

# Utilitarian Objects as Metaphor for Movement in Contemporary Artistic Practice

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## Abstract

Growing up, I was surrounded by everyday objects that once felt ordinary but now resemble a transitional narrative, marking my passage from childhood to adulthood, and shaping my memories and identity. This concept guides my inquiry, how can everyday materials be used to convey movement and transition? Under the guidance of MFA candidate Amarachi Odimba, I assisted in the production of her current work titled *ENFOLD Series*, which explores concepts of movement, material culture, and memory. The work is a mixed-media installation consisting of paintings, sewing, embellishments, and a plastic plaid bag, her personal travel bag, which historically relates to the socio-political history of the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in the 1980s. While assisting in her studio research through material exploration and literary review, I developed a personal work that reflects on the transition from childhood to adulthood. Drawing inspiration from her work, and skills learned in applied studies of material use, I incorporate a plain blue variant of the bag material she uses whilst incorporating materials from my childhood to create my work, titled *Metamorphosis*. The *ENFOLD Series* allowed my work to expand upon concepts of movement and transition, with similar material combinations including woven bags, embellishments, and personal childhood items. *Metamorphosis* suggests that the act of movement and transition can be exemplified by material culture, and that objects which we utilize every day, provide the basis of personal and collective expression and experience.

## Background

- My research-driven piece is derived from my assistance work to MFA Candidate Amarachi Odimba, who's current work titled *ENFOLD Series*, is a large collection of individual sculptural and painted pieces, exploring themes of belonging, place, and migration through material culture.
- *ENFOLDS* structural key piece is a personal travel bag of Odimba. This plaid bag comes in many variants of color and pattern, however, it uses those in checkered patterns of red, blue, black, and white. *ENFOLD Series* employs these utilitarian objects as both material and metaphor, using paintings that reflect on personal and communal experience, as well as embellishments.
- These bags are cheap, mass produced, practical, and can carry sentimental value to their carriers. Because of their use during the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in the 1980's, this specific colorway of plied bags received the nickname "Ghana Must Go" Bags, because they appeared as a metaphorical symbol of transition, and movement.
- By looking at material use in context and culture, we can observe the ways in which objects shape our communal understanding of identity.
- Learning from my assistance on this project, I carried these ideas and skills into *Metamorphosis* which forms a transitional narrative reflecting on personal memory, identity, and growth, by depicting my own personal transition: one from childhood to adulthood.



"Ghana Must Go" Bags in varying types, along with other, different bags



Amarachi Odimba, *Enfold 2*, 2025, acrylic, sequins and rhinestones, canvas and Ghana-Must-Go bag, 40x35x17cm



Amarachi Odimba, *Re-gaze*, 2025, acrylic, rhinestones, canvas and Ghana-Must-Go bag, 120x120x12cm



Solid Blue Variant of Bag



Violet Lorish, *Metamorphosis*, 2026, canvas, various threads, beads, wool, cotton, and felt, 8x8x4.5 in.

## Methods

- During my research on *ENFOLD Series*, I contributed to the disassembly, folding, machine-sewing, and hand-sewing of the bags with various embellishments featured, such as sequins and rhinestones. During this process, I also reassembled them into different sculptural forms and large flat pieces, which were then embellished and sewn onto the paintings for *ENFOLD Series*.
- This soft sculptural body of work presents migratory figures, both real and imagined, who carry Ghana-Must-Go bags as vessels for their belongings while in transit. Like the bags themselves, these are ordinary, everyday people. The figures are rendered in predominantly monochromatic acrylic on canvas in a simplified yet realistic manner, with carefully composed poses that foreground agency and presence.
- Bedazzle elements complete the works, introducing a duality that suggests both celebration and the idealization of movement as experienced or imagined by these individuals.
- This studio research resonated with me, reminding me of another variant of this bag: one in a solid blue print, which many American college students, including myself, use to move their belongings in and out of college dorms or apartments, reflecting the transitional time of college.
- My multi-media work, *Metamorphosis* uses this plain blue variant of the bags to reflect on my transition from childhood to adulthood. It features a variety of objects, which have been brought from my childhood or chosen in direct reference to it.
- In *Metamorphosis* I employ technical skills developed through my research work, including sewing, embroidery, and the assembling of material, to re-imagining the transitional narratives of *ENFOLD Series*, in a new context of transition, personal to me.
- This 3D work depicts a butterfly rising from a bed of flowers, which demonstrates the idea that movement and transition are dependant on one another. As the centerpiece, the butterfly is created from pieces of the solid blue bag with a metal lining to hold its structure, as well as a felt body. It's wings are embellished with hand-beaded embroidery. The background of flowers is created, using finger knit chains from my childhood, which have been hand-sewn into flowers. A similar twisted-chain variant is featured on the outer edges of the butterfly.

## Discussion

The transformation and elevation of utilitarian objects into art, can aid in understanding how our experiences shape our personal identity and memory. This study suggests that the items we find around us daily, which appear to be ordinary, carry social lives of their own, and their material memories relate narratives about their user. Everyday items used by people paint a picture of each unique user, which makes their identity accessible to a broad audience. By simply observing the objects which an individual utilizes in their everyday lives, we gain insight into their experiences. *ENFOLD Series* and *Metamorphosis* present an understanding of these concepts which allow the observer to view specific individual's connections with material culture and experience, exemplifying that artistic metaphor use is the basis for conveying personal and collective expression and experience.

References:

