

## Visual Presentation of Panic Under the Epidemic of the COVID-19: Painting Analysis Based on Personal Experiences

### Persembahan Visual Kepanikan Semasa Wabak COVID-19: Analisis Lukisan Berdasarkan Pengalaman Peribadi

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**ABSTRACT** - The background of the study is based on COVID-19 from March 2020 to May 2023, a period in which anxiety and depression rose by 25% globally. The study explores how painting can be used as an emotional expression tool to accurately express the "panic emotions" generated by artists during COVID-19 and help researchers release their emotions. The study used qualitative research methods to analyze the works of relevant artists during the epidemic period, and summarized the "panic" elements in the paintings. The results of this study are based on the researchers' own experience to produce relevant epidemic theme paintings.

#### INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic spread rapidly around the world, bringing profound impacts on human society. In a short period of time, daily life was broken, social distancing, lockdown policies, and the uncertainty of the pandemic led to a significant increase in anxiety and panic across the globe. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), global anxiety and depression rose by 25% during the pandemic (WHO, 2022). WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said: "The information we now have about the impact of COVID-19 on the world's mental health is just the tip of the iceberg, but it is a wake-up call for all countries to pay more attention to mental health and better support the mental health of their people" (WHO, 2022). In this context, painting, as an intuitive visual expression medium, is favored by more and more artists because of its powerful emotional transmission function. Gao Shenyang (2021) said that the paintings can not only record the special moments during the epidemic, but also convey the creator's inner panic, anxiety and unease through visual symbols and artistic language. This expression of emotions provides artists with a space of psychological catharsis, enabling them to face their inner fears and perplexities in the way of artistic creation (Gao, S. Y., 2021). At the same time, the artists' emotional narrative and visual retelling of the epidemic through their paintings provided valuable materials for subsequent social research. Secondly, these works not only reflect the psychological state of individuals, but also reflect the emotional changes and psychological states of the whole society under the public crisis. In addition, the artist encourages compassion for plague victims through paintings to inspire courageous caregivers. The artist protects and comforts the suffering society through strong emotions and shows the great power to overcome the epidemic (Kasriel, E. 2020).

This study focuses on the representation of "panic" in paintings during the epidemic, and explores how artists restate their personal experiences and emotional feelings through visual elements. The artists in focus include: Zhang Xiaogang, Hijack Art, Goya, and summarize the "panic" elements in paintings from multiple perspectives such as visual elements, emotional symbols, and color application. Through the discovery and summary of relevant elements, the researchers will produce two works, which are the reproduction of panic emotions generated according to their own epidemic experience, and also the practical verification of the theoretical framework of this study. What are the "panic" emotional elements in the epidemic painting? How to produce your own paintings? These two issues will be explained in this article.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts studio practice-based qualitative research. In their book, Creswell, John W. and Creswell, J. David (2018) talk about how qualitative methods rely on text and image data, while qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field where participants experience a problem or problem in a study. At the same time, qualitative researchers usually collect various forms of data, such as documents and audio-visual information, which are open data forms, and participants can freely share their ideas. Then, researchers review all the data and make an understanding of it. And organize it into code and themes that span all data sources (Creswell, John W. & Creswell, J. David, 2018). In addition to these general features, there are more specific approaches (i.e. survey strategies, designs, or procedures) when conducting qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell also says that these methods have emerged in the field of qualitative research since it came of age in the social sciences in the early 1990s. They include procedures for data collection, analysis and writing.

This study mainly carried out its own research through four steps. First, visual research, the main purpose of which is to collect and form ideas. The second, visual analysis, is a critique based on the visual analysis theory proposed by Feldman in the mid-20th century. Third, studio practice, with the goal of sketch generation and artwork completion. The following chart shows the process (refer with: Figure 1).

