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**FORM, MEDIUM, AND MEANING: THE AESTHETIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE NUDE FEMALE BODY IN NIGERIAN MODERN ART**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the aesthetic representation of the nude female figure in Nigerian contemporary art, focusing on its formal, material, and symbolic dimensions. The study addresses the problem of limited critical engagement with the ways Nigerian artists mediate between inherited Western traditions of the nude and indigenous cultural, spiritual, and moral values. Existing scholarship often privileges Eurocentric interpretations, thereby overlooking the recontextualization of the nude as a site of identity, resistance, and cultural critique in Nigerian art. The main objective of the study is to analyse how Nigerian artists reinterpret the nude not merely as an aesthetic form, but as a space of empowerment, decolonial expression, and feminist agency. Specifically, the study investigates how artistic strategies and material choices, such as ceramics and mixed media, enable new visual and symbolic possibilities that disrupt conventional narratives of objectification. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach through the visual analysis of selected works by Ngozi Omeje Ezema and Nnenna Okore. This approach is supported by critical engagement with feminist and postcolonial scholarship. The theoretical framework is grounded in decolonial aesthetics and feminist theory, while the conceptual framework situates the nude as both an artistic trope and a cultural text that reflects broader negotiations of gender and power. The findings demonstrate that Nigerian artists do not simply inherit the Western motif of the nude; rather, they reinterpret it to challenge objectification, reassert local aesthetics, and foreground issues of female autonomy, spirituality, and cultural identity. The paper concludes that the nude in Nigerian contemporary art functions as a powerful site for redefining aesthetics and negotiating identity on indigenous terms.*

**Keywords:** *Female Nude Form, Contemporary Nigerian Art, Feminist Theory, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Studies*

**Introduction**

The representation of the nude female body in art has long been a site of aesthetic inquiry, political contention, and cultural negotiation. Rooted deeply in Western art history as a symbol of idealized beauty and artistic mastery, the nude has often been associated with traditions of the male gaze, objectification, and the control of female bodies through visual regimes (Berger, 1972; Nochlin, 1988).

As creative practices developed within previously colonized regions, and particularly in Africa, the uptake of the nude figure stimulated far-reaching interrogation of cultural propriety, ethical acceptance, and postcolonial identity. Within Nigerian contemporary art, the aesthetic representation of the nude female offers a special case wherein colonial inheritances, local cosmologies, and gendered meanings intersect. This paper questions how Nigerian modern and contemporary artists represent the nude female body not as a neutral figural device, but as a dynamic and contested field of meaning. In a postcolonial world, the female nude is a rich vehicle for negotiating identity, recovering agency, and articulating alternative notions of beauty.

Nigerian artists, painting in oil medium, working with textiles, ceramics, and installations have redefined the nude to reflect indigenous sensibilities and counter dominant Eurocentric and patriarchal aesthetics. Oguibe (1995) and Okeke-Agulu (2015) observed that Nigerian modernism tends to work at the issues thrown up by the encounter between Western art training and local cultural paradigms, particularly questions of form, symbolism, and thematic content. This paper investigates the works of Ngozi Omeje Ezema and Nnenna Okore, whose oeuvre effectively integrates elements of classical modernism and new innovative tendencies. Their application of the nude is both cultural and aesthetic. In contrast to previous modernists such as Afi Ekong, who employed the nude for subverting colonial and patriarchal values, Omeje and Okore introduce feminine motifs and ritual symbolism in their representations.

The choice of medium is also meaningful: oil painting provokes allusions to classic and academic art, while textile, clay, and mixed media are more susceptible to embodied, symbolic, and religious interpretation. This paper contends that the artistic representation of the nude female form in contemporary Nigerian art is neither merely

mimetic nor apolitical; instead, it is a dense terrain in which artists negotiate issues of identity, aesthetics, power, and cultural agency.

The representation of the nude female body in visual art has historically been a locus of ideological contention, with aesthetic convention, gender relations, and culture being the forces in contention. Western art history has focused on the female nude as an icon of beauty, sensuality, and artistic value, as well as an icon of power and control. John Berger's seminal critique in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) identifies the visual regime whereby "men act and women appear," arguing that within classical European painting, the female nude is constructed for the pleasure of the male spectator.

The gendered depiction that presents the female as passive objects to be looked at is closely questioned by feminist art historian Linda Nochlin (1988), who critiques the institutional discriminations and representational norms that have predictably excluded the female from their participation as producers and subjects. Although these frameworks provide essential tools for analysing the politics of representation and gaze, their deployment in non-Western societies must be attentively considered. African cultures possess distinct visual languages and cultural logics that frequently do not map Western gender dualisms or aesthetic categories.

In his work, 'The Culture Game', Oguibe (1995) balances the imposition of Euro-American art theories on African art practice and demands that scholars recognize that African artists approach modernity and artistic form through historical and epistemological paths. According to Oguibe, African artists are likely to respond simultaneously to Western artistic influence and to indigenous cosmological frameworks, colonial history, and nationalist discourses. This negotiation is particularly evident in the path of Nigerian modernism.

