

Forms in Sculpture: The Sensibility of Materials and Techniques in Contemporary Practice

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Abstract

The sensibility of materials, its significant negotiations and engagement in the realization of forms and the contemplation of ideas which is a critical process in the creation of artworks is an object of concern to the artists and sculptors in particular. The diversifications of materials in sculpture are trending and identification concerning techniques and skills has problematized the engagement of materials. The inclusion of unconventional materials and their unique applications has enlarged the discourse on the definition of art and its products. The visual and perceptual powers of the artist and psychoanalytic implications are identified as cause-effect in the process of realization of forms through assemblage and, or composition of form. This study is hinged on contributing to the concern of deployment of materials and realization of form. Hence, the need for observation of artworks and processes of deployment of materials to embrace the challenges and implications of material on a form or paradoxically state if the form does give rise to the deployment of material for sculpture or vice visa. Artists, especially Sculptors are often expected to foreshadow an understanding of the product of their experiences, experimentations, exploitations and resources through the mediation of materials in the realization of form. However, this seamlessly presents the relationship between material, form and its realization through the deployment of various types of materials. It establishes the connections between skills and media (material); on one hand, and environment and the artist on the other. Then create a nexus between techniques, materials and the artist.

Keywords: *Form, Material, Realization, Conceptual, Perceptual, Visual powers*

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Background to the Study

The departure from conventional materials in sculpture has given impetus to the search and exploration of alternate techniques. Modern sculpture has included unconventional materials such as discarded objects, found objects or readymade; automobile parts; and domestic items in the realization of form. The process of “exploration”, as a method in the studio research has endeared sculptors to the adaptation and experimentation of some unconventional materials and items thus, devising new apparatus and techniques in the realization of dedicated forms. To explore forms, therefore, structure, concept and ideas are weaved into a fabric of sensibility of the individual artist. A form expresses the total appearance or organization and the essence of the way a work of art looks. This interactive engagement is the organization or an inventive arrangement of all the visual elements according to the principles that will develop unity in the work. These principles include the visual aspects of the work that can be isolated and described such as size; shape; materials; colours; and composition. Carrol (1999) enunciates that a complete work of art has peculiar characteristics in terms of components and composition. Ocvirk; Stinson; Wigg; Bone; and Cayton (2002) suggest that the components of a work of art are subject, form and content. The subject matter answers what the work depicts; the Form in context expresses the way it looks, and its totality; and the Value and Content highlight its meaning and philosophical leaning toward what a work of art is about. This exploration on the other hand has elevated content that provides implicit meanings in created forms such as social commentaries, expressions of ideas, feelings of the sculptor and the perceived public.

The intervention of representational mode and abstraction as the major characteristic manifestation of modern and contemporary sculpture begins with the object or event which the work depicts, its subject matter. As we experience how form and subject matter interact, we are often lured to the interpretation of content, shades and meaning. Components of sculpture can be lined up such as mass-volume, emptiness-fullness, texture, surface, ambience, movement, section, passes, etc. These components gain special character according to their structure/feature. For example, the effect created by metal and mass-emptiness and texture relation of stone as material exhibit different expressions from each other.

To examine the sensibility of materials in the realization of form in sculpture, the role of material knowledge; motivation of individual artist/Sculptor; the sensibility of materials; perceptual powers in appreciation of form and manifestations of contemporary sculpture are unavoidable concerns. These manifestations are derived from the attitude of the sculptor in the realization and representation of forms. These attitudes are inherent in the generation of ideas and materials, the conception of images, and the realization of form, content and subject matter. It also concerns the attitude of the public who provide judgment (criticisms) on the state of the forms, which are informed by the aesthetic appreciation and power of visual interpretation.

Conceptually, these manifestations, profess the significance and uniqueness of the products, and the methodologies adopted in the realization of the concept. In addition, such also may include the motivation of the individual artist, the aesthetic element or creative potential of

the object, which the artist selects. It also brings to the fore the psychoanalytic belief in the efficacy of powerful subconscious associations with objects. Since the twentieth century, modern and contemporary sculptures have assumed significant and complex abstractions of form, and relying on material knowledge is evident globally.

