In Search of Communication

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IN SEARCH OF COMMUNICATION

by

USMAN OLADEINDE

(Under the Direction of Marc Moulton)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the work included in Usman Oladeinde’s MFA thesis exhibition. The goal of this thesis paper is to explore major themes such as communication, identity, change, centeredness, landscapes, and language. These paintings present Arabic letter forms transformed into illegible shapes which are painted on landscape backgrounds, often depicting an aesthetic of textual elements receding into space. All these works are inspired by the Qibla, which is represented in the abstract and painted using acrylic media. Occasionally image transfers are mounted on the painted surface.

Visual representations like mine are communicative without forcing the viewer to one specific idea. I paint to connect with history, spirituality, and family. These shapes represent memory and centeredness. Influenced by identity, I am inspired by the duality of landscapes - struggle and ease, chaos and calm.

INDEX WORDS: Absorption, Arabic, Centeredness, Landscapes, Memory, Semiotics, Theatricality
IN SEARCH OF COMMUNICATION

by

USMAN OLADEINDE

Major Professor: Marc Moulton
Committee: Julie McGuire

Electronic Version Approved
May 2018
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to almighty Allah for blessing me with this special skill to better understand the world and help humanity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I’d like to acknowledge my family. Most especially my father Lateef Olawale Oladeinde and mother Olubunmi Olufunmilayo Oladeinde for their relentless support and being always there since birth for me. My siblings, even though we are miles apart, Ibrahim Oladeinde for his support, Yewande Oladeinde and Mariam Oladeinde for their unapologetic love. Also, I would love to acknowledge the Makanjuola and Olufowora household for being a family away from home, thanks for your guidance and making me feel welcome in your home.

I’d like to recognize my art professors always pushing for the best in me as a student. Most especially my thesis chair Marc Moulton for always challenging me and supporting my development as an artist. My thesis committee member Dr. Julie McGuire, I cherish and enjoy every conversation we have had in class and outside class and I admire your knowledge in art history. You are a role model. And Kelly Boehmer for all your guidance throughout my program at Georgia Southern University. Thank you for always encouraging me, listening to all my complaints, and the snacks. I will always cherish your counsel. I would like to recognize Dr. Jason Hoelscher and Dr. Onyile Onyile, thank you for all your advice during my program.

To the squad Courtney Ryan, Cyndy Epps, and Jessamy McManus. Thank you for being role models, colleagues, friends and family, you all knew me like no one else. I cherish every professional and social experience we have had together. Thanks for always making me see and approach things differently. Thanks Zak Kelly you’re a brother.

Lastly, Jason McCoy, thank you for empowering me with all technical knowledge which is a necessity for being a professional artist. I am very grateful.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Struggle of Identity

My works focus on my lack of spirituality and the terror of identity. This struggle is a result of my recent move to the United States from Lagos, Nigeria, where I was born and raised. Having travelled far from home my connections to my history, spirituality, and family are tested and seems to be fading. Every day, I would wake up to the Athan to Solat (which means the call to prayer) from the mosques and worship voice from churches in my neighborhood. Moving to the United States of America helped me realize greatly how much I miss the Athan to Solat. Upon reflection, I am often bothered by these fading connections. Art serves as a tool for me to connect my history, my spirituality and family.

Identity is an important theme in contemporary art. “The question [answers] I seek from myself are not only, who am I as an individual, but who are we as members of groups.”

1 My solution is to embrace my Muslim heritage by using Arabic letter shapes as a key element for experiencing identity in my painting and showing that growing up with the Arabic system is a part of my identity.

The Chaos of Change

Change has introduced chaos to the past way I used to think and act. Change is forging a new identity, I call this the “Chaos of Change.” This identity discovered through change transcended the urge for chaos in my painted works. Chaos in these paintings is represented through the

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layering of Arabic letter shapes to create complex visual structures and the illusion of 3-dimensional space. This space is visually chaotic because the letterforms are not meaningful as words. The forms are singular, they overlap, vary in scale, and focus. They do not form words or have extended meaning.

I am a complex individual. I am informed by the cultures of both Nigeria, Africa and the United States of America. This combination of cultures transforms my identity by the chaos of change.

Finding Centeredness & Calm

The chaos of change became a tool used to connect myself with spirituality and family. While working, I experience memory and centeredness. My hope is to involve viewers in this experience and share memories through art. The Arabic text used in my paintings are sometimes visible and sometimes subtle. They serve as tools in finding glimmers of calm. However, our society is overwhelming and this ideal led me to research the sublime in art.