In his study titled *Postcolonial Modernism*, Okeke-Agulu (2015) traces the work of Nigerian artists in the mid-twentieth century - specifically those within the Zaria Art Society - in their efforts to decolonize visual discourse under the aegis of "natural synthesis." Artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Demas Nwoko consciously fused European art-making methods to traditional visual forms of Igbo and Yoruba origin, creating hybrid styles that conveyed notions of postcoloniality and independence.

While Okeke-Agulu is primarily concerned with male artists, his theoretical interest identifies the ideological roles of medium and form in postcolonial art and their potential for undermining aesthetic hegemony. Here, the nude female figure - deeply embedded in colonial and patriarchal artistic traditions - becomes an especially contentious subject in Nigerian art. While Western academic models introduced the nude as a formal exercise in anatomical correctness and proportion, its uptake in Nigeria has often been beset by complications. Ogbecchie (2008), in his detailed investigation of Ben Enwonwu, brings to light the tension between the academic training of the artist and the dominant moral conservatism in the Nigerian society.

Enwonwu's nudes, though technically accomplished, were often met with controversy, mirroring the broader cultural discomfort with public nudity - especially female nudity - across much of Nigeria. This discomfort, shaped both by indigenous codes of morality and by Christian prudery during the colonial era, has contributed to the relative lack of representation of the nude within mainstream Nigerian art discourse and exhibition spaces. Though feminist scholars from within the African continent, such as Nkiru Nzegwu, have asserted the importance of women's agency in African aesthetic traditions, scholarly inquiry hardly addresses how such traditions are expressed in material and formal practices adopted by contemporary women artists. There is a striking absence of research in the literature that addresses artists like Ngozi Omeje Ezema, whose ceramic sculptures continually invoke the female body through fragmented, organic forms that suggest the themes of fertility, survival, and healing thereby foregrounding a material, post-traumatic visual vocabulary. She also uses the nude as subject matter and political gesture.

The artist employs clay and installation not just as technical means but also as conceptual models for remapping embodiment, spirituality, and gendered identity.

Nnenna Okore's practice occupies a critical position in contemporary Nigerian art, particularly in relation to the aesthetic construction of the female body. Although her works are largely abstract and rarely present literal figuration, they nonetheless engage the body through form, texture, and material metaphor. By manipulating organic media such as burlap, jute, clay, and handmade paper, Okore develops installations that evoke folds of skin, drapery, and bodily rhythms. This tactile quality allows her work to suggest corporeality without relying on naturalistic representation, thereby resisting objectification and opening space for alternative readings of the nude. Her material choices are equally significant. Fiber and clay reference indigenous craft traditions such as weaving and pottery - that have long been gendered as feminine within Nigerian culture. By elevating these materials into

monumental sculptural forms, Okore disrupts established hierarchies of medium, aligning the female body with resilience, labour, and ecological continuity.

This study adds to the increasing scholarship that reconceptualizes the nude as an African tradition, within local epistemologies, gendered experiences, and the lingering impacts of colonial modernity. The coming together of form, medium, and meaning is thus not coincidental but inherent in the way Nigerian artists build and problematize the visual lexicon that gathers around the nude.

The emphasis on the need for gender understandings rooted in African cultural contexts, critiquing Western gender binaries have been postulated by some Nigerian female scholars. Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) for instance argued that most African societies, like the Igbo have always had dual-sex systems and egalitarian social relations. She decries the fact that colonialism imposed rigid notions of gender roles and calls for a return to African beliefs in which gender was determined by relationships, cooperation, and circumstance. This fundamental perspective has continued to shape newer Nigerian feminist thinkers who adhere to this movement to reverse colonial impacts. Mobolanle Sotunsa (2019) writes about an "African variant" of feminism. This derives from local oral culture, proverbs, and community norms. She stresses that African feminist ideas must be harmonious with local beliefs and not simply replicate European or American ideas.

OluTimehin Kukoyi (2019), a Lagos-based queer feminist author, also responds to transplanted gender models by advocating for an experiential, rooted feminism that intersects with sexuality, motherhood, and urban life in Nigeria's unique socio-political context. Chioma Opara (2016) speaks about terms like *femalism* and *gynandrism*. These terms analyse gender as a networked force in African literature and beliefs. Simply put, African ideas about gender cannot be placed so readily into Western categories.

A political theorist and post-conflict scholar, Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso (2019) critiques knowledge systems that silence African women's voices and calls for gender studies that are relevant to the politics, history, and culture of Africa. Her research on conflict and displacement stresses the importance of local knowledge in feminist theory. Olufunke Baruwa (2020) similarly refers to the need for feminist interventions that are attuned to Nigerian girls' and women's lived experiences, especially in governance and anti-violence activism. Her work emphasizes the need for local involvement, awareness of diverse identities, as well as cultural variation to develop strong gender justice movements across Africa. Together, these scholars constitute a strong school committed to revolutionizing how gender is understood. They show that African feminist theory must be extrapolated from the real experiences, culture, and beliefs of African societies, and not imposed from outside (Nzegwu, 2006; Sotunsa, 2019; Kukoyi, 2019; Opara, 2016; Yacob-Haliso, 2019; Baruwa, 2020).

