

## SCULPTING AND PAINTING WITH FIBRE: A STUDIO EXPLORATION IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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### **Abstract**

*Since 2009, I have been exploring jute fabric with pieces of cloth and threads of different shades of colours for my sculptures. The experimentation, which is an extension of my previous 'Line Walk' jute sculpture project, has yielded structures of simple character with underlying metaphoric sense. This paper is a studio report on the exploration. It describes the materials used and the processes involved in constructing colourful visual forms without the use of conventional colour pigments. It also analyses the socio-political contents of some of the works generated from the studio investigation in the Nigerian context.*

**Keywords:** fibre art, line-walk, exploration, tying, dyeing, wrapping

### **Introduction**

A profound engagement with materials is central to the creative process in the visual arts. It is the artists' inherent skill that links hand, eye and mind while making art that transforms mute materials into visual poetry (Mcfadden & Taubman, 2005: 89).

Patterning, as a textile technique, inspires a wide range of compositional possibilities that could be exploited in the construction of woven structures. In my sculptural explorations, I am often attracted to the use of soft materials, such as fibre of different colours, because of their open-ended pliability and boundless creative possibilities as an unconventional painting medium. I have found that conveying nuances of thought with fibre usually involves patterning processes, which naturally allow the workings of the mind and hand to infuse crystallised life-experiences into the fibre materials and letting them culminate in visual imagery. Thus, my studio exertion with fibre essentially engages the patterning process. It agitates the mind and enhances thought flow during the art production process part, of which begins with my study of different forms and patterns created by nature, particularly those that make visual references to fibre. Diverse materials such as discarded cut-outs from the tailor's waste bin, different shapes of ropes, designed fabrics, pieces of cloth to be sewn into a dress, and a dressmaker's method and sewing styles influence my studio techniques as well as the nature of works I produce in this exploratory enterprise.

Undoubtedly, several contemporary fibre artists have engaged materials and process in diverse ways, and they have particularly enjoyed the spotlight in the contemporary art scene. Magdalena Abakanowicz, Sheila Pepe, Liz Collins and Sergej Jansen, for instance, have made efforts in bringing fibre-based techniques into the mainstream of art practice. Sergej Jansen's own description of his practice as 'painting without paint' perhaps relates appropriately to the approach I adopted in the current body of works that this paper describes. Like Jansen, I have engaged in a continuing exploration of what Wilson (2013: 208) sees as the 'residual possibilities of improvisation and the

decorative' Akin to Jansen's approach to fibre work is Collins' who also has described her process of working with fibre materials as painting. According to her, 'I get to direct the line, making it thick or thin, wide or narrow. It is painting with knitted yarn ...' (MacFadden, 2007: 22). Collins usually employs knitting method which allows her to create vein-like structures that she superimposes on silk organza material. This creative effort yields three-dimensional body imagery characterised by projected thick or thin continuous lines that resonate with meanings.

Sheila Pepe is perhaps another prominent artist that has expanded her engagement of materials and process to profound sculptural construction. With traversing passages of lines, she agitates her space which she tempers with the cool or warmth colours of her material as well as the rhythm of the repetitive grids of her crocheted and stretched structures. With shoelaces, yarn and ropes of assorted types and colours, Pepe constructs complex webs of knotted and twisted colourful lines that tend to portray several different meanings beyond web as a trap. In fact, many contemporary fibre artists share some similar artistic intentions and have their respective processes crossing at some points, even as their works remain quite unique in ways that reflect their individual experiences and socio-cultural contexts of practice. Their common concern, usually, is how a material might be deployed and not necessarily whether their work is considered as art or craft - an argument which fibre often becomes mired in (Porter n.d., quoted in Halperin, 2014). In other words, the problem of 'talking' with materials is paramount in creative fibre exploration and has formed the hub of my current studio inquiry.

This present work is an extension of my previous studio experiments with fibre, particularly the 'Line Walk' sculpture project. The 'Line Walk' project was a process-oriented studio exploration which depended on patterning and repetitive process of rolling, stitching and sewing as methods of dialoguing with jute sacks to create visual imageries (Obodo, 2010). The material and technique involved in the 'Line Walk' project were adopted in the present exploration, although new materials (wax, cloths, galvanised wire and nylon thread) as well as non-traditional processes of weaving were added to the process of manipulating assorted fibre materials into patterns of colour and texture. Besides, this exploration was fuelled by the new experiences I gained during my three-month Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship (SARF) in Washington D.C., USA in 2013. The research fellowship brought me face-to-face with some fibre artists and works which helped me to look more critically at my environment and modify the tone of my studio inquiry. The current approach provided grounds for pushing personal ideas around in search of the connection between process and product.

