

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

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CITATION: Antwi, E., & Poku, K.A. (2025). The Architecture of the surface: A comparison of material ontology and mastery in the works of Ablade Glover and Odd Nerdrum. *Journal of African Arts and Culture*, 9(1), 104-111.

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 all rooted in novelty (Ortlieb & Carbon, 2019). 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 (Elkins, 2001).

Scholars such as Muscalu (2020) and Sorokin et al. (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), it has concurrently created a deficiency in technical proficiency. Walter Benjamin (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 ambience and the collaborative spirit of the African Social Sculpture (Glover, 2011). 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, 2011).

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. To provide these artists with a psychological safeguard (Glăveanu, 2020). 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 (Elkins, 2001).

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) phenomenological foundations, which propound that our primary engagement with the world is sensory and corporeal. He argues that the body is not a mere object in space but our fundamental medium for having a world. In the context of painting, this suggests that the surface is not a flat image but a physical site of encounter where the "lived body" of the artist meets the "lived body" of the spectator. The "tactile bridge" is how Glover convey his audience into the thick ridges of oil paint to engage the viewer's sense of touch. According to Popova and Rączaszek-Leonardi (2020), who further advance the concepts of Merleau-Ponty, argue that the rhythmic impasto directly engages embodied consciousness, circumventing the intellectual demand for representation. Ingold (2013), extends the concept by dismantling Western hylomorphism while making a case for the vitality of materials as the artist thinks through to resolve outcomes. This ontological perspective is essential when analysing works

characterised by high materiality, such as the rhythmic impasto of Ablade Glover or the sanded surfaces of Odd Nerdrum. For these artists, the "Architecture of the Surface" serves as a rejection of the "thin," conceptual flatness prevalent in modern institutional art. Building up layers of pigment and oil enable the painter to create a tactile history – an "archaeology" of the canvas – that demands a physical rather than purely intellectual response. The "Archaeological Surface" is Nerdrum's means of engaging the viewer. His sanded surface mimics the "distressed" history of the human body, and by extension the human condition. It reveals the "material history" of the paint through process, leading the spectator to experience a communion between the observer and the observed (Elkins, 2001; Pettersson, 2012).

2.2 The Mastery Paradigm: Resilience and Technical Training

The Mastery Paradigm is grounded in the work of Ericsson et al. (1993) and more recently Hambrick et al. (2020), who also highlight that deliberate practice of sustained effort of over 10,000 hours is the key to peak performance. Mastery in any desirable field of human endeavour brings with it confidence. Ablade Glover was born in 1934, currently 91 years and has practiced his art for 65 years. Odd Nerdrum was born in 1944. He is currently 82 years and has practiced his art for 62 years. Here are illustrious and sterling master artists whose practice and legacy does and must continue to command respect the world over, from both the current generation and from posterity.

The empirical truth of craft is an ontological foundation inherent to artists who possess the "mettle" to engage deeply with their medium. Unlike a conceptual "idea," which a critic may dismiss as subjective or derivative, the physical mastery of anatomy, pigment chemistry, and the behaviour of light constitute an indisputable reality. This mastery is what Ingold (2013) describes as "thinking through making" – a knowledge grown through a persistent, sensory dialogue with the material world.

Resilience to negative feedback comes as part of the master's inherent fortitude. Bandura (1977) indicates 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 (Hambrick et al., 2020).

2.3 Field Theory: Bourdieu and the Strategic Outsider

Bourdieu's (1993) 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 Bourdieu (1993) and Sorokin et al. (2023), cannot be easily stripped away by institutional gatekeepers.

3. 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 radiant energy.

3.1 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.

In line with Joseph Beuys's concept of social sculpture, Ablade Glover employs paint to represent the communal psyche because each rhythmic stroke of the palette knife adds a single unit of energy to a larger pulsing commune. Glover intentionally creates a chaotic architecture of broad ridges of paint that reflects light at multiple angles to simulate the movement of a throng, the gleam of fabric, the colourful shimmering of roofs, or the lushness of the forest. This technical approach grounds the audience in the empirical truth of the African urban experience and ensures that his material ontology resonates with both the current generation and posterity. He treats the canvas as a site of social engagement, that allows him to successfully transform the architecture of the surface into a profound statement of cultural autonomy that effectively resists the flattening narrative of the Eurocentric gaze as Navei (2022) suggests.

3.2 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.

Nerdrum applies layers of hand-ground pigments and oils before systematically wearing away the paint's peaks using metal scrapers and sandpaper. This deliberate process of sanding and scraping reveals the sediment of prior hues to create a fuzzy visual effect despite the physical trauma inflicted upon the surface as Vestby (2013) describes. Such a distressed topography gives the painting a profound historical depth that mimics the aura of an Old Master work through a contemporary struggle for technical mastery. This substantial presence effectively resists the disposable nature of contemporary digital culture while establishing a technical monopoly that safeguards the artist's sovereignty as Nerdrum (2011) and Pelowski et al. (2017) affirm. The tactile complexity of the finished canvas serves as an empirical anchor for the soul in an era increasingly dominated by fleeting conceptual ideas and virtual simulations.

4. Comparing Case Studies: The Market and the Void

The contrasting Material Ontologies of Ablade Glover and Odd Nerdrum facilitate two distinct phenomenological experiences: - the elation of the collective and the contemplation of the void. These experiences are rooted in divergent technical applications of colour and spatial density.

