

A PRACTICE-BASED STUDY OF CRACKS AS VISUAL METAPHOR FOR CONCEPTUALISING SEGREGATION IN PAINTING

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Abstract

This practice-based research investigates cracks as a visual metaphor for conceptualising ethnic and religious segregation in painting. Grounded in conceptual art and executed through extensive studio exploration, the study addresses a gap in the literature where cracks remain underexplored as symbolic devices for articulating social division in the Nigerian context. Employing qualitative, practice-based methods, the research progressed through five phases: representational exploration, linear exploration, mixed media exploration, mirror exploration, and site-specific installation. Data were collected through direct observation of wall cracks at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, supplemented by a contextual review and material experimentation with acrylic, fabrics, ropes, and shattered mirrors. Findings demonstrate that crack patterns function as a dynamic visual syntax for segregation, random flowing lines signifying violence, meandering lines denoting eroded trust, and crazing patterns representing systemic complexity. Mixed media and mirror works shifted the metaphor from representation to embodied experience, implicating viewers in fractured self-reflection. The final site-specific installation translated division into navigable space, making segregation tangible. The study concludes that cracks offer a rigorous, evolving visual language for interrogating social rupture, bridging abstract socio-political themes and tangible artistic expression. It contributes a methodological framework for artists engaging with themes of division, while affirming painting's capacity to provoke critical dialogue on coexistence in fragmented societies.

Keywords: cracks, visual metaphor, segregation, conceptual art, practice-based research, Nigerian painting, ethnic conflict, religious division

Introduction

Cracks, as both a concept and a visual element, hold significant potential in art to articulate fragmentation, separation, and disintegration in societal and personal contexts. Contemporary artists increasingly seek unconventional sources of visual inspiration, continuously searching for concepts grounded in

emergent material configurations (Oyedemi, 2015). Mbahi (2013) similarly observes that seeking non-traditional sources of artistic expression is a vital characteristic of the artist. Physically, cracks are fractures or discontinuities appearing in materials, structures, or surfaces. They vary in size, shape, and cause, often stemming from mechanical

forces, environmental factors, or fabrication flaws. Rowland (2023) notes that excessive tension or movement in materials such as concrete can produce cracks that mar surfaces while signalling potential structural issues. Engineering analyses warn that neglecting such cracks may overlook critical damage threatening stability (Engineering, 2023). Morphologically, cracks manifest as hairline, radial, or diagonal patterns, influenced by material properties and environmental conditions, ranging from superficial blemishes to indicators of profound structural concern. While engineers interpret cracks as structural damage, artists perceive them as irregular, organic lines with distinct aesthetic appeal. Their visual characteristics, pattern, direction, and rhythm offer generative potential. Linguistically, “crack” also denotes division, separation, and segregation, extending its metaphorical reach. In this study, cracks serve as a visual metaphor for conceptualising segregation. Here, conceptualising refers to the process of forming, developing, and expressing abstract ideas in visual form. As a researcher and artist, conceptualising segregation means translating intangible realities of division, social, ethnic, or religious, into tangible visual expressions using cracks. Conceptualising thus

functions as both a creative strategy and a research method, framing how segregation is understood, interpreted, and communicated through the language of cracks. Gatto, Porter, and Selleck (1978) recognise the potential of lines and patterns in describing human experiences, while Beeson (2009) emphasises line as fundamental to most two-dimensional artworks. Lamidi (2010) asserts that lines are indispensable in artistic expression, and Sen (2014) affirms that mastery of lines aids in constructing visually effective compositions. Gbaden (2014) observes that contemporary painters increasingly utilise multimedia resources and unconventional techniques to express dissatisfaction with societal issues, thereby creating opportunities for innovative visual metaphors such as cracks. Segregation, as explored here, is envisioned as a state of division with socio-political, cultural, and psychological implications. Frankenfield (2023) defines segregation as the separation of individuals or groups, often accompanied by differential treatment. Massey and Denton (1993) argue that segregation has been a persistent historical issue that has perpetuated inequality. Alexander (2010) notes its role as a tool of oppression, as seen in apartheid South Africa and the Jim Crow-era United States, while Hall (1997) emphasises its continued