The display of the nude female body in images has conventionally been an ideological battlefield, susceptible to aesthetic convention, gender politics, and cultural norms. In Western art history, the female nude, has been highlighted as a symbol of beauty, sensuality, and artistic proficiency, in addition to a demonstration of power and control. In his influential book, *Ways of Seeing* (1972), John Berger developed the idea of the "male gaze," explaining how European art illustrates a dynamic in which "men act and women appear," thereby revealing asymmetrical relations of spectatorship. Extending this critique, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin (1988) focused on the institutionalized exclusion of women beneath the category of creative endeavour, alongside the uniform characterization of feminine figures as passive muses instead of autonomous ones. Although such feminist critiques offer requisite foundations, their extension to African contexts requires a more localized and culturally situated methodology. This study draws on African feminist theory and decolonial aesthetics with a view to forging a theory that is responsive to indigenous knowledges, colonial histories, and gendered power structures.

In her analysis of gender through the lens of African aesthetics, Nzegwu observes that traditional African representations of the body instituted often in ritual objects, textile arts, and body ornaments, hold meanings of beauty, morality, and self that cannot be collapsed into Western dichotomies of exposure and shame. At the same time, decolonial theory also offers tools with which to analyse how artists respond to the epistemic violence of colonial visual regimes. African feminist theory prioritizes contextualized knowledge of gender, questioning the assumed universality of Western feminist theory. In *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* Nzegwu (2006) contests the application of Euro-American constructions of gender to African societies. She contends that African cultural practices have historically granted women social agency, political power, and religious meaning which are properties that have been undermined by colonialism and Western forms of knowledge.

Her research presents the idea of an "aesthetic of continuity," in which female creativity and representation are drawn into lineage, ritual, and cosmology, in contrast to individualized or eroticized performances of selfhood.

Applied to visual art, this framework enables the comprehension of the female nude body beyond a sex object, but as a representation of cultural memory and woman's agency. Furthermore, it puts value on materials and processes that are normally associated with femininity, including textile production, ceramics, and body adornment (Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1987).

These media, devalued as "craft" under colonial art hierarchies, are reappropriated by contemporary Nigerian female artists to rearticulate embodiment, healing, and resistance. Complementing African feminist theory, the decolonial aesthetic theory is guided by the works of Walter D. Mignolo (2011) and Sylvia Wynter (2003), who question the colonial origins of Western modernity and knowledge production. In visual art, decolonial aesthetics involves the recovery of indigenous modes of seeing, ways of seeing, knowing, and making that were subordinated by the visual regimes of colonialism.

Mignolo (2011), in *'The Darker Side of Western Modernity'*, contends that decolonial aesthetics "disobediently" opposes the cultural and epistemological control of Western thinking by naming pluriversality, relationality, and ancestral memory. In the Nigerian situation, this perspective aligns with Chika Okeke-Agulu's (2015) investigation of "natural synthesis" in postcolonial artists - a positive integration of indigenous art forms and Western method to convey cultural independence. For female artists, decoloniality is accomplished through the utilization of non-traditional medium and the subversion of normal academic expectations connected with the male-dominated studio tradition.

In this way, the nude is elevated beyond the level of representational subject matter, instead constituting an ideographic site wherein artists mediate colonial histories, counteract moral conservatism, and seize control over visual discourses that encircle womanhood. These paradigms together enable a nuanced understanding of form, medium, and meaning. They depart from hegemonic paradigms of Western feminist and modernist critiques, refocusing attention on culturally situated practices of representation.

Oguiibe (1995) accuses the imposition of European aesthetical hierarchies onto African modernism and contends that African artists are involved in a "culture game" whereby they must negotiate between external expectation and actual cultural realities.

Decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo argue that modernity has always been based on a colonial difference, a logic of exclusion of non-Western ways of being and seeing. To them, form and medium are not politically neutral; they carry worldviews and power relations. The negotiation is particularly prominent in the discourse of Nigerian modernism. Okeke-Agulu (2015), in his study titled *Postcolonial Modernism*, charts the efforts of Nigerian artists in the mid-twentieth century to decolonize visual representation through the premise of the "natural synthesis." Artists such as Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Demas Nwoko knowingly engaged with European methodologies and fused these with Igbo and Yoruba visual modes, thereby developing hybrid aesthetics addressed to postcolonial independence and identity.

Though Okeke-Agulu concentrates primarily on male artists, his theoretical model highlights the ideological roles of medium and form in postcolonial art and their potential deployment against aesthetic hegemony. In this regard, the nude female figure - so entrenched in colonial and patriarchal art traditions - takes on a highly contentious topic in Nigerian art. Whereas Western academic training reduced the nude to a formal exercise in human anatomy and proportion, its reception in Nigeria has frequently been tense. Ogbechie (2008), in an essay on Ben Enwonwu, highlights the conflict between the artist's academic training and Nigeria's moral conservatism. In his opinion, Enwonwu's nudes, though masterful in their technique, were routinely met with scandal, echoing the broader cultural discomfort with public nudity, especially female nudity across much of Nigeria. This discomfort, borne of both local moral tradition and imported Christian modesty from the colonial era, has meant that the nude has had little place in mainstream Nigerian art criticism and exhibition spaces.

