

SATIRE, DISPLACEMENT AND RESILIENCE: NIGERIAN PAINTERS AND THE POLITICS OF GOVERNANCE AND HEALING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how contemporary Nigerian painters engage with the crises of governance, displacement, and trauma in the postcolonial state. Through a semiotic and postcolonial reading of six works by Chike Obeagu, Jerry Buhari, and Harrison Idahosa, the study shows how visual strategies of satire, fragmented landscapes, and childhood symbolism serve as cultural critiques and tools of resilience. Obeagu's "Reconciliation Table" and "Cork and Bull Story" deploy satire to expose elite hypocrisy and the reduction of governance to personal indulgence. Buhari's "Japa" and "Wise Men at the City Gate" document displacement and environmental neglect, functioning as counter-archives of collective memory. Idahosa's "The Less You See the Better" and "Echoes" foreground psychological dimensions of trauma through motifs of blindfolds, plaster marks, graffiti, and crowns, affirming dignity amidst fragility. Together, these works demonstrate that Nigerian painting is not confined to aesthetics but operates as non-verbal policy advocacy and social healing. The paper concludes that art in Nigeria must be integrated into governance discourse, not only as cultural heritage but also as a medium for critique, memory, and recovery in a society shaped by recurring crises.

Keywords: Paintings, Semiotics, Displacement, Governance and Resilience.

Introduction

Nigeria's postcolonial history has been marked by recurring crises that continue to affect governance, social stability, and community life. Problems such as corruption, weak institutions, ethnic and religious conflict, displacement, and insecurity have shaped daily realities for citizens and limited national development. These issues are often studied from political, economic, and administrative perspectives, but the cultural dimension is less examined. One area that requires closer attention is the role of visual art in interpreting crises, shaping public dialogue, and contributing to processes of social healing.

Art in Nigeria has historically been more than decoration or leisure. In precolonial societies, visual forms such as masks, murals, and sculptures were central to governance, religion, and communal memory. With the approach of independence, the Zaria Art Society, popularly known as the "Zaria Rebels", challenged colonial restrictions by blending indigenous traditions with modern techniques. This positioned Nigerian art as both a cultural expression and a political act of resistance. The legacy of this movement continues today, as many contemporary painters use their work to confront questions of governance, injustice, and resilience.

This paper examines the works of three painters; Chike Obeagu, Jerry Buhari, and Harrison Idahosa, who each address Nigeria's crises through distinctive visual strategies. Their paintings explore themes of corruption, displacement, trauma, and hope. The study uses postcolonial theory to situate the works within broader struggles for identity and authority, and semiotics to decode the symbols and metaphors embedded in the artworks. The aim is to show that art in Nigeria functions not only as creative expression but also as a political instrument, a counter-archive of social memory, and a resource for community resilience.

Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is grounded in postcolonial theory and semiotics, two complementary frameworks that help explained how Nigerian painters articulate critique, memory, and resilience. Postcolonial theory, as articulated by Fanon (1963), Said (1978), and Bhabha (1994), highlights the persistence of colonial structures in governance and culture, as well as the contradictions within postcolonial states. Fanon emphasises how colonial and postcolonial violence produced both social and psychological fractures. Said exposes the construction of dominant narratives that legitimise inequality, while Bhabha stresses hybridity and ambivalence as spaces where cultural resistance is enacted. These ideas are useful in situating Nigerian painting within broader struggles over authority, identity, and survival.

Semiotics, particularly Barthes' (1977) concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, provide a tool for decoding the visual strategies of the selected painters. Signs such as tables, blindfolds, crowns, and fragmented landscapes are not mere aesthetic elements but cultural texts that carry political meaning. They function as symbols of corruption, displacement, and resilience, constructing layered narratives that link individual experience with collective memory.

Within African art scholarship, Okeke-Agulu (2015) emphasises the Zaria Art Society's philosophy of "natural synthesis" as both aesthetic and political resistance. For him, Nigerian art is inseparable from its political context, where artists have long resisted domination by blending indigenous and modern forms. Ottenberg (1997), writing on the Nsukka group, highlights cultural continuity, showing how *uli* and other indigenous motifs in modern painting were deliberate assertions of autonomy and identity. Both scholars emphasised that Nigerian art is never neutral but functions as a site of power, memory, and resistance.

Building on these foundations, this paper argues that contemporary Nigerian painters extend these legacies in new ways. Chike Obeagu uses satire and exaggeration to critique corruption, hypocrisy, and misinformation in governance. Jerry Buhari deploys abstraction as counter-archives of

displacement. Harrison Idahosa engages trauma through childhood symbols, offering a visual language of resilience and psychological healing. Together, these artists show that Nigerian painting operates as both political expression and cultural therapy, challenging the failures of governance while affirming dignity and recovery in a fragile society.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to examine how selected Nigerian paintings address issues of governance, displacement, and resilience. The research combines postcolonial theory and semiotic analysis to interpret the artworks as meaningful cultural texts. The paintings by Chike Obeagu, Jerry Buhari, and Harrison Idahosa were chosen for their consistent engagement with Nigeria's socio-political realities. Data was gathered from the artworks themselves, exhibition catalogues, artists' statements, and relevant scholarly literature.

The analysis applies Roland Barthes' (1977) model of denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural associations), and myth (broader ideological meaning) to understand the symbols and compositions in the paintings. This is supported by postcolonial theory from Fanon (1963), Said (1978), and Bhabha (1994), which provides the context for understanding the works in relation to Nigeria's postcolonial experience. This methodology prioritises subjective interpretation over generalisation, offering insight into how these artists use visual language for cultural critique and as a means of fostering resilience.

Discussion and Analysis of Works

The analysis of selected works by Chike Obeagu, Jerry Buhari, and Harrison Idahosa provides insight into how contemporary Nigerian painters engage with the crises of governance, displacement, and trauma. These artists, though different in style and focus, share a commitment to using visual language as a means of cultural critique and social intervention. Their works serve as counter-archives, preserving experiences that are often marginalised or erased in official discourse, and as instruments of non-verbal advocacy, making visible the human cost of political failure.

The selection of these three painters reflects both continuity and divergence in Nigerian contemporary art. Chike Obeagu employs satire and distortion to expose hypocrisy, greed, and misinformation among the political elite, situating his practice within a long tradition of resistance through humour and exaggeration. Jerry Buhari, working through abstraction and landscape, addresses displacement and the fragility of national identity, transforming his canvases into symbolic spaces of collective memory. Harrison Idahosa turns inward to the psychological effects of crisis, using crowns, graffiti, and images derived from childhood to explore trauma and resilience. Together, their works highlight different dimensions of the Nigerian postcolonial condition; political corruption, social dislocation, and the search for healing.

The discussion that follows interprets two representative works by each artist, using semiotics to decode visual signs and postcolonial theory to situate their meanings within broader struggles for authority, identity, and survival. By examining Obeagu's satirical critiques, Buhari's counter-archives of displacement, and Idahosa's symbolic languages of resilience, the analysis demonstrates the multiple ways in which Nigerian painting functions as both political commentary and cultural healing.

Chike Obeagu



Plate I. Chike Obeagu, *Reconciliation Table*, 2021.
Retrieved from www.mutualart.com

"Reconciliation Table" by Chike Obeagu is a large, mixed media painting that directly references Leonardo da Vinci's "Last Supper," with thirteen stylized, exaggerated figures positioned around a banquet table. The central figure, dressed in a black suit, is flanked by others in white attire. Expensive bottles and glasses line the table, and strong architectural elements frame the composition, echoing classical Western religious iconography.

Obeagu's work operates as a sharp allegory for Nigerian post-election politics. The central, suit-clad figure embodies the archetypal political dealmaker, while the surrounding guests, engaged in chaotic, gestural dialogue, represent party members embroiled in disputes. The painting's

composition and physical excess suggest meetings where reconciliation happens, not out of concern for governance or public good, but from a need to protect elite interests, distribute patronage, and maintain the appearance of unity. Material wealth, shown through luxury drinks, emphasizes this self-interest.

Semiotically, "Reconciliation Table" uses the table and suppers as metaphors for political negotiation and betrayal, themes found in both the biblical origin and Nigerian political culture. Gestures of murmured conversations, and attentive expressions hint at deception and ongoing rivalry. The central figure's black suit, standing out against the white, symbolizes supposed neutrality or authority, but the theatricality points to the emptiness of such reconciliations, which are more about surface harmony than real peace.

From a postcolonial perspective, the painting critiques rituals of political settlement that blend indigenous and colonial traditions, yet ultimately reinforce elite dominance. Obeagu's deliberate combination of African features with Western composition accentuates the contradictions of Nigerian leadership, which is often hybrid yet not transformative. The reconciliation process is depicted as performative, preserving privilege while side-lining substantive debate about the nation's progress and public need.

The painting reflects cycles often seen after Nigerian elections: party "enemies" are publicly reconciled, not out of conviction, but to negotiate and share the "spoils" of office. The elite resolve their internal conflicts with staged displays for the media, while ordinary citizens remain excluded from the real benefits of governance. The grotesque faces, exaggerated mannerisms, and decadent setting expose the farcical essence of political reconciliation in Nigeria, turning what should be a solemn act into a satire of self-preservation and collective cynicism. Chike Obeagu's "Reconciliation Table" thus stands as a visual indictment of political rituals emptied of substance. Its parody of the Last Supper both heightens the gravity of betrayal in political life and exposes the tragic absurdity of Nigeria's elite reconciliation dramas. The painting challenges viewers to consider the moral and civic consequences of performative politics and affirms the power of art to critique deceptive discourses and call for genuine public engagement.



Plate II. Chike Obeagu, Cock and Bull Story, 2018.
Retrieved from www.mutualart.com

Cock and Bull Story presents two human figures addressing an audience. One is portrayed with the head of a cock, dressed in flowing *babariga*, while the other carries the head of a bull, dressed in a Western-style corporate suit. Behind them, smaller figures of listeners form the backdrop. The contrast between the two central figures, traditional attire with an animal head and modern suit with another animal head, creates an image of conflict and deception staged before the public.

At the denotative level, the painting depicts two figures addressing a crowd. Connotatively, the animal heads symbolise misinformation, distortion, and competing falsehoods. The cock and the bull are drawn from the familiar phrase “cock-and-bull story,” which in Nigerian and global English parlance, means a fabricated or unbelievable tale. By embodying political actors as animal-headed figures, Obeagu highlights how leaders and public speakers often trade in half-truths, rumours, or manipulative rhetoric that deepen conflict rather than resolve it.

Semiotically, the work encodes the struggle between fabricated narratives and public trust. The cock, associated with noise and self-display, symbolises boastful yet empty rhetoric. The bull, associated with brute strength and aggression, symbolises forceful imposition of false narratives. Together, they construct a myth (Barthes, 1977) of political discourse in Nigeria as performance

rather than truth. The audience in the background appears concerned yet powerless, reflecting the position of citizens subjected to contradictory stories.

From a postcolonial perspective, *Cock and Bull Story* engages the theme of decolonising knowledge. The juxtaposition of traditional attire and Western suit shows how both indigenous and imported systems of authority can perpetuate falsehoods when misused. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) has argued, decolonisation requires critical engagement with narratives, rejecting both colonial impositions and elite manipulations that deny communities truthful accounts of their condition. In this painting, Obeagu draws attention to the dangers of misinformation in a fragile postcolonial state where conflict is easily inflamed by fabricated stories.

Placed in the context of this paper, *Cock and Bull Story* extends Obeagu's satirical critique beyond corruption and hypocrisy as seen in "*Reconciliation Table*" to misinformation and propaganda. While the earlier works expose elite greed, this painting warns of the destructive effects of false narratives on issues of governance. The work becomes not only a satire of political actors but also a call for critical thinking, truth-telling, and inclusive dialogue in Nigeria's governance. By visualising misinformation as absurd and grotesque, Obeagu affirms the role of art in challenging deceptive discourses and promoting more equitable and resilient pathways to peace.