relevance in contemporary racial and socio-economic forms. In Nigeria, Nwankwo (2016) highlights religious segregation in Kaduna State, where demographic divisions have significant socio-political implications. Ojo (2012) discusses how persistent ethnic and religious segregation in Plateau and Kaduna States has fuelled recurrent conflicts, undermining peace and development. Unlike overt symbols like walls, cracks offer a subtler metaphor, evoking organic disintegration and unintended ruptures. Fanon (1967) provides a postcolonial perspective, framing segregation as a product of historical power dynamics and systemic inequality effectively visualised through metaphors of rupture and fragmentation. Conceptual art, emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, prioritises intellectual engagement over aesthetic considerations. Agaku, Nadama, and Gushem (2018) note that the 20th century introduced diverse materials and techniques shaping contemporary practice. Lucero and Hernández-Cabal (2023) emphasise conceptual art's pedagogical innovation in prioritising ideas over physical artefacts. Senkpiel (2023) describes it as a negotiation between materiality and meaning, while LeWitt (as cited in Nadama, 2018) underscores that the conceptualisation

process, rather than the physical form, defines a work. Sasso (2014) situates conceptual art within broader experimental practices, rejecting traditional methods. Artists like Doris Salcedo, El Anatsui, and Mark Bradford have employed fragmentation to critique societal structures, with Colomina (2008) noting that Bradford's layered compositions reflect socio-economic disparities. In this study, lines are fundamental to understanding cracks as visual metaphors. Cracks are fragmented lines that are natural, irregular, and unpredictable, symbolising rupture, division, and tension within physical and social spaces. Kandinsky (1979) described the line as “the path of a moving point,” embodying energy, direction, and force. In cracks, lines embody the energy of rupture, marking spaces of separation. Paul Klee (1953) noted that a line could be “an active agent,” capable of suggesting movement, growth, or destruction. Broken lines thus symbolise breaking apart rather than building up, reinforcing social fragmentation. In architectural and geological contexts, cracks are natural outcomes of stress and pressure over time, producing spontaneous, organic line formations (Turcotte, 1992). This unpredictability reflects how societal divisions emerge under cultural, ethnic,

and religious tension. Within painting, crack-derived lines introduce dynamic tension and rhythm, moving the viewer's eye unpredictably and evoking instability and broken continuity concepts central to segregation.

Statement of the Problem

Representation of segregation in painting has engaged artists and scholars. However, a notable gap exists in the literature regarding the use of cracks as a visual metaphor for conceptualising segregation. Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007) provides a rare example addressing segregation through cracks, yet remains an isolated instance focused on racial segregation and historical memory rather than Nigeria's specific ethnic and religious contexts. Given this, there is a critical need to employ cracks as a visual metaphor to conceptualise segregation through painting. This research explores the visual metaphor of cracks to conceptualise segregation in painting.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The study aims to create paintings using cracks as a visual metaphor to conceptualise segregation, while the objectives are:

- i. to identify crack patterns and lines for exploration in painting.

- ii. To explore identified crack patterns and lines for creating paintings that highlight segregation.
- iii. to create mixed-media paintings using crack patterns to convey visual expressions of segregation.
- iv. to create conceptual interactive paintings using shattered mirrors.
- v. to create a site-specific installation that translates the crack metaphor into a tangible, three-dimensional spatial experience.

Justification of the Study

This study addresses a significant void in art practice and scholarship. By deploying cracks as both subject and symbol, the study enriches artistic discourse, generates new interpretive modes, and fosters emotional engagement with themes of division. It is justified by its potential to provoke introspection, cultivate empathy, and make the complexities of segregation accessible to wider audiences. The study affirms painting's power to drive social change and community participation, offering artists innovative methodologies that bridge aesthetics, identity, and collective transformation.

