

**Reflections of the Abyss: Artistic Explorations of Metamorphosis and the Gaze****Zeekeyi Denison Yibowei (Ph.D.)**

Department of Fine and Applied Arts  
Faculty of Environmental Sciences,  
Niger Delta University, Wilberforce Island  
Bayelsa State **Phone:** +2348101547699  
**Gmail:** zeekeyiyibowei@ndu.edu.ng

**Abstract**

This studio-based investigation navigates the psychoanalytical ontology of the mind, foregrounding psychological mirroring as a pivotal mechanism in delineating the fluid boundaries of selfhood. The individual emerges as the sovereign artist of their metamorphic self-portrait, scripting trajectories of renewal and rediscovery through introspective insight. Grounded in the dialectics of association and dissociation (Freud, 1914), the research catalyzes an ongoing negotiation between fragmented and cohesive aspects of the psyche. Drawing upon Lacan's 'mirror stage' (1949), the study illuminates imaginary identifications central to the formation of the ideal ego and identity negotiation. Expressionist digital paintings (2025) depicting multiple mirrors reflecting disparate self-versions underscore the interplay of association, dissociation, and embodied selfhood (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Warm and cool chromatic tensions (yellow ochre, red, blue) convey the affective charge of encountering mirrored multiplicities. Bridging psychoanalytic (Freud, Lacan) and phenomenological perspectives, the artworks instantiate the vicissitudes of self-formation, inviting viewers to weave narrative tapestries from enigmatic reflections of subjective compositions. Interpretation is posited as a creative act of self-engagement, distilling personal meaning from the dialectical interplay of introspection and mirrored facets of the psyche. Ultimately, the research underscores the agentic capacity of individuals to craft self-narratives amidst the reflective oscillations between reality constructs and imaginative reconfigurations.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytic Ontology, Psychological Mirroring, Metamorphic Self-Portrait, Introspective Insight, Subjective Compositions, Association and Dissociation

**Introduction**

This paper explores concepts of self through the creation of studio-based paintings that employ digital tools to invoke a psychoanalytical framing of the mind. It argues that the mechanism of psychological mirroring plays a pivotal role in delineating the fluid boundaries of selfhood, rendering the paintings paradigmatic in both conceptual and contextual terms. Within this framework, the individual emerges as the sovereign artist of their metamorphic self-portrait, scripting trajectories of *renewal* and *rediscovery* through the epistemic currency of *introspective insight*. The process underscores the agentic capacity of the individual to navigate the dialectics of *association* and *dissociation* with respect to their experiential repertoire, thereby catalyzing an ongoing negotiation between fragmented and cohesive aspects of the psyche.

Grounded in a *raw, intuitive engagement* with the unfolding intrapsychic events, the individual confronts their reflected self-image—hence the phrase ‘when you look at the abyss, it stares back’ thus looking at the reflection of the self, it stares back at you, engendering a dynamic interplay

between reflective awareness and ontological becoming. This confrontation with one's reflections invites a hermeneutic oscillation between reality constructs and imaginative reconfigurations, fostering a polysemous interpretative space wherein readers are encouraged to weave their own narrative tapestries from the enigmatic reflections of their subjective compositions. Consequently, the act of interpretation is posited as a creative act of self-engagement, wherein personal meaning is distilled from the dialectical interplay of introspection and the mirrored facets of the psyche. The significance of the subject matter is that, it adopted key theoretical underpinnings underscoring this type of critique can be seen in the Psychoanalytical Ontology which is rooted in the psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1915; Lacan, 1977), that is responsible for the shaping of human subjectivity as a perspective, positing that the mind is a locus of dynamic unconscious processes shaping selfhood. This is not different from the Psychological Mirroring based on the way concepts like the Lacanian 'mirror stage' (Lacan, 1949), is perceived as fostering an imaginary identification, that is responsible for the forming of an ideal ego, and to a greater extent is key to assisting with the crucial moments of self-formation and identity negotiation. Following the Metamorphic Self-Portrait posited here, it is intended to proffer a reflect on the fluid, constructed nature of self-representation (Goffman, 1959), emphasizing agency in self-crafting. This brings us to the context of the *Introspective Insight* which serves as bridge to the notions of self-reflection (Winnicott, 1960) and the hermeneutics of self-understanding (Ricoeur, 1981)—a *Subjective Compositions* underscoring the interpretative, constructive aspect of personal narrative (Bruner, 1990). This narrows down to the position of 'Expanded Concepts' that has to do with Association and Dissociation, a reflective psychoanalytic mechanisms (Freud, 1914) that is responsible for impacting integration/fragmentation of self-experience. From this, we get to see how 'Reflective Awareness' is connected to phenomenological traditions (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) thus emphasizing the embodied, perceptual engagement with self. Closely to this, is the 'Imagination and Reality' interplay echoing postmodern conceptions of blurred boundaries between constructed realities (Baudrillard, 1981). Of course, all of this cannot be possibly understood without backing it up with visual criticisms of the psychology of each possibility presented here. Thusly, Readers are encouraged to weave their own narratives from the enigmatic, reflection of their own interpretations of each of the subjective compositions presented here.



