

Article

## Fragility of Tradition: Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves and Postmodern Nigerian Art

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### Abstract

*This paper examines Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves within the context of the 2021 Kó Art Space exhibition in Lagos, Nigeria, titled "The New Nsukka Art School: Between Continuity and Change." Grounded in the ideological and experimental traditions of the Zaria Art Society and the Nsukka Art School, Ezema's work reflects a dynamic synthesis of Nigerian artistic heritage and postmodern sensibilities. Tracing the historical roots of artistic radicalism in Nigeria, beginning with the Zaria rebels' resistance to Euro-centric pedagogy in the late 1950s, the discussion explores how Uli motifs and local materials became central to a new form of artistic expression. Ezema's ceramic practice extends this trajectory of experimentation by transforming terracotta into a medium for conceptual exploration, emphasizing fragility, impermanence, and environmental themes. Positioned at the intersection of tradition and innovation, her work challenges the boundaries of ceramic art, signposting the evolution of contemporary Nigerian art in a globalized world. This study situates Terracotta Dry Leaves as a radical reimagining of materiality and artistic expression, embodying both continuity with and deviation from cultural traditions.*

**Keywords:** Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, Terracotta Dry Leaves, Nsukka Art School, Uli motifs, Nigerian contemporary art, fragility, ceramic art

### Introduction

The wave of artistic radicalism that greeted the Fine Arts department of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, later renamed Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, in 1958, was unprecedented. Perhaps in the queue with the general quest for freedom at the dusk of the decade before 1960, when Nigeria got her independence, the art students of the institution systematically punctured the balloon of intellectual suppression. Agitation was rife against the Euro-centric curriculum for art learning imposed on the students by the largely British educators; they wanted to do art the Nigerian way, not the British way. However, the young art students wanted a combo of Nigerian art forms and some of the British ones 'useful' on the ground at the moment. They wanted to use art to find originality within Nigeria, not to lose it, and so, the agitation for the synthesis of Nigerian art forms and those of Britain was the subject of rebellion, for they were branded the 'Zaria rebels'. The brand name was later to transmute into the 'Zaria Art Society'.

The experimental days that heralded the aftermaths of the call for the synthesis of traditional artistic ideologies with some of the foreign ones taught by white art lecturers at the Zaria Art School, opened a vista of opportunities for Nigerian artists to think inwards a lot more. (Alu et al, 2024). Members of the Zaria rebels later spread into different parts of the country, their ethnic origins, to find Nigerian-based metaphors for artistic content projection, an attitude held beyond their undergraduate days in Zaria. Uche Okeke, a leading member, from the Igbo



ethnicity, started projecting *Uli* art in very dynamic ways. *Uli*, an indigo seed, of the same colour was processed by Igbo women for use in body painting and murals. The linear motifs anchored by the Igbo women of South East Nigeria got more popularised by Uche Okeke and his protégés in ‘metaphorising’ the Igbo cultural compass very stylistically. *Uli* motifs, therefore, tooled the liberalisation of the artists of the Nsukka School extraction a great deal, thereby presenting them as exponential in artistic experimentalism.

The Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria is one of the foremost art institutions in Nigeria. Established in 1961, the art department was duly born into the waiting hands of freshly gotten Nigeria’s independence. Regrettably, the art programmes of the Nsukka art school, like the Zaria art School, earlier on, were highly ‘Europeanised’. By Europeanisation we mean that the European art lecturers in the institution flagged art teaching structures that showed much Euro-centric educational curriculum. In the wake of the upheavals leading to the Nigeria-Biafra civil war and its encumbrances, signs were high enough that schooling was going to be disturbed in the Eastern region, so, the expatriate art lecturers were driven away by the prevailing unsafe. After the war, when indigenous artists took over, artistic experimentation was combined with theoretical pedagogies to form the core bipod of the art learning structure in the institution (Alu et al, 2024).