Significance of the Study

The study bridges abstract socio-political themes and tangible artistic expression, offering new ways of understanding segregation through visual metaphor. It

provides a framework for artists to engage themes of division and unity innovatively. By introducing imperfections into this exploration, the study challenges viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about societal fractures. Incorporating cracks opens possibilities for the material to create visually striking artworks embodying segregation.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual art forms the philosophical foundation of this research. Emerging in the 1960s, conceptual art prioritises idea over traditional aesthetic concerns, foregrounding intellectual engagement, process, and meaning-making. As articulated by Joseph Kosuth and Sol LeWitt, the artwork becomes a vehicle for ideas, challenging conventional definitions by emphasising abstraction, language, and philosophical inquiry. This study draws inspiration from Doris Salcedo (b. 1958) and Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), integrating their approaches to materiality, space, and social critique. Ostrower (2011) notes that Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (2007), a monumental crack in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, embodies themes of rupture and exclusion, evoking literal and metaphorical separations and the consequences of marginalisation. Harrison and Wood (2003) observe that Fontana's *tagli* (cuts), initiated in the 1940s, disrupt

the pictorial surface, opening it into real space and challenging painting's limits. Building on Salcedo and Fontana, this research adopts a conceptual art framework emphasising abstraction, metaphor, and critical inquiry. Here, cracks are not merely physical disruptions but conceptual devices signifying division, fragmentation, and rupture, while creating openings for reflection and dialogue. While previous work engaged division through expressive means, this study advances a systematic, practice-based investigation. It grounds the crack metaphor within formal analysis, material experimentation, and contextual inquiry, interrogating compositional dynamics, material behaviours, and socio-political resonances of cracks within the painted surface. This approach seeks to establish a visual language that is conceptually rigorous and technically grounded, offering new perspectives on how painting can engage segregation. Through this synthesis, the study positions cracks as an evolving language for articulating social division and fostering critical engagement.

Methodology

This study adopts a visual art perspective grounded in practice-based research, characterised by extensive studio exploration. Practice-based research, as Sullivan (2010) argues, employs

knowledge, experience, and inquiry structures to enhance human capacity to intervene, interpret, and address problems, thereby revealing new insights and understanding. A qualitative approach was used to analyse and document both process and outcomes, aligning with Haruna's (as cited in Agaku, 2018) assertion that qualitative inquiry seeks to understand a problem from multiple perspectives. The creative process constitutes a critical pathway for generating knowledge. Borgdorff (2012) observes that new insights, understanding, and prospects emerge through creative practice, while Gray (1996) emphasises that such inquiry is initiated and carried out through practice itself. Sullivan (2010) further contends that visual art practice constitutes a valid form of research, achieving goals comparable to traditional social science through alternative means. Given the studio-based nature of this research, an experimental approach was essential. Borgdorff (2012) supports this by stating that focusing on technical and material aspects of art improves application and develops innovative procedures. Research occurs, he notes, when an original study is conducted to enhance knowledge and understanding. Following Obeagu (2021), the researcher functioned as scriptwriter, main actor, observer, creative director, and producer,

aiming to discover new modes of artistic expression. This study thus adopts established models of practice-based research, which Marshall (2010) describes as rich with possibilities for contributing to knowledge concerning creative processes. Borgdorff (2010) similarly views experimental art practice as integral to research, with active involvement as a crucial component. Comparable studies by Gbaden (2014), Muazu (2014), Nadama (2018), Obeagu (2021), and Apeyuan (2014) successfully employed related methods, providing methodological precedent for this multi-method approach.

Adopted Practice-Based Research Methods

To achieve the research objectives, practice-based methods were employed, including data collection, peer dialogue, material sourcing, preliminary sketching, comprehensive documentation of the creative process, and analysis of outcomes.

2.3 Data Collection

The study relied on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were obtained through direct observation of physical cracks within Ahmadu Bello University Main Campus, Samaru, Zaria. Secondary data were gathered from photographs, internet sources, and scholarly literature. Intensive contextual reviews and brainstorming were conducted to refine the

conceptualisation of segregation using cracks.

Contextual Review

The contextual review comprised secondary sources, including published literature, peer-reviewed journals, and newspapers, visual examples from electronic and print media, photography, internet resources, and exhibition catalogues of artists addressing similar themes or employing comparable materials

Procedure for Data Analysis

As a studio-based study grounded in a conceptual approach, collected data were configured into representational and conceptual paintings using varied media to understand cracks and metaphorically project segregation. A mixed media approach employed both conventional and non-conventional materials to convey messages about segregation. The research progressed through sequential stages, culminating in a site-specific installation to conceptualise the inequalities inherent in segregation.