This paper therefore focuses on the series of works which I produced in jute fibre material with cloths and threads, using the studio processes of dyeing, tying, rolling, sewing and dabbing. Considering that colour work is particularly crucial in the exploration, this paper also reports on the procedures of colour application and the method used in creating both the wall-bound and in-the-round fibre works. Formal and contextual analyses of the studio exploratory outcome are also made. For the purpose of clarity, photographs of the work processes (stage by stage), as well as images of some works produced are used to illustrate this report.

## Materials and Tools

Materials and techniques serve the creative desires of the artist as a result of preference, not by happenchance or accident (McFadden, 2007). The exploration is concerned with fibre materials, which include cotton, silk, polyester, linen, nylon and jute. These are fibres we encounter on a daily basis. They are readily available in different forms and colours. While some were selected from binned off-cuts in tailors' trash cans or purchased as fabrics from the local markets, others were procured as threads, twines and ropes (see Figs 1 and 2). Jute fabrics, however, come as empty commodity sacks (Fig. 3) usually used for storing grains. The sacks were purchased from traders who, after retailing the contents, disposed of them for some amount of money (Obodo, 2010). In addition to these, traditional fibre materials used include galvanised metal wire (Fig. 4), acrylic paints, tempera and synthetic dye stuff.

## Procedure

### *Processing the Materials*

Fabrics, threads and synthetic dye stuff were the major types of materials used. Although assorted kinds of cloths (plain and designed) were explored, plain woven cotton material was dyed into desired colour patterns and used. The plain cloth was dyed using either batik or tie/dye technique. The composition intended for production determined the colour of the dye to be used. Second-hand jute bags bought from traders selling grains in local markets often came with stains and particles of food items packaged in them. In cleaning them up, the bags were turned inside out, flipped severally, washed thoroughly with water and detergent and then dried on cloth-line outdoors under the sun (see Fig. 5). This exercise especially helped to get rid of food particles that could decompose under humid environment and cause unpleasant odour. Sometimes, depending on the composition to be made, the bags were dipped in a dye bath containing solution of synthetic dye (Fig. 6), locally known as 'ecolin'. Varied colours of spun cotton thread were produced by dipping some lengths in baths containing different colours of dye. Twisted galvanised wires (sold in bundles of ten short lengths per bundle and referred to as 'roofing bands' by traders who sell building materials) were bought, straightened, cut to desired lengths and structured with pliers for use as armature.



Fig. 1: Nylon and dyed spun cotton threads



Fig. 2: Pieces of cloth (collected from tailors' bins)



