

VISUAL REPRESENTATION AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF TRANSPORTATION CHAOS IN LAGOS-BASED CONTEMPORARY ART

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ABSTRACT

Lagos is characterised by rapid population growth, severe infrastructural pressure and persistent congestion across its road and water transportation systems. These conditions have become important subjects in the works of contemporary Lagos-based visual artists who use painting to document, interpret and critique the everyday experience of mobility in the city. This study examined how transportation chaos is visually represented in selected paintings and how non-artists perceive these representations. The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observation and textual analysis of selected paintings produced by Festus Adeyemi, Bolaji Ogunwo, Ishola Matthew, Dolapo Ogunnusi, Abiodun Olaku, Gbenga Orimoloye, Aderinsoye Aladegbongbe and Kazeem Mumin. Thirty-two paintings were purposively selected, with four works drawn from each artist. The findings show that reckless driving, traffic obstruction, commuter impatience, verbal abuse and the excesses of law enforcement agents were the dominant forms of transportation chaos represented in the selected paintings. The artworks also captured the periodicity of chaos, especially during peak movement on roads and waterways. Non-artists interpreted the paintings as realistic portrayals of their daily struggles and as symbolic commentaries on civic disorder in Lagos public space. However, public access to such paintings remains limited because many of the works are held in private collections rather than displayed in accessible public spaces. The study concludes that Lagos-based contemporary paintings provide a valuable visual archive of urban transportation disorder and serve as interpretive tools for understanding mobility, public behaviour and civic regulation in Lagos.

Keywords: transportation chaos; visual artists; non-artists; painting; public perception; Lagos

Introduction

Artistic representations of transportation chaos on Lagos roads and waterways provide important insights into how commuters, traffic workers and the wider public experience and interpret mobility in the city. The works of Lagos-based visual artists communicate the challenges of transportation in ways that are accessible, educational and culturally meaningful. They depict the disorder, anxiety and negotiation that characterise daily movement across Lagos public space and also present visual commentaries on the social consequences of traffic offences and regulatory excesses. Ogundele (2022) notes that visual art performs several representational functions by complementing human existence, social interaction and public understanding. In Lagos, symbolic representations of transportation challenges extend this function by making congestion, disorder and human struggle visible in paintings. Through skilful composition, colour, line and spatial arrangement, artists interpret the complex patterns of movement that define the city. Heavy congestion is one of the defining features of urban life in Lagos. Previous visual anthropological studies on transportation have examined travellers' visual accounts and inscriptions on commercial vehicles, including cars, buses and trucks. However, limited attention has been paid to the ways in which transportation chaos is represented in contemporary paintings.

This study, therefore, explores how selected Lagos-based artists represent transportation chaos and how members of the public perceive these representations. Lagos commuters encounter persistent mobility challenges within public space, and these challenges have visible social, economic and psychological effects (Asobele, 2003; Faoseke, 2009; Fashola, 2000). Visual arts are also useful materials for anthropological research because they support the interpretation of social realities and cultural meanings. Ololajulo (2022) argues that visual art is a medium of expression, representation, interpretation and communication. This position is relevant to the present study because the paintings analysed here show how non-artists perceive the artistic representation of transportation chaos in Lagos. The central problem addressed in this study is whether public interpretations of artistic representations of transportation chaos correspond with the artists' intuitive perceptions. Although quantitative and qualitative studies have documented transportation infrastructure problems in Lagos (McSherry & Ozioma, 2021; Otunla, 2019; Oyebode, 2022), little scholarly attention has examined how Lagos transportation chaos is depicted in paintings or how artists and non-artists interpret such artworks. It is therefore important to investigate how artistic impressions can educate commuters, transport workers and the general public on transportation disorder in Lagos.

Research Questions

1. What specific paintings depict experiences related to road and water transportation chaos among commuters, passengers, traffic workers, drivers and boat operators in Lagos?
2. What forms of transportation chaos do Lagos-based artists choose to represent?
3. What are the views of non-artists on the visual illustration of transportation chaos?
4. How do artists' perceptions inform different artistic creations?
5. What is the impact of the interpretive schema in the selected works on commuters and passengers?

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study was to investigate how selected Lagos-based artists visually represent transportation chaos on roads and waterways and how the perceptions of artists and non-artists inform artistic creations that educate the public about mobility challenges in Lagos. The specific objectives were to: identify paintings depicting road and water transportation

experiences among commuters, passengers, traffic workers, drivers and boat operators in Lagos; explore Lagos-based artists' choices of transportation chaos; discuss the views of non-artists on visual illustrations of transportation chaos; explain how artists' perceptions inform artistic creations; and discuss the impact of the interpretive schema in the selected works on commuters and passengers.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in symbolic and interpretive anthropology associated with Clifford Geertz and later interpretive scholarship (Geertz, 2007; Johnson, 2013). The theory holds that culture is understood through the meanings people attach to events, practices and symbols in their social world. Its relevance to this study lies in its emphasis on how people construct meaning from cultural symbols and how those meanings shape social interpretation. Lagos-based visual artists symbolically represent transportation chaos on roads and waterways as part of the wider urban experience. Their paintings act as cultural symbols through which commuters' struggles, public disorder, regulatory tensions and civic behaviour are interpreted. In this sense, each artwork functions as an object, event and visual text through which Lagos transportation realities are communicated.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Committee of the University of Ibadan. Informed consent was obtained from participants, and the purpose, benefits and possible risks of the study were explained. Participants' identities were protected, and they were referred to by coded labels in the presentation of findings. Both the statement of the person obtaining consent and the statement of the person giving consent were appropriately signed and filed.

Study Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design because it focused on description, interpretation and textual analysis. This design was appropriate for examining visual impressions, artistic meanings and public perception. Several anthropological methods of inquiry were used to collect data from the study population, including in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observation and textual analysis. The selected paintings constituted the primary visual materials for the study. Fieldwork was carried out over six months in Lagos Island and Lagos Mainland. The participants included artists, non-artists, drivers, studio attendants, commuters, passengers and art admirers. Focus group discussions were conducted in purposively selected locations, including Idumota and Obalende on Lagos Island and Oyingbo and Yaba on the Mainland. These locations were selected because they contain heavily populated streets, busy transport corridors and active waterways that appear in the selected artists' paintings. The study focused on 32 paintings produced by eight contemporary Lagos-based artists, with four works selected from each artist. This methodological approach was designed to align closely with the research objectives and to bring out the interaction between artistic production, public interpretation and everyday transportation experiences in Lagos.

Study Area

Lagos is located in south-western Nigeria on the Atlantic coast in the Gulf of Guinea, west of the Niger River Delta. It lies approximately on longitude 3°24'E and latitude 6°27'N. The 2006 national census recorded a population of about 17 million for Lagos State, while contemporary estimates suggest that the population is between 20 and 22 million. Lagos is ethnically diverse, with representation from many Nigerian ethnic groups (Faoseke, 2009). It is Nigeria's commercial capital and one of the country's major industrial centres. Its aquatic

environment supports diverse forms of water transportation, including ferries, speedboats and canoes.

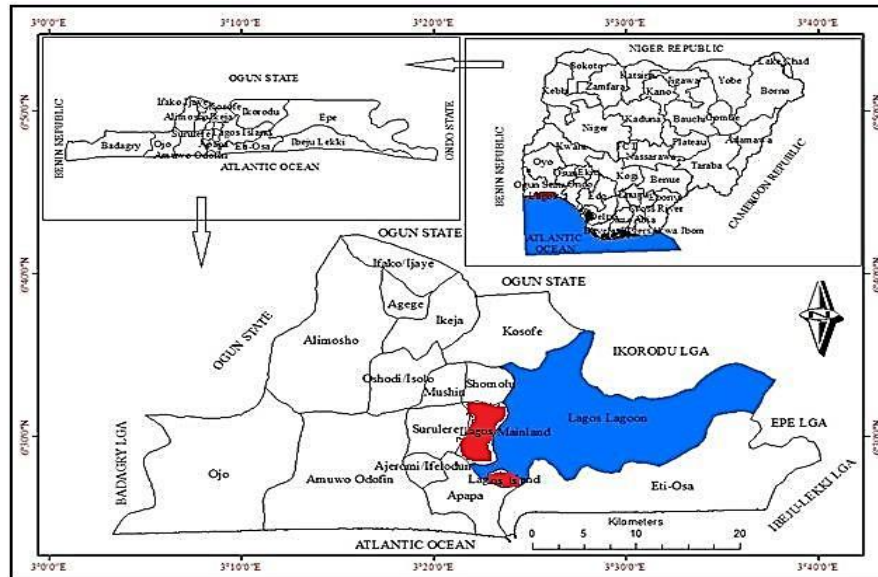


Figure 1. Map of Lagos State showing the study area. Source: Ministry of Land and Housing, Lagos State Secretariat.