Jerry Buhari

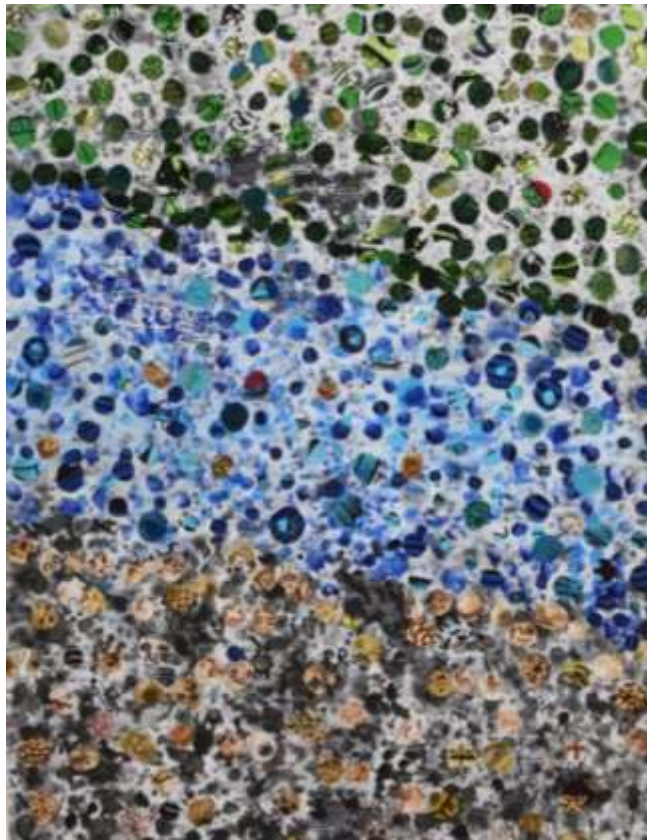


Plate III, Jerry Buhari, Japa, 2025.
Retrieved from www.mutualart.com

Jerry Buhari's "Japa" (2025), a solo exhibition presented by Ed Cross Fine Art, is a poignant exploration of migration and displacement in Nigeria, encapsulated in the Nigerian slang term "Japa," which derives from the Yorùbá word meaning "to flee" or "to escape." The term has become synonymous with the mass exodus of Nigerians, particularly the youth, seeking better opportunities abroad due to socio-economic and political challenges at home. Through a series of artworks, Buhari interrogates the phenomenon of migration as a direct consequence of poor governance in Nigeria. This analysis situates "Japa" within a socio-political and postcolonial framework, exploring how the artwork reflects displacement as a ramification of systemic failures in governance, drawing on semiotic, postcolonial, and socio-political lenses to unpack its layered meanings.

At its denotative level, "Japa" one of the paintings that comprises a series of works and fourteen miniature paintings on paper, as showcased in the exhibition from May 8 to June 28, 2025. The works feature abstract and fractured compositions, with motifs of dislocation and movement, while

the miniature paintings offer intimate, small-scale reflections on migration. The work depicts fragmented spaces, jagged lines, and evocative forms that suggest departure, uncertainty, and the pursuit of “greener pastures.” The exhibition’s setting, with its emphasis on close viewing, invites audiences to engage with the works’ intricate details, emphasizing the personal stakes of migration against a broader socio-political backdrop.

Connotatively, “Japa” serves as a powerful critique of the systemic failures in Nigerian governance that drive mass migration. The term “Japa” itself carries a sense of urgency and desperation, reflecting the desire to escape oppressive conditions such as corruption, unemployment, insecurity, and poor governance. Buhari’s use of fractured spaces and disjointed motifs in the textile works symbolizes the broken social contract between the Nigerian state and its citizens. Buhari’s reflections his children’s potential migration, underscores the emotional weight of displacement. The imagery of “green lands” in the sub-series “Migrant’s Dream of Green Lands” connotes the idealized vision of opportunity abroad, contrasted with the harsh realities of Nigeria’s socio-economic landscape.

The fragmented forms and tense motion in the artwork convey a sense of dislocation, not only physical but also psychological and cultural. Migration, as depicted in “Japa”, is not merely a movement across borders but a response to a governance system that fails to provide basic security, economic stability, or opportunities for growth. The works’ abstract nature allows for universal resonance, but their rootedness in the Nigerian context, through the title “Japa” and Buhari’s reflections on post-colonial Nigeria, grounds them in a specific critique of systemic mismanagement.

Semiotically, “Japa” encodes the interplay between individual agency and systemic failure. The fractured spaces and motifs of dislocation function as signs of a disrupted society, where poor governance has eroded trust and stability. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ concept of myth (1977), Buhari constructs a visual lexicon that exposes the myth of progress in post-colonial Nigeria. The promise of independence and development has been undermined by corruption, mismanagement, and insecurity, creating a narrative where migration becomes a survival strategy rather than a choice. Buhari’s work signify the complexity of migration as both a physical journey and an emotional unravelling.

“Japa” engages with the legacy of colonial structures and their continuation in Nigeria’s governance failures. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, decolonization requires dismantling not only colonial impositions but also the elite manipulations that perpetuate inequality in post-colonial states. Buhari’s work highlights how poor governance, marked by corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency, has created a “socio-economic and political cave” from which Nigerians seek to escape. The *Japa* phenomenon, as depicted in the painting, reflects a postcolonial state where the

promises of independence, economic prosperity, security, and self-determination, have been betrayed by successive administrations. This aligns with the postcolonial critique of “brain drain,” where the loss of human capital further weakens the nation’s capacity for development.