**Plate 1.** Freudian Integration/Fragmentation of the Self. 2025. Digital painting (Procreate ArtStudio Pro brushes and tools and Photoshop)

### **Studio Analysis "Fragmented Reflections" - A Exploration of Association, Dissociation, and Embodied Selfhood through Expressionist Aesthetics**

The canvas presents a poignant portrayal of a black man, his gaze directed outward with an overwhelming sadness that permeates the visual narrative. Surrounding him are several orb-like mirrors, each reflecting distorted images of himself, embodying the psychological interplay of association and dissociation as conceptualized by Sigmund Freud (1914). These reflective spheres serve as visual metaphors for the multifaceted mechanisms shaping self-experience, underscoring the subject's discomfort with the fragmented representations of his selves, as if wishing their dissonant existence could be annulled.

### **Expressionist Hues and the Conveyance of Sadness**

The artist's deployment of Expressionist color palettes evokes a profound emotional resonance, central to conveying the subject's inner turmoil. Dominant tones of somber blues and greens, juxtaposed with jarring accents of ochre and umber, articulate the discordance inherent in dissociative processes. The chromatic choices align with Expressionist tenets, prioritizing affective communication over representational fidelity. Notably, the muted yet intense coloration surrounding the orb-mirrors amplifies the sense of disunity and psychological strain, while deep shadows cast upon the subject's visage accentuate his affective disquiet.

### **Brush Strokes and the Capture of Psychological Fragmentation**

The brushwork exhibits a turbulence reflective of the inner chaos associated with dissociative fragmentation. Thick, gestural strokes delineate the contours of the distorted reflections, instantiating the disrupted coherence of self-experience (Freud, 1914). Conversely, the portrayal of the central figure employs more contained strokes, perhaps intimating a striving for integration amidst fragmentation. The differential application of brush techniques effectively maps the tension between associative links fostering self-cohesion and dissociative mechanisms precipitating splits in self-experience.

### **Psychoanalytic and Phenomenological Intersections**

The artwork resonates with Freud's notions of association and dissociation, illustrating how these processes shape the integration or fragmentation of selfhood. The orb-like mirrors displaying distorted selves evoke the defensive nature of dissociation, whereby aspects of experience are split off from conscious awareness. Concurrently, the painting embodies phenomenological preoccupations articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), emphasizing the embodied nature of perception and experience. The subject's embodied presence, coupled with reflective awareness of his fragmented (mirrored selves), underscores Merleau-Ponty's focus on lived experience ("le vécu") and intersubjective engagement.

### **Reflective Awareness and Embodied Engagement**

The interplay of reflective capacities and bodily engagement depicted in the canvas speaks to the nexus of psychoanalytic and phenomenological perspectives. The man's gaze outward, beset with sadness, suggests a reflexive confrontation with dissonant self-representations, highlighting the entwined nature of self-perception and embodied experience. This alignment fosters an understanding of how individuals navigate coherence and fragmentation in their sense of self, bridging theoretical constructs with visceral artistic expression.

## Artistic Synthesis and Psychological Insight

"Fragmented Reflections" distills complex psychoanalytic and phenomenological dynamics into a visually arresting exploration of selfhood. Through Expressionist aesthetics, the artist conveys the affective weight of association and dissociation, inviting viewers to contemplate the psychological underpinnings of self-experience. The work thus stands as a compelling instantiation of how art can crystallize intersections of psychological theory, embodiment, and the pursuit of self-coherence.



**Plate 2.** *Psychological Mirroring 1.* 2025, Digital Painting (Procreate brushes, ArtStudio Pro brushes and tools and Photoshop) left.

**Plate 3.** *Psychological Mirroring 2.* 2025, Digital Painting (Procreate brushes, ArtStudio Pro brushes and tools and Photoshop) right.

### Analysis of the Expressionist Renderings of Psychological Mirroring: Lacanian Mirror Stage and the Negotiation of Selfhood

The Expressionist canvases under consideration offer profound thoughts at a contextual level with visual explorations of the Lacanian 'mirror stage' (Lacan, 1949), a conceptual cornerstone in understanding the formation of the ideal ego and the intricate processes of self-formation and identity negotiation. Through striking depictions of multiple mirrors reflecting disparate versions of the self, these paintings illuminate the imaginary identifications central to Jacques Lacan's theorization, while resonating with Freudian psychoanalytic underpinnings.

