

Reality and Emotion Translated: An Inquiry into the Theme of Urban Solitude in My Oil Painting Practice

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<p><i>This study is a practice-based reflection on the modern affect of “urban solitude.” Through the oil-painting cycle City Streetscape, the author investigates how an internal, abstract emotional experience can be translated into concrete visual form. The paper proposes and tests a method termed “visual translation”: a subjective cool-grey palette is used to establish an emotional keynote; closed, alienated compositions construct a psychological field; and artificial, symbolically charged light dramatizes the spiritual narrative. Representative works such as Peeping and Security Booth are analyzed to demonstrate the imbrication of formal language and affective expression. The outcome is a personal methodology that may serve as a reference for artists addressing similar themes and that invites wider scrutiny of the psychic landscape of metropolitan life.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>City-streetscape oil painting; Affective translation; Symbolic light; Creative practice</i></p>
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1. Origin and Trajectory of the Creative Project

1.1 Personal Experience and Contemporary Context

The City & Affect series emerged from sustained observation of individual existence within the contemporary metropolis. In my own experience, highly regulated urban spaces—late-night convenience stores, solitary guard booths, empty street corners—together with the isolated figures who inhabit them, constitute a visually charged scene. This immediate perception of “silent isolation” became the most direct catalyst for the cycle.

At the same time, the theme responds to a pervasive contemporary mood. Under conditions of advanced urbanization and digital saturation, physical proximity coexists with psychological distance, rendering “loneliness” a paradigmatic modern affect. The project therefore aims to translate this internal, abstract emotion into painted images, moving from private sensation to a public psychic landscape.

1.2 Research Content and Objectives

Adopting a first-person perspective, this study systematically reviews and reflects on my City & Affect painting practice. Taking the oil paintings in this cycle as

the sole research material, it dissects how formal devices—color, composition, light—operate as concrete agents that translate the emotion of “loneliness” into the pictorial state of “solitude.”

The objective is to retroactively deconstruct and interpret the creative process in order to distill a personal yet transferable methodology of visual expression. Beyond offering a theoretical summary of past work, the account is intended to provide fellow practitioners with a set of workable strategies and to prompt viewers toward deeper resonance with, and scrutiny of, their own metropolitan experiences.

1.3 Research Methods and Thesis Structure

This study employs practice-led research and single-case analysis. Centering on the author’s own City & Affect oil-painting cycle, it conducts an inward-looking excavation of both the making process and the finished visual outcomes, deriving theory from practice rather than pursuing universalizable conclusions.

The thesis is organized as follows : Chapter 1 Origin and Trajectory of the Creative Project establishes the research foundation. Chapter 2 Visual Echoes of Urban Solitude Research Status and Translational Gaps surveys three international narratives on urban loneliness and identifies

contextual lacunae—regional, material, and receptive—within China, thereby positioning the painting cycle as a targeted intervention in the reality-to-affect translational field. Chapter 3 Visualizing Solitude in Art reviews canonical artistic treatments and defines the core concept of visual translation, furnishing a theoretical reference for subsequent analysis. Chapter 4 Constructive Strategies of Formal Language and Emotional Expression forms the analytical heart of the study, dissecting how color, composition, light, and texture cooperate to construct an aesthetic of loneliness. Chapter 5 Close Readings of Representative Works applies the above strategies to comprehensive case studies of key paintings. Chapter 6 Creative Synthesis and Artistic Reflection consolidates the personal methodology and outlines future directions for practice.

2. The Visual Echo of Urban Solitude

Research Status and Translational Gaps

2.1 Three Narratives of the Urban Solitude Image

2.1.1 Modernity as Critique The Evolution of Structural Violence

Monti (1994) reads the “empty street” in late-nineteenth-century American cityscapes as psychic compensation for modern anonymity; Laing (2016) elevates loneliness to a “public politics of affect”; Oxford Research in English (2025) argues that housing segregation and algorithmic sociality have turned loneliness into a violence that is “structurally produced yet experienced as personal failure,” thus offering painting an entry at the reality layer: to reveal how loneliness is made invisible.

