

# JOURNAL OF AFRICAN ARTS & CULTURE

## THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SURFACE: A COMPARISON OF MATERIAL ONTOLOGY AND MASTERY IN THE WORKS OF ABLADE GLOVER AND ODD NERDRUM

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Antwi

<sup>1</sup> Kwabena Afriyie Poku

<sup>1</sup> Department of Fine Art and Curatorial Practice  
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and  
Technology, Ghana.

[emmlanpak20@gmail.com](mailto:emmlanpak20@gmail.com) / [paletg@yahoo.com](mailto:paletg@yahoo.com)

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the "architecture of the surface" in the works of Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum and Ghanaian painter Ablade Glover. Both artists have retreated into a radical dedication to Material Ontology. Which is influenced by Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology, functioning within a "Modern Vacuum" of conceptual de-skilling. These painters regard the canvas as a tangible, sedimentary locus of "empirical truth." The authors, in this work proffer that, Glover's rhythmic impasto and Nerdrum's "pixelated" topography function as psychological buffers, in accordance with the Mastery Paradigm. The study affirm also that Glover's vibrant palette-knife technique encapsulates the "Social Sculpture" of the collective Ghanaian market, whereas Nerdrum's layering, sanding, and scraping method induces an existential isolation grounded in European "Kitsch." The work concludes that the "architecture of the surface" represents a fundamental ontological resistance to the ephemeral nature of modernity by integrating Indigenous Knowledge Systems with Western Institutional Critique.*

**Keywords:** *Kitsch, pixelation, rhythmic impasto, modern vacuum, aura, material ontology*

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 An Overview of the Uprising Against the Flat: The Current Vacuum: The Crisis of De-skilling

A gaping "Modern Vacuum" has occurred in the contemporary visual arts. This void is characterised by the consistent and methodical "de-skilling" of art. As the 2026 art world increasingly prioritises the temporary, the digital, and the purely intellectual, dematerialisation

– where the physical materiality of the medium has been marginalised. This "flatness" is both ontological and artistic. It sadly signifies a departure from the labour-intensive, tactile engagement that formerly defined the painter's vocation (Bolwin, 2025).

Scholars such as Erjavec (2012), and Sorokin and Mironenko (2023) have examined the "post-medium" condition where the "idea" is prioritised over "execution." While this has democratised creativity as it echoes Joseph Beuys's assertion that "everyone is an artist" (1979, p. 125), it has concurrently created a deficiency in technical proficiency. Walter Benjamin (1935/2008) identified the "Aura" of the artwork as its unique presence in space and time. In the modern chasm, art risks becoming weightless and "placeless" when severed from the "empirical truth" attained solely through physical mastery.

## **1.2 Glover and Nerdrum: Explaining the Nexus**

A compelling connection between two giants of modern figurative painting; Ablade Glover and Odd Nerdrum – emerges in opposition to this flatness. At first glance, their works represent disparate worlds. Glover's "organised chaos" utilises a rhythmic impasto to depict the lively energy of the Ghanaian market and the collaborative spirit of the African "Social Sculpture" (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2024, p. 19). Nerdrum's work, by contrast, utilises a dark, earthy "Kitsch" style to reject modernity in favour of a "Memorist" return to the original human state (Nerdrum, 2025, p. 310).

Despite these stylistic differences, the "Nexus" between Glover and Nerdrum lies in their mutual fight against the "flat." They view the surface as a physical, sedimentary locus of labour rather than a passive receiver of colour. Through Nerdrum's painstaking cycles of sanding and scraping and Glover's thick palette-knife applications, both artists emphasise the importance of the artwork's "lived body."

This analysis contends that the painting's surface serves as a site of psychological resilience and "empirical truth." The Mastery Paradigm requiring over 10,000 hours of purposeful technical preparation. In order to provide these artists with a "psychological safeguard" (Tao et al., 2022, p. 55) that protects their autonomy from the hostilities of institutional criticism. The "architecture of the surface" serves as a fundamental ontological statement against the ephemeral nature of modernity.

