

A Study on the Visual Language of Urban-Themed Contemporary Chinese Oil Paintings

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Abstract: Based on the theory of visual language, this paper systematically analyzes the transformation of visual language in contemporary Chinese urban-themed oil paintings from four aspects: spatial schema reconstruction, encoding and translation of urban symbol systems, subjective color and light rhetoric, and brushstroke texture and material integration. By combining the oil paintings of contemporary oil painting artists such as Liu Xiaodong, Wang Yuping, and Chao Ge, this paper explores the artistic characteristics of oil painting art in the context of local urban culture, including the realistic depiction of reality, emotional expression, and conceptual representation in urban-themed works. It also proposes effective methods for expressing humanistic emotions in urban-themed works in contemporary oil painting creation.

Keywords: Urban themes; Contemporary Chinese oil paintings; Visual language; Art form

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, China's urbanization process has developed rapidly, and the urban landscape has undergone a complete transformation. In contemporary oil painting creation, artists have focused on developing and applying urban themes, which can enable oil painting creation to exhibit richer artistic connotations and evoke strong ideological and emotional resonance from people^[1]. Therefore, urban-themed oil painting works no longer merely reproduce the passive scenes of urban landscapes; instead, they are important carriers for depicting urban life, observing individual survival conditions, and reconstructing urban cultural memories. The academic community has also conducted extensive research on this, with Du Yang's research pointing out that imaging technology and mass images have deeply permeated contemporary oil painting creation^[2], making oil painting present a distinct "image-oriented tendency" in terms of framing, composition, and schema processing, which provides an important perspective for understanding how urban-themed oil paintings incorporate the visual grammar of the image era. Shuidong and Liu Zhe, Shi Qiang focused on discussing the emotional expression in urban-themed oil paintings^[3-4], arguing that while creators reflect the contradictions and survival conditions of urbanization, they also give the works strong humanistic concern, making urban themes become an important entry point for contemporary oil painting's emotional expression and value orientation; Lu Yao started from the language of painting^[5], analyzing the individualized exploration of Chinese contemporary artists in terms of form, color, brushstrokes, and the application of comprehensive materials; Song Xue and Zhang Ran^[6-7] initially sorted out the visual presentation characteristics of contemporary urban oil paintings in terms of composition methods and color expressions, emphasizing that oil paintings should be close to urban life and reflect the social spirit through appropriate formal language. However, considering the existing research results, most studies either focus on the exploration of emotional connotations or generalize the influence of imageization and general visual expressions, and rarely place urban-themed oil paintings in the unique context of China's urbanization, conducting a systematic, in-depth, and interrelated form-culture analysis of visual language elements such as spatial schema reconstruction, urban symbol encoding, subjective color and light rhetoric, and brushstroke texture materiality - and this is precisely the focus of this article's research. Based on this, this article takes visual art as the starting point, analyzing the artistic depiction and emotional expression of urban themes in contemporary Chinese oil painting creation from four levels: the breakthrough and reconstruction of spatial schema, the selection and translation of urban symbol systems, subjective color and light rhetoric, and brushstroke texture and material integration.

2. The Impact of Urban Culture on Contemporary Oil Painting Creation

2.1. The Impact of Urban Culture on Contemporary Oil Painting

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development process of Chinese oil painting has basically been in sync with the changes in the entire social structure, and to a large extent, it has presented a homomorphic state^[8]. For instance, in the early days of China, oil painting was the spokesperson for the historical narrative of the revolution and the collectivist ideology. Before the eve of the reform and opening up, it was the reminiscence and nostalgia for rural China. For a considerable period of time, oil painting played the role of "image testimony of history". However, since the late 1980s, with the establishment of the market economy and the surging tide of urbanization, a rare geographical structure and cultural psychology migration occurred in Chinese society. In this process, the creative logic of contemporary Chinese oil painting has undergone a fundamental rupture. From serving a certain grand narrative, the "collective consciousness", it gradually shifted to focusing on individual experience, the "individual consciousness". This is not only a process of style evolution, but also a process in which the personal thinking ability and the awareness of exploring truth of artists begin to sprout under the influence of modern civilization.

2.2. From Grand Narratives to Micro Narratives

For the oil paintings produced during the first three decades of the People's Republic of China, whether it was Dong Xiwen's "The Opening Ceremony of the Nation" or the subsequent series of revolutionary historical paintings, they all adopted a basic creative mode of "collective memory" and "epicism". The "omniscient and all-powerful" narrative stance required artists to abandon their own sensory experiences and submit to a highly politicized aesthetic discourse. However, with the reform and opening up, especially influenced by Western modernism, a trend of "anti-narrative" emerged in contemporary Chinese oil paintings. Artists began to question the monolithic historical narrative and attempted to escape the constraints of the grand historical discourse system and turn to the mundane, ordinary yet real world of daily life.