Fig. 3: Bundles of empty jute sacks

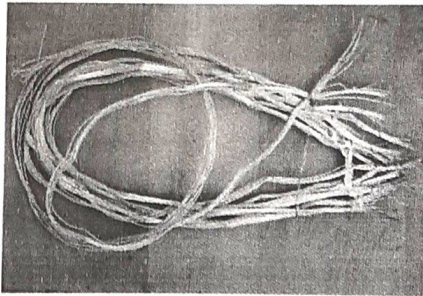


Fig. 4: Galvanised wires

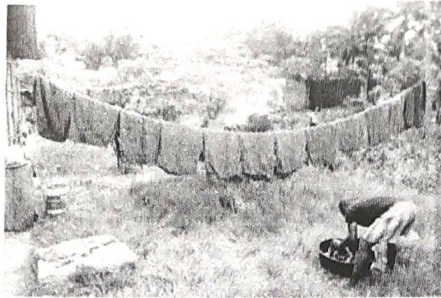


Fig. 5: Washed sacks drying under the sun

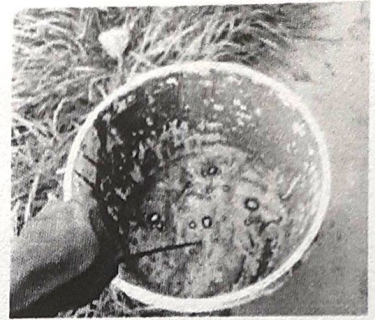


Fig. 6: Dye bath

### The Composition: Dialogue with Structure and Process

Jute fabric is the basic material used in this studio exploration in which two main approaches of wrapping/tying and sewing were employed in creating the two categories of fibre works (colourfully patterned fibre sculptures and sewn jute fabric installations) generated during the exercise. In some compositions, colours or pre-fashioned patterns, such as the long tubular or short cylindrical forms, were not emphasised. So, materials such as the colourful nylon threads, brilliant pieces of cloth or acrylic paints, which were used in the configurations that I made with the long tubular or short cylindrical forms, were dropped. There was no tying nor painting process involved. Only hand-sewing technique was employed in piecing cut-outs of jute fabrics together into desired forms. The process was much less labour-intensive, but perhaps more eloquent. In other works, however, jute fabrics were cut into pieces, folded and sewn into rolls or tied to create lumps (Figs 7a - 8c) that were used to compose reliefs or sculptures in the round. Some were even used in making installations (see, for example, Fig. 9). For the sculptures that were composed with the long tubular or short cylindrical forms, below are the stages of production involved in their creation.

**Stage 1:** Production started with the cutting of jute bags into strips of different lengths and widths. Each strip was rolled, lengthwise, round a piece of galvanised wire and then stitched with nylon thread to create a long tubular or short cylindrical form, using a needle. For each composition, a considerable quantity of the tubular or cylindrical forms required was produced in varying sizes - long or short, thick or thin. With these forms ready, the first stage of composition commenced. The forms were spread out on the floor where they were selected, one by one, and arranged in a particular format, according to sizes, to create some colour patterns (Fig. 10). This arrangement yielded a plane, broad surface that acted as primed ground reserved for colour applications. After determining the design and transferring the sketch on paper onto the arranged jute rolls with chalk (in a process where sketch was available), the next process was to wind cotton or nylon threads tightly round the cylindrical or tubular jute forms. It should be noted that sketches were not always made for all the compositions. In some, the jute formations on the floor were confronted directly without sketched patterns.

**Stage 2:** In fact different possibilities were inspired by the form and colours of the tubular jute material. At some points, strips of cloth were cut out and wrapped round the tubular forms and firmly

secured with the threads (Fig. 11) which were used, colour after colour, depending on the guiding chalk marks made on the jute arrangement as they lay on the floor. Even the wrapping cloth strips were selected and used according to how their colours or inherent design patterns fit into the composition at hand. But the painterly effect achieved in this exploration with fibre was more particularly achieved with the use of threads which offered more possibilities for tonal gradation in the works. Threads come in many different colours and sizes of thickness which if wound sparsely or densely, create some degree of shade or tint in a composition. This possibility was adequately utilised in this exploration. Threads were used like paints to highlight some areas, shade certain points and create contrast in some places within a piece. A strand of a very brilliant hue, for instance, could be used to lighten up a broad shady area.

**Stage 3:** The third stage of the composition began with the modification of forms which resulted from the wrapping and tying exercise carried out earlier on each of the cylindrical tubular forms. Each jute roll was picked up, beginning with the first on the row, pressed until it took a definite curve or twisted shape and then placed back in its position. Viewed collectively after this exercise, the jute roll arrangement (still on the floor) exhibited a rhythm of ups and downs created by the undulating movements of the bends and twists given to the tubular jute forms after the tying exercise. At this stage of production, the work appeared the way it would when completed. But corrections could be easily made now on the work to enhance its formal composition, either by reshuffling the arrangement or altering the level of depth impressed on the tubular forms. The colour work could also be enhanced by retouching some areas, if necessary, with threads and pieces of cloth. Paints (preferably acrylics) may be applied if required.

**Stage 4:** This entails joining the short cylindrical or long tubular jute forms (already worked with threads and pieces of cloth and arranged on the floor) together to create a piece. This procedure involved sewing them together at intervals, roll by roll, with needle and thread. The process was started from the left side, beginning with the first roll in the row and ending at the right side. Normally, long tubular forms are arranged in single row for a composition while short cylindrical forms are deployed in multiple rows. But sometimes both long and short jute rolls could be used jointly in a work. A pair of pliers was required to push and pull the needle through the rolls of jute which have become thick and relatively hard because of their sizes and the tying work done on them. The jute strips used in fashioning them were folded severally into compact rolls and then secured firmly with many rounds of thread wound tightly around them. While sewing the jute rolls together, the negative spaces in-between them were carefully considered in the creative process.

