is not practiced in the field of textiles with a majority representing 72.5% of 29 respondents does not attach any concept in the works they produce. However, it has been observed that, about 90% of our textile products are for apparels and anytime there is a textile exhibition or a visit to textile galleries all one sees is fabrics and apparels. It is upon this idea that the researchers explored with other media to produce conceptual textile artefacts that will serve other purposes other than fabrics and apparels.

Project One is titled “at the market” (Plate 1). A heavy base fabric measuring 120cm × 60cm was used. An illustration of a market settlement made on paper was transferred onto this base fabric. The materials used were dyed fibres (red, blue, green), thread, fabric scrap of different colours, synthetic leather, wood chippings, polyethene, glue, and tools used include picker, a pair of scissors, needle and tracing wheel. The techniques employed were embroidery, appliqué, adhesive bonding and dubbing.



Plate 1: At the Market

Plate 1 depicts a market settlement, the features and activities that go on in the market, hence the title “at the market”. Kohli (2013) considers settlement as a place where people live and interact through activities such as agriculture, trade and entertainment, and a market as any structure that allows buyers and sellers to exchange any type of goods, services and information for their consumption.

The work describes a general space and interaction of other spaces in a general space. There are many general spaces and the market is one. The market is a general space where other spaces of all kinds interact within time. The more the spaces are introduced the bigger the interaction of these spaces. These spaces may be permanent or temporary, specific or seasonal depending on the need for space at a given time. These spaces are created periodically by the movement of time.

In the composition, the base fabric is a larger space representing the size of a market and the various pieces of fabric on the base fabric are spaces and structures in a market. These spaces are created gradually with time, right from the opening of the market to closing. These spaces become more or dense, resulting in the growth of the market. The spaces created are in the form of space within space, space under space, space over space, space through space, and this is represented with the overlay and underlay of the pieces of fabric in the work. In the project, the various patterns describe a market space, where some areas are well organised and others show congestion. The small pieces of fabric represent congested areas in the market space where there are no sheds, resulting in traders finding any available space to display their goods thereby making noise and attracting attention. Whereas the big pieces of fabric represent well organised areas in the market where the movement is at ease and there is less noise. Red and orange colours are used to depict a noisy area whereas colours in blue are used for serene areas in the market space which may be as a result of less interaction in these spaces.

In the market, people interact with things such as goods and services, thereby creating a chain of communication where this is represented by the interaction of pieces of different fabrics together either by stitching or bonding. Further, it is a busy place where there is a lot of movement of goods and services as depicted by the arrangement of various shapes and colours in successive order, creating rhythm. In the market space, there are varieties of goods displayed, as shown in the project using a variety of colours. Food being a dominant trade item in the market is represented by a dominant yellow colour. The work is suitable for wall hanging in large rooms for better viewing.

Project Two is titled “the Unseen” (Plate 2). A skeletal map of a community was sketched on paper and transferred onto a dense base fabric measuring 60cm × 80cm using a tracing wheel. Materials used were jute fabric and yarn, fibre, fabrics, yarns, wood, plastics and metallic yarn. Techniques employed were appliqué, knotting, embroidery, adhesive bonding and painting.



Plate 2: The Unseen

The Oxford Dictionary (2012) defines unseen as something not seen or predicted or perceived. The unseen represents an imagination, a thought or an idea. For this to be manifested, it needs the colouration of visible materials for it to be manifested.

According to Wikipedia (2009), human settlement comprises shelter, infrastructure and services. One considers buildings or infrastructure as the kind of activities and services rendered in a community. The concept is on the development of a place within a space and the planning of a space within a place. The unseen, as the name implies, is used to depict a community setting where some places are developed and others undeveloped. The developed area is seen with the entire infrastructure in place, but that of the undeveloped area has barely anything to be seen. There are, however, unseen structures which are seen with time. As a community grows or population increases with time, buildings also multiply from one place to another. Normally little or no attention is paid to the undeveloped areas just as the poor are unnoticed or less valued in the community. The poor are less cared for in everything that goes on in the community, such as education, social amenities, decision making and infrastructure, just to mention a few. Ironically however, the poor help the rich in the society to become richer. The rich depends on the poor for their goods and services. In the community, anything about the rich is perceived and admired by the masses and anyone would wish to be associated with the rich in the society for survival.