Plate IV. Jerry Buhari, Wise Men at the City Gate, 2016-2017.
Retrieved from www.mutualart.com

Jerry Buhari’s “Wise Men at the City Gate” offers a striking visual commentary on displacement and migration, with a focus on the ramifications of poor governance in Nigeria. The artwork features three central figures framed within an archway, surrounded by vibrant yet contrasting

colours and abstract form. The title of the painting evokes the biblical Magi, hinting at a narrative of journey and arrival. Connotatively, the painting serves as a metaphor for the plight of those displaced by poor governance. The “wise men” can be interpreted as migrants or seekers of refuge, arriving at the “city gate” in search of safety or opportunity. The archway, traditionally a symbol of entry or sanctuary, here appears ominous, implying that the city offers no true refuge, mirroring the disillusionment faced by those fleeing governance failures. The umbrella motifs may symbolize lost the remnants of a once-thriving community or haven, now disrupted by systemic neglect.

Drawing on Roland Barthes’ concept of myth (1977), the painting constructs a narrative where the “wise men, typically bearers of gifts and wisdom, become emblematic of a society misled by ineffective leadership. The vibrant yet disordered colours signify the tension between potential and ruin, reflecting a governance system that fuels rather than resolves conflict.

From a postcolonial viewpoint, “Wise Men at the City Gate” engages with the legacy of colonial structures and their enduring impact on Nigerian governance. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) argues, decolonization demands a critical rejection of narratives that perpetuate inequality. The displacement depicted reflects a state where inherited and local systems of authority fail to address the needs of citizens, driving them to seek salvation beyond their borders. The abstract complex frame of the could critique the hybrid governance model, blending colonial legacies with indigenous corruption, that has left Nigeria fragile, pushing its people toward migration.

Buhari’s work is deeply tied to Nigeria’s socio-political realities, where poor governance manifests in high unemployment, insecurity (e.g., Boko Haram and communal conflicts), and environmental degradation within rural and suburban communities. The “city gate” evokes urban centres like Lagos or Abuja, which may serve as hubs of opportunities and much-admired infrastructure, despite being marred with outcomes of mismanagement. The painting’s creation in 2016-2017 aligns with a period of heightened migration from rural to urban centres.

Like “Japa” (2025), “Wise Men at the City Gate” addresses migration as a response to governance failures, though its focus on an urban threshold shifts the narrative toward arrival rather than departure. The work is a powerful indictment of displacement as a ramification of poor governance in Nigeria. Through its vivid colours, abstracted forms, and symbolic archway, the painting captures the journey of migrants seeking refuge. Buhari thus calls for a re-evaluation of leadership and systems that drive citizens to the gates of an uncertain future, reinforcing art’s role in advocating for justice and resilience.

Harrison Idahosa: Childhood Symbols, Trauma, and Resilience



Harrison Idahosa, *The Less You See the Better*, 2025
Artist collection.

The Less You See the Better presents the portrait of a young boy blindfolded with a plain white cloth. The image is overlaid with abstract effects of dripping paint, smudges, and layered textures that partly obscure the portrait. Childlike scribbles, graffiti, and marks spread across the surface, while a drawing of a crown hovers above the boy's head. The juxtaposition of the blindfold, the distortions, and the playful graffiti generates a composition where concealment, disruption, and symbolic affirmation coexist.

Connotatively, it engages questions of perception, knowledge, and survival. The blindfold operates as a sign of restricted vision and deliberate ignorance. Within the Nigerian socio-political landscape, this recalls the notion that full awareness of corruption, violence, or political conflict

can be both dangerous and overwhelming. The drips and smudges create a visual field of distortion, signifying the instability of truth in a society where narratives are manipulated. The childlike graffiti evokes innocence but also suggests unresolved trauma and fragmented memory. The crown, though crudely drawn, affirms dignity and value despite concealment and distortion.

Semiotically, the painting encodes a paradox. The blindfold symbolises naivety or protection; the graffiti marks function as residues of childhood resilience; the crown signifies worth and identity. Together, these elements construct a myth (Barthes, 1977) of survival through selective blindness. In this context, not seeing everything becomes a strategy for endurance and mental stability. From a postcolonial perspective, the painting visualises fractured subjectivity in a nation where propaganda, censorship, and trauma shape everyday life. Fanon (1963) highlights how colonial and postcolonial violence destabilise both psyche and body. Here, the boy's hidden eyes reflect that destabilisation, while the crown and graffiti suggest an enduring inner dignity. The canvas thus operates as a counter-archive, preserving the psychological costs of governance and crisis through symbolic form.