Traditionally, sublime can be defined as a moment of greatness or awe. Today communication is overwhelming, there is a constant demand for attention. This overwhelming demand destroys my sense of being calm or centered. For instance, there is less of physical communication because mobile phones, for example, today’s culture encourages more of non–physical communication. The mobile phone has become the most often used method of communication. The experience of using a mobile phone to check text messages, to take and make calls, to search the internet is sprawling. For me, the mobile phone with its all-encompassing connectedness to communication is part of the sublime.
The sublime is influenced by the writings of Edmund Burke, an Irish philosopher who separated beauty and sublime into rational categories. As Edmund Burke stated in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* it is “A type of sublime which has the power to control and destroy us.”

Sublime can be described as the greatness to inspire awe such as the awe we experience from mobile phones. According to Burke the sublime is that which has the power to compel and destroy us which is also applicable to mobile phones and communication respectively. For instance, the always-on connectedness, the information demand, the social media network of mobile phones can overwhelm us. The extended capability of the phone has gained enormous power to control us. What it destroys on the other end is how it changes the mode of communication and this is a problem. In my work, I seek to express the balance between communication and the awe of being overwhelmed, as the sublime in our contemporary society.

Finding Landscapes

Landscapes are powerful tools and unique representation in understanding history. Prior to the seventeenth century, landscapes were less important as subject matter and used to appear in the background of pictures. But that has changed because landscapes can now dominate the picture plane and be the primary subject matter. In this era, painters such as Nicholas Poussin painted classical landscapes. Nineteenth century painters such as J.M.W. Turner and John Constable

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3 Ibid
expanded the boundaries of art by painting landscapes as the subject. Later, the French treated landscapes as Impressionist and landscape painting became a vehicle for revolution in modern art.\(^4\)

The natural landscape has also been a subject matter for many artists interpretation in the concept of the sublime. Specifically, the built landscapes are landscapes enhanced by humanity while the natural landscapes are the original landscapes before alterations. As I travel through both built and natural landscapes I realize the act of viewing the landscape can be an act of realizing oneself as but a small part of nature. This is the sublime—the ability to understand the vastness of nature, an awe beyond my understanding. I enjoy the natural landscape, especially how it visually recedes into space, extending beyond me. These are the characteristics I seek to re-create in my paintings.

The idea of the sublime and the historical subject of the sublime comes to play in my painting.\(^5\) I paint by juxtaposing a conceptual idea of landscape and added layers of symbolism that are important to represent my identity. Equally, my choice of color informs how these juxtapositions are created too—usually my color palette consists of blue, green, brown, grey, warm white, and cool white. The elements of landscape and identity become combined to become visual language. It is this main theme of a combined language which ties each of my painting together through concepts of the landscape and identity.

Language

The visual language in my painting refers to how all elements transcend into a new vocabulary for communication. For instance, the perspective lines, geometric shapes, linear representations, and Arabic letter shapes are all visual language developed in my work. The Arabic letter shapes have a double meaning first, they are visual and logical reference points of identity in the paintings,

\(^4\) Tate, Landscape. “Art Term; Landscape Across the Century.” Tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/landscape
\(^5\) See page 8, finding centeredness and calm
secondly, they are not traditional anymore because their representation in the paintings are deconstructed, thereby inserting the function of a new language.
CHAPTER 2

INFLUENCES

General Sources

In the early stages of my research, I was influenced by artists such as Julie Mehretu, Ryan McGuinness, Matthew Ritchie, Jose Parla, and Frank Stella. Of these, Julie Mehretu, Jose Parla, and Ryan McGuinness became relevant to my recent body of work. This chapter will describe how their works influenced mine.

Ryan McGuinness

I began exploring chaos using Arabic letter shapes as iconic signifiers for visual representation in my works. Influenced by Ryan McGuinness’s layering of indexical signifiers through print making as seen in No Bees, No Honey; No Work, No Money, 2013, acrylic on wood panel, 48 by 48 inches. Ryan McGuinness is a multidisciplinary artist, in his works he pushes the boundaries between the real subject and its abstraction. This inspired me to push the boundaries between the written Arabic letter shapes and the abstraction in my painting. An example of Ryan McGuinness work is from his Mother and Child series. Mother & Child (Monoprints #1, #33), 2015, screenprint on Lana paper, 60 x 42 in.
Fig 1: Ryan McGuinness, *Mother & Child* (Monoprints #1, #33), 2015, screenprint on Lana paper, 60 x 42 in.