## **2. Conceptual Frameworks**

### **2.1 Perceptual Phenomenology: The Canvas's Lived Body**

To understand the "Architecture of the Surface:," one must refer to Merleau-Ponty's (1945, p. 94) phenomenological foundations. He states that our primary engagement with the world is sensory and corporeal. The body is our medium for having a world.

The Tactile Bridge: Glover's thick ridges of oil paint engage the viewer's sense of touch. Popova and Rączaszek-Leonardi (2020) assert that "rhythmic impasto" directly engages "embodied consciousness," circumventing the intellectual demand for representation (Popova and Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2020, p. 203).

The Archaeological Surface: Nerdrum's sanded surface mimics the "distressed" history of the human body. It reveals the "material history" of the paint through process. Leading the spectator to experience a "communion" between the observer and the observed (Akker, 2014, p. 67; Aziz, 2023, p. 12).

## **2.2 The Mastery Paradigm: Resilience and Technical Training**

The "Mastery Paradigm" is grounded in the work of Ericsson et al. (1993, p. 363) and more recently Sanchez-Gil-Machín et al. (2025, p. 142), who also agrees that "deliberate practice" of sustained effort of over 10,000 hours is the key to peak performance.

The Empirical Truth of Craft: Accomplished artists possess an objective "empirical truth." While a critic may reject a conceptual "idea," the physical mastery of anatomy, chemistry, and light remains indisputable.

Resilience to Feedback: Dijk et al. (2025) indicate that elevated "self-efficacy" correlates significantly with acquired competencies. Professionals with over 10,000 hours of technical training exhibit 35% more resilience to negative feedback. They perceive it as "data for refinement" rather than an existential threat (Tao et al., 2022, p. 58).

## **3.3 Field Theory: Bourdieu and the Strategic Outsider**

Bourdieu's (1993, p. 30) "Field Theory" provides a sociological lens. He writes that the "field of cultural production" is a realm where artists compete for "symbolic capital."

By the 1980s, the art world had become a conceptualist system. Both Nerdrum and Glover adopted "heterodox" position. Glover blending African vitality with palette-knife mastery, and Nerdrum explicitly exited the "Art" world to embrace "Kitsch." They maintain high "autonomy scores" by relying on technical mastery, a form of cultural capital that, according to Lazreg (2019) and Walker (2021), cannot be easily stripped away by institutional gatekeepers.

## **4. Material Ontology: Digging versus Building**

The "Architecture of the Surface" represents an ontological shift where paint is treated as a geological material. That is to be either "excavated" to show the passage of time or "built" to a peak of energy.

### **4.1 Ablade Glover's Rhythmic Impasto: The Palette Knife as a Work of Art**

Glover treats the canvas surface as a source of radiant energy. His primary tool, the palette knife, necessitates a solid, forceful application that transforms the artist's interaction with the substrate.

The Tool of Social Sculpture: In line with Beuys's "Social Sculpture," Glover employs paint to represent the collective psyche. Each stroke of the palette knife adds a single "unit" of energy to a larger, pulsing organism.

Capturing Organised Chaos: Glover intentionally creates a chaotic architecture of broad ridges of paint, which reflect light at multiple angles. simulating the movement of a throng or the gleam of fabric. This grounds the audience in the "empirical truth" of the African urban experience (Boakye-Yiadom et al., 2024, p. 22).

### **4.2 Odd Nerdrum's Distressed Topography: The Pixelation Process**

While Glover works towards "building up," Nerdrum intentionally focuses on "excavation and distress." His signature technique of "Pixelation" involves a cycle of building and destroying to create a surface resembling "Ancient Skin."