The jute, a dull fabric, maps the population of the undeveloped area or the poor in the community. The jute fabric taking the domineering portion explains the fact that the poor outnumber the rich in the community. Places with catchy or bright colours which are easily noticed, depict the rich in the community, and are few. For a bright colour (the rich) to be perceived or seen, it takes the efforts of a dull colour (the poor), therefore the rich depends on the poor for survival and vice versa. Though the poor outnumber the rich and assist them in all activities, however, with time, some of the descendants of the poor develop to become rich as depicted in the work by few bright spot areas on the jute fabric. In a community, both the poor and the rich are valuable because it takes a dull colour to project a bright colour. The work can serve as textile mural and can be done on interior walls of a museum, cultural centre and the hospitality industry to showcase textile art.

In Plate 3, **Project Three** (The Far Away Window), lines in the form of perspective to the centre were drawn directly onto a base fabric measuring 75cm × 65cm. Materials used were fabric scrap, fibre, polyester yarn, jute yarn, toothpick, wood chipping and acrylic paint. Tools used were brush, a pair of scissors, cutter, and picker. Techniques employed were painting, stitching, adhesive bonding and painting. Elements were arranged in successive form to look further away from the other.

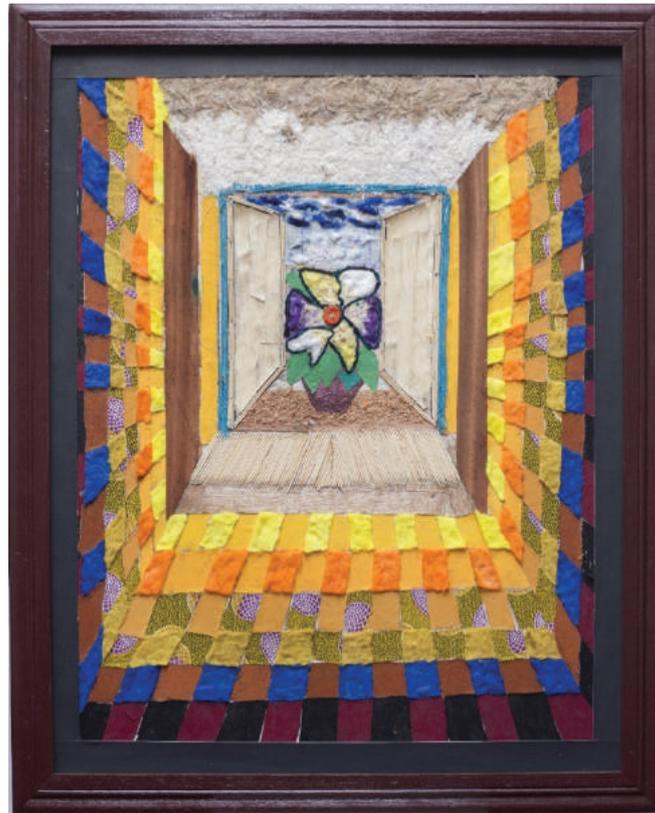


Plate 3: The Far Away Window

The title, “the faraway window” is metaphorically used to represent one’s aspirations. Aspirations are the desire to achieve things, which implies moving towards a desired space/ place. The concept is on the movement of individuals through spaces to a desired place. Life is in stages or progression and therefore, before one gets to the desired place, there is a movement from one stage to the other. Spatial desires are different, and we all do not grab the same opportunities as we move through space. No matter where one stands or comes from, there is an opportunity available. Life in itself is a journey, and has different chances for an individual, be it smooth or rough depends on the decisions and choices one makes.