Material Knowledge

Ataseven and Guven, (2017. p 332) relying on George Herbert's "The Elements of Sculpture" maintain that materials are first and principal because everything is made from something and each material contains "unique characteristics". Also, they pontificate that the sculptor must be aware of the numerous possibilities within a particular material and knowledge of the tools and techniques needed to work with. *"Nothing the sculptor does to the material is neutral; every act contains meaning. Creating a sculpture is a three-way conversation between sculptor, material and viewer"*. Material is by necessity at the centre of that conversation and it is as much alive as the other two. However, the ultimate aesthetic challenge for the sculptor is to create a form that transcends the material from which it is made. They further concluded that as the twentieth century progressed, the range of artistic materials increased exponentially and the exploration of these new materials greatly expanded the expressive potential of modern and contemporary sculpture. That being so, when we see a contemporary work for the first time, one logical question might be: why did the sculptor choose this particular material?

The formation of figure knowledge, which is one of the first steps of sculpture in the educational process, passes through grasping the basic plastic elements and shaping of material in the general sense. Any kind of material bearing special features presents many various and different figural possibilities. So, knowing material along with its horde during the educational process and training/apprenticeship provides support to the embodiment of imagination. This situation, at the same time, constitutes an important effect in the development of the creative process as it is going to presents the richness of ideas in the transformation of imagination into a figure. The constitution of form knowledge thought to have been the first step in sculpture skills calls for the shaping of the material. In this case, it is possible to talk about a pattern between material knowledge and basic plastic elements.

Every material creates different visual results on basic plastic elements constituting sculpture stemming from its special construction and character. In this process, the usage of basic plastic elements shapes respectively according to the nature of every material. A vital tie exists between plastic shaping possibilities and creativity through the abundance/richness of material knowledge. To know the material is one of the most significant experiences for a person who wants to know the art of sculpture. So, the planning of material knowledge in a system has been one of the most crucial necessities. It should be taken into consideration that different materials generate different effects and shaping or plastic elements of sculpture which can be identified through emptiness-fullness, mass-volume and horizontal-vertical components will provide different possibilities and effects in any material. Technique and method depend on the material being used. In other words, any material (stone, bronze, clay, plaster) necessitates its technique and method. A sculptor has to know the nature of the material he/she uses. We cannot create any figure that flashes into our mind so randomly but to question how far are the possibilities of stone, wood, bronze, plaster, metal and alloy or fibre?

The twentieth-century sculpture took its rise as a fundamental reaction against the preceding century. Among the most important and outstanding features in which the two epochs of classical and modern sculpture differ are the problems of sculptural materials in the first instance and the process of realization of form in sculpture in the other. The nineteenth-century sculptor concluded his work with design for sculpture viz - clay model and plaster. The production of the sculpture was split up into two stages - the creative stage and the stage in which the sculpture was carried out - and of the two, the sculptor chose the creative stage and abandoned the actual material formulation (Zdenka, 2015; Osborne, 1969). Both agree that the practice had a far-reaching influence on the delivery of sculptures of the era. The sculptor relegated the practical accomplishment of the work to a specialist craftsman. It meant that in the former, the artist designed conceptualized and prepared the work to the point where the craftsman continues to produce the final work. Although, this practice has not been lost as some sculptors still depend on the craftsman to produce artwork such as bronze castings, tessellation of mosaic tiles, metal construction and so on.