At the same time, though, female Nigerian artists have utilized the nude to resist hegemonic discourse and redeem the female body from objectification, research on these kinds of artists is limited. Although there are African feminist scholars, who have asserted female prominence in African aesthetic traditions, scholarly research does not often examine how such traditions are expressed in the material and formal modes used by contemporary female artists such as Ngozi Omeje Ezema, who uses the nude as a thematic concern as well as a political statement. Ngozi Omeje Ezema is a Nigerian installation artist and sculptor whose practice often investigates the cultural, emotional, and psychological aspects of the female body. Her works offer critical commentary on the objectification and commodification of the female body, issues that are common in both global and African systems. Omeje's practice is centred on the notion that the body, especially the female body, possesses great agency; yet this agency has been continually stifled by patriarchal and colonial structures. Her artworks are usually presented as images of animals and objects, which become metaphorical and symbolic in meaning and value.

Similarly, Ezema employs clear nylon yarn to suspend ceramic pieces, which collectively build up to create a complete sculpture. The artist involves the perception of the viewer and invites audience participation with her installations.

Using her own life experiences as a point of departure, her work deals with issues of identity, family, and the female body. She frequently refers to the concept of the vessel in its many interpretations, borrowing from the shapes and materials of nature, along with other repurposed materials.

Omeje is most renowned for her sculptural depictions of the female form, achieved through clay and other mixed media. Her pieces frequently entail fragmentation or distortion of the human form, both portraying the physical as well as the multifaceted emotional and psychological dynamics of the female within a patriarchal society.

### **Ngozi Omeje Ezema's "Leaf Series"**

Ngozi Omeje Ezema's "Leaf Series" is a profound examination of the complexities of the female experience, utilizing symbolic use of natural material, mainly clay. Suspended and complex, the shapes dictate the sequence, recalling motifs of vulnerability, strength, and resilience especially with regards to femininity and identity. In the series, the leaf is a fitting symbol for fragility and impermanence, frequently linked with the feminine experience in a wide variety of cultural contexts. Leaves are ultimate transients; they grow, go through changes, and eventually break off from their stems, exhibiting the variety of women's existence and experience at different phases of their lives. Leaves also represent concepts of growth, reawakening, and reinvention, though, qualities that fit the cyclical process of the female body. The leaf holds cultural value in most African societies, commonly symbolizing life cycles, fertility, and commitment to tradition. Using this symbol, Ezema undertakes a metaphysical analysis of the female body placing it firmly in the frameworks of nature.

Ezema uses clay - terracotta - to create the leaves, a material that introduces texture to the symbolic depth of the piece. Terracotta is a significant material in African art, representing earth, heritage, and female power. By creating leaves from this material, Ezema ties her piece to the earth, reaffirming the connection between the female and nature. The suspended quality of the leaves in her artwork is a visual metaphor for the precariousness of women's roles in society. The leaves seem to be floating, emphasizing their delicacy but also suggesting that they are being held in position by invisible forces just as women are so often defined by unseen social pressures and expectations. Ezema's 'Leaf Series' challenges conventional depictions of the female body, tending to prioritize abstract and metaphysical imagery over literal, corporeal representation. The suspended and fragmented forms express a fractured sense of identity and femininity, synopsising individual and collective experience for the female. Ezema's Leaf series foregrounds her continued investigation of the leaf symbol as a fertile visual motif laden with emotional metaphor. For Ezema, the leaf symbol exists as a state of being a transient subject whose physical properties symbolically signify rites of passage and the attendant states of liminality. The inherent qualities of leaves in her recent artworks become a formal and narrative means to engage themes surrounding the female body. In their gathered and suspended condition, the leaf motifs function simultaneously as both the signifier and the signified content. They not only mimic forms but also interrupt, delineate, and energize spaces. Ezema's installations are capable of rapidly transitioning from a position of stillness to one of vibrant motion. Furthermore, they convey a profound aesthetic that highlights endless possibilities propelled by the spirit of experimentation. Her installations invite audiences to consider the emotional labour, pain, and strength that women routinely and silently experience as they negotiate gender conventions and societal norms rooted in patriarchy. Additionally, the vulnerability and impermanence of leaves enact the tenuous equilibrium women must strike as they balance family demands, work obligations, and personal ambitions, confronting obstacles that seem insurmountable but are faced every day with unassuming resilience. Omeje's work is fundamentally feminist in its tenor, questioning how social institutions trap women into exigent roles and restrict their autonomy of expression and agency.