#### Painting One: Fragmented Reflections of the Black Man

The first canvas presents a man gazing upon various iterations of himself reflected in multiple mirrors, some of which appear to proximate and align with his outlook personality, whilst others evoke distance and dissonance. The Expressionist brushstrokes employed here are vigorous and gestural, accentuating the emotional tenor of the subject's encounter with these mirrored selves. Warm hues of yellow ochre and red interplay with cool blues, generating a chromatic tension that underscores the psychic complexity of self-reflection. The warm colours (yellow, red) seem to infuse certain reflections with a sense of affinity or aspiration, whereas cooler tones (blue) imbue others with detachment or estrangement.

## **Painting Two: Interrogating Personalities in the White Shirt**

The second painting depicts a man in a dominant white shirt with folded sleeves, appearing to confront and interrogate his different personalities as reflected in multiple mirrors. A fourth personality observes from behind, conveying a sense of rejection or exclusion from the mirrored tableau. Here, the white shirt emerges as a pivotal hue, advancing towards the viewer with a clarity that symbolically echoes the revelatory aspects of Lacan's 'mirror stage'. The starkness of the white garment contrasts with the expressive warmth of yellow ochre accents and the cool probing blues, suggesting an interplay of self-perception and the fragmentary nature of identity. The brushstrokes are precise and tactile, heightening the visceral sense of the subject's engagement with his reflected personas.

## **Lacanian Mirror Stage and Imaginary Identification**

Lacan's 'mirror stage' (1949) posits a formative phase wherein the man, encountering their reflections, undergoes an imaginary identification crucial to the constitution of the ego. This process fosters the development of an ideal ego, an aspirational self-image central to identity formation. The paintings' depiction of multiple, discordant reflections speaks to the multiplicity of self-views and the negotiations inherent in constructing a coherent sense of self. The mirrors serve as visual metaphors for the Lacanian notion of the gaze, implicating the subject in a complex phase of identification and misrecognition (*méconnaissance*).

## **Connections with Freudian Theory**

The explorations of fragmented self-reflections resonate with Freud's concepts of the ego's defensive mechanisms and the splittings of the self. Freud's (1914) discussions on narcissism and the ego's formation highlight the investments in self-images and the tensions between cohesive selfhood and fragmentation – themes echoed in the Expressionist renderings. The Lacanian mirror stage can be seen as extending Freudian notions of identification, inflecting them with an emphasis on the visual and the imaginary in shaping subjectivity. The paintings thus instantiate a dialogue between these psychoanalytic perspectives, visually articulating the vicissitudes of self-formation.

## **Expressionist Aesthetics and Psychological Insight**

The interplay of warm (yellow, red, yellow ochre) and cool (blue) colours, rendered through bold Expressionist brushstrokes, effectively conveys the affective charge of encountering one's mirrored multiplicities. The dominant white shirt in the second painting symbolically underscores the piercing clarity of self-reflection associated with Lacan's mirror stage, permitting viewers to glimpse disparate realities or versions of the self. These artistic choices facilitate a profound engagement with the psychic dynamics of identity negotiation, bridging psychoanalytic theory with potent visual expression.

## **When the Abyss Stares Back**

The ontology of the mind; the act of psychological mirroring, of the individual emerges as the sovereign state of catharsis of their metamorphic self-portrait, scripting renewal and rediscovery in the currency of introspective insight. In fostering an understanding of what catalyzes harmony or dissonance for the self as a thinking, sentient entity, the individual is associating, and dissociating his experiences and yet remain rooted in a raw, intuitive approach of the unfolding events as he stare at his own reflection. The approach invite interpretation, blending reality and imagination in to a space of aesthetic tension and visual ambiguity.