Jose Parla

Jose Parla is another large scale multidisciplinary artist. His works consist of layers of paint, gestural drawing and found ephemeral combine to evoke the histories of urban environment. Using the backdrop of world cities, he creates abstraction that can appear to be photorealist fragments of what he sees in the chaos of the metropolis. His works reflect the ephemeral layers of walls that show a place that is no longer present, while engaging memory and imagination with the contemporary.\(^6\) Influenced by the ambition in Parla’s work, I realized the impact of scale in visual communication. Scale is an important characteristic of my body of work in this thesis because it enhances gestural brush work in my paintings.

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\(^6\) Jose Parla. Joseparla.com/#/text/about/
J.M.W. Turner

The conceptual framework of my paintings is informed by 19th century artist J.M.W. Turner. Turner created remarkable naturalistic landscapes that challenged industrialization and urbanization. The primary element of Turners work compared to mine is the use of light to create a luminous atmosphere. For example, *Snow Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbor’s Mouth*, shows much use and control of a luminous atmosphere compared with my painting *Untitled* (dig deep in the moment).
Fig 3: JMW Turner, *Snow-Storm: Steam-Boat off a Harbour’s Mouth*

Fig 4: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled (Dig Deep in the Moment)*, Acrylic and Laser Inkjet image transfer on canvas, 2017

Julie Mehretu

The second half of the twentieth century challenged the definition of a painted landscape because twentieth century artists expanded to include urban and industrial landscape and less traditional media was used in making these landscape paintings. Today, the contemporary style of landscape paintings reveals similar characteristics. Again, we have more artists pushing boundaries, such as Julie Mehretu who remains an important influence in my studio practice.

Julie Mehretu makes large scale paintings and drawings that refer to elements of mapping and architecture, achieving a calligraphic complexity that resembles turbulent atmospheres and a dense social network. Her work engages the history of non-objective art from Constructivism to Futurism.
- posing contemporary questions about the relationship between utopian impulses and abstraction. Influenced by her calligraphic complexity that resembles turbulent atmospheres and dense social network, her fragments of architectural rendering and an aerial view of an urban grid introduced the element of linear perspective lines in my paintings.

Fig 5: Julie Mehretu, *Stadia I* 2004 Ink and acrylic on canvas

Like Julie Mehretu, who is an Ethiopian-American, my paintings express a duality of experience between two places because I paint momentary-places that are influenced by the forms found in landscapes. Traveling through the landscape each day I see and remember things that are worth sharing such as the relationship between the built landscape and natural landscape. When I paint momentary places, my aim is to create a representation that shares the same intensity as the reality. This is the duality of experience I express in my paintings.

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CHAPTER 3

DEVELOPMENT OF THESIS WORK

Phase 1

My early works were very chaotic compositions with an abundant layering of Arabic letter shapes. I was concerned with creating complex layers of Arabic texts, structures and the illusion of space. At this point of experimentation, the Arabic text functioned as an iconic signifier. There are three transformational phases in my early works that led to the body of work in this thesis. My first phase was about capturing quick expressive brush work and the materiality of the paint. During this phase, I was concerned about how paint reacted to speed, thinness, texture, and fluidity as well as creating a visual representation of spatial depth on a two-dimensional plane. My quick expressive brush work generated through my emotions were documented as marks. This phase can also be described as my intuitive phase because it helped develop my intuitive process and this phase helped resolve how color is manipulated in my painting.

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8 See page 21 Semiotics.
Phase 2

In the second phase, I developed Arabic letter forms to function as shapes combined with the illusion of a dream like space. I began exploring chaos using Arabic texts while paying attention to design elements and at this point I was using Arabic texts as an iconic signifier.

Arabic letter forms function as iconic signifiers for visual communication. To describe this relationship of text to structure I reference the work of Ferdinand Saussure, the Swiss linguist and semiotician whose idea laid a foundation for many significant developments in the study of signs in the 20th century. Saussure describes semiotics as the study of signs, symbols and signification. It is the study of how meaning is created9. The two elements that make up semiotics are the signifier and the signified. First, the signifier is any material that signifies, for example an Arabic word on a page conveys meaning through Arabic alphabetical symbols. Second, the signified is the concept that a signifier refers to. For example, voicing the sound of an Arabic word is a signifier for the concept of that word. The signified is also conveyed by the written Arabic word. Such signifiers are used for language communication.