Plate I: Ngozi Omeje Ezema, *the leaf series*, 2020, terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal, source: <https://ko-artspace.com>



Plate II: Ngozi Omeje Ezema, *the leaf series*, 2020, terracotta, acrylic, monofilament fishing line, metal, source: <https://ko-artspace.com>

The fractured quality of her art implies a break with the classical ideal norms that commodify African and Western women. The displaced and manipulated images of the female in her works prompt the viewer to re-examine her visions of female body and beauty and to ask oneself to consider the historical oppressions of the female gender in domestic and public spaces. By situating the body once more in an instant of displacement as well as redemption, Omeje's art draws attention to the necessity of the body as a point of departure for feminist liberation. In her art, she employs decolonial aesthetics to disrupt colonial visual norms that tend to render the African female body as passive and sexualized. Her deconstruction of the female body in her art is an extension of the broader process of decolonization, retrieving the body, identity, and culture that the colonial had tried to exterminate.

#### **Nnenna Okore: Form, Medium, and the Corporeal Metaphor**

Nnenna Okore occupies a unique position within Nigerian modern and contemporary art because her practice, though primarily abstract, enters into critical dialogue with the discourse of the female body. Unlike artists whose representations of the nude rely on anatomical fidelity and visual presence, Okore's practice disperses the body into textures, folds, and sculptural surfaces. Her installations and wall-mounted pieces resonate with corporeality not through figuration but through material evocation. In this way, her work complicates the notion of the "nude" by challenging assumptions that the body must be visibly rendered to be aesthetically constructed.

Okore consistently works with organic and biodegradable materials - burlap, jute, rope, handmade paper, clay, cheesecloth, and even recycled newspapers - which she twists, braids, dyes, and stitches into large-scale installations. These tactile processes metaphorically echo the skin, veins, muscles, and folds of the human body. For example, in *Agbogho* (2009), a work whose title translates from Igbo as "young maiden," Okore engages femininity both linguistically and materially. The wrinkled, draped textures of burlap resemble garments that cling to and conceal the body, while simultaneously evoking fragile flesh and epidermal surfaces. The formal choices in this piece raise aesthetic questions about vulnerability, concealment, and the politics of bodily display, themes central to the artistic construction of the nude. Unlike Western art traditions, which often frame the nude as an idealized object of vision and desire, *Agbogho* gestures toward the tension between exposure and protection, making the viewer acutely aware of the body's fragility (Okore, 2010).



Plate III: Nnenna Okore, *Agbogho*, 2009. Clay and Burlap. 49 x 28 x 4 inches  
Source: <https://smocontemporaryart.com>

### Form

At first glance, *Agbogho* appears as a rippling, undulating surface composed of concentric spirals and vertical linear elements. The composition is organic, resembling a garment, skin folds, or a textured body covering. The wavy contours suggest movement, like fabric draped over a torso, evoking the female body without literal figuration. The repetition of spirals and lines reads as hair, skin texture, or bodily ornamentation, allowing the piece to stand as a metaphorical nude—present through allusion rather than direct depiction. By emphasizing folds, creases, and tactile rhythm, Okore highlights the corporeal qualities of form that are often central to nude representation.

### Medium

Okoré uses clay and burlap, materials associated with both fragility and durability. Burlap, a coarse fabric linked to trade, packaging, and domestic use, carries connotations of labour, modesty, and everyday life. Clay, in turn, is elemental - earth-bound, malleable, and historically tied to women's craft traditions in Nigeria, especially pottery. Together, these materials elevate "ordinary" feminine-coded media into monumental sculpture. The spiralled clay rolls on the borders of the piece create a rhythmic pattern that can be read as adornment which echoes hair curls, beads, or body ornamentation traditionally used to enhance female beauty. Thus, the medium itself becomes a metaphor for the body's surface: porous, layered, and shaped by cultural labour.

### Meaning

The title *Agbogho* - Igbo for "young maiden" - grounds the piece explicitly in the female body. Yet rather than presenting a nude figure in the Western sense (a body exposed for the viewer's gaze), Okore reframes nudity as *suggestion*. The body is abstracted into textures and patterns that evoke vulnerability, modesty, and ornament simultaneously. This reconfiguration of the nude resists the colonial and patriarchal framing of African women as objects of desire or ethnographic curiosity. Instead, the female body is represented through material memory, ecological processes, and cultural codes of textile and clay craft.

In the context of Nigerian modern art, *Agbogho* offers a decolonial interpretation of the nude: the body is not revealed through flesh but *constructed* through organic materiality and abstraction. Formally, it emphasizes folds and drapery rather than anatomical detail; materially, it invokes feminine-coded labour and indigenous traditions; meaningfully, it transforms the nude from a site of objectification into a metaphor of resilience, identity, and cultural continuity.

In summary, *Agbogho* embodies the aesthetic construction of the nude female body not by showing it directly, but by abstracting it into folds of clay and burlap that stand in for skin, garment, and adornment. It exemplifies how form, medium, and meaning intersect in Okore's work to challenge and expand the Nigerian modernist discourse on the female body.