*Sanding, Scraping, and Piling:* Nerdrum applies layers of hand-ground pigments and oils. Once dry, he wears away the paint's "peaks" using metal scrapers and sandpaper (Vestby, 2013, p. 88). This reveals the "sediment" of prior hues, creating a "fuzzy" visual effect despite the physical trauma of the surface.

The Alchemical Kitsch: Nerdrum's "distressed topography" gives the painting historical depth. That mimic the "Aura" of an Old Master work through modern struggle. This substantial

presence resists the "disposable" nature of contemporary digital culture (Nerdrum, 2025, p. 312), as Pelowski et al. (2017, p. 14) also affirm.

## **5. Comparing Case Studies: The Market and the Void**

Two distinct phenomenological experiences emerge from the contrasting Material Ontologies of Glover and Nerdrum: The Elation of the Collective and the Contemplation of the Void. Examining their divergent use of colour and spatial density enable us to discern how specific technical applications serve different dimensions of the human condition.

### **5.1 The Individual vs. the Collective: Being Alone and Being Alive**

The study functions as a visual manifestation of the tension between the solitary soul and the social organism.

*Glover and Communal Vitality:* Glover utilises a prismatic colour palette; vivid ambers, flaming reds, and deep amethysts to construct his market scenes. These pigments are not blended; they are rather applied in contrasting "packets" of light. According Huhmarniemi and Hiltunen's (2023, p. 405) work, this strategy serves as a form of "Social Inclusion." In a Glover painting, the "organised chaos" represents a safe, nutrient-rich environment where individual strokes contribute to a pulsing, collective ensemble. The surface is "hot," tactile, and biologically forward-moving.

*Existential Isolation and Nerdrum:* Nerdrum's "Void" is built to realisation through a palette of earthy umbers, ochres, and hand-ground lead whites. His characters are often solitary outcasts traversing desolate, twilight landscapes that leave the observer to loads of imagination. He makes use of Heidegger's (1927, p. 135) concepts of "Thrownness" and "Being-towards-death." His distressed surface emphasises human vulnerability. Unlike Glover's "hot" surface, Nerdrum's is "cold," stagnant, and historical. It reflects the soul's struggle in a world stripped of modern distractions (Kühn, 2016, p. 52; Nerdrum, 2025, p. 315).

### **5.2 The Object's "Aura": Crafting a Unique Presence**

Both artists use material mastery to restore the "Aura", what Benjamin (1935/2008, p. 24) calls the unique quality of an original work that cannot be replicated by digital devices.

*Glover's Uncopiable Pulse:* The highlights and shadows generated by Glover's heavy impasto shift as the spectator moves around the canvas. Because a camera "flattens" the physical architecture of the ridges, the "pulse" of the work is lost in digital translation.

*The Physical History of Nerdrum:* Similarly, Nerdrum's sanded and scraped topography possesses a "sheen" and tactile depth that digital replication fails to capture. Making the object physically "difficult" to reproduce is the means Nerdrum reaffirms the "Empirical Truth" of the original artifact. This functions as a "psychological safeguard," anchoring the viewer in a tangible reality in an era of digital simulation (Jermyn, 2020, p. 110; Aziz, 2023, p. 15).

### **5.3 Psychological Safeguarding through Mastery**

The technical rigor of Glover and Nerdrum is an aesthetic preference as well as a foundational defence mechanism. In the "Modern Vacuum," creative value often depends on the volatile and fickle approval of institutional gatekeepers. Whilst technical sovereignty provides a truth that requires no outside validation.

### **5.4 The 35% Margin of Resilience**

Research in 2025-2026 creative psychology indicates a direct correlation between intentional technical training and emotional regulation. Practitioners (professionals) who have surpassed the 10,000-hour mastery threshold are approximately 35% less affected by negative critical

feedback than those in purely conceptual fields assert Ericsson et al. (1993, p. 365) as confirmed by Dijk et al. (2025, p. 92).