Since the Renaissance, what had been merely the preparatory work in sculpture now acquired the entire character of the creative act itself in the nineteenth century. Gradually, during the twentieth century, the sculptor again combined his work, the design and its realization. The reaction against the nineteenth century, however, does not signify a return to the traditional workshop methods of realization, in other words, there was no return to the classical three-stage process consisting of the drawing, three-dimensional model and the realization. Rather the artist remained isolated in his work alone in the sense that between him and his material there is no longer the middleman - the practical craftsman. Even mechanical work or division of labour within the workshop was eliminated. The material is permitted to receive the immediate touch of the artist's individuality. Realization of form becomes the burden of craving for the reality of hidden images in wood, metal, and stone and contemplation of the potentiality of material and objects. Therefore, in this sense, the work of certain twentieth-century sculptors especially those of Brancusi, Henry Moore, and Picasso present a new value by offering a new meaning for the concept of originality. This development also saw an end to the question of material realization and completion of work as an imperative of the technicians but acquired philosophical and aesthetic nodes (Zdenka, 2015; Krauss, 2002).

The Motivation of Individual Artist/Sculptor

The issues relating to sculpture materials and the part played by them in the creative process as it were throughout the first half of the 20th century by the practice and theory of sculpture, opened up a whole series of problems of which some were solved simultaneously, others only in course of time. Zdenka (2015) argues that the first is the critique of “neo-platonic aesthetics”, which had been paramount in the art of the previous period - the Renaissance, the elaboration of a new concept of the creative process and the significance of the work of art, and finally the initial application of new principles in the practical approach to sculpture. Modern sculptures presented an entirely new formulation of problems of material in art. Zdenka, in his reflection, believes that material has acquired its definite and purposeful character and assumed its space as an active factor in the creative act itself. “For along with the purpose of the work, it is material qualities of the medium which form the determining factors

from which 0artistic form results”, Zdenka concluded. The determination of form by factors lying beyond the personality of the artist was considered by many to be a limitation of his artistic freedom; and an understanding of his part in the creative act.

During the 18th and the better half of the 19th centuries, some art critics of the 18th century rehearsed the aesthetic doctrines which were paramount in art and also their antithesis. Schopenhauer according to Zdenka (2015) maintained that “there is only one end of all arts, the representation of ideas and that their essential difference lies simply in the different grades of objectivization of willpower to which ideas that are represented belong”. The level of achievement of form and aesthetics resonates in the ability of the sculptor to tune the material to the frequency of desired effect and determined representation.

The meaning of most artworks however is not exhaustive by a discussion of materials, techniques and form. Most interpretations also include a discussion of the ideas and feelings that the artwork engenders. In examining the materials, an art critic has the task of comparing the meanings that are obvious or prevalent in a wide variety of individual works. The decision to cast a sculpture in bronze, for instance, inevitably affects its meaning, the work becomes something different from what it would have been if it had been cast in plaster, gold or plastics, even if everything about the work remained same. Materials in each artwork assume an arrangement of shapes, colours, textures and lines, which are organized into various patterns and compositional structures. Furthermore, visual interpretation elicits commentary on how salient features of the form contribute to the overall meaning of the finished work. The material of the object depicts and enhances the realization of the form.

Manifestations of Contemporary Art

The manifestations of contemporary art exhibits reveal tremendous fluidity and limitations are being dismantled, theories are being subjected to more interrogation and scrutiny and definitions are weaning. Robertson and McDaniel (2003) believe that “old hierarchies and categories are fractioning”. The potential in this dispensation is the going conversation on new technologies offering different ways of conceptualizing, producing; and showing sculptures visually; established art forms are under scrutiny and revision; an awareness of heritages from around the world is fostering cross-fertilizations, and everyday culture is providing both inspirations for art and competing for visual stimulations. The diversity and rapid transformations are intriguing but can be demanding for those who want to understand contemporary art and actively participate in the discussion, about what is happening. Along with dynamic manifestations of contemporary art, content has become a significant issue. Looking back at the history of modern art, it is debatable whether the idea of “art for art's sake” truly took over the thinking of modernist theorists and artists. However, there were periods when art critics such as Clement Greenberg and influential avant-garde artists advocated formalism in preference to aesthetics and emphasized form rather than content in creating and interpreting art. Their concern was mainly with investigating the properties of specific media and techniques as well as the general language of traditional aesthetics, thus the role of colour or composition.