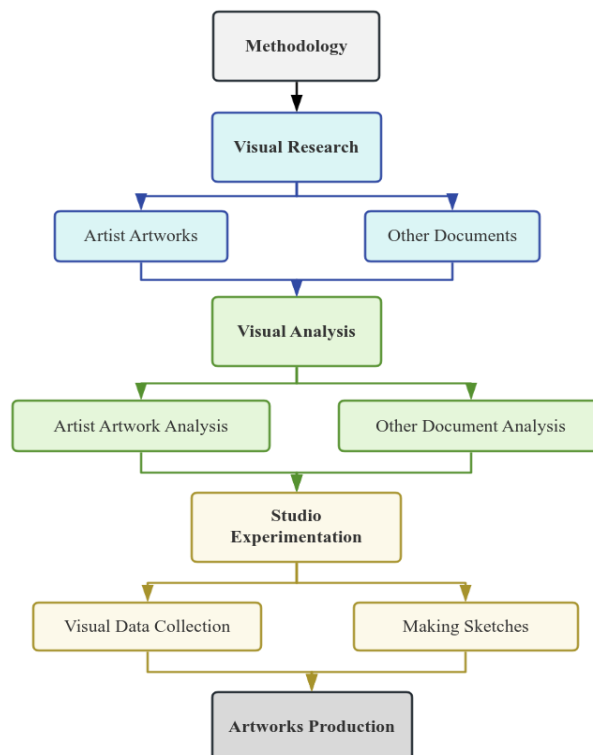


Figure 1. Methodology Framework.

## 1.1 Visual Research

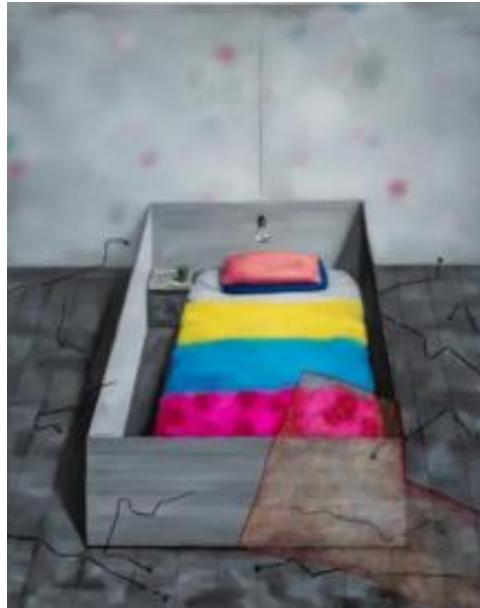
Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519) was the first to use visual research methods and obtain visual evidence, as sketches, sketchbooks, models, writing are examples of Leonardo's creation (Gray & Malins, 2004). The methods of visual research are used in many fields, with the main purpose being to gather or form ideas (Puadi, MF, Khairani, MZB, Othman, ANB, 2020). While visual imagery is a created perspective, visual art making can be likened to a diary, a fact that artists do not lose sight of. Cubist painter Pablo Picasso once said, "Painting is just another way of keeping a diary." In addition, visual images are unique and can arouse people's specific emotions, and visual images are powerful and occupy a relatively high position in memory (Leavy, P., 2020, P236). Pink (2001) also mentions that data collection can take the form of photos, artwork, videotapes, website home pages, emails, social media texts, or any form of sound (Pink, 2001). Based on the method of visual research, the researchers will collect photos during the epidemic as well as my own manuscripts. Because the painting process of researchers is mainly based on real picture sources.

## 1.2 Visual Analysis

This process will adopt Feldman's visual analysis theory. According to the visual analysis theory proposed by Edmund Burke Feldman in the mid-20th century, this process is divided into four steps: Describe Analyze Interpret Judge. Describe: Describe exactly what you see, in sufficient detail. The description should include the content and subject in the figurative work, as well as the abstract elements in the non-figurative work (size, shape, texture, color, light source, media, form, space, etc.). Second, Analyze, this stage analyzes how these formal elements interact with each other to form the overall composition and aesthetic effect of the work. This step encourages the viewer to think about how the artist uses these elements to convey meaning and emotion. Third, Interpret, this part explains the content and theme of the work, considering the artist's intention and possible symbolic meaning. This step helps the audience communicate more deeply with the work and develop their own understanding. Fourth, Judge evaluates the work according to the previous analysis, considering its aesthetic value, emotional impact and cultural significance. The following 3 artists were analyzed by the researchers:

### 1.3 Zhang Xiaogang (b. 1958)

Zhang Xiaogang, born in Kunming, Yunnan Province, China in 1958, is one of the important representatives of Chinese contemporary art. Currently, he lives and works in Beijing. His works enjoy a high reputation in the international art world with unique style and profound connotation.