Sampling

Eight major contemporary artists who reside and practise in Lagos Island and Lagos Mainland were purposively selected. The selection was based on the relevance of their works to transportation chaos on Lagos roads and waterways. According to the Society of Nigerian Artists, Lagos Chapter records, there were about 150 active painters among approximately 400 practising artists in Lagos as of 2024. The selected artists were considered suitable because their paintings directly engage the transportation realities of the city.

Findings

Selected Artists and their Works

Festus Adeyemi's selected works include Olokada, Keke Marwa, The New Order and BRT Lane. Bolaji Ogunwo's works include Old Oshodi, After the Rain, Rail Line Market and The River Side. Ishola Matthew's works include Idumota, Morning Rush, A Place I Used to Know I and A Place I Used to Know II. Dolapo Ogunnusi's works include Closing Time at Idumota, Before the Closing Hour, Busy Bus Stop and Rush Hour in Lagos Island. Abiodun Olaku's works include 247 Lagos, Transfiguration-Owode, Twilight Glory-Iganmu Lagos and Lunar Stirring-Makoko Series. Gbenga Orimoloye's works include Waterfront Ilaje, In the Morning, Feeling of the Canoes and Canoe on the Creek. Aderinsoye Aladegbongbe's works include Lonely Fight, Eye of the Sea, First Berth and Digging Deep. Kazeem Mumin's works include Setting Out, Makoko at Sunset, House on the Stilt and Homeward Bound.



Plate 1. Olokada. Artist: Festus Adeyemi.



Plate 2. Marwa. Artist: Festus Adeyemi.

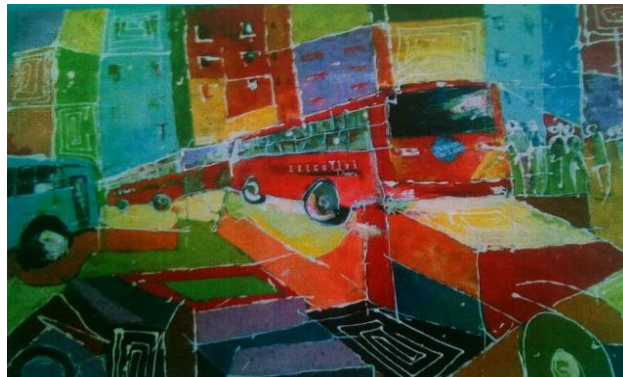


Plate 3. BRT Bus. Artist: Festus Adeyemi.



Plate 4. Old Oshodi. Artist: Bolaji Ogunwo.



Plate 5. Idumota. Artist: Ishola Matthew.



Plate 6. 247 Lagos. Artist: Abiodun Olaku.



Plate 7. Waterfront Ilaje. Artist: Gbenga Orimoloye.



Plate 8. First Berth. Artist: Aderinsoye Aladegbongbe.



Plate 9. Before the Closing Hour. Artist: Dolapo Ogunnusi.

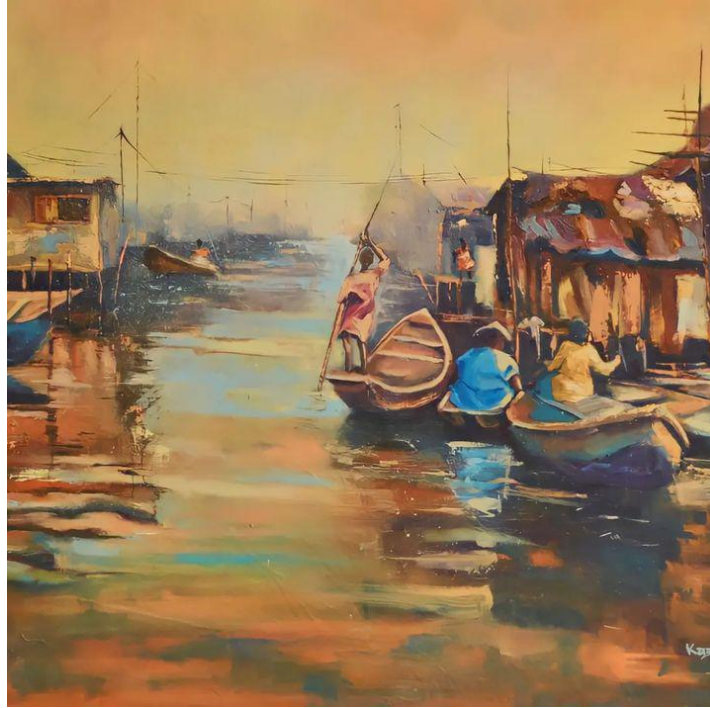


Plate 10. Makoko at Sunset. Artist: Kazeem Mumin.