Right from the 1970s, the present driving force of studio art in Nsukka School, according to Okoro (2021), has been exploration and experimentation with *Uli* motifs and commonplace materials. Okuyeme (2021) added that the Nsukka School is best known for the revival of *Uli*, an Igbo art tradition that was historically used for the body and wall murals, placing this visual language into contemporary art discourses. From the foregoing, one can deduce that whereas *Uli* motifs became ideological, experimentation in Nsukka was taken beyond *Uli*. The efforts of Chike Aniakor, El Anatsui, Obiora Udechukwu, Olu Oguibe, Chijioke Onuora, Tayo Adenaike, Krydz Ikwemesi, Eva Obodo, to mention a few, have confirmed this permissible navigation in the explorative track of the un-foreknown (Okafor, 2024).

We are in a postmodern age. But because of globalization and its attendant effects, some authorities may quarrel with this assertion. Nevertheless, the characterization of the postmodern age is fragmentation, trans-historical experiences, shifting boundaries and sites, and easy access to art materials that artists destroy, only to constitute, a voice of their creative freedom away from patronizing institutions. Their creative choices are unbounded while their creative directions know no limits. They have replaced institutional patronage with the triumph of a radical creative temperament and innovation (Aniakor, 2015). In the long queue of Nsukka-bred explorative artists is Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, a ceramic artist and one of the three selected by the Kó Art Space in Lagos, for a tripartite exhibition themed: ‘The New Nsukka Art School: Between Continuity and Change’.

### **The Nsukka School as a Force in Global Art Radicalism**

Initially known as Enweonwu College of Art, the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established in 1961 as one of the earliest departments in the University. The Nsukka Art School or Nsukka School, is,

however, not exactly a code name for the department, rather, it represents artists trained in the department whose ideological inclinations stream from the experimentalist mannerisms that the school is known for. In other words, ours is more of a school of thought, fuelled by individual radical searches for ‘something new’ in the art horizons, than a physical art school epitomised by methodical sameness. According to Rice (2018), the Nsukka School, which is named after the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, was a group of artists and faculty members associated with the use of *Uli* – a form of body and mural decorative painting indigenous to the Igbo culture of Nigeria – in their work and are considered disciples of Uche Okeke’s teachings and artistic influence. The *Uli* experiment sought to address Okeke’s call for ‘natural synthesis’ in the visual arts of Nigeria and the formation of an art appropriate for the post-independence age. Other members of the group who experimented with *uli* forms through painting and drawing were Chike Aniakor and Obiora Udechukwu, followed by their students Tayo Adenaike and Olu Oguibe.

The formal and aesthetic codes of the Nsukka School draw primarily from the art school’s creative ideology which emphasizes experimentation as a critical aspect of the creative process (Okuyeme, 2021). If the name, Nsukka School or Nsukka Art School simply represented the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, then it would have also staged an encapsulation of the same curricula convention rolled over the years, since after the Civil War. The permission for students and artists of the ideological family to spread out in search of individual artistic protectorates fruitfully resulted in sundry findings. Though the initial progenitor, Uche Okeke and his immediate acolytes succeeded in entrenching the *Uli* creative ideology in the school, there has been a paradigm shift from the course; one in which a spectrum of postmodern radicalism seems to have been ignited, in the making of the likes of Ngozi-Omeje Ezema; a neo-*Uli* art activist (Anikpe et al, 2024).

The Nsukka art signature is, apart from having the *Uli* linear abstraction tendencies, richly embedded in diverse individual approaches to doing art in a different or new-found way. Okuyeme (2021) stated that the Nsukka School is a term used to distinguish artists who have studied and taught at the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in South Eastern Nigeria, and who share a critical engagement in both their visual and theoretical fields. The emergent stylistics of the neo-Nsukka class promise the world very prominent findings in the sojourn to artistic individuality.