In Plate 3, the different colour patterns represent different people and the variety of opportunities available as we journey through space within time. The perspective nature depicts the various stages or the movements in life through spaces. Different textured materials used describe the smoothness, challenges or difficulties that one encounters in life in the decisions and choices made. At every stage in the ladder of life, there is a decision or choice available, but the focus is on one’s aspiration. No matter where one stands in life there is an opportunity available, therefore one must take advantage of whatever opportunity available in making decisions and choices. People from all spheres of life emerge with the view of getting to their desired space (i.e., the far window), some give up just by the gateway to the window (available opportunity), while others strive harder, but still will be far from reaching the window. Because life is a ladder and its only death that ends the ladder, one must seize the daily opportunities available to the desired space. The piece can serve as a wall-hanging and can be placed in theatre or an auditorium for a better view because of the perspective nature of the work, which will be appreciated well at a distant view.

In Plate 4 titled “**Urbanization**”, a base fabric measuring 65cm × 45cm was used onto which a sketch of the concept was made. The materials used were yarns (cotton, polyester, jute, and

twine), cord, synthetic leather and buttons. Tools used were a pair of scissors, tracing wheel, needle, and picker. Techniques employed were appliqué, knotting, adhesive bonding and embroidery.



Plate 4: "Urbanization"

Plate 4 is an area perspective of urban space or cosmopolitan space and how the structures have been planned. An urban area is a location characterized by high human population density and vast human built features, in comparison to the areas surrounding it (Wikipedia, 2009). Urbanization is therefore characterised by population growth and institutional expansion in terms of infrastructure. In the urban area there is controlled and uncontrolled planning of space (settlement) and this is due to the presence of the settlers. The controlled spaces are residential estates, industrial areas, security zones and governmental areas, among others, where the planning of these spaces is well organised. The uncontrolled spaces are the slums, light industrial areas and new site settlements, characterised by lack of proper planning and layout resulting in chaotic space.

An urban setting has the various types of settlements; the controlled and uncontrolled spaces are linked to the various types of settlement in an urban space (linear, dispersed and nuclear). The work shows the arrangement of elements to depict the various settlements. The extreme right shows a linear settlement in diverse direction, and is considered as a controlled space. The extreme left is a mixture of settlement and it shows a clumsy space, considered as an uncontrolled space. The nucleated setting describes space occupied with a lot of different people with different activities all within that given space. The buildings are close to one another and therefore share common amenities. Colour bands are arranged to represent different categories of people, different nationality, religion, ethnicity, race, culture, sex, age, just to mention a few. The development of our urban spaces is as a result of the influx of people for better

opportunities, the excessive demand for land for several purposes which lead to uncontrolled spaces. The piece can serve as a wall-hanging, and apart from placing it at the museum and art gallery, it can also be placed at offices of metropolitan assembly and town planners, who are in charge of the planning of space within a settlement.

Conclusion

Conceptual art has increasingly become appreciated in the field of art. The conceptual artist uses language in place of brush and canvas, and allows their thoughts to represent their work. The project has revealed the possibility of combining conventional and non-conventional materials in making unique textile artworks. The non-conventional materials, however gave definite solid shapes thereby creating different surface effects. Manipulation, organisation and composition of the materials were very interesting, especially with the cutting and picking of individual materials to be fixed onto the base fabric whereby the process yielded highly artistic results. Production of concept-based art with conventional and non-conventional textile materials was a very revealing exercise, every bit of which was phenomenal. The success of the research provides a good platform for textile artists to explore diverse materials and techniques to create conceptual textile artefacts. The study also provides opportunities to students to utilise alternative materials within the environment to produce textile art and to undertake projects of this kind in order to meet the standards for the contemporary art world. Finally, the study serves as a proposal for Ghana Education Service to consider in reviewing the Textiles syllabus at Senior High Schools to augment the scope of Textiles at that level.

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