**Plate 4.** *Quiet Vulnerability*, 2025. Digital Painting (Procreate brushes, ArtStudio Pro brushes and tools and Photoshop)

The canvas stands as a separate mirror: a looking glass embodying a concept that masterfully captures a surreal reflection of a man (may be the viewer) in business suit standing before it. In the composition, the mirror says something else; the man's satchel is unseen as part of the reflection by those who do not know how to truly look in the mirror, and the man's facial features does not accord with the mirror reflection. As well as this, the depiction of his left hand is tucked away in his trouser pocket from the mirror reflection, and in the reverse, the right hand resting on the flat surface of the table, is not accurate for the reflections. The disparity between the reflection and self, echoes a departure from certain reality or recognition of the self or something more. The logical connection or disconnection of the real self, and the reflection resists literal interpretation, inviting viewers instead to a space of visual anomaly. This invite tension in itself, but the man appears less concerned about this shift as much as we do. Presumably, are we the ones who do not know how to truly see for ourselves? The painting depicts the surrender of self reflection from the innermost feelings and emotions of the idealized within this framework, speaking quietly to the viewer in a manner reminiscent of a private conversation with a priest at the other end of a veiled curtain. Conversely, the mirrors comprising this conceptual structure vary in state: some appears duplicated, but this particular image of a subject staring at his face is devoid of soul—the recognition of self, a void yawning from its own framework—desiring an ideal self; perhaps a moment of recollection or more of a profound masking from such moments—interpretations of the subject matter is open to many possibilities upon where context underlying this variability becomes fragmented, but enables self-perception, bridging the temporal dimensions of past and present. Like a scrying ball, these reflective surfaces conjure memories – personal, intimate moments that remain exclusive to the individual gazing into the mirror.

This is a compositionally striking entity in its own right – one encounters the potent symbol of renewal, akin to a tabula rasa that affords the individual an opportunity to rewrite their narrative anew, according to their desires imagined in the reflection. The mind, operating as a distinct and autonomous facet of the self, possesses the capacity to generate and compose intelligent ideas, often transmuting the intangible into tangible manifestations.

This psychological paradigm facilitates a confrontation with the self, allowing individuals – as separate, thinking entities – to identify areas of interest and concern within their interior landscape. The resultant outcome is a clearer picture of elements that harmonize with or disrupt their personal equilibrium, yielding an enhanced understanding of what resonates as consonant or dissonant for the self. Through this reflective process as seen in the paintings, each individual assumes the role of artist crafting their new self-portrait, utilizing not just physical pigments but the conceptual chroma of introspection to script a narrative of renewal, rediscovery, and self-authorship. Colour, as in light, in the realm of self-reflection, often embodies illumination – a metaphorical unveiling of inner truths. It can symbolize awareness, clarity, and the piercing of shadows that obscure aspects of the self. Consider these interplays:

1. **Illumination and Insight:** Light can represent moments of profound understanding, where inner darkness is dispelled, revealing patterns or truths previously unseen.
2. **Shadow and Contrast:** The interplay of light and shadow might echo the dualities within us – the acknowledged and the concealed, the luminous facets and the obscured parts of our psyche.
3. **Reflection and Refraction:** Like light bouncing off mirrors, self-reflection can involve the bouncing of perceptions off our inner 'surfaces', refracting into new understandings or revealing distortions.

**Ephemeral Nature:** Light's fleeting qualities might mirror the transient nature of emotions, thoughts, and self-perceptions – ever-shifting like the play of luminosity.

In art and psychology, light's symbolism can touch upon:

1. **Consciousness:** Light often correlates with conscious awareness.
2. **Transformation:** Shifts in perception can feel like a 'lightbulb moment'.
3. **Revelation:** Inner light might symbolize epiphanies or breakthroughs.

In context, this resonance with light evokes aspects of transformative potentials, such that its role in revealing hidden selves, or something else is akin to the psychological theories posited here. Each of the subject matter raised here are relevant citations on the issue of **Agency:** Individual authorship in crafting self-narratives/Multiplicity per shifting identity through Introspective Insights (self-reflective processes: accessing inner states).

Nonetheless, crafting images beyond textual analysis emphasizes the need for creative learning of the concepts of psychoanalysis art, and is entrenchedly necessary for studio painting analysis. Beyond these, your guesses are as good as mine, as all are intertwined with welcoming critiquing of the visuals serving as mere reflection of insights into the discourse.

## Conclusion

Through these evocative depictions of psychological mirroring, these Expressionist paintings offer compelling visualizations of Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic concepts, threading its path to the *Phenomenology* (Merleau-Ponty) of embodied perception which is central to experiencing self/world as depicted in the various paintings. They illuminate the intricate processes of self-formation and the imaginary identifications shaping our engagements with reflected selves, inviting contemplation on the fragmentary and aspirational dimensions of identity.

## References

- Baudrillard, J. (1988). *America*. London and New York: Verso.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of Meaning*. Harvard University Press.
- Freud, S. (1991). *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Trans. James Strachy. London:

- Penguin Books.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Lacan, J. (2006). *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*. W. W. Norton and Company: New York.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Motilal Barnasidass Publishing House.
- Ricoeur, P. (1981). *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge; New York, Paris: Cambridge University Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1960). *Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self*. In *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. New York: International Universities Press.