### **Kavita Chellaram, Kó Art Space and Contemporary Nigerian Art**

The Yoruba word, *kó* means “to gather” or “to build”. Having known that the *kó* art space is about art, a layman can, at least, adduce that the objective of setting up such a gallery was hinged on gathering art and artists. Indian-born Kavita Chellaram has invested a lot of time and attention in developing and gathering art in Nigeria. In exploring the art map of Nigeria, she seems to have drawn a fresh map for herself, surveying and pulling up radically creative minds, a project that led to the founding of the Lagos-based auctioneers *Arthouse Contemporary Ltd*, which focuses on modern and contemporary art from West Africa. She established *Arthouse Foundation* to also provoke discourses on contemporary art in Nigeria, through residencies for artists. Establishing the *kó* art space was aimed at

supporting contemporary art in Nigeria, though as a project parallel to the art auction house. In the words of Chellaram (2020), we aim to support the creativity of contemporary art in Africa by providing a platform to communicate, share and grow.

According to Donnan (2012), when *Arthouse*, the Lagos gallery and auctioneer, held its first sale in 2008, Kavita Chellaram, the managing director, had a simple goal. A long-time collector of Nigerian modern and contemporary art- the walls at her Lagos home hang heavy with works by some of the lions-she was eager to establish a market. "There was no transparency of price," she says of the days before that first auction, which saw a painting by Bruce Onobrakpeya, one of Nigeria's famed "Zaria rebels", fetch more than \$80,000. Just four years on, the market Mrs Chellaram helped establish is booming and prices are soaring for the best works by Nigerian contemporary artists, the finest of which are now celebrated around the world.

I am excited to create Kó as a separate and unique gallery entity. This will allow us to create focused exhibitions regularly, delve more deeply into artists and art historical topics, generate research and publications, and continue to promote Nigerian art on the global stage (Chellaram, 2020).

Having ventured into a myriad of art exhibitions and marketing projects in Nigeria, the Kó art space, in 2021 decided to do a three-phase show of artists from the famed Nsukka School of Art, seemingly interested in installations at the time. It appears that the baseline for selection was the propensity with which the artists digressed from unilateral *Uli* experimentalism, into more aggressively complex paths that further signpost the Nsukka School as unique, hence, the sub-theme; Between Continuity and Change. The initial allotment for the threesome show was: (i) Ngozi Omeje-Ezema (ceramic artist); Jan 28 - Feb 11, 2021, (ii) Eva Obodo (sculptor and art educationist); Feb 25 - March 11, 2021, and (iii) Ozioma Onuzulike (ceramic artist and art historian); March 25-April 8, 2021. The third phase was, however, later rescheduled for: March 29-May 6, 2021.

### **Brief Profile of Ngozi Omeje Ezema**

Born in 1979, ceramic artist, Ngozi Ezema, (Nee Omeje) was trained at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka where she obtained her Bachelor of Arts, BA degree in 2005. She hails from Nsukka in Enugu State of Nigeria. Ezema joined the teaching staff of her alma mater in 2009, the same year she completed her Master of Fine Arts, MFA degree in ceramic art. Like most products of the Nsukka School ideology, Ezema steadily interrogates the seemingly impossible, challenging conventionalism and boldly veering into the path of newness in which a gong beckons on the world to come to see eureka. She is a strong poster face in the infusion of modernity into a tradition that in itself, stirs the world of creativity. Like Onuzulike, she believes that manipulating clay is not to make vessels, casseroles, pitchers, trinket boxes and industrial tiles, only. In other words, Ezema likes to take ceramic art beyond the utilitarian specs, proving that 'something else' can come out of clay with a very complex assemblage of terracotta forms in mixed media installation (Okafor, 2024).

In 2014 she won the Life in My City Art Foundation Prize. In 2015, her project, 'Against All Odds', won the Outstanding Concept Award of Nigeria's National Art Competition. In 2016 Ezema participated in the first International Biennale in Central China and *le Pinceau de L'integration* in Senegal during the Dakar Biennale. Same year she was commissioned for a special installation project at Art X in Lagos. In 2018 the Centre for Contemporary Art, CCA, hosted Ezema's first solo exhibition in Lagos. In 2019 Ezema won the High Excellence award at the Cheongju International Craft Biennale in South Korea. She has participated in art residencies with the centre for Contemporary Art, CCA/Triangular Art Trust, Lagos; Goethe Institute Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria; Sevshoon Art centre, Seattle; Goethe Institute, Kumasi, Ghana; and the Triangular Art Trust, Jos, Nigeria.