**Figure 2.** Safe House No 1, Oil Painting on Canvas, 200x160cm, 2021.  
*Source:* Tag Art Museum

In 2021, Zhang Xiaogang created "Safe House 1" (refer with: Figure 2). At that time, there were many isolation pods in Wuhan, China, and many pictures gave me a strong stimulus: everyone was isolated in an isolation pod, but it was strange that the quilts they used were very bright, which formed a strong conflict with the environment. Xihai Art Museum (2021) Reviews Zhang Xiaogang's works: In the picture, a fence separates the bed from the outside world. The bed is colorful and full of vitality, while the outside of the bed is black and white, fuzzy and dense, symbolizing people's desire for safe space and fear of the unknown during the epidemic period (Tag Art Museum, 2021). The painting echoes Zhang Xiaogang's previous painting style. Lu Peng (2006) analyzed Zhang Xiaogang's other works as follows: In the "Ghost series", Zhang Xiaogang expressed his feelings in the hospital ward, especially the bed, in a surreal way, he wanted to express the fear of death," The "white bed" is the place where the soul exists, but this place is no longer a hospital, but closer to the hell that El Greco tells us about (Lv, P., 2006). Beds, lamps and boxes are common themes in Zhang Xiaogang's works, as well as the expression of his psychological symbols. The narrow space, simple light source and a bed are the safe space in the artist's memory, and also echo the psychological comfort brought by the makeshift hospital to the public during the special period.

The use of color in the painting is very striking. The colorful beds form a strong visual contrast against the gloomy background, which not only draws the attention of the audience, but also reinforces the bed as a symbol of safe space. However, this safe space is fenced off, suggesting a sense of fear of being trapped and unable to escape.

The painting is very successful in its emotional expression, not only capturing the common emotions of people during the pandemic, but also concretizing them through the form of visual art. The fear in the painting is multilayered, from fear of the disease itself to fear of isolation and loneliness. Through Feldman's theory of visual analysis, we can see the artist's clever use of color, composition, and symbolic elements to convey this complex emotional state. The painting is not only a record of people's psychological state during the epidemic, but also a profound reflection on the common emotions of mankind in the face of disaster.

#### **1.4 Hijack Art (b. 1992)**

Hijack Art, born Jacques Guetta, is a contemporary artist who produces compelling and socially and politically critical work, known for its unique realism and imaginative construction.



**Figure 3.** Street graffiti, 2020.

*Source:* Thepaper.cn

In the Pico-Robertson neighborhood of Los Angeles during the pandemic, artist Hijack Art created a mural depicting two soldiers "holding back" the coronavirus (refer with: Figure 3). Chen Dongyun (2020) wrote in his report: His mural, at the corner of West Pico Robertson Avenue and Reeves Street, shows two people in hazmat suits trying to fight off the virus with hand sanitizer and a vacuum cleaner with a "No Covid-19" logo. The movements appear tense and focused, and the background is pure black. Enhanced the tension of the picture (Chen, D.Y., 2020). "Fear of the pandemic and a call to action inspired many people to create," the artist said. "My paintings are a mix of careless spring break students, toilet paper hoarders, conspiracy theorists and suspicious patients." Hijack added, "Someone told me it felt like we were in the middle of a war, so I put that element into my work.

This piece of street graffiti by Hijack is very emotionally expressive, and it manages to capture and convey the climate of fear during the pandemic. Through the limited color and strong black and white contrast, the artist effectively highlights the importance of cleaning and disinfection, while also expressing people's fear of the epidemic and hope for defeating the virus. The painting is not only a reflection of the social phenomenon during the epidemic, but also a profound exploration of human emotions in the face of disaster. It reminds us that even in fear, people can find the strength to unite and resist.

### **1.5 Francisco Goya (1764-1828)**

Plague and death were common subjects in European religious paintings, especially after the Italian Black Death epidemic of 1477-1479. In the subject matter of epidemic and death, the depiction of Spanish romantic artist Goya impressed me deeply. Created by Goya for the Black Death that shocked the world at that time (refer with: Figure 4), this group of paintings opened the precedent of epidemic painting and provided a classic case for the artistic creation of epidemic themes in the future.