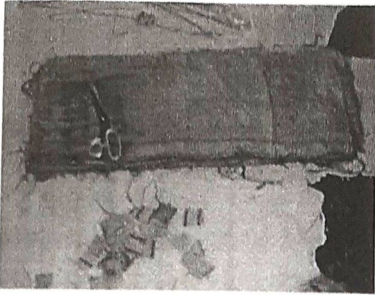


Fig. 7a: Dyed jute bag cut into broad strips

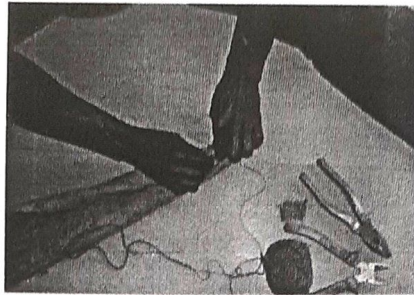


Fig. 7b: Creating a long jute roll



Fig. 7c: Sewing jute fabric into short cylindrical shape

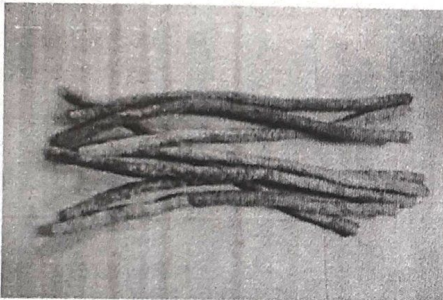


Fig. 8a: Long cylindrical shapes fashioned by sewing with acrylic fibre

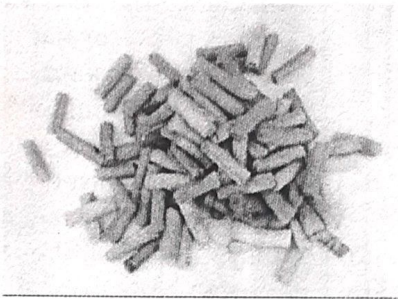


Fig. 8b: Short cylindrical shapes fashioned by sewing with acrylic fibre

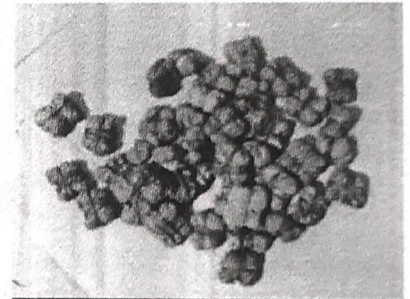


Fig. 8c: Jute fabrics tied into lumps with nylon thread

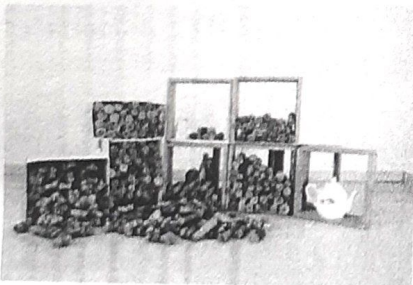


Fig. 9: An installation with wrapped jute lumps

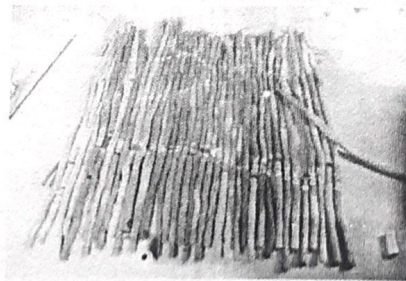


Fig. 10: Long cylindrical shapes arranged on the floor with guiding chalk marks

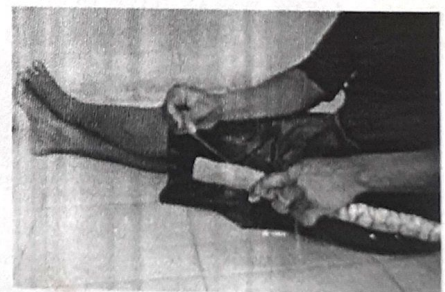


Fig. 11: creating a pattern on a long cylindrical shape

### Finishing/Display of Works

Every jute work produced in this exploration required finishing touches. Usually, there are loose strands of threads or jute fibres that need to be trimmed with scissors after production. Sometimes some of those loose strands were allowed to dangle; and even additional ones attached at

strategic points on the work to introduce a flow of delicate linear dimensions, which at times were animated by breeze. Besides, the colourful threads brought in were selected based on their colours with the intention of complementing certain colours on the work. The fraying tips of the nylon threads were controlled with heat using cigarette lighter or candle light. Areas which required improvement in colour were further retouched with acrylic paints that were applied with sable brush. After this, there was the problem of how to display the finished work.