This is actually reflected in the "new generation" of painters in the 1990s. In this regard, Du Yang's discussion on the tendency towards imageization can serve as evidence. Contemporary artists have changed their definition of "truth", no longer pursuing an idealized typical form, but rather preferring to capture some accidental, instantaneous, and even somewhat absurd urban slices. Liu Xiaodong's bored young man and Yu Hong's female portraits suspended in the urban background are all the results of this awakening of individual consciousness. This popularity of "micro-narratives" is the visual mapping of the individual atomization of existence in the process of urbanization in art. Artists no longer have the ambition to construct a complete historical picture, but use specific, flesh-and-blood individuals to reflect the mental picture of an era. "We" becomes "I", which gives Chinese contemporary oil paintings a vivid personal temperature and provides psychological groundwork for their later urban writings.

2.3. Visual Transformation of Social Responsibility

The rapid development of urbanization not only provides abundant materials for art but also nurtures the innovation of urban-themed paintings by the new generation of oil painters. Urban areas are no longer just the backdrop for artistic creation; instead, they have become objects that can be observed and dissected. With a critical consciousness, contemporary oil painting has broken away from the singularity of formal aesthetics and acquired sociological and anthropological value. Issues that Song Xue and others focus on are similar. In their articles, they all mention the "emotional expression" and "problem awareness" in urban-themed oil paintings. Good urban-themed paintings always contain the painters' thoughts on the current modern situation behind them. For example, Zhang Yifeng's depiction of the humble yet strong image of migrant workers is not just a story about the lower class; it is also a voice questioning the identity anxiety in the process of urbanization. Li Yali and others' depiction of old residences and family photos shows the spiritual barrenness and memory rupture of contemporary urbanites under the prosperity of material desires. Such criticism is not mere preaching but rather the philosophical reflection on social problems expressed through the language of images. Urban narrative oil paintings have become an "art that meets the demands of the times". It is a mirror of urban culture and also a sharp weapon to resist the negative influence of urban culture^[9].

3. Urban Symbol Systems in Contemporary Oil Painting Works

3.1. Architecture as a Spiritual Container and a Symbol of Power

In Zhao Ge's urban works, office buildings are depicted as geometric shapes in cool gray tones, with sharp angles and glass reflections emphasized. People are small and distant, and the building volume dominates everything. This is an exposure of the alienated nature of urban space due to instrumental rationality. The city is no longer a space measured by people, but a monument of capital and power. In contrast, in Xin Dongwang's paintings, the makeshift shacks where migrant workers live or the dilapidated apartment buildings to be demolished have their walls peeling off, revealing the original concrete texture^[10]. Xin Dongwang delicately depicts this with a thick texture and a warmer gray-brown tone. Here, the buildings are merely a temporary living place for the lower-class people, whose dignity has been lost, and they form a strong sociological contrast with the cold and transparent glass facades.

3.2. Symbolization of Transportation and Transitional Spaces

Subway carriages, bus carriages, and waiting halls are the places where modern urbanites spend the most "non-purposeful time". Liu Xiaodong's works such as "New Immigrants in the Three Gorges" and "Warm Bed" place the migrant worker group in houses to be demolished or temporary beds. It is a suspended space between the homeland and the city, where the body movements are relaxed but anxiety is hidden. Objects such as playing cards, cigarette butts, and electric fans acquire the symbolic meaning of daily life. This suggests the individual's drifting state in the process of urbanization. Wang Yu's paintings of empty bus seats or bicycles parked at the hutong entrance, where "there are people but no one is present", better reflect the loneliness of urban life than large group portraits.

3.3. Appropriation and Criticism of Consumerist Visual Codes

Billboards emblazoned with beautiful faces, luxury brand logos, and neon-lit foreign script—some painters amplify these elements in a quasi-Pop Art style, or juxtapose them against weary passersby, thereby exposing how consumer spectacle colonizes subjective desire. The establishment of this urban semiotic system also signals that contemporary Chinese oil painting has developed a conscious "urban awareness": no longer treating the city as mere backdrop, but rather deconstructing it as a visual subject capable of independent expression. As shown in Figure 1, the modern oil painting *Memory of the Floating City* depicts a northern city street just after the rain, reflecting a cool, observational stance toward quotidian urban space. Deliberately flattening perspectival depth into planar color blocks, the artist interweaves "advanced grays" with localized vivid hues. This approach not only captures the crisp coolness of the post-rain atmosphere, but also inadvertently conveys a sense of estrangement between people and their environment—subtly echoing the earlier discussion on the visual reconstruction of modern urban space.