Her monumental installation *Osimili* (2017), exhibited at the Biennale of Sydney, further illustrates this bodily metaphor. Constructed from dyed jute, wire, and cheesecloth, the cascading, flowing forms resemble hair, drapery, or skin in motion. Here, the body is abstracted into a choreography of materials, its presence articulated not through literal outline but through rhythm, density, and texture. The piece embodies a corporeality that is fragmented and dispersed, aligning with feminist and decolonial critiques of the nude that resist centralized, objectifying representation. By suggesting bodily presence through absence, Okore reconfigures the aesthetic vocabulary available to Nigerian modern art, moving away from the figural and into the material symbolic.



**Plate IV: Nnenna Okore, *Down to Earth*, 2017, Installation (Osimili series), Burlap, dye and wire, Varied Dimensions. Source - <https://www.jenkinsjohnsongallery.com>**



**Plate V: Nnenna Okore, Body Language, 2015, , Installation (Osimili series), Burlap, dye and wire, Varied Dimensions.**

Source - <https://www.jenkinsjohnsongallery.com>

### **Form: Abstraction and the Evocation of the Body**

Okore's installations, *Osimili* (2017) and the red-hued fibre works exhibited internationally, demonstrate a deep interest in form as both material structure and symbolic gesture. These works often consist of expansive, suspended sculptures made from dyed fibres, textiles, and wire mesh, arranged in cascading, wave-like configurations. Although non-figurative, their forms unmistakably evoke the folds, drapery, and undulations of the human body, particularly the female nude.

The hanging, porous structures suggest skin and flesh, while their concave and convex surfaces recall womb-like enclosures or cavities of the body. The monumental scale engulfs the viewer, offering a bodily experience rather than a mere visual representation. Thus, form in Okore's work is not mimetic but associative; it echoes the body through abstraction, translating corporeality into rhythm, texture, and movement. In this way, she reimagines the nude not as an exposed surface but as a space of sensorial and phenomenological encounter.

This aligns with broader tendencies in Nigerian modern art, where artists have sought to negotiate the representation of the body as both cultural signifier and modernist form (Dike & Oyelola, 1998). Yet Okore's abstraction destabilizes the authority of the gaze, emphasizing instead the tactile, processual, and intimate qualities of form.

### **Medium: Materiality, Femininity, and the Politics of Craft**

Medium is central to Okore's reconfiguration of the nude. She works with fibres, burlap, jute, handmade paper, and found textiles such as materials traditionally relegated to the domain of craft, recycling, and domestic labour. By manipulating, dyeing, and layering these materials into monumental sculptural installations, Okore elevates what is often considered "low" or "feminine" work into the realm of high art.

The red and earthen tones she frequently employs carry visceral associations with the body: blood, flesh, hair, and skin. In particular, the red fibre installation evokes menstruation, fertility, and reproductive cycles - biological realities of womanhood that remain underexplored in the visual canon of Nigerian modern art, which has historically emphasized the aestheticized, eroticized nude.

Okore's emphasis on fibre also references the cultural practices of weaving, dyeing, and textile production in Nigeria, traditions often carried out by women. In reclaiming these mediums, she not only asserts their legitimacy as vehicles for fine art but also aligns them with the politics of embodiment. Here, medium becomes metaphor: the fragility, porosity, and organic decay of her materials parallel the temporal and cyclical nature of the female body. This process-based approach contrasts sharply with the polished, illusionistic surfaces of oil on canvas through which the nude body has conventionally been constructed. In Okore's case, the body is not painted, framed, or fixed; it is woven, unravelled, and suspended, emphasizing mutability and transformation over permanence.

### **Meaning: The Nude as Corporeal Metaphor**

The meaning of Okore's work emerges from her refusal to replicate the Western canon of the nude, which has historically objectified the female body as a site of visual pleasure for the male gaze (Berger, 1972). Instead, her installations propose a decolonial alternative: the body as fragmented, abstracted, and dispersed into material traces.

By engaging with the nude through evocation rather than depiction, Okore displaces the voyeuristic gaze and foregrounds embodiment as lived experience. Her installations function as corporeal metaphors - spaces that

conjure the textures, vulnerabilities, and strengths of the body without presenting it as spectacle. This is particularly significant in a Nigerian art historical context, where the female nude has often been deployed as an aestheticized symbol of cultural continuity or modernist sophistication.

Okore's approach challenges this legacy by insisting that the female body is not simply a surface for cultural or national inscription but a dynamic, ecological, and sensorial entity. Her installations thus transform the nude into a site of cultural memory, ecological consciousness, and gendered critique. They echo feminist art practices globally, which have sought to reclaim the body from patriarchal representations, while also remaining grounded in Nigerian material traditions and cultural references.

### **Okore in the Context of Nigerian Modern Art**

Situating Okore's work within Nigerian modern art highlights the generational and methodological shifts that shape the aesthetic construction of the nude female body. For artists of the Zaria School, such as Uche Okeke or Yusuf Grillo, the female figure was often stylized within the framework of natural synthesis, merging indigenous motifs with modernist principles. For Enwonwu, the nude female figure symbolized both beauty and modern identity, serving as an allegory of cultural hybridity (Okeke-Agulu, 2015).