Responses to the Artworks Viewed by Commuters (Non-Artists)

This section presents data collected from commuters and passengers who had experienced transportation chaos on Lagos roads and waterways. It captures what they perceived, understood and interpreted as the basic components of chaos in the visual artworks produced by Lagos-based artists. The responses are organised thematically. Five non-artist commuters were interviewed after viewing selected paintings. They are identified as Participants 1 to 5 to preserve confidentiality.

When I see a work of art created by an artist, I often find it remarkable. I do not know how to draw, let alone combine colours. Therefore, when I see an artist's painting, I think about God as the ultimate artist behind human creativity. I believe God gives artists the gift to draw, paint and illustrate daily human experiences. Based on what I see, artists are special people. **(Participant 1, FGI, non-artist, October 2024).**

Although I cannot draw or paint like an artist, I can clearly see the reality of the objects and figures depicted on canvas. One painting showed transportation at a particular location in Lagos Island, where yellow Danfo buses appeared to move uncontrollably along the street. The movement of the buses was captured so vividly that it felt as if I was physically present at the scene. The commuters gathered at the bus stop also appeared real. As someone who appreciates paintings, I can distinguish between a photograph and a painting, although this may not be easy for people who are not familiar with artworks. **(Participant 2, FGI, non-artist, October 2024).**

I admire artworks and the artists behind them. I began appreciating artistic creation when I was young through a roadside artist in my neighbourhood who painted popular musicians and important personalities. To me, the process seemed

almost magical. Even today, I still wonder how artists begin a work and arrive at a beautiful painting that shows transportation chaos through the combination of many colours. **(Participant 3, FGI, non-artist, October 2024).**

I am always interested in good artworks, but the high prices placed on them are a major concern, especially given the economic challenges in Nigeria. I have seen art lovers turn away because of the price. Some artists prefer to keep their works **until someone offers the amount they expect. Perhaps this is because the works** are intellectual property, but it still limits access for many people who appreciate art. **(Participant 4, FGI, non-artist, October 2024).**

I love artworks because of my childhood contact with artist friends, but I often do not know where to buy them. Artworks are not like ordinary goods that one can easily find in a supermarket or store. I was told that artists display their works at exhibitions, and that some works may be found in museums or recreation centres. However, I have rarely seen artworks in the recreation centres I have visited. I believe many people in Lagos do not know where artists display their works. **(Participant 5, FGI, non-artist, October 2024).**

Summary of Study Materials and Participants

Artists	Works per artist	Total works	Road chaos works	Waterway chaos works	FGD participants	IDI participants
8	4	32	15	17	20	5

Thematic Analysis of the Findings

Out of the 32 works produced by the selected artists, 10 were presented in this paper to illustrate the chaotic situations experienced by Lagos residents on roads and waterways. Plates 1 to 5 depict major modes of road transportation in Lagos, including Okada, Keke Marwa, Molue, Danfo and BRT buses. Plates 6 to 10 represent waterway transportation and show how boats, canoes and ferries navigate congested aquatic spaces during peak periods. Plate 1, Olokada, reflects the artist’s creative representation of the effect of Okada transportation on urban movement in Lagos. Multiple riders and passengers are shown moving across one another at a junction, apparently without observing traffic rules. The short gaps between motorcycles, unstable movement and frightened posture of passengers suggest vulnerability and disorder. The brushstrokes, colours and composition communicate the instability of Lagos roads and the dependence of many commuters on a mode of transport associated with irregular movement and risk.