Glover utilises a "hot," vibrant palette and rhythmic impasto to manifest the collective energy of the Ghanaian market. His dense, palette-knife-driven surfaces create a "social sculpture" where individual forms dissolve into a communal "architecture of the surface". Conversely, Nerdrum's "cold," stagnant, and historical topography emphasises human vulnerability and existential isolation. Through a "distressed" surface and muted, earthy tones, his work reflects the soul's struggle within a world stripped of modern distractions. While Glover's materiality celebrates intrinsic local aesthetics and communal presence, Nerdrum's sanded, historical layers invite a solitary engagement with the "aura" of the Old Masters and the enduring weight of human history and future.

4.1 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 represents communal vitality. He utilises a prismatic colour palette; vivid ambers, flaming reds, and deep amethysts to construct his market scenes and

environmental paintings of lorry parks, urban landscapes, shanty towns, and crowded markets (Aburam, 2024). These pigments are not blended; they are rather applied in contrasting packets of light. According to Navei (2022), Glover's works serves as a form of social awakening to our environmental heritage – a call to cherish and preserve our cultural and ecological environs. In a Glover painting, the "organised chaos" represents a safe, nutrient-rich environment where individual strokes contribute to build a pulsing, communal ensemble. The surface is "hot," tactile, and biophysically advancing.

Existential Isolation and melancholy are what defines Nerdrum. His "Void" is built to realisation through a palette of earthy umbers, ochres, and hand-ground lead whites. He depicts characters that are often solitary outcasts traversing desolate, twilight apocalyptic landscapes that leave the observer to loads of narrative imagination. He makes use of Heidegger's (1927) concepts of Thrownness and Being-towards-death. His distressed surface emphasises human vulnerability. Unlike Glover's "hot" surface, Nerdrum's is cold and composed, alive yet stagnant, and historical. His work reflects the soul's struggle in a world stripped of modern distractions (Pettersson 2012; Nerdrum, 2011).

4.2 The Object's "Aura": Crafting a Unique Presence

Both artists use material mastery to restore the Aura, what Benjamin (2008) calls the unique quality of an original work that cannot be replicated by digital devices. Glover's Uncopiable Pulse results from his unique application of fresh paint to his support. 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. Where the work stays fixed in that last angle of reflection when it was captured. On the other hand, directly experiencing the work affords the observer several ways of seeing it from many reflected angles. The Physical History of Nerdrum's work, depicting his investment of time and technique is inseparable and inescapable by his audience. His sanded and scraped topography possesses a sheen and tactile depth that digital replication fails to capture. This makes the object physically difficult to reproduce. It is his means of reaffirming the "Empirical Truth" of the original artifact, functioning as a psychological safeguard, anchoring the viewer in a tangible reality in an era of digital simulation (Popova & Rączaszek-Leonardi, 2020).

5. Psychological Safeguarding through Mastery

The technical rigour 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 (Bellugi, 2020) approval of institutional gatekeepers. Whilst technical sovereignty provides a truth that requires no outside validation.

5.1 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) as confirmed by Hambrick et al. (2020).

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.

5.2 Craft's "Empirical Truth" as Self-Efficacy

Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy explains that mastery experiences are the most potent way to build a resilient psyche. This safeguard of competence is evident when Glover organises a chaotic crowd into a logical prismatic structure through his use of the palette knife, engaging in a mastery experience that reinforces his agency. Similarly, the heritage anchor allows Nerdrum to link himself to the traditions of the Old Masters, inheriting a legacy of truth that predates and will likely outlast modernist and post-modernist thought. In the words of Bandura's (1977), this connection provides a psychological anchor that prevents the burnout often associated with the constant need for novelty in the postmodern condition of the conceptual world as described by Erjavec (2012).

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 as Navei (2022) perceives how his works inspire Ghanaians to cherish and conserve the environment. Glover's dynamic rhythmic impasto possesses a symbolic lineage rooted in traditional Ghanaian craftsmanship particularly found in Ga Samai and Adinkra symbols. His works present an artistic fusion of traditional philosophical visual language vested with heavily colourful impressionistic techniques that result in a canvas surface bearing tactile wisdom. This tactile quality conveys a sense of collective identity through texture much like Adinkra symbols communicate complex philosophies through visual characters. Such rhythmic impasto creates a shared visual language that mirrors the communal energy of the African social landscape and contributes to a process of post-colonial recovery. In this context the palette knife becomes a tool for reclaiming the social sculpture of the African market by resisting the flattening narrative effect of the Eurocentric gaze. This resistance is further supported by the "Architecture of the Surface" which serves as an ontological statement of cultural autonomy. As Salami (2013) notes in his analysis of Glover's work, the "organised chaos" of these surfaces represents a sophisticated intellectual engagement with Ghanaian social structures.

6.2 Rethinking the Academy: The Future of Pedagogy

Referencing Joseph Beuys, Odd Nerdrum, and Ablade Glover suggests a necessary and promising shift in art education because in contemporary academies the Beuysian sphere of the idea often eclipses the Nerdrumian and Gloverian sphere of craft. This imbalance needs to make way for a more enduring and inclusive mixed model that recognises a resilient 21st-century pedagogy that balances conceptual freedom with technical rigor. Reintroducing the mastery paradigm will provide students with the psychological tools necessary to thrive in a volatile market while establishing a technical monopoly that safeguards their creative sovereignty. Furthermore, 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 as Salami (2013) demonstrates that Glover's organised chaos represents a sophisticated intellectual engagement

with social structures. Integrating these perspectives will allow the modern curriculum to finally validate tactile wisdom as a peer to linguistic philosophy.

7. Conclusion: The Surface that Lasts

The "Architecture of the Surface" in the works of Ablade Glover and Odd Nerdrum stands as a compelling protest to the transience of the modern world. Choosing to "build" and "excavate" enable these artists to have created sites of "Empirical Truth" – with material value, 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 environment, their works serve as a tactile reminder that human identity is not and cannot be reduced to 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. To reclaim the proven transformative power of the human touch.

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