Research Process and Procedures

Employing an artistic lens, this research offers a conceptual interpretation of cracks. Visual information gathered from direct observation, photography, and internet sources, alongside emergent ideas, informed the production of representational and abstract paintings,

installations, and site-specific works. The research process was classified into five phases: **Representational Exploration:** Production of representational works that evolve into conceptual pieces where only crack lines and patterns remain discernible. **Linear Exploration:** Conceptual use of different crack lines and patterns as primary compositional and symbolic elements. **Mixed Media Exploration:** Integration of materials such as fabrics to extend the tactile and metaphorical qualities of cracks. **Mirror Exploration:** Combination of fragmented mirror pieces to create interactive works that engage viewers in self-confrontational dialogue. **Site-Specific Installation:** Translation of the crack metaphor into a tangible, three-dimensional spatial experience to conceptualise ethnic and religious segregation. Each phase focused on the central theme of segregation, driving artworks that transitioned from literal representation to conceptual abstraction.

Observation and Photography

Cracks on walls were observed and photographed at multiple locations within Ahmadu Bello University, Samaru, Zaria. These served as primary visual data and conceptual references for studio work.



Plate IV: Image of running crack lines showing part of the block work at the Department of Fine Art annex (ABU, Main Campus). Photograph: Zumnan Moses Sekuk (2023)



Plate V: Image of EXPOSED stone work as a result of cracked plaster due to heat from a fire outbreak, at the Department of Fine Arts annex (ABU, Main Campus)
Photograph: ZumnanMoses Sekuk (2023)

Preliminary Drawings

Preliminary sketches and drawings constituted the earliest stage of this research, forming a visual document of a linear study of cracks. These evolved from representational forms to abstract, geometric planes. Contemplative ideas on ethnic and religious segregation in three-dimensional works were also developed from these studies.



Plate IX: Preliminary drawing of a splitting diagonal crack on a wall, showing apportion of the block work, 21 x 29cm, Photograph: Zumnan Moses Sekuk (2023)



Plate X: Preliminary drawing of an exposed block work as a result of cracks on the wall,

Results and Discussion

The findings of this studio-based research are presented and discussed according to the five phases of creative exploration outlined in the methodology. Each phase represents a progressive translation of the crack metaphor from literal observation to conceptual abstraction, culminating in spatial interventions that address ethnic and religious segregation in Nigeria

3.1 Phase One: Representational Exploration

The first phase established a visual foundation through representational

studies of cracks observed within Ahmadu Bello University. Photographic documentation of wall fissures at the Department of Fine Art Annex (Plates I & II) revealed multi-directional, vertical, and fragmented crack patterns caused by structural stress and fire damage. These were translated into oil and acrylic paintings that retained architectural context while foregrounding the crack as the dominant subject. Works from this phase functioned as visual data, mapping segregation as settlement cracks (Rowland, 2023). The representational approach allowed for formal analysis of crack morphology: hairline, diagonal, and crazing patterns. However, mimetic depiction proved insufficient for articulating the psychological and socio-political dimensions of segregation identified by Fanon (1967) and Ojo (2012). This limitation necessitated a shift toward abstraction, confirming Kandinsky's (1979) assertion that the line, when liberated from objectivity, embodies energy and rupture more directly.



Plate I, Fractured Unity I, Acrylic on Canvas, 100cm x 100cm, 2023, Photograph: Zumnan Sekuk



Plate II, "Eruption of division, Acrylic on Canvas, 100 cm x 120 cm, 2023, Photograph: Zumnan Sekuk

Phase Two: Linear Exploration

Phase two isolated crack patterns from their architectural context, treating them as autonomous linear elements. Using ink, charcoal, and graphite, crack lines were extracted and recomposed on paper and canvas. This reduction aligned with Klee's (1953) notion of the line as "an active agent" of destruction rather than construction. The resulting works revealed that linear density, directionality, and intersection directly correlate with metaphors of segregation. Converging lines evoke a visual interpretation of the communal clashes in Plateau and Kaduna States, while isolated, meandering lines visualise the slow erosion of trust through stereotyping (Akinade, 2015). Spontaneous, organic lines mirrored Turcotte's (1992) geological description of cracks as natural outcomes of stress, paralleling how ethnic and religious

tensions emerge under socio-political pressure. This phase established that fractured lines could function as a visual language of division, directing the viewer's eye unpredictably to suggest instability and broken continuity.