### **Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Unique Art-Voice**

As artists, the desire to make unique art can drive us mad. For most of us, this motivation is what inspires us, or what torments us. When I'm at my worst, it's usually because I don't feel like my work is saying anything special. When I'm at my best, it feels like I'm making things I haven't seen before, and that feels pretty damn good (Cicak, 2023). Chicago illustrator Nicole Cicak in the above statement captures succinctly the mindset of every explorative artist, especially given the prevailing competitive preponderances which most times seem to carve a gender-led partition among artists. It is unarguably; in this calibre of 'saying something special' that Ngozi-Omeje Ezema belongs. In furtherance, she expressly essays the female gender as comparatively masculine in exerting artistic energy via diverse media.

Having to conceive the making of leaves in terracotta is worth applauding. The processes involved in treating and baking clay to such a state are intriguingly configurative. The earth-brown colour of the terracotta leaves suggests dryness; no dry leaf is green anymore. This was how Ezema chose to address the tenderness of the female gender, among other themes. Some leaves are dry to the point of turning black or some other colours deeper than brown; this is suggestive of decay, a state of despondency in which many women are painfully watching the world today. Whereas women could be addressed as assorted vases, the shrivelled, green-less and disfigured shapes of the dry leaves, suspended from the heights with fishing twines, also suggest that it is only a matter of time before the unwanted happens, as each hanging leaf could disengage when the suspender becomes weak, old or cut off, thereby, making the unfortunate leaf to fall lifelessly down, to join a myriad of others on the ground of despair. Hanging the terracotta leaves however suggests giving life to the lifeless or hope to the hopeless. See plates 3, 4 and 5. Apart from female gender-related issues Ezema also addresses social matters with her manipulation of several shapes of animals and other things with the suspended dry leaves. Cicak (2023) justifies the vigorousness attended to by Ezema in her works by stating thus: "I wish making unique art were as simple as picking up some paints and hoping and hoping your personality comes through in your work"

On her relationship with clay, during an interview with Olivia Barrell of Art Formes, South Africa, Ngozi reports: "It is a very temperamental medium, malleable to touch and disobedient to impatient hands." When asked about artists who likely influenced her she expatiated, "El Anatsui has a big impact on my work.

He guided me to discover artists who work with suspended elements in their large-scale installations, such as Cornelia Parker and Jaehyo Lee- both of whom I consider great sources of inspiration” (Barrell, 2021). On the explorative pedigree of Ngozi-Omeje Ezema, according to Agujiobi-Odoh (2024), she realised that transporting ceramic works to an art exhibition location or site is quite burdensome because of their size and weight, so she set out to solve the problem. Using the clay medium she began to produce clay fragments in large numbers. Toning some with chosen colours, she fired them in the kiln, from which she now obtained her terracotta clay fragments. She soon learnt that these clay fragments could easily be transported to any art gallery and installed on-site as works of art.

In the kó 2021 art exhibition, Ezema sub-themed her solo show: *Boundless Vases*. It was a show of her very dexterous approaches towards creating dry leaves with terracotta using fishing twines to hang the ceramic pieces till all the fragments form admirable shapes. The dry leaf motifs, presented in this paper as Ezema’s voice during the exhibition spoke for themselves and the artist, in breaking away from conventionalism. Elements of pigmentation were also used to inject perspectives in ‘metaphorising’ her messages. Her works address life’s issues like: family, the female gender, fragility and other environment-bound themes. ‘Boundless Vases’ indeed showcased multiple vase-like shapes made of: terracotta, acrylic, monofilament, fishing line and metal.

This paper is a sequel to two earlier publications on the participation of Omeje’s colleagues, Eva Obodo and Ozioma Onuzulike: (i) Social Narratives in Polychromatic Embroidery as Hallmarks of Eva Obodo’s Works at the February 25 - March 11, 2021, Ko Art Exhibition, Lagos, Nigeria; Published in *Innovations* Vol. 76. (March 2024) and (ii) Appraisal of Ozioma Onuzulike’s Stoneware and Terracotta Ceramic Keloids at the March 29 - May 6, 2021 Kó Art Exhibition, Lagos, Nigeria; published in *Innovations*. Vol. 77 (June, 2024).