Figure 1: Urban-themed oil painting "Memories of the Floating City"

4. Subjective Color and Light Rhetoric in Contemporary Urban Painting

4.1. High-Grade Gray and Urban Alienation

As urban-themed oil paintings gain more social audience, people have developed a profound emotional resonance with the expression of urban cultural life in these paintings. Painters such as Zhao Ge, Liu Xiaodong, and Yu Hong, who come from academies, prefer to use some low-saturation, low-contrast gray systems, such as cold gray, purple gray, brown gray, and blue gray, interwoven together, with subtle color gradations to shape volume. The tonal quality of "high-grade gray" has a hidden spiritual resonance with the distant and serene artistic conception of traditional Chinese ink painting, and can accurately convey the restrained, cold, and distant state of interpersonal relationships in the city. In Yu Hong's "She" series of works, the figures float on a unified cold gray background, and their skin tones are covered with multiple layers of transparent color washes, giving a white glaze-like skin tone, highlighting the individual's sense of loneliness while also revealing a rational reflection on the multiple identities of contemporary women. Liu Xiaodong's urban-themed works, although with loose and bold brushstrokes, generally control the overall color within the range of warm neutral grays - earth yellow - gray green, with occasional bright red T-shirts or blue plastic bags serving as emotional anchors, contrasting the dullness of daily life with occasional vitality (see Figure 2).

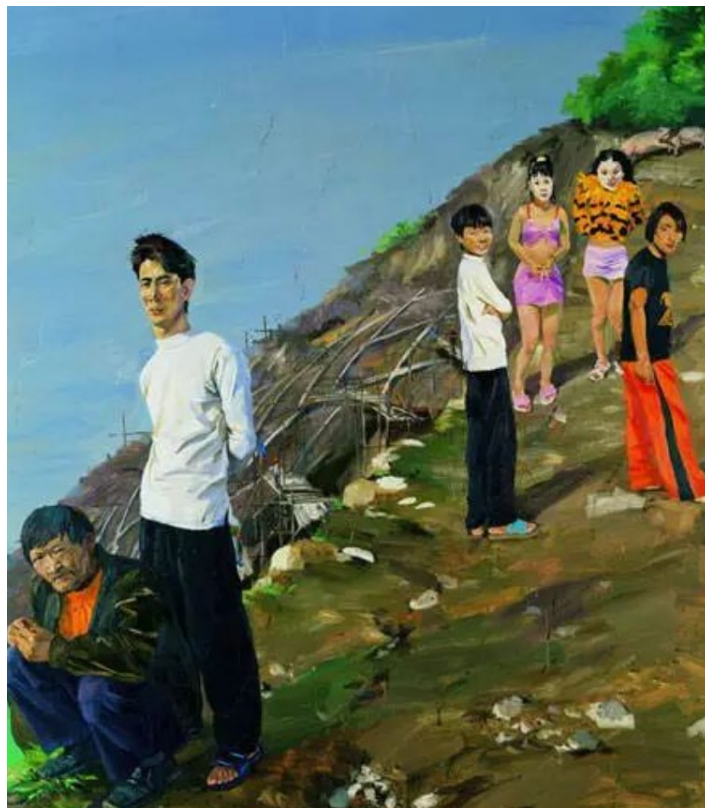


Figure 2: Partial view of Liu Xiaodong's oil painting "New Immigrants in the Three Gorges"

4.2. High-Saturation Neon and Consumption Night Scene Rhetoric

Some artists actively cater to the night lighting colors of the city, using combinations of magenta, blue, yellow, and purple to imitate the reflection effect of LED soft advertising and street lights on the asphalt road after rain. These colors are usually found in works depicting the night life scenes of the city center, generating a dazzling visual stimulus under the strong contrast of light and dark. On the one hand, it shows the bustling and lively scene of the city at night, on the other hand, it also expresses the feeling of being lost and disillusioned after such indulgence in the carnival. Some artists use thick application of fluorescent color strips with a scraper to create the glowing state of light tubes, even using unconventional media such as acrylic and fluorescent pigments, making colors the narrative subject of "light" rather than relying on the modeling of light and dark. Such "excessive" color use is to dissolve "indulgence's emptiness" with an "extreme indulgence", when the retina of the viewer is stimulated by the dazzling colors, the experience is not pleasure but a sense of suffocation and visual

fatigue, achieving the revelation of the illusory essence of urban nightlife in terms of aesthetics.