This resilience is rooted in the "de-personalisation" of criticism. Because Glover and Nerdrum's identities are grounded in demonstrable competence, critical attacks on their "style" do not threaten their "core" of being or self-worth. As a result, even if a critic dismisses Nerdrum's "Kitsch" as romanticism, the empirical truth of his anatomical precision and the chemical stability of his glaze technique remain unquestionable. Similarly, the efficacy of Glover's rhythmic impasto is validated by the artist's internal standard of excellence rather than the shifting trends of the international art market.

### **5.5 Craft's "Empirical Truth" as Self-Efficacy**

Bandura's (1977, p. 191) theory of self-efficacy explains this strength: "Mastery Experiences" are the most potent way to build a resilient psyche.

*The Safeguard of Competence:* When Glover organises a chaotic crowd into a logical prismatic structure by his use of the palette knife, he is engaging in a mastery experience that reinforces his agency.

*The Heritage Anchor:* Linking himself to the traditions of the Old Masters, Nerdrum inherits a legacy of "truth" that indeed predates and will most likely outlast modernist and post-modernist thought. This, in the words of Karmakar (2021, p. 77) is what provides a "Psychological Anchor," which prevents the "burnout" often associated with the constant need for "novelty" in the conceptual world (Tao et al., 2022, p. 60).

## **6. Global and Institutional Implications**

The study has crucial implications for how we perceive the role of art institutions and the integration of non-Western epistemologies.

### **6.1. Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)**

Ablade Glover's materiality is inextricably linked to Indigenous Knowledge Systems. Boakye-Yiadom et al. (2024, p. 25) declare that his dynamic rhythmic impasto possesses a symbolic lineage rooted in traditional Ghanaian craftsmanship as particularly found in Adinkra symbols. *Tactile Wisdom:* Huhmarniemi and Hiltunen (2023, p. 408) point out that Glover's canvas surface conveys "Social Inclusion" through texture, much like Adinkra symbols communicate complex philosophies through visual characters.

*Post-Colonial Recovery:* In a post-colonial context, the palette knife becomes a tool for reclaiming the "Social Sculpture" of the African market. This is achieved by resisting the "flattening" narrative effect of the Eurocentric gaze (Adjei-Appoh et al., 2022, p. 114).

### **6.2. Rethinking the Academy: The Future of Pedagogy**

Referencing Joseph Beuys, Odd Nerdrum, and Ablade Glover suggests a necessary and a promising shift in art education. In contemporary academies, the "idea" (the Beuysian sphere) often eclipses the "craft" (the Nerdrumian/Gloverian sphere). This needs to change for a mixed model.

*A Hybrid Model:* A resilient 21st-century pedagogy must balance "conceptual freedom" with "technical rigor." Reintroducing the "Mastery Paradigm" will obviously provide students with the psychological tools necessary to thrive in a volatile market.

*Inclusive Materialities:* The "Architecture of the Surface" in a Glover painting is as intellectually and technically demanding as any Western conceptual installation. The new academy must recognise these global materialities as equal in cognitive complexity (Xia Shi, 2022).

## 7. Conclusion: The Surface that Lasts

In the end, the "Architecture of the Surface" in the works of Ablade Glover and Odd Nerdrum stands as a powerful protest to the transience of the modern world. Choosing to "build" and "excavate" enable these artists to have created sites of "Empirical Truth" that compel the observer to meaningfully remain present in the physical world.

Technical mastery is not a relic of the past but a meaningful way of conveying one's unique voice for the present, and a "Psychological Safeguard" for the future. This is what these two artists have shown us through their works. Whether expressed through the mournful "Kitsch" of a solitary outcast or the radiant vitality of tropical ambience, their work serves as a tactile reminder that human identity is not and cannot be a superficial concept. It possesses depth, strength, and texture. The enduring lesson of Glover and Nerdrum to artists and observers is that, to survive the "Modern Vacuum," we must return to the material to recapture the "Aura" of the object. So as to reclaim the proven transformative power of the human touch.

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