**Figure 4.** The Plague Hospital, Oil painting on canvas, 32.5x57.3cm, 1798-1800  
Source: Artchive

Fundacion Goya en Aragon (2010) made an artistic analysis of "The Plague Hospital": The scene, set in a hospital room containing many large arched structures, shows a group of people suffering from the terrible effects of the plague epidemic. A golden glow lit up the space, revealing the distressing situation inside, where some patients tried to help the sickest, even the dying, by giving them medicine to drink. Despite the hostile atmosphere, they continued to work, sometimes even having to hold their fingers to their noses. In Etching No. 1, this pose is repeated in the figure walking through the eerie landscape of corpses. Here, the figures are drawn with quick, fine brushstrokes and their faces are only surface-treated, in many cases giving them a hallucinatory appearance that indicates the approach of death (Fundacion Goya en Aragon, 2010). The Artchive website (1998) described the work as "reflecting the suffering and panic experienced by people in the pandemic through the gloomy figures and the dim light through the only window to create an oppressive atmosphere" (Artchive, 1998).

In addition, Goya is good at using "black painting" to embody the evil, depression and panic of emotions (Cascardi, A. J., 2022). The work uses rich contrast of light and shade and exaggeration to enhance the hopeless and mysterious atmosphere of the picture. The application of black tones and the penetration of light and shadow enhance the sense of picture and urgency. It creates an oppressive atmosphere shrouded in clouds, reveals the fragility of life and the heaviness of death, shows the dark side of the halo of humanity, and truly records the tragic state of people's lives under the Black Death. However, Goya added a warm element to the painting. In the center of the painting, a white window with light and sunlight breaks the scary atmosphere of the painting. This light, like the God they believe in, brings "light" and "hope" to the patients in the hospital.

## 1.6 Studio Experimentation

Based on the research data collected by the researcher, the analysis of the proposed works, the summarized color and theme elements, and the researcher's personal experience, in the part of studio practice, the researcher created the following two works to respond to the topic by drawing sketches and the production process of artworks.

## 1.7 Artwork 1 Process

The researcher's sketches come from his first perspective of being isolated during the isolation period (refer with: Figure 5). The photos are based on the researchers' own experiences. In 2021, the researcher was stopped by local epidemic prevention personnel at the subway station and taken to a local hotel for 14 days of isolation. The entire hotel was empty except for the quarantined personnel and supervision personnel in the room, and the walls of the entire hotel were wrapped up.



**Figure 5.** The Researcher is quarantined in hotel, 2021  
*Source: Researcher*

Sketch (refer with: Figure 6), the researchers changed the composition of the photo, turning the rectangle into a square, removing the light on the head of the photo, and the beginning of the color is a copy of the researcher's original photo. After modification of the second color atmosphere of the sketch (refer with: Figure 7), the original warm tone of the photo was changed into a dark tone, and the processing of details was strengthened.



**Figure 6. 7.** Sketches, 2024  
*Source: Researcher*

The resulting work is "Isolation" (refer with: Figure 8). The work presents a dark corridor with rough mottled walls on both sides, creating an oppressive atmosphere. In the corridor, a figure in a white protective suit stood, looking lonely and mysterious. In the hallway, food distributed to the quarantined was placed on tables on either side. The overall scene gives the feeling of a hospital or isolation space.

The composition of this painting takes the deep corridor as the core, and the lines guide the viewer's eyes to extend to the depth of the picture, giving people a sense of endless continuity, symbolizing the infinite extension of time and space. The characters wear protective suits that cover their faces, symbolizing the ambiguity and alienation of identity. In terms of color, gray, brown and dark tones enhance the somber and oppressive feeling of the picture. White protective clothing and the faint light on the ground stand out in the picture, forming a strong contrast, symbolizing purity, isolation and hope.

In this painting, the researcher conveys his feelings of panic through tone, composition and symbolism. The brushstrokes and color choices hope to make the viewer feel a strong impact on the environment of the time, triggering a reflection on the state of isolation and an awareness of human vulnerability.



**Figure 8.** Isolation, Oil painting on canvas, 120×120cm, 2024  
*Source:* Researcher

### 1.8 Artwork 2 process

The researchers' grandmother died of the period of COVID-19. (refer with: Figure 9) is a photo of the researcher's family accompanying her in the hospital during her grandmother's infection, taken in 2020.