4.3. Backlight Silhouettes and Solitary Narration

In contemporary urban-themed oil paintings, artists are skilled at using the application of light and shadow techniques to express the emotions of urbanites. "Solitude" is an indispensable topic in urban culture and also a theme that painters are passionate about expressing. For example, the backlit effect often seen in the city: the light from the subway entrance stretches the person's shadow long, as if in silhouette, this is often used by many artists in their works to highlight the sense of loneliness; people often fail to see or deliberately ignore the face of the person, focusing on the shape of the body and the contrast of light and shade formed in the surrounding environment, and light becomes a metaphysical boundary line between inside and outside, visible and invisible. Clearly, these techniques draw on Hopper and later the German New Leipzig School (part of the circle of Neo Rauch's artists). However, in the context of Chinese urban language, they have been infused with local commuting experience. The office workers swallowed by light in the morning rush hour subway station are a nameless moment shared by millions of people. Color and light have now transcended the function of representation and become a direct chromatograph of the urban spiritual atmosphere.

5. Brushwork Texture and Material Integration in Urban-themed Oil Paintings

5.1. Expressive Brushstrokes and "Unfinished Feeling"

The signature technique of contemporary oil painting master Liu Xiaodong is to generously apply paint, move the brush rapidly, retain the direction of the brushstrokes and even the accidental drips, deliberately not making fine finishes in some areas to create a sense of "happening in real time"^[1]. This rough and direct style influenced by De Kooning and Lucian Freud precisely matches the haste, crudeness and raw state of urban life, while overly refined classical treatment reveals the unreal aspect of urban life. Xin Dongwang, on the other hand, uses a jagged and sharply defined "scraping brush" to express the wrinkles of migrant workers' clothes and the crisscrossing grooves on their faces. The brushstroke direction twists and turns along with the change of object shape, with the texture density varying layer upon layer, like shaping a clay mold, revealing the simple vitality of the grassroots people from the canvas(see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Liu Xiaodong's oil painting "Your City"

5.2. Interplay of Planar Scraping and Urban Wall Texture

In urban-themed oil painting works, painters also adopt new techniques, such as depicting the mottled walls of old urban areas. They often use a scraper to apply paint evenly, then sandpaper polish or scrape out the contrasting colors beneath to imitate the peeling paint, remnants of posters, and rain stains on the urban walls. The texture formed on the canvas and the texture of the depicted objects form a "texture of the picture - texture of the depicted object" isomorphism relationship, making the act of painting itself become a small simulation of the material metabolism process of the city (painting - aging - covering - re-painting). Wang Yuping in street scene sketches often uses a wide brush to apply thickly and generously the powder-colored paint, then sketches with a pencil or charcoal, loosening the physical boundaries, allowing the urban warmth in the alleys to overflow from the defined form.

5.3. Conceptual Integration of Composite Materials

Some artists are no longer satisfied with pure oil paint. Instead, they stick some urban waste materials on the canvas, such as train tickets, copies of demolition notices, fragments of advertising sheets, and even small pieces of cement, using these mixed media to enhance the "on-site feeling" of "urban objects"; or turn the oil painting into a conceptual symbol of installation^[12]. This practice uses painting to record a segment of abandoned urban memory, responding to Adorno's claim that "art should preserve those suppressed by civilization." In this context, brushstrokes and texture are no longer mere technical issues; they become the very "body" of urban oil painting—the tangible embodiment of the painter's hand and the city's objects on the canvas.

6. Conclusion

The significance of urban themes in contemporary Chinese oil paintings lies in the fact that they break through the focal perspective in terms of space and incorporate fragmented and multi-point-of-view juxtapositions; in terms of symbols, they establish a unique visual code system specific to cities and endow it with sociological and philosophical connotations; in terms of color and light, they break free from the logic of natural light and use artificial light colors and subjective gray tones to express the urban spiritual climate; in terms of brushstrokes, textures and materials, through material experiments, the canvas becomes a micro-site of the urban material metabolism. Truly powerful urban oil paintings neither fall into the sensationalistic display of skyscraper clusters nor degenerate into image appendages of sociological reports. Instead, they maintain tension between formal autonomy and cultural reflection. They use the unique touch, color layers and temporality of oil painting to transform those unnamed, fleeting and overlooked lives in the concrete jungle into spiritual images that can be repeatedly gazed upon.

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