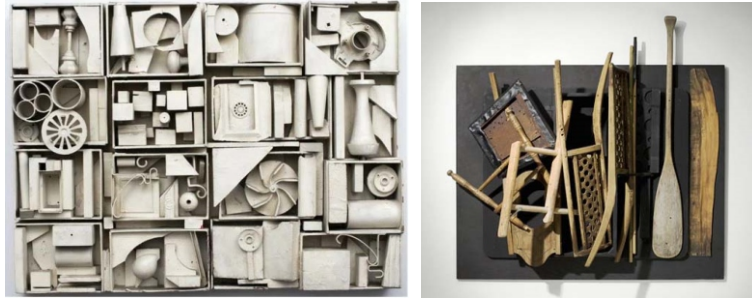
Robertson et.al (2003) argue that formalism is rather inadequate for interpreting art that expresses the inner visions of artists or art that refers to the world beyond art. They assert “*when pop art appeared in the 1960s, the limitation of formalism became an evident and broad range of theories surfaced, including post-modernism, post-structuralism, feminism, and post-colonialism*”. Suffice it to say, therefore, that in recent and contemporary art, artists have engaged deeply with meaningful content. Robertson et.al further maintains that after 1980, active artists are motivated by a range of purpose and ideas beyond a desire to express personal emotions and visions or to display a mastery of media and techniques. Political events, social issues and relations, economy, science and technology, the built environment, the flow of ideas, and other forces and developments are propelling artists and providing content and theme for their works.

Realization of Form

Sculpture as an art form has widely expanded its sphere of influence and the range of content and forms. In the 1970s, during the reign of minimalism sculpture, pared-down abstract sculpture predominated and emphasized simplified abstract volumes - primary structures. In the 1980s and extending into the present, sculptors dramatically broadened the forms, techniques, and materials they selected. In addition to creating sculptures from traditional materials such as bronze, marble and wood, artists have continued to make sculptures from a wide range of unconventional materials as well as found objects. To date, the readymade has become the remix, early in the twentieth century, Dada artist; Marcel Duchamp famously exhibited unaltered found objects such as a *Urinal* and a *Snow Shovel* as what he called “readymades” or found sculptures. Several artists have since experimented with found objects and images, including other Dada artists, the surrealists, the so-called junk sculptors of late and a range of artists interested in techniques of assemblage or the conceptual implication of the readymade.

Louise Nevelson (1899 - 1988) began making a sculpture using found wooden objects in 1955. She assembled boxes and assorted objects in a variety of shapes and forms, creating complex structures from carefully selected discards of modern society. Each compartment was both parts of the total form and intriguing composition. Her works were usually wall pieces, viewed frontally as reliefs and painted as single unifying colours, such as black, white or gold (Duane and Preble, 1985)

Fig. 1



Attributed to Louis Nevelson (American, 1899-1988) found object mixed media sculpture in a monochromatic white painted finish, composed of blocks, dowels, wheels and other materials including one box at upper right branded: "Admiration," mounted to a wood backboard, apparently unsigned. Overall: 26" H x 35" W x 3.5" D. Provenance: From the Financial District estate of a private collector.

<https://www.bidsquare.com/online-auctions/showplace/attributed-to-louise-nevelson-modern-sculpture-2146605>

Fig. 2



Umberto Boccioni Bronze Dimensions 111.44 cm (43.87")
1931 bronze cast displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

Burnham (1975) and Krauss (1977) pontificate that the contribution of futurism may end up in the field of sculpture when it would seem least likely to succeed. Burnham says Boccioni's unique form of *Continuity in Space* is a large, arresting bronze in which the forms seem to have been shaped by rushing air, air whose currents we can almost feel extending beyond the fluttering shades of metal just as they penetrate. The dynamic "*lines of force*" are severely angular ones which he says, is an interpretation of a moving automobile in a weave and twist, materializing as solids. A striding figure is still discernible as the motif for the composition and its *unique forms of continuity in space* are innovational.