**Figure 9.** Researcher's grandmother in hospital with family, 2020  
*Source:* Researcher

In the process of the sketch, the researcher removed the redundant characters in the real photo, and changed the modernization of the hospital into a dilapidated hospital, and then form the sketch (refer with: Figure 10) to increase the sense of panic in the picture.



**Figure 10.** Sketch, 2024  
*Source:* Researcher

In the final product, I changed the tone of the sketch, removed the sense of color, and adopted a pure black, white and gray color atmosphere. (refer with: Figure 11) "Death" is the final work of the researcher. The painting depicts the grandmother lying on a hospital bed. In the picture, you can see a number of neatly arranged iron bed beds, each bed is covered with white sheets. The surrounding environment appears dark and depressing, and the whole picture is filled with a solemn and cold atmosphere. The light in the room was dim, the walls were grey and black, and the Windows were so blurred that no light seemed to come in.

The horizontal composition of the picture is adopted, and the arrangement of the beds guides the viewer's eye to extend from the foreground to the far distance, strengthening the depth of the space, while also suggesting the endless number of beds. This repetitive structure gives a sense of oppression and monotony, symbolizing a large number of scenes of illness or death. In terms of color, the researchers chose cool tones with low saturation, contrasting the gray-black walls and white sheets. White sheets usually symbolize purity or peace, but here they give a cold, lifeless feeling, suggesting the advent of death. The window in the picture seems to be an outlet of hope, but its vague and closed state makes people feel that there is no hope and a closed environment. The researchers used this element to further enhance the emotional tone of the image - panic.

Through this painting, the researcher expressed his yearning for grandma and released his long-suppressed emotions, and also showed the reluctance and panic in the face of grandma's imminent death at that time. Secondly, the researchers wanted to convey a sense of despair and panic, implying people's helplessness in the face of disaster. The existence of the window may symbolize the human desire to escape the disaster and find hope, but the closed state of the window reveals the cruelty of reality - hope is blocked and people are trapped in an endless cycle of tragedy. In addition, the researcher wants to express the reflection on the suffering of human beings in the period of epidemic or major disaster through this painting, reminding the viewer to face the fragility of life and the inevitability of death.



**Figure 11.** Death, Oil painting on canvas, 110×130cm, 2024  
*Source:* Researcher

## RESULTS

Through qualitative analysis, this study explores how artists express "panic" through paintings during the period of novel coronavirus pneumonia. The results of the study showed that artists utilized a variety of visual elements and emotional symbols to convey their personal and emotional experiences during the pandemic. Specific findings are as follows:

**Use of color:** The artists in the study generally used dark tones to express the depression and anxiety caused by the epidemic. This use of color not only reflects the severity of the epidemic, but also deepens the viewer's sense of panic.

**Thematic elements:** The artists chose thematic elements directly related to the epidemic, such as isolation beds, protective clothing, hospitals, etc., to express the panic of the epidemic. These elements not only reflect the psychological state of the individual, but also reflect the emotional changes of the society under the public crisis.

**Emotional symbols:** Through strong emotions and visual symbols, such as protective clothing and isolation Spaces, the artists convey the panic and unease of the epidemic, while also inspiring people to think about life and desire for hope.

**Reproduction of personal experiences:** Based on the researcher's own experience during the epidemic, two works were created, which not only reproduced the researcher's panic, but also proved the theoretical framework of the study in practice.

## CONCLUSION

Through visual analysis of artists' works during the pandemic, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of painting as an emotional expression tool in dealing with panic. The findings suggest that painting can provide emotional support for artists and viewers, helping them to release and regulate emotions, and relieve anxiety and loneliness. In addition, the expression of emotion in painting art provides a theoretical basis for the treatment of psychological trauma in the future.

At the same time, future research could continue to explore the role of different art forms in the management of emotions and how works of art can be used to help people better understand and cope with the psychological impact of public crises such as pandemics. The significance of this paper is that the relevant painting elements obtained in the research process can be used in the treatment of psychological trauma in the future to help more patients with psychological trauma.

In addition, through this study, we can see the application potential and value of painting art in the field of mental health. In the future psychological intervention practice, the emotional expression and psychological adjustment function of painting art should be fully explored and utilized to provide more emotional support and psychological comfort for people. At the same time, this study also provides a new perspective and method for the study of painting art in the field of mental health, and promotes the practice and development of painting art in psychological intervention.

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