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Towards the Creation of Contemporary African Landscape Art

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ABSTRACT

Landscape refers to all the physical natural features of an area. These features have been changing under the influence of natural forces and human activities. They have been depicted by artists across the world over time as landscape art, and can provide a basis for historical inquiry. Landscape art has also been used as a tool to express fears of increased industrialization and ecological disasters. However, the representation of the landscape in Africa is mainly impressionistic without any implicit ideology. This study therefore aims to use landscape art as a tool to call attention to the problems of the physical African landscape, especially changes due to degradation and fragmentation of the land. To achieve this, the study innovates the use of parched earth and tree rings. Locally sourced red earth was applied over wood canvas and exposed to heat from portable electric heater. This resulted in similar natural parched earth patterns, over which was then applied the tree rings pattern using concentrated acrylic. This creation encompasses ideas about the land and drought, to deviate from the typical images of landscape painting in Africa, often depicting imaginary scenery.

Mots clés: African Landscape Art; Earth; Tree rings; Environment; Drought.

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1. Introduction

Art can be seen as a nature or a creation; it is a visual or creative recreation of the beauty that appears in real life (Lasap, 2022). Art in any form or media, can be described as a means of representing ideas, recording events, tracing physical advancements, as well as capturing moments and feelings inspired by nature and human activities. (Inwood, 2008). In this context, landscape art, which involves the depiction of natural scenery, can function as a tool for historic documentation of the physical

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environment, validating the dynamics of human experiences and environmental changes overtime (Ajiboye and Fajuyigbe, 2015). Typically, landscape art (also called landscape painting) captures mountains, valleys, bodies of water, fields, forests, coasts, (with or without) man-made structures and people (Blumberg, 2020). The depiction of landscape art has played a major role in the creation of cultural identities, the concept of which commonly refers to the way of life of a people, or a feeling of belonging to a group in which there are a number of shared attributes including knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals and laws (Wen and White, 2020). In first describing landscape, J. Hills Miller (in Foster 2008), acknowledges that it (landscape) is not a pre-existing thing in itself, but is made into a humanly meaningful space, by the living which takes place within it. According to The Cultural Landscape Foundation, landscapes generally provide scenic, economic, ecological, social, recreational, and educational opportunities to help communities better perceive and understand themselves (The Cultural Landscape Foundation, 2020). In fact landscape, as a notion in the English Language, in its first three hundred years was seen as a cultural practice that worked explicitly to represent human cultures and their integral relationship with the natural world (Blankenship, 2011). Its characterization and representation in paintings as landscape art, has always formed an integral part of societal ideals. In the West, it was used to portray historical or religious messages, depicting settings for human activity (Visual Arts Cork, 2022), or attaching metaphorical meaning to the natural elements. By depicting mythological or biblical stories set in elaborate natural settings, the landscape artists of the era were able to emphasize the power of the divine over humanity (Blumberg, 2020), as can be seen in the background settings of religious, mythological and secular paintings. In China, and indeed parts of Asia, landscape paintings lie at the very heart of culture and is closely related to politics, philosophy, literature, and religion. It emphasizes the important interaction human beings have with nature, and the harmony maintained if humans see themselves as an intrinsic part of it (Wen and White, 2020).

The nature of landscape art has evolved over the centuries, from being unacknowledged as a genre of art, to becoming the key subject of some of the world's most recognizable paintings, and as a medium capable of expressing ideological, political and philosophical values. Indeed, within the visual arts, the landscape art genre is now instantly recognizable, identified by its subject matter (which is landscape), representing nature itself, taking the land and the natural environment as its main theme or focal point (Newham, 2010). However, in Africa, the representation of the landscape has continued to be mainly impressionistic without any implicit ideology, often depicting imaginary scenery of outdoor family life or wild life and sunsets by the river. There is the need for African landscape artists to create an ideology with their creations, even if it be propagandist (Sarapik and Ventsel, 2017), but can provoke conversations about the reality of the artist and the depth of meaning in his creation.