Whether working in wood, stone, or metal, Brancusi and Matisse are purists in their veneration of the primary sculptural principle of the symbolic relationship between form and material. This love of sculptor's materials for their own sake, the adaptation of form to the expression of the materials' inherent character, is a constant in most contemporary sculpture. For instance, Bashorun (b.1955) has since incorporated automobile parts in sculpture to achieve exquisite forms and to represent satiric commentaries on the political and economic quagmire in Nigeria. He chose to combine antique chain hoists, forged links and hooks, wares, bolts and nuts, and disused motor engine parts to create enigmatic sculptures. His awesome combination or range of discarded domestic objects, and joinery skill give the sculptures distinctive appeal. Ugiomoh (2014) opines that Bashorun's work endorses the manifesto of Constructivists. Within the creative promptings of post-colonialism however, one encounters in Bashorun's work, ideological currents that point to re-modernization. Bashorun's work as encoded and indeed his overall oeuvre remain a reminder of the "Constructivists' manifesto that queries the rationale for mimetic art". Ugiomoh maintains "*the Constructivists hold the view that the ideal work of art should enrich the repertoire of forms so that humanity may be ennobled*". In this regard, earlier cultural tools that are grounded in intra-cultural interactions now assume new realities in heightened composite connections as metaphors.

Bashorun continued to push the limits of creativity by conflating design consciousness with sculptural adaptability. Having to some large extent un-exhausted joinery possibilities for utilitarian and aesthetic expressiveness shows his exploration of the materiality of matter. This he does by testing the concreteness and palpability of usable materials, thereby establishing their corporeality. The dexterity with which Bashorun works with diverse materials such as steel, aluminium, wood, brass, and plastic derivatives is commendable. He stretches the malleability of metal to create complex patterns with motifs carefully crafted, and cuts the aluminium sheets he obtains from assorted cans of drinks and beverages into varying sizes. The cut-outs are used to create compositions by juxtaposing different shapes and colours to maximize design sensibility. Bashorun also uses the full beverage cans as three-dimensional design units to create complex or simple but colourful relief compositions. He sometimes combines steel, brass and stainless steel to create textured sculptural designs. He nevertheless maintains a high creative manipulation of wood with the various sizes of cut-out shapes that are delicately arranged and joined to form dynamic textured backgrounds. The foreground images are of longer and bolder strips of wood that are equally carefully arranged, both vertically and horizontally to generate visual balance. Filani (2015) describe Bashorun as a "*master artist whose approach to creativity is both cerebral and unique*". Bashorun by his skilful creativity has charted a new course for the artist, not only as a talented being with affective sensibilities but also as a scientist with remarkable insight into quantitative analysis. Indeed, the artist interprets his design to build functional artistic objects or create chimerical images purely meant for aesthetics.



Plate 1: Bashorun (2016) *Remains of Past Glory*, Steel, galvanized and enamel, 61 x 61 x 33cm.



Plate 2: Bashorun (2014) *Poli-Tic.*, Steel, 30.5 x 58 x 30.5cm

Ngene Eze, a contemporary Nigerian sculptor, metaphorically explores forms by creating multi-part figurative sculptures by arranging plastic, discarded plates, and plastic containers. His forms are expressions of hunger and starvation in Nigeria as a result of the poor economy, mismanagement and misrule (Ngene, 2015).

Visual and Perceptual Powers in Appreciation of Form

Mediating on the realization of form, Osborne (1969) believes that there are other means of acquiring knowledge and developing our interest in sculpture. The acquisition should come through studies and consultations and toward a fuller apprehension of expressive forms of sculpture itself. Being conscious of having an awareness of sculpture as something presented to perception. Osborne (1969) further submits that the capacity for a relevant kind of sensory apprehension depends on the development of a special kind of sensibility, perceptual skills, and attitudes. Therefore, it implies that apprehension is not a function of factual knowledge. In understanding form, therefore, there is the import of conceptual understanding and the process of perceiving. Perception is often taken to be a kind of immediate, unthinking and

soaking-up of the world (including works of art) by the senses - but a direct awareness during which we switch off our busy conceptualizing intellects - and put ourselves into a state of receptivity. There is a certain amount of truth about this if we can think of nothing more to do with a work of art than stand in front of it asking ourselves questions about its date, the mathematical relations between its parts, and its significance for psychoanalysis, we are not likely to reach for a reasonable position in appreciating it as a work of art.