Harrison Idahosa, *Echoes*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 2021, 140 x 170 cm.
Artist collection

Echoes depicts a boy's portrait marked by symbolic interventions: a strip resembling plaster or tape across the forehead, layers of dripping paint and smudges, childlike graffiti and scribbles on the surface, and a crown motif above the head. The portrait combines elements of injury, memory, and affirmation, creating an image that is both wounded and resilient.

The plaster-like tape across the forehead connotes injury or trauma, suggesting physical or psychological wounding. The dripping textures and smudges create an atmosphere of fragmentation and instability, reflecting the lingering effects of conflict and crisis. Yet, the crown and graffiti introduce playful and affirming elements, transforming pain into resilience. The childlike graffiti in particular signifies innocence and memory, suggesting that childhood imagination endures even in traumatic environments.

Semiotically, the forehead tape functions as a sign of both damage and recovery, encoding the paradox of mental suffering and healing. The crown operates as a sign of dignity, asserting worth and identity in the midst of trauma. The graffiti marks act as signs of memory and endurance, echoing childhood play while symbolising survival. Taken together, these signs generate a myth of hope within fragility.

From a postcolonial lens, *Echoes* visualises how trauma reverberates in collective memory. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity is useful here: Idahosa merges injury with affirmation, creating a hybrid visual field where pain and resilience coexist. The painting also challenges official narratives that often erase the psychological dimensions of conflict. By embedding scars, crowns, and childhood graffiti into a single composition, the canvas preserves experiences of violence while also affirming recovery. This duality aligns with Herman's (2015) model of trauma recovery, which stresses the importance of remembering and reclaiming dignity as steps toward healing.

Together, *The Less You See the Better* and *Echoes* illustrate Idahosa's distinctive approach to trauma and resilience. Both works centre on childhood imagery; graffiti, scribbles, and crowns, while engaging themes of concealment, injury, and affirmation. In "*The Less You See the Better*", survival emerges through selective blindness and protection against overwhelming realities. In *Echoes*, resilience emerges through the transformation of scars into symbols of dignity and memory.

Unlike Chike Obeagu's satire or Jerry Buhari's depictions of displacement, Idahosa turns inward to explore the psychological and emotional consequences of conflict. His paintings construct a visual language of resilience that links individual trauma with collective healing. By combining symbols of injury with crowns and childhood motifs, Idahosa positions art as both archive and therapy, bridging political critique with emotional recovery.

Through "*The Less You See the Better*" and "*Echoes*", Harrison Idahosa demonstrates how contemporary Nigerian painting addresses trauma not only by documenting pain but also by affirming dignity and resilience. His works transform blindfolds, plaster marks, and graffiti into semiotic systems that visualise the coexistence of fragility and strength. In doing so, Idahosa extends the role of art beyond political resistance, offering it as a space for psychological healing in the postcolonial Nigerian context.

Findings

The analysis of the artworks reveals three primary findings:

1. **Satire as a Tool for Political Critique:** Chike Obeagu's work uses satire, exaggeration, and humour to expose corruption, hypocrisy, and the spread of misinformation within Nigerian governance.
2. **Art as a Counter-Archive:** Jerry Buhari's paintings act as a visual record of displacement and migration. His abstract and fragmented style documents the physical and emotional consequences of governance failures, preserving a collective memory often absent from official narratives.
3. **Visual Symbols of Trauma and Resilience:** Harrison Idahosa's paintings use symbols like blindfolds, crowns, and childlike graffiti to explore psychological trauma. This visual language affirms dignity and recovery, demonstrating art's role in facilitating both personal and social healing.

In summary, the study finds that contemporary Nigerian painting is not merely decorative. It functions as a vital form of social commentary, advocacy, and a resource for resilience in a context of recurring national crises.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Nigerian policymakers and governance institutions should integrate art and artistic critique into public discourse as a legitimate medium for civic engagement and reflection on national issues.
2. Art education curricula in Nigeria should be strengthened to include the study of art as a form of social and political commentary, encouraging this practice in future artists.
3. Government and cultural bodies should increase support for artists and exhibitions that critically engage with national challenges, recognising art as a valid form of non-verbal policy advocacy.
4. Further research should investigate the specific ways visual art can be used in therapeutic and community-based settings to support healing and recovery in post-conflict areas of Nigeria.

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