Indexical signs are signifiers caused by the signified, for example in my paintings a perspective line conveys an idea of a built landscape. Iconic signs are where the signifiers resemble the signified. For example, the Arabic letter forms in my paintings no longer function with the original meaning because they have been removed from their original context. They are, however, Iconic signs for Arabic culture.

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Phase 3

In the third phase of my early work I combined Arabic letter forms with representations of suggestive landscape from memory. I started as a landscape painter and my interest in the concept of landscapes was strengthened after I was able to comprehend how and why it was used by Julie Mehretu in her paintings.
Theatricality & Absorption

Over the duration of my graduate program, I have experimented with many techniques and materials. Techniques such as thin application of color, color drips on the canvas, painting in transparent layers, working with collage, masking off parts of painting with tape to create an illusionistic representation of the natural landscape, and painting on the corners of the canvas to represent an illusion of 3-dimensionality on a 2-dimensional surface. Some of the materials I use to generate my art includes, acrylic paints, acrylic media, inks, laser-ink jet printer transfers using acrylic gloss medium and I often use an image projector while generating my paintings.
As a backdrop for meaning, theatricality and absorption are conceptual models used in my painting creation. By this I mean, Renaissance paintings functioned as a window for absorption to happen. For example, Raphael’s *School of Athens* absorbs the viewers into an illusionistic space using two-point linear perspective, color, and formal relationships. Late twentieth century modernist painting focused more on time-based activity. For example, Jackson Pollock’s rhythmic paintings incorporate mood which is time based. He was more concerned with the physical act of painting itself rather than the illusionistic window. In comparison to Renaissance and modernist paintings, contemporary paintings are multi-disciplinary because they combine the physical act of painting and the illusion of a window to communicate ideas.

My idea of theatricality is influenced by Michael Fried, an art critic and historian. According to his critical essay, *On Art and Objecthood*, Fried described an object to be theatrical if it has ‘presence’.

"*Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder takes it into account*"\(^{10}\)

*Michael Fried*

As an object, the thickness of the painting frame figures into the work’s ‘presence’. My work process starts from carefully viewing the natural and built landscape. Colors from the built and natural landscape influences my color choices depending on my location at a given time. Colors such as grey, blue, green and brown colors are always constant. I believe these colors conceptually suggests the natural and built landscape without complexity.

The thickness of my painting frame itself figures into my methodology. I find irregular shapes from the natural and built landscape which are worth sharing. These shapes are always recorded

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\(^{10}\) Micheal Fried. *On Art and Objecthood*
in my sketchbook which is where I develop possibilities on how to build my painting stretchers. While doing this I experience an ephemeral thought on what every new painting is going to visually look like, and this thought only lasts until I put the first coat of paint on my canvas.

The frames are represented like a square or the aerial view of a cube that are distorted and they have multiple sides. The representation of a square reminds me of a Qibla, an Islamic monument which is used for the direction for prayer. Developing these paintings depend on the complexity of the irregular shaped canvas and the rudimentary choice of color application on the canvas.
Fig 9: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled (Dialectics between Tranquility and Chaos)*, 2016, acrylic on canvas

*Untitled (Dialectics between Tranquility and Chaos)* is chronologically the first work in this thesis exhibition. This piece introduced the idea of presence in my work. Formally, I decided to challenge the traditional idea of a painting surface and *Untitled (Dialectics between Tranquility and Chaos)* is a good example of my late experimentation. This piece is a four-side irregular trapezoid and it hangs on the wall like a rhombus. The orange color background is mixed with patches of umber color layered over it. The interpretation of this background color is based off
the sunset, umber symbolize earth and orange symbolize the sunset itself which is sublime and ties back to a conceptual representation of the landscape. Masked out lines layered within Untitled (Dialectics between Tranquility and Chaos) are visual representations of a built landscape. Arabic letter shape used in this piece is a good example of chaos because they are layered throughout the composition. The top corner in this piece creates a spiritual experience which is an inherent characteristic of my other paintings.