Plate 2, Keke Marwa, presents a cluster of tricycles struggling for access within a confined space. The drivers and passengers appear trapped in a queue created by artificial obstruction. The colour composition suggests disorder and highlights the way in which tricycle operations can contribute to congestion, delay and discomfort for commuters. Plate 3, BRT Bus, depicts another face of the Bus Rapid Transit system in Lagos. The buses are lined up at a bus stop, while many passengers queue and struggle to board. The BRT route is framed by congested urban buildings and a busy streetscape. The painting captures the paradox of a modern transport system operating within a city still burdened by crowding, pressure and uneven mobility management. Plate 4, Old Oshodi, symbolically represents Oshodi before its transformation under the administration of former Lagos State Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola. The work portrays a hyper-busy environment with concentrations of Molue and Danfo buses, market activities and stationary traffic. Ogunwo’s treatment of the scene reveals the dense, messy and commercially charged environment that defined old Oshodi. Plate 5, Idumota, is a typical representation of transportation chaos on Lagos Island. The work shows large numbers of people

moving in different directions, trying to board Molue and Danfo buses that barely stop to pick passengers. The overcrowded buses, tired commuters and clustered figures reveal the physical and emotional strain of commuting in a congested urban environment.

Plate 6, 247 Lagos, symbolically represents the impact of water transportation chaos on commuters and passengers. The painting shows ferry boats, canoes and other vessels moving across a busy water space at evening time. The atmospheric condition, moonlight and city reflections create a visual narrative of Lagos as a city that remains active and congested late into the day. Plate 7, Waterfront Ilaje, represents the chaos experienced by Lagos residents who use speedboats and canoes at Ilaje. The painting captures early morning movement, with passengers entering boats, drivers preparing for trips and vessels clustered along the waterfront. The waves, unstable boats and crowded terminal suggest the uncertainty and pressure associated with water commuting. Plate 8, First Berth, uses stylistic forms and expressive colours to illustrate the impact of larger vessels on smaller boats and canoes. The painting suggests that bigger ships dominate the water space, creating waves that make movement difficult for smaller vessels. The tension between large and small vessels visually communicates the risks and inequalities within Lagos water transportation. Plates 9 and 10, Before the Closing Hour and Makoko at Sunset, further express the difficult situations created by Lagos transportation chaos. They show how roads and waterways become congested at particular times of the day and how commuters, traders and residents negotiate mobility under pressure.

Discussion

The selected works identify specific commuter experiences associated with daily movement on Lagos roads and waterways. The paintings reveal reckless driving by Okada riders, Keke Marwa operators, Danfo and Molue drivers, and boat operators. These transport actors contribute to obstruction, disorder and clumsy movement in the city. Commuter impatience also intensifies the problem by creating confusion and disrupting the free flow of vehicles and passengers. The works further show how verbal abuse, the struggle to meet daily targets and the excesses of law enforcement agents complicate movement on Lagos roads and waterways. These challenges appear to have inspired the artists to create paintings that document and critique transportation chaos. For the non-artists who viewed the works, the paintings were realistic portrayals of daily experience and symbolic commentaries on civic disorder. The findings also show that public access to the selected artworks is limited. Many paintings are purchased by private collectors and kept in homes, making them inaccessible to a wider audience. This limits the educational and social value that the paintings could have if displayed in public galleries, museums, transport terminals or civic spaces.

The findings align with Lawuyi (2011), Odey (2017) and Usman (2022), who emphasise that urban chaos in Lagos is produced by overlapping events and competing uses of public space. The findings also support Adekoya's (2002) position that art can be used to express contemporary issues and address social problems. Similarly, Asobele (2003) maintains that artists and their works provide reflective perspectives on people's activities. The present study therefore establishes that the perceptions of commuters are largely consistent with the intuitive perceptions of the artists because the selected paintings visually represent the everyday realities of transportation chaos in Lagos.

Conclusion

Transportation chaos remains a defining feature of Lagos urban life. The selected artworks help viewers understand traffic situations, commuter struggles and the disorder that occurs on roads and waterways. Through these visual representations, Lagos-based artists expose

the daily challenges faced by commuters and show how transportation disorder affects public life. The study demonstrates that commuters' perceptions are largely in tune with the artistic intuitions portrayed in the selected paintings. The artworks educate the public, transport workers and government stakeholders by making transportation chaos visible and interpretable. They also provide a visual archive of Lagos mobility and a basis for public reflection on civic order, regulation and urban planning. The study recommends that artworks depicting Lagos transportation experiences should be displayed more widely in public institutions, galleries, transport terminals, museums and educational spaces. Such visibility would expand public access to art and strengthen the role of visual culture in civic education, urban policy dialogue and transportation reform.

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