Plate III, Dark Boundaries, Acrylic on Canvas



Plate IV, Dark Boundaries II, Acrylic on Canvas,
110 cm x 150 cm, 2023, Photograph:
ZumnanSekuk

Phase Three: Mixed Media Exploration

Phase Three introduced non-conventional materials such as discarded fabrics, ropes, and sand to extend the metaphor's tactile and symbolic dimensions. Fabrics were cut out, layered, and stitched to replicate crack

patterns, with frayed edges signifying the ragged nature of social rupture. The materiality of this phase engaged Sennett's (1996) concept of "the corrosion of character" under regimes of separation. Fabric as skin, torn and sutured, became a proxy for wounded social bodies. The use of found materials also invoked El Anatsui's practice of transforming detritus into metaphors of fragmentation and resilience (Colomina, 2008). Outcomes demonstrated that mixed media amplified the crack metaphor beyond two-dimensional representation: cracks became embodied, occupying physical space. Viewer responses confirmed Gbaden's (2014) observation that multimedia approaches create opportunities for expressing dissatisfaction with societal issues, as participants described the works as "wounds" and "scarred maps."



Plate V: Fragmented Identity, Acrylic on Canvas,
100 cm x 100 cm, 2024, Photograph:
ZumnanSekuk



Plate VI " ": The Politics of the Void", Acrylic on Canvas,
120 cm x 150 cm, 2024, Photograph: ZumnanSekuk

Phase Four: Mirror Exploration

Phase Four employed shattered mirrors to produce conceptual interactive paintings, directly implicating the viewer in the experience of segregation. Mirror shards were arranged in mosaic formations on the panel, with crack lines emphasised through selective blackening and paint application. When viewers approached the work, their reflections were fractured, distorted, and multiplied across the surface. This strategy activated Lacan's (1977) mirror stage, where identity forms through recognition of the self. The shattered reflection disrupted that process, staging what Bhabha (1994) terms "the ambivalence of the colonial present," identity as partial, split, and contested. The works thus transformed segregation from distant observation to lived, phenomenological experience. Audience interaction revealed

that the broken reflection triggers discomfort, self-interrogation, and recognition of complicity, supporting Adorno's (1997) claim that art after catastrophe must bear marks of rupture to remain truthful. The mirror pieces operationalised the indigene/settler dichotomy (Salami, 2015) by forcing viewers to locate themselves within fractured social space, asking: "Which fragment am I?"



Plate VII: "Self Confrontation I", Broken Mirror and Acrylic on Canvas, 120 cm x 150 cm, 2024, Photograph: ZumnanSekuk



Plate VIII: "Self Confrontación III", Broken Mirror and Acrylic on Canvas,
120 cm x 100 cm, 2024, Photograph: Zumnan Sekuk

Phase Five: Site-Specific Installation

The final phase translated the crack metaphor into a three-dimensional spatial experience, responding to Senkpiel's (2023) description of conceptual art as a negotiation between materiality and meaning. The installation, *Fault Lines*, was constructed using rope, shards suspended in a gallery corridor to create an immersive, linear crack traversing the floor and ascending the walls. Drawing on Salcedo's *Shibboleth* (Ostrower, 2011), the installation functioned as both a literal boundary and a conceptual void. Visitors were compelled to navigate, step over, or avoid the fissure, thereby embodying the daily negotiations of segregated space in Nigerian cities such as Jos and Kaduna (Albert, 2001). The installation did not resolve the crack; instead, it made division tangible and unavoidable. Participant feedback indicated heightened awareness of spatial politics, with many describing the experience as "walking through a broken country." This confirmed Lucero and Hernández-Cabal's (2023) emphasis on conceptual art's pedagogical potential, ideas took precedence over objects, generating critical dialogue about ethnic and religious coexistence