For relief works, provisions were made at intervals along a horizontal line on the upper parts where needle and thread were used to create latches that could rest on nails for purpose of hanging on walls. Galvanised wires were used instead of thread for the latches in large pieces because of their weight. At each strategic point marked for hanging, the wire was burrowed through two jute rolls and tied with pliers. Depending on the sizes of the works, several nails are required on the wall to enable the pieces stretch out well for better viewing. The works that are in-the-round do not need latches as they do not need to hang on walls. They are free-standing pieces which internal supports are firmly secured on wooden bases. There are some of course that stand without bases (see fig. 12a). They could be folded somehow and made to stand balanced just on their lower edges. These sorts of works could also be stretched and hung on walls as reliefs. For example, *Cut and Join II* displayed as a free-standing sculpture in fig. 12a, is now displayed as a wall-bound relief (see fig. 12b). In most of the works, however, there is neither front nor back; both sides of the reliefs appear the same and every side of the free-standing sculptures could be the front.

### Results/Conceptual Discussion

Three works have been selected from the body of work produced in this studio exploration to discuss the results of this studio project. These are titled *Cut and Join I* (2011 -2012), *A Journey of One Thousand Kilometres* (2010) and *Life is War* (2012). These works, like every other product of the project, were essentially produced with jute fabric using a common technical process of hand-sewing. *Cut and Join I* (Fig. 13) is one out of the "Cut and Join" series produced between 2010 and 2014. It is a wall-bound sculpture composed with varied patterns of cylindrically shaped jute forms (long and short rolled jute fabrics). The long rolls, formally structured into curves and colourfully designed with pieces of cloth and nylon thread, are woven and sewn into a piece that runs vertically down with a break in movement towards the lower part of the work. The movement is resuscitated with suspended short jute rolls which are connected to the long ones with lengths of tiny threads attached to the tips of both the long and short rolls. The flow of movement in the work is enhanced with dangling lines of long multiple coloured threads attached at interval to some of the vertical wavy long tubular forms. Laid on the floor, under the hanging piece, is an arrangement of colourful short cylindrical jute forms stacked and sewn together with thread. And on the body of the hanging piece are similar short jute rolls made to run horizontally across the woven curvy tubular forms with many of them concentrating on the upper left side.

*Cut and Join I* is a metaphor that examines life situations constantly punctuated with occasional breaks and breakthroughs. Although the term 'cut and join' in common parlance has become a derogatory term, particularly in Nigeria where it is used to qualify poorly skilled artisans, uncoordinated projects or programmes and inconsistent political agenda, this work is an attempt to

visualise the interconnection of things in life. As suggested in the work, nothing is continuous; whatever exists (long or short) only ends where it starts in a similar or different form. As the convoluted work explores the intersections among different lengths of jute rolls, fine lines of threads and variegated patches of colours, the viewer is drawn into literal and figurative perspectives guided by both material and structure, and blended with wrapping and tying to portray dependence of one thing on the other.

*A Journey of One Thousand Kilometres* (Fig. 13) is among the first works produced in this exploration of fibre materials. Like in *Cut and Join I*, long ropes of reinforced jute fibre, patterned with colourful pieces of cloth and dyed spun cotton thread, were woven into a long strip that was folded to create the shape of a snail. Although the work is displayed here as a free-standing sculpture representing a snail, it can also be unfolded, stretched and mounted on a wall as a relief. As a snail, the piece makes allusions to the pace of human, social, economic and political development in Africa. But stretched out on a wall as a relief, it evokes the images of the tide - perhaps tides of crime and violence; tides of public opinion against corruption - strong tides that make 'swimming' very dangerous.