Fig 10: Usman Oladeinde, Untitled (Quite One II), 2016, acrylic on canvas
Fig 11: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled (Quite One I)*, 2016, acrylic on canvas
Fig 12: Usman Oladeinde, (En Route), 2017, acrylic and laser inkjet print image transfer on Masonite board
Fig 13: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled (Dig Deep in the Moment)*, 2017, acrylic, laser inkjet prints

image transfer on canvas
Fig 14: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled Diptych (Beads)* Acrylic and latex on canvas, 2018

*Untitled Diptych (Beads)* includes two rectangular painting surface that metaphorically can represent a window. This window suggests a glimmer of calm, memory and centeredness. This piece has an unusual green glow. While not always green, this glow is inherent in all my paintings and is used to represent a centered calmness.

I layered Arabic letter shapes throughout the composition in a subtle way and this is because of the growth in refining my intuitive process. The prayer beads in *Untitled Diptych (Beads)* is a compositional element intentionally placed as an element to move the viewers’ eye around the composition of the painting. With a window-like shape, this piece serves as a window to view the metaphorical beyond and to be absorbed in that vision. The formal qualities of *Untitled Diptych (Beads)* presents a conceptual representation of a landscape through color, atmospheric
quality and perspective line which visually shares similar intensity as the landscape. Blue and grey colors in this piece suggests the sky. Also, the green and brown colors suggest nature.

This piece was challenging because it literally relates to centeredness. Each canvas is centered, and each canvas was painted on simultaneously in my studio. The challenge was it would look different every time I try to fix a visual problem. For instance, there are two letter shapes layered on each canvas which is on the viewers eye level, they shared equal treatment but different forms. The challenge with these two letter shapes occurred when I painted a highlight on the right letter shape, it altered everything on the left canvas leaving it uncentered. These eventually were centered again after I carefully studied both sides of Untitled Diptych (Beads).

Fig 15: Usman Oladeinde, *Untitled (Transcendence)* Acrylic and latex on canvas, 2018
**Untitled (Transcendence)** is the most recent piece created in this thesis exhibition. Formally, the stretcher represents a Qibla and it is very saturated in cool gray with a little touch of warm gray and white. The energy in this (Transcendence) is reminiscent of historical artist JMW Turner. This piece is very atmospheric including saturated perspective lines which refers to the concept of the landscape. I use compositional element such as the prayer bead image to visually move in and out of the painted atmospheric treatment in (Transcendence). The glow at the end of the perspective line is where I tend to suggest glimmers of calm, without recognizable representation. The Arabic letter shapes in this piece are layered with a transcending quality which is a representation of spirituality, and this is strengthened by the eye perspective of the viewer.

The Arabic letter shape is for the most part represented in white in this piece because I consider this shape as important to my Identity, Spirituality, and Family. Symbolically, white conveys serenity, calmness, and it ties back to the characteristic of a receding element found in a landscape. In making this piece I challenged my refined intuitive way of making with time and this piece is the result of working under a limited time frame. I’m glad I took the risk too because everything I have learned in my studio about creating my work is represented in (Transcendence) and this is carried out in a simple and refined manner.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I have always painted traditional landscapes on traditionally shaped canvases. The autonomy of the traditional is sometimes mind-numbing which is why my paintings appear as they do. Through using basic principles from traditional art making such as the characteristic of a landscape, compositional elements, and Arabic letter shapes in the search of communication, I challenge the autonomy of painting.

The struggle my painting expresses in the search of communication, is shared with society. This experience is reflected as chaos in the piece *Untitled (Dialectics between Tranquility and Chaos)* because our society is bombarded with uneasiness from an influx of information. In comparison, my later piece such as *Untitled (Quiet One II)* is an escape I suggest to the viewers to find glimmers of calm, easiness, centeredness, and memory. Centeredness and memory is an extension of all my pieces and specifically *Untitled (Transcendence)*. While making this piece I had a specific goal and I knew exactly what I wanted which made production easier and faster. This was because of the phases of learning prior in my studio practice and during these phases of learning I would spend more time on production because every compositional element and research was being figured out as I made the piece. For example, in *Untitled (Dig Deep in the Moment)*, despite its simple complexity and production time, I encountered many challenges, which added to the learning experience of the work.

Although the Arabic letter shapes in my painting are symbols of Identity, Spirituality, and Family, I also consider the Arabic letter shape as a way of seeing and communicating about the Arabic culture. This is in our present society via expressing these letter shapes in my body of work.
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