In line with the foregoing, the current study seeks to first underscore the notion of African Landscape Art and then creatively depict the contemporary physical African landscape, with a focus on some of its associated issues, including changes due to degradation and fragmentation of land as a result of natural processes. To achieve this, the study innovates the use of parched earth and tree rings, provoking conversations about drought in parts of Africa. With the incidence of climate change due to rising global temperatures linked to increased heat, drought, insect outbreaks, declining water supplies, reduced agriculture yields among others (Masih, 2014), the resulting creation, captures the impacts (of climate change) on the land. The result of this creative process is shown in the Appendix.

2. Methodology

This study sought to use landscape art as a tool to call attention to the problems of the physical African landscape, more specifically, the changes due to degradation and fragmentation of the land brought about by the incidence of climate change and rising global temperatures. To achieve this, the study innovates the use of parched earth and tree rings. Locally sourced red earth was applied over wood canvas and exposed to heat from portable electric heater. This resulted in similar natural parched earth patterns, over which was then applied the tree rings pattern using concentrated acrylic. Tree rings are a recording of the number of years of a trees existence, including its 'experiences' - through fire and drought, as well as plague and diseases, all of these are recorded in the rings over several years. This creation encompasses ideas about the land and drought, to deviate from the typical images of landscape painting in Africa, often depicting imaginary scenery without any implicit ideology. The foregoing notwithstanding, an extensive search was (first) conducted to identify literature on African

Landscape Art, and provide a theoretical basis for the study. Queries were run using open, publicly accessible search platforms, with the keywords "Landscape Art" and "African Contemporary Landscape Art". Emphasis was placed on published journal articles and books that address the issues of landscape representation; results from established art blogs and web pages of landscape artists were also considered. Query results were limited to publications and articles in the English language only. All results were further refined by simplified random sampling based on the aim of the study, eliminating results about landscape architecture and outdoor land art.

3. Review and discussions

From review of existing literature, it was found that, although artists have been painting landscapes since the ancient times (The Getty Education, 2022), 'landscape art' was first established as a genre, in Chinese Art around the 4th century, and much later in Western Art around the 16th century. However, there is a dearth of information on what can be termed 'African Landscape Art', and whereas the ideologies behind the works of Chinese and western landscape artists are easily perceived, creations from African landscape artists often only communicate an aesthetic appeal.

3.1 Chinese and Western landscape art

Chinese landscape painting comprises three elements - mountains, rivers, and waterfalls, hence the Chinese name 'shan-shui', loosely translating to 'mountain-water' for landscape art. In fact, mountains are at the heart of Chinese landscape paintings. They are believed to be the place where the immortals reside because they touch the heavens. Chinese landscape art had a huge influence on the art of the surrounding Asian countries including Japan and Korea (HyeSeung Lee 2016). However over time, Japanese landscape paintings took on a unique identity of its own, introducing more color, bigger human figures, and the unique Japanese value of 'wabi-sabi', which expresses a sense of imperfect beauty peculiar to the Japanese culture (Astra WordPress, 2022). In Korea, the Chinese style of landscape painting remained dominant in the Joseon era until the mid-17th century when 'true-view' landscape art began to take hold, and Koreans became conscious of their own cultural identity. The 'true-view' presented scenery that truly existed in Korea (Asia Society, 2022).

In Western Art, landscape typically featured as the background of paintings, ancillary to a main theme, or as a setting for human outdoor activity. The genre has developed over time and in several expressions:

- From the beautiful background scenery of religious/mythological paintings (such as the "*Fall of Icarus*") in the 16th century,
- The exquisite pastoral outdoor setting for religious themed paintings (such as the "*Landscape with the Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah*") in the 17th century,
- The scenic paintings that portray the divine harmony of nature and a calm confidence in the prosperity of the times (such as the "*The White House Chelsea*") in the 18th century,
- The depiction of man and nature existing in perfect harmony, with naturalistic out-of-doors paintings inspired by the natural outdoor environment, seeding pictures with (historical) actions and places (such as "*The Hudson River*") in the 19th century, and
- To the photorealistic creation and interpretations of the land through pictorialist effect that showed formal compositions of close-up, cropped views of the city with industrial buildings, crystalline seascapes as well as urban townscapes (such as "*The House by the railroad*") in the 20th century (Visual Arts Cork, 2022).