Another work which resulted from the exploration is *Life is War* (Fig. 14). It is a collection of empty and stuffed bags configured with pieces of jute fabrics and cloth. The organic nature of the work initiates some kind of randomness created by the straps at the upper side (along a horizontal metal line on which the bags hang). This bag arrangement forms spatial divisions that are gathered as cloud and then dropped like rain or snow. Here, jute bags are deconstructed, manipulated and revitalised in the original context it functioned 'as a container for storing and shipping goods abroad for export' (Obodo, 2010: 29). Thread and pieces of cloth add colour to the composition while the protuberant sacks, energised by the wrapped contents, emphasise its three-dimensionality. Fluidity is introduced in it with multiple lines of straps suspended on a straight horizontal metal line.

*Life is War* is loaded with several layers of meanings. It takes a more confrontational stance as it mirrors man's struggle for survival. The use of large, small, stuffed and empty bags in the composition generates questions such as 'why are these bags so?' and 'what do the differences in size and capacity mean?' But even a viewer with just the haziest understanding of art appreciation recognises in the work the allusion it makes to the issue of savings. Of course affluence and poverty are measured based on the weight of a person's purse. As metaphor, *Life is War* reflects the economic pulse of the society where, from a political point of view, equality is rather a theoretical matter that is often discussed but very rarely practiced, and where there are happy and wealthy individuals as well as poor and miserable ones. The wrapped contents of the bags reveal the enormity of the undeclared stolen assets of the typical Nigerian public office holders, while the empty and floppy small bags tell many stories about the poor amidst the rich.

Perhaps the work yields a deeper meaning in reference to the struggling menial worker in the Igbo areas of Nigeria who would, under pressure, echo in vernacular *uwa bu agha*, literally interpreted as 'the world is war', which is either won or lost! As an Igbo saying, *uwa bu agha* means that life is a struggle. At every level in social life there is a struggle. While the poor toils to make ends meet, the rich labours to maintain his status. Sometimes drudges utter it as an exclamation when hardship bites relentlessly. At times if somebody is asked how he fares, he would respond: *a na anu*



*ya!*, which means 'the struggle is on!'. Also, people may say *uwa bu agha* as an expression of pity when looking at a miserable wretch seeking to make ends meet. Some 'barrow boys', truck pushers and commercial drivers even inscribe it on their carts and trucks as their maxim. Looking at the work, there are visual features of the term 'struggle' reflected on it. The configuration process, the display, the forms and even the physical nature and condition of the jute material used for the work make direct allusion to labour and apparent lack of luxury.

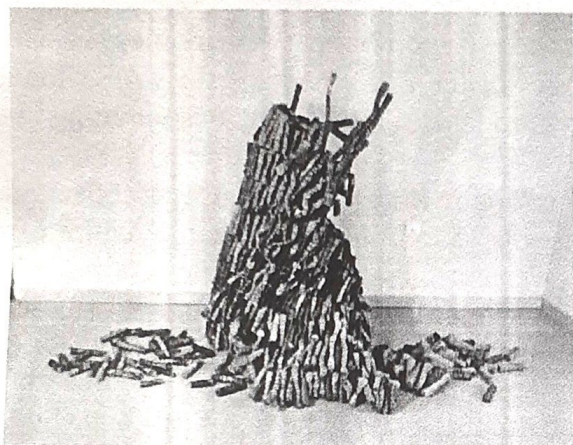


Fig. 12a: *Cut and Join II* (2013) jute fibre, dye, cloth and nylon thread (displayed as a free-standing sculpture)

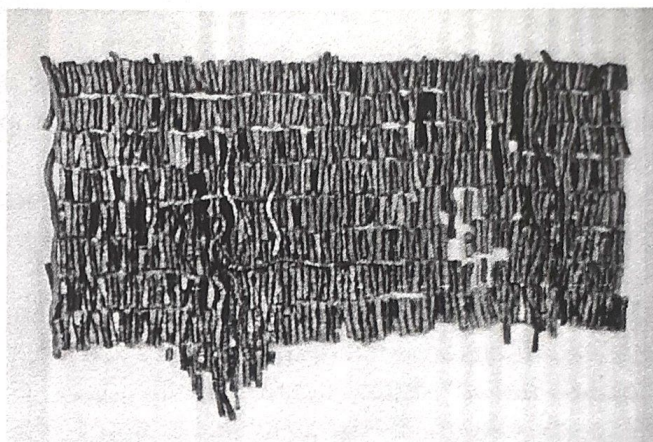


Fig. 12b: *Cut and Join II* (displayed as a relief sculpture)