By contrast, Okore avoids figuration entirely, embracing instead the symbolic and abstract. Her practice extends the discourse of the nude beyond representation into materiality and process. This shift reflects both the influence of global contemporary art and the urgency of decolonial practices in African art today, where artists resist inherited paradigms and propose alternative ways of constructing meaning around the body.

Nnenna Okore's installations exemplify how form, medium, and meaning intersect in the reconfiguration of the nude female body in Nigerian modern art. Through abstract forms that evoke the corporeal without representing it, through fiber-based mediums that foreground domestic and feminine labour, and through meanings that resist objectification in favour of metaphor and embodiment, Okore transforms the nude into a decolonial and feminist aesthetic strategy. Her work underscores that the female body in Nigerian art need not be fixed in representation but can be reimagined through material, abstraction, and process as a dynamic site of cultural memory, ecological reflection, and gendered critique. In doing so, she expands the terrain of Nigerian modern art, demonstrating that the aesthetic construction of the nude can emerge as much from texture and form as from flesh and figure.

The medium itself is central to Okore's construction of meaning. Her deliberate use of "low" or humble materials references textile traditions, weaving practices, and recycling cultures that are historically gendered feminine. These labour-intensive techniques such as twisting, knotting, stitching are associated with domestic craft, but in Okore's hands, they are transformed into monumental forms exhibited in galleries and biennales. This elevation of gendered material practices into the fine art context becomes a feminist intervention. It suggests that the nude can be constructed not only through the direct representation of flesh but through metaphors of labour and materiality. The body, then, is signified by texture and surface, by the traces of the hand that weave and knot the form into being.

This approach represents a profound decolonial alternative to the Western canon of the nude. Instead of reproducing the body as an object of visual pleasure, Okore reimagines it as a tactile, fragmented, and ecological entity. Her works thus resist the colonial history in which African female bodies were frequently objectified and catalogued, whether in ethnographic photography or in modernist primitivist painting. By grounding her practice in organic materials and indigenous processes, Okore inserts cultural memory and ecological consciousness into the discourse of the nude. The body becomes less about erotic visibility and more about continuity, resilience, and transformation.

In this way, the meaning of Okore's work lies in its refusal of representational fixity. The nude female body is not reproduced, but reconfigured through abstraction, materiality, and metaphor. Her art demonstrates that form need not be mimetic to be corporeal; medium need not be traditional "high art" material to construct profound meaning; and the female body, even when absent, remains a site of negotiation in Nigerian modern art. By dispersing the body into folds of burlap, cascades of cloth, and layers of recycled fibre, Okore expands the terrain of how femininity and embodiment can be imagined. Ultimately, her practice shows that abstraction and material process can be equally potent as figuration in constructing the aesthetics of the female body, positioning her among the most innovative voices in contemporary Nigerian art.

### **Discussion and Findings**

The discourse on the nude female body in Nigerian modern art reveals a layered interplay between representation, materiality, and cultural meaning. Historically, the nude entered Nigerian art through the dual influence of indigenous aesthetics and Western academic traditions introduced during colonial encounters. While male modernists such as Ben Enwonwu and Bruce Onobrakpeya often rendered the nude as allegory for national identity, cultural purity, or aesthetic beauty, these representations risked reproducing the male gaze, positioning the female form as passive subject rather than active agent.

Contemporary artists such as Nnenna Okore and Ngozi Omeje Ezema destabilize this trajectory by shifting attention away from literal figuration toward material abstraction and metaphor. Okore's installations, constructed from burlap, rope, and jute, reframe corporeality through texture, folds, and tactile rhythm. Her works resist objectification by allowing the viewer to *sense* the body through movement and materiality rather than through eroticized depiction. Ezema's *Leaf Series*, composed of suspended clay forms, similarly reframes the body through fragility and ecological metaphor. The delicacy of her ceramic leaves invokes associations with breath, skin, and the cycles of life, positioning the female body as both transient and regenerative.

Both practices highlight the critical role of medium in reshaping meaning. Fiber and clay, often dismissed as "low" or "craft" materials, are elevated into monumental forms that command attention. These material choices evoke traditions of weaving, pottery, and domestic labour, practices historically gendered as feminine. By appropriating and transforming these mediums, Okore and Ezema assert a decolonial critique of aesthetic hierarchies, situating women's labour and ecological consciousness at the centre of modern artistic discourse.

This shift demonstrates how the nude in Nigerian modern art is no longer bound to literal representation but can be reimagined as metaphorical, ecological, and political. Through abstraction, process, and medium, contemporary women artists create a counter-narrative that dislodges the objectifying gaze and foregrounds the body as a site of resilience, cultural memory, and agency.

From this study, several key findings emerge:

**a) The Nude as a Dynamic Construct**

The nude female body in Nigerian modern art is not a static form but a mutable construct shaped by historical, cultural, and artistic interventions. Its meaning shifts depending on context, from nationalist allegory in early modernism to feminist and ecological metaphor in contemporary practice. Nigerian artists do not simply inherit the Western motif of the nude; rather, they reinterpret it to challenge objectification, reassert local aesthetics, and foreground issues of female autonomy, spirituality, and cultural identity.