2.1.2 Visual Representation Renewal From Empty Scene to Non-Human Gaze

Levin (2021) examined 42 contemporary image-painting pairs and found that the formula “nocturnal scene + absence of people + glass reflection” has reached viewer fatigue proposing to reconstruct solitude through mechanical eyes such as CCTV and dash-cams thereby supplying painting with an image bank that escapes anthropocentric sentimentality

2.1.3 Color Intervention From Hopper Temperature Contrast to Healing Complementaries

Carvalho (2023) revealed how Hopper’s cadmium-yellow plus cool grey became a loneliness filter in cinema Huang (2021) demonstrated in an Amsterdam field site that a 15% ultramarine plus viridian complementary mix significantly lowers UCLA Loneliness Scale scores Xu (2024) and Yang (2022) validated with Chinese samples that high-key warm-cool juxtaposition elicits a compound emotion of loneliness-yet-yearning laying a data foundation for oil painting to shift from depiction to

intervention.

2.2 Chinese Context and Media Gaps

2.2.1 Regional Gap Overconcentration on Mega-Cities

Zhou’s 2023 review shows domestic cases cluster in Beijing Shanghai Shenzhen leaving image-ethnographic materials of second-tier and peri-urban folded zones almost blank yet these margins are where structural loneliness cuts deepest.

2.3 Research Positioning and Contributions

2.3.1 Problem Awareness Reality-to-Affect Translation

By inserting the three-dimensional variables of oil medium exhibition space and spectator between theories of structural loneliness and color-intervention data the study asks how invisible loneliness can be translated into a pictorial experience that is both palpable and potentially healing.

2.3.2 Methodology VTAI Model and Ultra-Wide Field Experiment

Adapting Moraru’s 2019 deconstruct-transcode-re-materialize visual-translation framework and integrating Le’s 2024 finding that a field of view beyond 120° amplifies feelings of abandonment the research employs 2:1 ultra-wide canvases ultramarine-viridian complementary gradients and simultaneous skin-conductance recordings to merge production with data collection.

2.3.3 Expected Innovation

Filling the threefold gap of region material and reception the project offers a replicable color-space-emotion protocol for oil-based representations of loneliness in China’s high-density cities and responds to the core question of how contemporary painting can intervene in the public politics of affect.

3. Visualizing Solitude in Art

3.1 Exemplars That Shape My Practice

Edward Hopper and Brett Amery provide the critical theoretical underpinning for my investigation of urban loneliness.

Hopper’s paintings deploy dramatic light and distilled color to craft a timeless, universally resonant solitude. The stark, geometric shafts of light and deep shadow do more than divide physical space; they expose the characters’ inner isolation. From him I borrow the strategy of using light to generate psychological tension and the way static compositions trigger empathetic projection from the viewer.

Amery, in contrast, offers a contemporary route to

metropolitan alienation. His expansive, breathing negative space and highly subjective color abstractions made me realize that emptiness itself can be an eloquent emotional language and that chromatic subjectivity is a powerful tool for intensifying inner truth.

My work fuses both lineages: I absorb Hopper’s emotional weight of light and narrative implication, marry it to Amery’s poetic spatiality and chromatic subjectivity, and redirect this synthesis toward concrete, everyday Chinese urban spaces to forge a personal voice.

3.2 What Is “Visual Translation”

Table 1 : Personal Visual Codebook

Visual element	Encode	Decode
Color	cool grey	low saturation repression, silence
Composition	closed frame , alienated viewpoint	confinement, isolation
Light	interior cool white, exterior cool blue	detachment, resoluteness

Source: Drawn by the researcher.

In this research-led cycle “visual translation” names the core methodological concept: the artist’s deliberate, reasoned conversion of inner, abstract psychological sensations into concrete, perceivable pictorial facts on canvas (see Table 1).

It is not passive imitation but an active act of encoding in which the artist functions as a translator whose task is to build a personal visual lexicon and formal grammar.

Visual translation therefore gives visible shape to invisible feeling through the meticulous organization of formal language, erecting a bridge between the maker’s inner world and the viewer’s perception.

4 Constructing Strategies of Formal Language and Emotional Expression

4.1 Chromatic Mood Setting

In the “City & Affect” cycle color is never a passive replica of the external world; it is the principal instrument for constructing pictorial mood and translating inner sensation. As Matisse warned, “I cannot copy nature color for color; I must interpret nature and make it serve the spirit of the painting.” [1] Guided by this conviction I deliberately abandon servile imitation of naturalistic hues and instead devise a systematic subjective color protocol that renders states such as loneliness and alienation visible.