Ngozi-Omeje Ezema and her Terracotta Dry Leaves Installation Process  
**Media:** Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.  
**Source:** Nkem Fortynues Alu et al: Research 2024

## Research Design

This study adopted the desktop research design, which aligns with its theme and content. According to Owa (2024), desktop research utilizes existing data from sources such as books, articles, websites, and databases to address research questions. Also referred to as secondary research, this method relies on information previously gathered by other researchers, without requiring new data collection from primary sources. Desktop research incorporates both qualitative and quantitative approaches; however, this paper specifically employed a qualitative desk research design. The qualitative dimension of desktop research fits well with this study's need to interpret meaning, symbolism, and cultural context of Ezema's use of terracotta to explore themes like fragility and environmental concerns. Qualitative research's key methodologies, such as textual and visual analysis, thematic extraction, and critical interpretation, offer depth and nuanced insights into the artistic and cultural narratives central to the present study.

Desktop research, also known as secondary research, is one of the most common and effective research methods for studies that rely on interpreting existing data. By focusing on already available materials such as books, journal articles, websites, and databases, this approach eliminates the need for fieldwork or primary data collection, making it a cost-effective and time-efficient option. It is particularly suitable for this study, where the goal is to analyze and synthesize information about a specific topic – the work of Ngozi-Omeje Ezema – through an existing body of research or documented knowledge.



Installations of Images in Terracotta Dry Leaves on Display  
**Media:** Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal  
**Source:** *Nkem Fortynunes Alu et al: Research 2024*

## Objectives

This review aimed to come up with artist-respondent-based analyses on Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves exhibited at the Ko 2021 tripartite art exhibition. The respondents were allowed to align to selected content and feature options, as calibrated. Specifically, the study objectives were to:

1. Analyze the impact of colour and composition in conveying the intended messages within Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's *Terracotta Dry Leaves*.

2. Assess the extent of artistic freedom expressed in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves.
3. Evaluate the interplay and balance between aesthetic and idealistic elements in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's installations.
4. Investigate the significance of *Boundless Vases* within the context of modern ceramic art.

## Participants and Sampling

There were 148 art entrepreneurs, lecturers and postgraduate students randomly selected as respondents. All the respondents are residents of Eastern Nigeria. After being treated to sampling and participation eligibility requirements, 48 were dropped and the picturesque questionnaire tagged Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Pictorial Questionnaire (NOETDL-PQ) was sent to 100 respondents. Each respondent was to return only one copy of the NOETDL-PQ, meaning that duplication was not allowed. All the 100 copies of the NOETDL-PQ were returned electronically, as sent, but 12 had incomplete data issues, and therefore, were dropped. Data from 88 copies were finally analysed. The sampling and participation eligibility processes are reflected hereunder.

## Instruments for Data Collection

The first instrument for data collection was a researcher-designed picturesque questionnaire labelled: Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Pictorial Questionnaire (NOETDL-PQ), used to poll responses from the artist-respondents. The first section contained interrogations streaming from the review questions, while the next section showed 24 plates of Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's works as exhibited.

The second instrument was the Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Respondents Data Chart (NOETDL-RDC) designed for the collation of personal and bio data of the artist-respondents. All data in this instrument were for documentation purposes, not for discussion.

The third instrument was the Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Evaluation Frequency and Percentage Rating Desk (NOETDL-FPRD) designed for frequency and percentage conversion of responses. All data collated from the respondents were converted to percentage ratings and discussed afterwards.

## Method of Data Distribution and Analysis

Data from the NOETDL-FPRD were split into four sets per row, for acceptance and rejection assessment ease, and rated thus: 51-88 (HA- Highly accepted); 36-50 (A- accepted); 26-35 (R- rejected); 0-25 (R- Highly rejected). There were 4 questions under each of the review interrogations, and the number of respondents ticking for each option, affirmative or non-affirmative, weighed on the scale above, for its classification. The final stage was the conversion of the polls to simple percentage ratings.