To appreciate an art form, Osborne further suggests the heightening of sensory awareness and emotional responsiveness, a certain attitude of mind, or mental set, and an intense perceptual activity to help tremendously in the task. In appreciation of sculpture, we have to be able to distinguish visually and apprehend spatial relationships and qualities of form, of extreme subtlety and complexity. Osborne argues that there are ways in which the materials of sculpture may contribute to the finished work and evaluation of the form. Primarily, the materials bring to it their sensory properties such as the visual and tactual properties. Most sculptors bear these in mind as they work, exploiting them so that they become part of the total organization of the qualities that are presented to our senses by the work. The beauty of materials is one of the most easily appreciated aspects of sculpture, for example, the well-known translucency of wood, some metals, and stainless metal sheets that seem to reflect light on its surface could be seductive in themselves to divert attention from the formal qualities of the work. Therefore, it infers that we may be admiring a beautiful piece of material instead of looking at the sculpture.

Another concern is the physical and structural properties which present the sculptor with different opportunities and challenges. They may suggest many ways of forming the materials and discourage others by making some kinds of forms easy to achieve and others difficult or impossible. In addition, the structural properties that may affect the forms of both figurative and abstract sculpture lie in the latent possibilities in the material which often than not are only limitations on the complete freedom which the sculptor would otherwise have, yet paradoxically they may also stimulate his inventiveness and creativity. As it has been observed, the modern sculptor, being free from the necessity of representing natural forms, may engage his whole attention in exploring and exploiting the properties of his materials and then make it his concern to evolve forms that are particularly suitable to them. Examples abound with intriguing designs and concepts achieved with unconventional materials recovered from waste and junk sites; discarded household, automobile parts and e-waste objects.

In an evaluation of form and the significance of material, the technical processes used in working/producing the artworks are inevitable issues that cannot be overlooked. Far more than these surface qualities, however, are the deeper influences that technical processes do have on the structure and composition of the work. In the consideration of contemporary sculpture, attention must be given to the process of constructivism which has ushered in recent innovations in the engagement of unconventional materials. The essential feature of contemporary art is the technique of producing sculptures by assembling them mostly from the pre-formed pieces of materials. It is thus very different from the plastic or glyptic processes

of building or carving forms in a homogeneous mass of material. The formal qualities of constructed or assembled sculpture depend very much on the technique and materials that are used, and since these include almost any of the techniques and materials of modern engineering, the sculptures are extremely diverse in their sensory and constructional characteristics.

Conclusion

The trending inclusion and exponential increase in exploration of non-conventional materials have resolved in part the challenges of the production of sculptures. The sculptor is no longer bonded to the adaptation of traditional workshop methods of production and realization of form. Though, modern and contemporary sculptures present an entirely new formulation of problems of material in art and sculpture, in particular, the material has acquired its definite and purposeful character and assumed its space as an active factor in the creative act itself. For along with the purpose of work, it is the material qualities of the medium which form the determining factor from which artistic form results.

Art has witnessed increased diversifications in styles, techniques and material imposition; and realization of form has assumed inestimable dimensions that contemporary sculpture invention of truth to materials and transformations of the original state of materials have given impetus to a reason to accept the impact of material in the realization of form. Following this dictum, materials do give rise to the realization of impeccable form. Forms are conceived in ideas and thoughts of the artist, which, in a virtual state may remain a dream, but genius in the artist propels to evoke the visual perceptive powers and application of the latent skills and dexterity of technique to realize what appeals to the sense of touch and acknowledgement of the reality of the unseen yet existed. Make connections between skills and media (material); on one hand, and environment and the artist on the other. Then create a nexus between techniques, materials and the artist.

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