Indeed, through the evolution of the landscape art genre, it has continued to capture and communicate the experiences of landscape artists over time. Landscape artist Song Chen, uses soil, or 'earth ink' to express the spiritual nature of her creation. She uses her creation as a tool to connect with the natural landscape. Her works have strong ancient cultural connotations with the soil also symbolizing the union of energy and divinity, the communion of the unity of man and nature, as well as providing insight into the formation of the universe. Her creations involve the use of black ink, linked to her belief that the sky is black, arguing that the blue of the sky is due to the diffraction of light in the depths of the universe (Art Burning Art Explosion, 2021). For other landscape artist, like Rachel Hirabayashi, her creations are images or ideas filtered through 'emotional memory'. They show

strength with color, texture and composition. Her technique of layering pigments, bring out a sense of veiled stillness and of timelessness. The themes of her paintings include general landscapes, human settlements within a landscape, landscape environments that have been lost or changed through the use of the land, as well as changes on the land brought about by human activities. Her palette divulge arid plains, the diverse qualities of light and the forceful yet sinuous nature of water. Most of the visual forms from where she draws inspiration are based on a memory, something that has made an impression upon her either visually or emotionally (Moffat, 2013). Gail de Jong, she uses traditional oil painting techniques as a way of expressing the essence of her creation, with multi layered surfaces built up with oil paint on canvas or aged metal surfaces, signifying the geological structure of the land. The surfaces of her paintings appear to move through layers of culture and history, allowing multiple readings to her creation. She created her works from the events of ancient histories, weather events, as well as the activities of gold mining in the 19th century, around the Nevis Valley, the Carrick Range and Bannockburn. Living in that region and walking the land daily, allowed for her imagination to flourish and the emergence of visual stories. Consequently, in her creations, poetry and myth take precedence over perceived reality, and deeply felt images of a unique world emerge (Hullabaloo, 2022). German artist Anselm Kiefer, his creations were from Germany's post-war identity, history, and mythology, his work being linked to Neo-expressionism. Kiefer's large-scale paintings were characterized by a combination of textured pigment with organic matter, metal, and lead. His landscape scenes provoke arguments from the past as well as recent controversial issues, surrounding literature, politics, religion and philosophy (Tate, 2022), (Delagrangue, 2022).

3.2 African landscape art

In Africa, the limitations on the research on 'African Landscape Art' notwithstanding, expressions of culture and art are abundant within Africa, with large amounts of cultural diversity being found not only across different countries but also within single countries. However, descriptions of landscape art in these countries do not appear to follow any implied or even explicit ideology, and are often described by vibrancy of color, or the technique of brush strokes. Indeed, the art scene in Africa is characterized by a dynamic list of artists whose creations capture their own unique and personal experiences.

In South Africa for instance, most landscape paintings show areas where the artist has travelled through and/or lived in. Occasionally an artist will create a landscape scene based on a verbal or written report, or a landscape of his or her imagination. At other times, the creation becomes the end result of a process that involves the artist's direct experience of a place, combined with personal memories and ideas about it (Newham, 2010). In East Africa, landscape art broadly seems to capture cattle, wildlife/reserves, and in West Africa, the landscape paintings show scenes from nature or the painters natural environment. For individual landscape artist like Jacob Hendrik Pierneef, born in South Africa to Dutch immigrant parents, his creations were greatly influenced by post-impressionist trends in Europe, focusing on the mathematical logic that followed architectural projections with impressionist techniques and geometrically organized compositions, representing nature in abstract angular geometric forms with different shades of blue. He also considered the decorative possibilities of his geometric experiments, and did not carry them to an abstract conclusion, but rather provided a unique definition of the artistic South African environment/landscape (Graham's gallery, 2020), (Newham, 2010). Maggie Laubser, mainly painted 'harvest paintings' that feature laborers working on the farm. This is perhaps due to her farming background and the tasks involved in sowing and harvesting crops. Her paintings depict the laboring class in a highly idealized and reductive way, with simplified images of people in patterns that correspond to the landscape around them, making them part of the pattern of the land. This simplified modeling and deliberate distortion has the effect of 'transforming the characters into symbolic, universal figures'. Thus her creation emphasizes their integral and agricultural function within the landscape. Indeed, by depicting farm laborers in such a generalized way, she is ignores the social reality of their lives, which was marked by poverty and social dispossession. Her paintings celebrate the virtue of a simple life of honest toil, but fail to acknowledge the black laborers' disempowered role and the reality that they are not cultivating their own land (Newham, 2010). For Nigerian artist Adeyemi Adenuga, his creation 'Oyo-Agunpopo hill', shows his understanding of the water color medium in depicting landscape - the hill with fresh and free flowing strokes indicating the