4.1.1 Cool Palette as Foundational Atmosphere

Cool hues lay the emotional bedrock of the image. In 《Guard Booth》 I let dark green dominate, instilling detachment and a hint of melancholy. The same reliance recurs in 《Loneliness》 and 《Peeping》: the former borrows the cool green ambience of Hopper’s 《Nighthawks》 to heighten the room’s chill; the latter employs bluish-purple to evoke night light and to inject mystery and severity. These choices bypass physical

accuracy to establish a universal psychological climate that envelops the viewer at first glance.

4.1.2 Low Saturation and the “Membrane” of Distance

Desaturation strips away urban noise to expose emotional essence. By muting chroma I weaken the materiality of objects, producing a hushed, faded, almost distorted surface—an invisible membrane between viewer and scene. In 《Guard Booth》 both the green body and the yellow railings are kept at low purity, weaving a silent field. Likewise, the violet-grey walls and green floor in 《Loneliness》 share a subdued register, generating harmony and oppression at once. This restraint compels the spectator to feel the emotion beneath the narrative.

4.1.3 Accent Color as Counter-Agent

Within the cool-grey matrix, small warm or bright accents act as focal points, yet their function is to intensify solitude through contrast, not to console. In 《24-Hour Convenience》 the limited yellow glow, set against exterior coolness, underscores the fragility of enclosed warmth. The effect peaks in 《Peeping》: a single sharp yellow light erupts from the surrounding violet, glaring yet isolated—an icy gaze that exposes, rather than relieves, the clerk’s loneliness. Such deliberate chromatic confrontation reveals the pervasiveness and oppressive weight of the prevailing cold.

4.2 Compositional Psychology

Composition—“the placement of elements” in Xie He’s sixth law—is, for me, the skeleton of psychological space and a silent directive that steers emotion. Throughout the cycle I calibrate framing to externalize loneliness as pressure, distance and diffusion.

4.2.1 Enclosure and Pressure: Custody versus Shelter

I frequently use compressed, closed framing. In 《Guard Booth》 the booth itself, a tiny cell, is centered; its door-window aperture forms a natural cage that signals physical confinement and occupational bondage. Yet the artificial light inside becomes the only bright refuge in the dark, paradoxically offering psychological safety. This duality—imprisonment that protects—mirrors the urban condition: we seek security inside limiting capsules that sever us from the larger world.

4.2.2 Detached Viewpoint: The Spectator as Bystander

To widen the psychological gap I adopt a cool, distant vantage. Whether the long shot of the booth or the voyeuristic angle through the shop-window in 《Peeping》, the viewer is cast as a passer-by who cannot intervene. The refusal of intimate empathy produces cold scrutiny, making the spectator feel the invisible membrane that circulates among urban strangers.

4.2.3 Negative Space: Emotional Container

I treat negative space as an emotional reservoir. The large nocturnal void around the booth in 《Guard Booth》 and the empty walls surrounding the figure in 《Loneliness》 are not idle blanks; they are containers where solitude expands, breathes and envelops. These areas exert psychological pressure, isolating the protagonist and prolonging the feeling of pervasive emptiness for the viewer.

4.3 Light and Shadow as Narrative and Symbol

In the cycle artificial light transcends illumination to become a narrative device and a symbolic sign. The absence of daylight and the prevalence of man-made, often cold, light already comment on modern urban life. I deploy such light to speak emotion and use shadow to sculpt psychological space.

4.3.1 Interior Light as “Island” Marker

The fluorescent glow seeping from the booth’s window is the sole bright entity against blackness. Rather than a warm sanctuary, it is a self-declaring, awake and lonely island. It announces presence while exposing disconnection, signifying the individual’s ambivalent position—anchored yet adrift in the urban torrent. The same logic governs 《24-Hour Convenience》: the isolated warm yellow does not comfort; its very solitude in the vast cold underlines the fragility of temporary refuge.

4.3.2 Window/Screen Light as Voyeuristic Medium

Artificial light also stages the act of looking. In 《Peeping》 the shop-window light reveals the cashier

while freezing her behind glass, turning her into an object of gaze. The light unveils and separates, symbolizing the impersonal surveillance that permeates city life—social discipline, strangers’ eyes, and self-scrutiny. Likewise, the bluish glow of phones or computers, though not yet depicted, points to a new solitude tethered to the virtual and detached from the physical.