## Findings

The study findings were derived from the data spread in the tables below:

**Table 1:**

*The Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Respondents Data Chart (NOETDL-RDC)*

Sex	Designation	State of residence	Familiarity with Ezema	Familiarity with her works	Description of her works
Male	50 Studio artists	39 Abia	8 Yes	47 Yes	Boring 0
Female	38 Art lecturers	30 Anambra	30 No	41 No	Creative- 81
	PG std artists	19 Enugu	20		Too experimental 7
		Ebonyi	15		
		Imo	15		

*Source: Nkem Fortynunes Alu et al: Research 2024*

From the inference on the NOETDL-RDC there were 50 male and 38 female final artist-respondents that participated. Further breakdown shows: 39 studio artists, 30 art lecturers and 19 art postgraduate students. On States of residency, 8 were resident in Abia, 30 in Anambra, 20 in Enugu, 15 in Ebonyi and 15 in Imo states of South-East Nigeria. A total of 47 respondents were familiar with Ezema and her works but 41 were not. On rating her works, using three scales provided, 81 accepted that she is creative, 7 said she is too experimental but none stated that her works were boring.

**Table 2:**

*The Ngozi-Omeje Ezema Terracotta Dry Leaves Evaluation Frequency and Percentage Rating Desk (NOETDL-FPRD)*

Frequency and percentage rating of data on: (i) the extent to which colouration and assemblage bring out intended motives in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves (ii) the possibility of Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves weighing up for artistic self-freedom, (iii) the extent to which there is a comparative evaluation of aesthetics and idealism in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves installations, and (iv) the extent to which 'Boundless Vases' are relevant in contemporary ceramic art (n=88)

	Interrogations (n=108)	Answer options	Acceptance/rejection		Translation			
			F	%	HA	A	R	HR
1	To what extent do colouration and assemblage bring out intended motives in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves	It's more of colouration	42	47.3		√		
		It's more of assemblage	40	45.45		√		
		It's both, on equal proportion	6	6.82				√
		Its none of the two	-	-				√
2	Can Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves weigh up for idiomatic expressions of	She is too innovative for ceramic art	-	-				√
		She risks being misconstrued	15	17.05				√
		It has been achieved already	73	82.95	√			

	artistic self-freedom?	She cannot compete with the men	-	-					√
3	To what extent is there a comparative evaluation of aesthetics and idealism in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves installations?	Moderate extent	22	25					√
		The comparison is needless	-	-					√
		Idealism is uppermost	61	69.32	√				
		She panders towards sculpture installations	5	5.68					√
4	To what extent are 'Boundless Vases' relevant in contemporary ceramic art?	They mean little in industrial ceramics	-	-					√
		They mean more to the artist than to the world	-	-					√
		They are relevant for artistic innovation	16	18.18					√
		They represent the artists peculiar signature	72	81.82	√				
<p><b>Key:</b> 51-88 (HA- Highly accepted); 36-50 (A- accepted); 26-35 (R- rejected); 0-25 (R- Highly rejected).</p> <p><b>Source:</b> Nkem Fortyunes Alu et al: Research 2024</p>									

Data in Table 2 show that, to an appreciable extent, colouration and assemblage are elements that bring out the intended motives in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves experiment. Specifically, 42(47.3%) ticked colouration and 40(45.45%) ticked assemblage; both scores stand on a near-equal, and within the affirmative category. On the second question of whether the Terracotta Dry Leaves weigh up well for idiomatic expressions of artistic self-freedom, 15(17.05%) respondents disagreed by stating that she risks being misconstrued, but 73(82.95%) agreed on the grounds that the aim had been achieved already, however, none accepted the notions that she is too innovative for ceramic art and that she cannot compete with the men, respectively. Assessing the extent to which there is a comparative evaluation of aesthetics and idealism in Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's Terracotta Dry Leaves installations had 61(69.32%) in the positive, postulating that idealism is uppermost on her mind, but 22(25%) stated that it is to a moderate extent. However, 5(5.68%) were in the non-affirmative, on the grounds that she panders towards sculpture installations. None agreed that the comparison is needless. Investigating the extent to which 'Boundless Vases' are relevant in contemporary ceramic art polled a whopping 72(81.82%) of the respondents in the affirmative, on the grounds that the works represent the artist's peculiar signature, 16(18.18%) however stated that her styled vases were relevant for artistic innovation.