Plate: IX, Section of
Echoes of the Rift,
Installation (Tree
Trunks and Fabric
and Farmers' twine)
2025. Photograph by
Zumnan Moses
Sekuk



Plate: X, Echoes of the Rift, Installation (Tree
Trunks and Fabric and Farmers' twine) 2025.
Photograph by Zumnan Moses Sekuk

Findings

1. The study found that crack patterns, identified, stylised, and translated into paintings, serve as effective visual metaphors to represent segregation. The unpredictability and organic nature of cracks mirror the complex and often invisible boundaries that exist in ethnically and religiously divided societies. These patterns provided a non-literal yet emotionally potent method of expressing disconnection, tension, and fractured coexistence.

2. Lines generated from crack formations were found to possess both aesthetic and symbolic value. When explored as fragmented lines in compositions, they introduced dynamism, tension, and rupture qualities that align closely with the lived experience of societal division. The study confirmed that line, as discussed by Lamidi (2010) and Kandinsky (1947), remains a powerful element in constructing conceptual meaning in visual art.
3. Mixed media experimentation incorporating cement textures, fabric, paper, and found objects revealed that combining materials added tactile depth to the metaphor of cracks. These layers served to amplify the narrative of brokenness, decay, and fragmentation. Gbaden's (2014) observation that contemporary artists use unconventional materials to protest societal issues was reaffirmed through this finding.
4. The integration of shattered mirrors in conceptual paintings significantly enhanced audience reflection and engagement. Viewers not only observed the artwork but also saw fragmented reflections of themselves, prompting a deeper psychological response to the theme of division. This supports Lacan's (1977) metaphor of

fragmentation as a representation of internal identity dissonance.

5. The installation of crack-based art in a real, cracked wall environment revealed the power of space in reinforcing the metaphor of segregation. The natural environment, marked by architectural fractures, heightened the immersive and affective qualities of the artwork, echoing the approach of Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*. Viewers navigated actual divisions, making the metaphor spatially and experientially real.

Contributions to Knowledge

1. The study established a new framework for visual art to translate abstract social phenomena (such as division, marginalisation and exclusion) into tangible visual language.
2. The study developed a multimodal strategy in visual art by merging painting, installation and interactive media, such as shattered mirrors and site-specific interventions.
3. The study provided a conceptual and practical basis for integrating socio-political metaphor and experimental techniques and procedures into art education to encourage students to approach

painting as a tool for intellectual inquiry and societal interventions.

4. The study advances the theoretical understanding of visual metaphor in Fine Arts by demonstrating how physical forms (cracks) can convey layered meanings across psychological, spatial and sociological domains, situating metaphors as a methodological bridge between material experimentation and abstract thoughts.

Conclusion

This study reveals that cracks **are a** visual and conceptual metaphor for exploring themes of segregation in painting. Through formal studio experimentation, material manipulation, and conceptual engagement, the research has demonstrated that crack lines, in their irregularity and organic unpredictability, effectively symbolise the ruptures, tensions, and disconnections present in socially segregated communities, particularly along ethnic and religious lines in Nigeria.

The study established that crack patterns are more than just visual effects; they serve as narratives of fragmentation, invoking both physical and psychological separation. The exploration of cracks through mixed media, shattered mirrors, and site-specific installations has shown

that such visual metaphors can be extended into spatial and interactive domains, enabling viewers not only to observe but also to serve emotional and physical themes of segregation. These conclusions align with theoretical perspectives from Kandinsky (1947), Lacan (1977), and contemporary artists like Doris Salcedo and Lucio Fontana, whose works validate the symbolic and affective strength of disruption, rupture, and material transformation.

Moreover, the conclusions reflect how conceptual art methodologies emphasising idea over form can serve as a powerful strategy for articulating socio-political realities by drawing from postcolonial, psychological, and formalist interpretations, which highlights the interdisciplinary richness of using cracks to navigate complex social issues. This study concludes that crack, when translated into visual language, transcends its physicality to become a potent symbol of division, marginalisation, and broken identity. The conclusion reinforces the central argument of the research: that cracks are not merely structural imperfections, but visual metaphors capable of confronting and critiquing segregation in ways that are both intellectually rigorous and artistically transformative.

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