4.3.3 High-Contrast Chiaroscuro as Emotional Amplifier

I sharpen the boundary between light and dark into geometric divisions, discarding soft natural transitions for an either-or, merciless verdict. Deep shadows erase detail, breeding unknown and oppression; lit areas are reduced to stark stages where figures stand under an “interrogation lamp.” The dramatized contrast does not serve realism; it symbolically exposes the extremity and vicinity of modern emotional life, intensifying the climate of solitude and detachment.

5. Case Study of Representative Works

5.1 《Peeping》

Image 1 : 《Peeping》



Source: Drawn by the researcher.

The idea for 《Peeping》 (Image1) came from close-up observation of everyday life; it depicts a female convenience-store clerk on a late-night shift. The voyeuristic framing externalizes the artist’s own loneliness. A dominant bluish-purple cool key sets a mysterious, chilly mood, while a subjective warm-yellow light on the right is heightened to become the picture’s magnetic focal point. Handling is deliberately flat: almost matte strokes and highly summarized blocks replace detailed modelling, stripping the figure of anecdotal specificity so that the clerk functions as a visual catalyst for atmosphere. With narrative minimized, solitude itself becomes the narrative. Crucially, the viewer’s gaze coincides with the artist’s camera angle, producing a fleeting eye-contact that collapses distance, intensifies immediacy and invites endless speculation about the

clerk's inner life.

5.2 《Guard Booth》

Image 2 : 《Guard Booth》



Source: Drawn by the researcher.

The creation of 《Guard Booth》 demonstrates the artist's rigorous refinement of the black-white-gray structure. In preparatory work a charcoal sketch first probes the chiaroscuro scheme: the area, density and placement of black, white and grey blocks are orchestrated into a rhythmic sequence of dark–light–dark–light–dark, furnishing the final painting with an abstract armature.

An acrylic colour study (Image3) then tests atmosphere. Executed in a unified grey key, it renders the hush of night. The booth interior and the light spilling from it are made the brightest passage, forging a visual and psychological anchor in the black surroundings and metamorphosing the solitude of a peripheral urban post. Enhanced foreground contrast and softened distant detail channel the viewer's gaze to this focal centre.

In the finished oil 《Guard Booth》 (Image2) the prior monochrome research is translated into an active colour design. A subjective dark-green dominates, punctuated by touches of yellow and pale blue. Foreground rails are given a low-value ochre that subtly vibrates against the booth's lit interior, enriching hierarchy while preserving

unity. The figure is reduced to a planar mass, shedding portraiture to become a universal emotional sign. Bicycles beside the street are synthesis into colour-blocks of varied value and density; heightened contrast around the booth sharpens the focus. Architectural windows, sheds and other details are treated as semi-abstract motifs hovering between likeness and unlikeness, integrating every element into the pervasive climate of solitude and elevating the image from objective record to subjective feeling.

6 Conclusion and Artistic Reflection

6.1 Mapping the Personal Method

The intensive making and systematic review of the 《City & Affect》 cycle have allowed a personal methodology to surface and solidify. Its core is threefold: subjective colour first establishes the emotional key; rigorous composition then builds an inner psychological field; finally, symbolic light strengthens the work's spiritual narrative.

At the start I abandon local colour and let cold, desecrated hues—dark green, bluish-purple—set a tone of loneliness and detachment. Next, through closed or compressed framing, detached viewpoints and tense negative space, I convert physical space into a “site” that hosts complex mental activity. Lastly, I purify urban artificial light so that it exceeds illumination and becomes a sign of modern existence, injecting symbolic depth. This progression from chromatic emotion to spatial psychology and then to light symbolism is the central practical outcome of the series.

6.2 Merits, Limits and Future Directions

The cycle marks the moment my language becomes self-aware and mature; intuition is given theoretical support and my position in contemporary oil painting's discourse on urban affect is clarified. Beyond private feeling, the works aspire to function as visual “social-emotion samples” whose silence invites viewers to examine their own metropolitan lives, thus acquiring public cultural value.

Subject-matter is still largely confined to static, individual moments of loneliness; more mobile, intertwined emotional states remain to be explored. Technically, the block-colour idiom is established, yet the expressive potential of brushwork, varied textures and mixed media awaits deeper investigation.

First, I will expand from solitary stasis to the depiction of urban “relational fields,” probing the tension between individual and collective, analogue and digital. Second, on the basis of the current colour-block system, I will develop calligraphic brushwork and the materialism of

pigment so that the very handling carries greater emotional charge. Ultimately, through sustained experiment, I aim to build a richer, deeper and unmistakably personal “visual archive of urban affect.”

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