## Discussion

The four-pronged investigation polled interesting findings and remarks among the artist-correspondents. Colouration and assemblage were discovered as key factors that justify the motives of the artist, with 47.3% and 45.45% ticking for colouration and assemblage apiece. When clay is prepared and fired to achieve leaf-shaped pieces of terracotta, the imagery of fallen leaves is attained, but refusing to glaze them in colours, rather preferring to leave them in the natural brownish colours of baked clay, or further pigmenting some into varied colours of dry, faded or decaying leaves, helps to attain colouration. Furthermore, stringing the leaf

fragments into the desired overall shape by suspending them from the roof of each casing helps to attain their calibrated titles and desired positions.

The major reason it could be said that Ezema's experiments could weigh up positively for idiomatic expressions of artistic self-freedom was that only a few per cent of the respondents rejected or challenged the notion. A whopping 82.95% asserted that the aim had been achieved already, so the need for questioning does not arise. On the extent to which there is a comparative evaluation of aesthetics and idealism in Ezema's works 25% postulated that the level of comparison is moderate while an insignificant 5.68% rejected the notion on the grounds that she panders towards sculpture installations. However, 69.32% of the respondents stated that because idealism is uppermost on their minds, comparative evaluation exists to a high extent. In all none accepted the notion that there is no need for such comparison.

Findings showed that to a huge extent 'Boundless Vases' being the group name for all the works exhibited by Ezema, in their uniqueness, are relevant in contemporary ceramic art, with 81.82% of the respondents affirming, based on the fact that the works represent the peculiar signature of the artist. 18.18% agreed but on the grounds that her styled vases were relevant for artistic innovation.

## **Conclusion**

Kavita Chellaram's vision for the Kó Art Gallery exhibition was to highlight the works of Nigerian artists, specifically a new wave of creators associated with the New Nsukka Art School, who uphold Uli traditions while incorporating innovative, hybrid techniques. Within this framework, Ngozi-Omeje Ezema distinguished herself through her experimental work *Terracotta Dry Leaves*, which demonstrated a thoughtful approach to both conceptual and material aspects of ceramic art. Her focus on coloration and composition emerged as key factors in articulating the project's thematic and aesthetic goals.

To realistically capture the appearance of dry leaves—both in terms of form and natural color dynamics—the artist made the strategic choice to leave her clay leaves in their bisque state. By forgoing a glazed finish, Ezema preserved their earthy, matte texture, staying true to the fragile, organic essence of nature. Glazing, which often introduces a glossy sheen, would have disrupted the hyperrealistic effect she sought to achieve, distancing the artwork from the intended representation of naturally decayed or dried foliage. This subtle yet deliberate decision reflects her commitment to aligning materiality with conceptual depth.

Ezema's choice to experiment with terracotta within this context underscores her innovative approach to ceramic art. By elevating a traditionally utilitarian material like terracotta into a medium for conceptual exploration, she expands the boundaries of ceramic artistry, positioning it as a tool for addressing themes of fragility, impermanence, and environmental consciousness. Her intricate assemblages demonstrate a seamless blend of technical mastery and artistic vision, with innovation standing out as the defining hallmark of her work.

Furthermore, while idealism is a cornerstone of Ezema's practice—expressed through her thematic emphasis on organic life and environmental issues—

considerations are not neglected. The visual appeal of her installations, conveyed through their intricate forms and carefully calibrated colors, reflects a keen understanding of aesthetic values that complement her idealistic intentions. This balance between idealistic depth and aesthetic sensitivity reaffirms the artist's ability to navigate both the conceptual and visual dimensions of contemporary art.