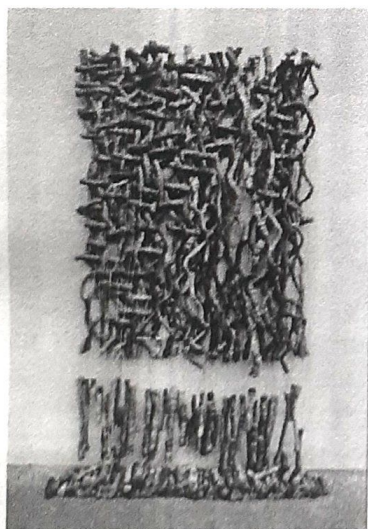


Fig. 13: *Cut and Join I* (2011 - 2012) jute fibre, dye, cloth and nylon thread

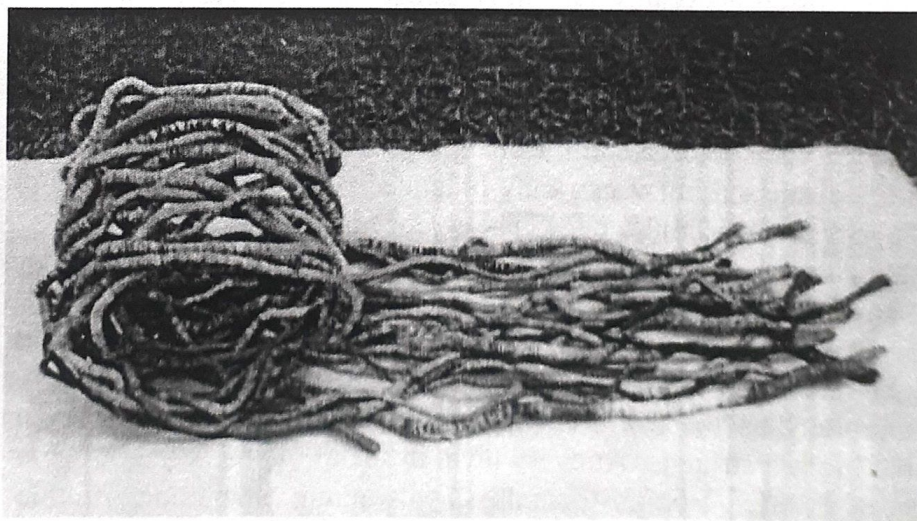


Fig. 14: *A Journey of One Thousand Kilometres* (2010) jute fibre, dye, cloth, cotton and nylon threads



Fig. 15: *Life is War* (2010) jute fabric, cloth, dye, metal and cotton thread

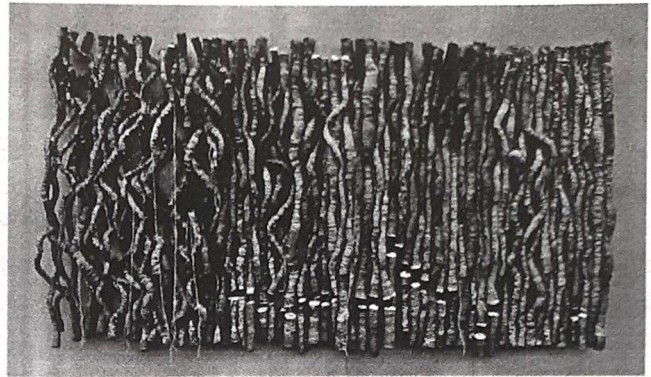


Fig. 16: *Breakthrough* (2012) jute, cloth, dye, acrylic and nylon thread

### Conclusion

I have explored several methods for manipulating fibre, dyeing, folding, stitching, wrapping and tying in order to transform selected fibre materials into colourful visual imageries. In this artistic exercise, I focused on process which involved an additive method, as in modelling, of constructing the works a single element at a time, beginning with wrapping a piece of wire (armature) with a strip of jute fabric to building it up bit by bit with pieces of cloth and threads. Thus, the project initiated an exercise where the linear quality of fibre was explored to develop colourful textile structures of long, short, straight and twisted motifs which after being organised suggest something straight or crooked about life, depending on the perspective they are viewed from. In other words, it engaged a process that has to do with the dimension of selecting, arranging and organising materials and patterns in ways that are personal. Although pushing ideas around in fibre with this technique of layering has generated pieces of different rhythms and readings, the process still pose more possibilities.

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