vegetation, and the clear sky. His work is direct, and although produced in black and white colors, his fresh and translucent application of the water color medium is not obscured. Ben Enwowu also painted naturalistic landscapes which were smoothly executed in rich colors. His landscape creations show a love for nature, filled with lush vegetation and palm trees with human figures who are most likely wood loggers found around the base of the trees (Ajiboye and Fajuyigbe, 2015).

3.2 Contemporary issues and artistic creation

The depiction of the changing natural environment by landscape artists over time continues to be at the core of landscape art. The current reality of global warming and climate change is one that respects no borders and the impacts are clear across continents (Archer, 2009).

Climate change is affecting the rainfall patterns in parts of eastern Uganda, resulting in landslides. In Kenya, wide rivers are now dried up valleys, the coastlines of Togo and Benin have receded due to soil erosion (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies - IFRC, 2022). There are several other places in Africa facing the challenges of drought. This impression of drought creates similar images in the minds of observers, regardless of their origin. Indeed, the 'natural' appearance of parched earth due to drought is distinct and instantly recognizable. Soil cracks naturally when its moisture content is reduced due to high temperatures or dry ambient conditions. These high temperatures can be from the incidence of global warming brought about directly or indirectly, by the activities of man on the land. To simulate these conditions in the studio, the author exposed locally sourced red earth, which was spread out on a wooden surface/plane to heat from commercially available electric heater (see figure 1 below), resulting to similar natural parched earth patterns.



Figure 1. Simulated parched earth pattern creation (source: author, 2022).

Over the parched earth was applied the tree rings pattern, the choice of which was based the knowledge that they are a recording of the number of years of a trees existence, including their 'experiences', i.e. whatever they have been through - fire and drought, plague and diseases, all of these are recorded in the rings. Several factors affect the growth of trees, their size, shape and color. The dark and finer rings represent hot conditions, while wider rings indicate wet seasons. Trees have lived through numerous climate changes, environmental changes and historical shifts. Indeed, trees are great at keeping records (Othman, 2017). In Africa and in other places where drought has occurred, the tree rings from trees in these areas will appear darker and finer due to long dry seasons or periods without water. Current study attempts to express this by using darker colors (see figure 2) to emulate the organic/biomorphic tree ring pattern. Trees are the main victims of industrialization and civilization - they provide food, medicine, clothes, the oxygen we need to survive, as well as shelter, both directly or indirectly, their importance cannot be overemphasized.



Figure 2. Tree ring patterns on parched earth (source: author, 2022).

The parched landscape background is a simulation of the natural effects of drought on the land due to climate change and human activities. The abstract tree ring images represent the times or period through which Africa has experienced drought, as indicated by the darker colors. The overall creation is to create awareness about the current environmental problems facing the African landscape.

The landscape creation raises the observers perceptive awareness to a level of experience in the land, the observation of soil cracks reveals an infinite world of reality in a common place. As the viewer is drawn more into the detail of the creation, the crack patterns take on a familiar natural formation. The viewer can then expand their vision to a scale where the image becomes an aerial view as the tree ring painting elevates from landscape background to the actual level of the viewers sight (see Appendix).