**b) Medium as Meaning**

The use of unconventional materials by artists such as Okore (fiber, burlap) and Ezema (clay, ceramics) demonstrates that medium itself functions as a language of embodiment. Material choices carry gendered, cultural, and ecological connotations that redefine how the nude is constructed and perceived.

**c) Abstraction as Resistance**

By avoiding direct figuration, contemporary women artists resist objectification and reframe the female body as experiential rather than visual. Abstraction allows the body to be evoked through folds, textures, and organic forms that emphasize process and metaphor.

**d) Decolonial Intervention**

Both Okoré and Ezema challenge Western canons of the nude by reclaiming African material traditions and situating the body within local cultural and ecological frameworks. This decolonial approach positions Nigerian women's art as a critical counterpoint to Eurocentric ideals of beauty and representation.

**e) Plurality of Feminine Aesthetics**

The divergent approaches of Okore and Ezema - one emphasizing tactile density and resilience, the other fragility and transience - illustrate that the nude female body in Nigerian art is not monolithic but plural, accommodating multiple aesthetic strategies and cultural meanings.

## Conclusion

The aesthetic construction of the nude female body in Nigerian modern art underscores the complex intersections of form, medium, and meaning within the nation's artistic traditions. Historically, the nude has functioned as a contested site: appropriated within colonial and postcolonial narratives, it was often filtered through Western ideals of beauty and representation. Nigerian modernist painters and sculptors of the mid-twentieth century drew upon this legacy, sometimes adopting the nude as a symbol of cultural renewal or allegorical femininity. Yet, the risk of objectification remained, as the female form was frequently positioned as both muse and metaphor.

Contemporary interventions by female artists such as Nnenna Okore and Ngozi Omeje Ezema disrupt and expand this framework. Okore's installations, woven from burlap, jute, and fibre, abstract corporeality through texture, folds, and organic movement. Her works shift attention away from literal figuration, foregrounding instead the sensory and tactile dimensions of embodiment. Similarly, Ezema's *Leaf Series* transforms clay into suspended constellations of fragile, leaf-like forms that metaphorically echo skin, breath, and cycles of renewal. These fragile yet resilient installations suggest the female body as a site of metamorphosis—delicate yet enduring—thereby reframing nudity in terms of vulnerability, resilience, and continuity with nature.

Both artists highlight the centrality of medium as a carrier of meaning. Okore's use of fibre invokes domestic and communal labour, while Ezema's manipulation of clay emphasizes material memory, fragility, and regeneration. In their practices, the nude is not staged as an exposed body but evoked through organic metaphor, material

presence, and abstraction. This approach reclaims the female body from the objectifying male gaze and situates it within a broader discourse of decolonization, in which African women artists assert new vocabularies of form and meaning.

The broader implication is that the nude female body in Nigerian modern art is not a fixed form but a dynamic construct shaped by historical legacies, social transformations, and artistic agency. From modernist renderings of allegorical femininity to contemporary material explorations that privilege abstraction, the nude reflects shifting discourses of gender, embodiment, and cultural identity.

Conclusively, the study of the nude in Nigerian modern art highlights how women artists such as Okore and Ezema expand the thematic possibilities of the body. By privileging abstraction, materiality, and ecological metaphor, they dislodge the nude from objectification and reposition it as a vessel of memory, resilience, and philosophical reflection. Their works affirm that the nude continues to evolve as a critical site of negotiation—between tradition and innovation, between corporeality and metaphor, and between local identities and global discourses of modern art.

### Recommendations for Further Research

This study demonstrates that the nude female body in Nigerian modern art is a fluid and evolving construct, shaped by shifts in form, medium, and meaning. However, further research is needed to broaden and deepen this discourse. First, comparative studies between male and female artists could illuminate how gendered perspectives shape the construction of the nude. While women artists like Nnenna Okore and Ngozi Omeje Ezema reimagine the body through abstraction and materiality, male artists often engage the nude through figuration and symbolism. Examining these differences systematically would provide richer insights into the politics of representation. Second, cross-cultural analyses between Nigerian artists and those from other African contexts such as Ghana, Senegal, or South Africa - could reveal how regional traditions and colonial legacies differently inflect the construction of the nude. This would situate Nigerian practices within a broader Pan-African conversation on embodiment and decolonization.

Third, there is need for further exploration of the nude in new media and performance art. With the increasing prominence of photography, video art, and digital installations in Nigeria's contemporary scene, the body is now being constructed through interactive and performative modes. These emerging practices could significantly expand the vocabulary of the nude.

Finally, ethnographic and reception-based studies could investigate how audiences in Nigeria interpret contemporary representations of the female body. Understanding the social, cultural, and gendered dynamics of reception would provide critical insights into the ways meaning is negotiated beyond the studio and gallery spaces. Overall, future research should continue to destabilize singular narratives of the nude and highlight its plurality across gender, media, geography, and audience. In doing so, scholarship can more fully account for the complexity of the female body as both subject and metaphor in Nigerian art.

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