In conclusion, Ngozi-Omeje Ezema's *Terracotta Dry Leaves* epitomizes the evolving legacy of the New Nsukka Art School, where tradition and innovation converge. By weaving together the cultural resonance of Uli-inspired artistry, the material experimentation of terracotta, and the conceptual rigor of environmental themes, the artist successfully bridges the gap between tradition and modernity, making a profound contribution to the global discourse on contemporary Nigerian art.









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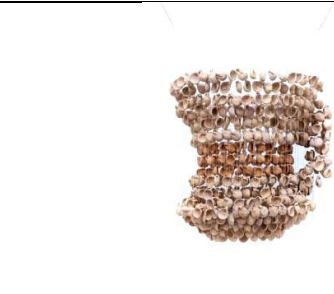
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## Appendix

PICTURE SPREAD OF NOETDL WORKS	
	
<b>Plate 1 :</b> Stunted (leaf series)	<b>Plate 2:</b> Subjugation (leaf series)
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 76 3/4 in 91 x 91 x 195 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 76 3/4 in 91 x 91 x 195 cm (2020)
	
<b>Plate 3:</b> Freedom (leaf series)	<b>Plate 4:</b> Vase 1
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 76 3/4 in 91 x 91 x 195 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 103 1/8 in 91 x 91 x 262 cm (2020)
	
<b>Plate 5:</b> Keeper of Light	<b>Plate 6:</b> Union 1
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 11 3/4 in 91 x 91 30 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 59 7/8 11 3/4 x 83 7/8 in 152 x 30 x 213 cm (2020)

	
<p><b>Plate 7:</b> Union 2</p>	<p><b>Plate 8:</b> Eavesdropper</p>
<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>	<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>
<p><b>Dimension:</b> 59 7/8 x 11 3/4 x 83 7/8 in 152 x 30 x 213 cm (2020)</p>	<p><b>Dimension:</b> 35 7/8 x 35 7/8 x 83 x 7/8 in 91 x 91 x 213 cm (2020)</p>
	
<p><b>Plate 9:</b> Vase 2</p>	<p><b>Plate 10:</b> Vase 3</p>
<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>	<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>
<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 24 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 61 cm (2020)</p>	<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 24 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 61 cm (2020)</p>
	
<p><b>Plate 11:</b> Vase 4</p>	<p><b>Plate 12:</b> Vase 5</p>
<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>	<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>
<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 24 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 61 cm (2020)</p>	<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 29 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 76 cm (2020)</p>
	
<p><b>Plate 13:</b> Vase 6</p>	<p><b>Plate 14:</b> Vase 7</p>
<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>	<p><b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.</p>
<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 29 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 76 cm (2020)</p>	<p><b>Dimension:</b> 11 3/3 x 11 3/4 x 29 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 76 cm (2020)</p>

	
<b>Plate 15:</b> Vase 8	<b>Plate 16:</b> Vase 9
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> Dimension: 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 35 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 91 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> Dimension: 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 35 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 91 cm (2020)
	
<b>Plate 17:</b> Vase 10	<b>Plate 18:</b> Vase 11
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 35 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 91 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 35 7/8 in 30 x 30 x 91 cm (2020)
	
<b>Plate 19:</b> Vase 12	<b>Plate 20:</b> Vase 13
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 x ¾ x 42 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 107 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 x ¾ x 42 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 107 cm (2020)
	
<b>Plate 21:</b> Vase 14	<b>Plate 22:</b> Vase 15
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 42 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 107 cm (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 42 1/8 in 30 x 30 x 107 cm (2020)

	
<b>Plate 23:</b> Vase 16	<b>Plate 24:</b> My Goal
<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.	<b>Media:</b> Terracotta, acrylic. Monofilament, fishing line, metal.
<b>Dimension:</b> 61 x 61 x 122 cm. (2020)	<b>Dimension:</b> 61 x 61 x 122 cm. (2020)
<b>Source:</b> Nkem Fortynnes Alu et al: Research 2024	

### Ethical Considerations

The artist Ngozi-Omeje Ezema was, accordingly, consulted before the assessment of her works began, and she gave her consent. All the artist-respondents were also formally notified. There was no violation of ethical procedures at any stage.

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