4. Conclusion

Landscape painting has been described as the depiction of the natural outdoor scenery in art. This natural scenery (also called the landscape), and its representation is the most complex conceptualization of our living environment, which is constantly changing under the influence of natural forces and as a result of human activity. This change has been captured by landscape artists over time.

New concepts and understanding of the landscape as well as our interaction with it, opens up new possibilities for contemporary landscape artists. Contemporary artists through their creation are able to provoke different dimensions, other viewpoints and ideas about the current issues facing the world, including the realities of climate change brought about by rising global temperatures, which impact can be seen on the land. Indeed, current realities are challenging existing concepts and notions about the way we interact with our landscape, as well as the changing notions of landscape representation which has opened up new possibilities for landscape art, as more and more landscape artist of these days, embrace new perspectives and innovations that have little to do with the traditional view of the countryside that has been thought of as landscape painting in the past. Indeed, while most images of landscapes are often enjoyed for their beauty or as a record of the painters experience, landscape artists now respond to fears of increased industrialization, the threat of global destruction, and ecological disasters. However, a close study of the early contemporary African artists who painted landscapes, revealed that their creations showed beauty and natural scenery, capturing geographical locations, as well as the rich traditions and diverse beauty of their locations. Common scenes like markets, village life, wildlife and nature have been the trend in most galleries, exhibition halls and art markets. But, the current reality of the African continent, and indeed the rest of the world, goes beyond these captured superficial aesthetics.

Landscape painting, directly or indirectly, involves history and documentation, as well as other approaches including the materiality that is associated with the surface of the painting (which also sometimes includes the relationship between the material and surface), as well as the conceptual understandings that has been formulated in relation to the painting, i.e. the kind of impression that the landscape painting constructs and refers to, in the mind of the observer. This is what the current study attempts to reveal. It is important to think about landscape painting in new ways, as well as in new circumstances. Current creations have been made to encompass ideas about the land and drought, to

deviate from the typical images of landscape painting often seen as natural, without any implicit ideology. In fact, the current study sought to present the problems of the physical African landscape, especially changes due to degradation and fragmentation of the land brought about as a result of both natural processes and human activities, with a focus on drought. Drought is a noteworthy cause of low agricultural profitability and of crop production vulnerability, which impact can be seen on the cracked or parched soil/earth, as well as on trees which we depend on for food, shelter and oxygen needed for survival. Naturally, soil cracks when its moisture content is reduced due to high temperatures or dry ambient conditions. To simulate these conditions in the studio, locally sourced red earth, which was spread out on a wooden surface/plane, was exposed to heat from commercially available electric heater. This resulted to similar natural parched earth patterns from drought, over which was then applied the tree rings pattern using concentrated acrylic. Tree rings are a recording of the number of years of a trees existence, including its experiences - through fire and drought, as well as plague and diseases, all of these are recorded in the rings over several years.

The look of the land, and the landscape being shown in most paintings was a result of the conditions the painters were exposed to. These conditions were represented in the painting by the way that the creation is portrayed. It is through this depiction that an interaction with nature is shown. The look of these landscape paintings also shows the aspirations and values of those that owned the land, or those who commissioned or viewed the paintings. Thus, wealthy patrons commissioned works that portrayed their vast acquisition of the land they occupied, hiding social relationships that were unequal and exploitative. While this reaction to landscape images is valuable and has had important and constructive outcomes, there is now the opportunity to think about landscape painting in different ways, to be a tool for change, and as a way to call attention to the realities of the times we live in. More awareness needs to be raised on the destruction of nature by man, as well as the effects of global warming on the environment. The creative arts research needs to break free from the traditional paradigm, and embrace the more complex nature of art projects as a tool for spiritual and mental awakening, the theme of the authors creative expression in the appendix.

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Appendix



Figure 1. Awakening 2022. Acrylics on earth 80"x 80"



Figure 2. Awakening 2022. Acrylics on earth 80"x 80"



Figure 3. Awakening 2022. Acrylics on earth 80"x 80"



Figure 4. Awakening 2022. Acrylics on earth 80"x 80"



Figure 5. Awakening 2022. Acrylics on earth 80"x 80"