

IMAGINATIVE ANIMALS AS INSPIRATION IN THE CREATION OF DARK ART STYLE DIGITAL DRAWINGS

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Abstract. Traumatic experiences often leave a profound psychological impact due to shocking, frightening, or dangerous events that cause emotional distress in individuals. This work is a visual exploration in the form of dark art-style digital images, inspired by the personal experience of losing a father and the stories of others who have experienced similar mental suffering. The dark art style was chosen because it can emotionally represent trauma and raise awareness of mental health issues in the context of contemporary art. The resulting work is a 60 × 60 cm digital image printed on luster paper, featuring an imaginative animal in a gloomy landscape as the main subject. The visuals are developed symbolically and surrealistically through grotesque forms, anatomical deformations, and a dark, emotional atmosphere. Elements such as glowing red eyes, skulls, ruins, and spider webs were processed using an iPad, Apple Pencil, and the Procreate application. The creative process includes pre-production (research and sketching), production (digital drawing), and post-production (refining and printing). The imaginative animal in this work represents the deepest fears, lasting memories, and unseen forces in the human psyche, while the damaged setting serves as a metaphor for the abandoned psychological space. This work serves as an emotional expression and cultural reflection on trauma, as well as a critique of the lack of social empathy for psychological suffering.

Keywords: trauma, imaginative animals, digital images, dark art, visual expression

1. Introduction

Traumatic experiences are an integral part of human life, leaving deep emotional scars and impacting mental well-being. Mental well-being itself is a combination of positive feelings (happiness, satisfaction) and effective psychological and social functioning (Huppert, 2009). Emotional wounds, on the other hand, are psychological pain stemming from negative experiences such as regret, sadness, or loss. These experiences can trigger serious physical or psychological disorders if left untreated. Traumatic events generally involve intense emotional disturbance that exceeds an individual's capacity to manage it healthily. Trauma can have a significant impact on emotions, self-perception, and social relationships. Spytka (2023) explains that psychological trauma alters a person's perception of the past and future, and affects motivation, self-development, and life balance.

Trauma is a profound emotional response to an event that threatens or injures physically or psychologically, leaving a lasting impact on the individual. These events typically exceed a person's ability to process them healthily, triggering feelings of fear, helplessness, or despair. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020), trauma can stem from events such as the loss of a loved one, accidents, violence, or disasters. The impact is not limited to the moment of the incident but can affect thought patterns, emotions, behavior, and even physical health in the long term.

Within the family structure, the father plays a crucial role. Fathers often provide a sense of security, stability, and resilience in facing life's challenges. According to Lamb (2010), a father's involvement during a child's development not only impacts the formation of social

behavior but also the child's self-confidence and emotional regulation. The absence of a father figure during this developmental period creates feelings of emptiness, isolation, and emotional instability that are difficult to describe verbally. The loss of an important figure in life, particularly a father at a young age, has been shown to have a significant impact on a person's mental well-being. Farooqi & Khan (2021) explain that the loss of a father figure at a young age has been scientifically proven to have long-term psychological impacts, including depression, anxiety, and identity disorders. However, some individuals also demonstrate the capacity for psychological growth following the loss, as demonstrated by Asgari & Naghavi (2020).

In addition to personal experience, the author also witnessed firsthand the emotional journey of a close friend who lost his father at nearly the same age. This friend displayed signs of deep grief, difficulty building trust, and anxiety about the future. Through intense interactions, the author sensed that this experience of loss had similar psychological wounds. Previous studies have also emphasized the important role of family, community, and mental health professionals in mitigating the long-term psychological impact of trauma (Rachmadhani et al., 2024). This shared experience served as a compelling reason for the author to incorporate the themes of loss and trauma into his artwork as a means of reflection and healing.

In the face of this loss, the urge arose to delve back into past experiences through a reflective process. However, the limitations of verbally expressing emotions prompted the author to seek alternative media to understand and channel this psychological burden through digital images. Digital images were chosen for their flexibility in exploring shape, color, and texture. Zhu et al. (2022) demonstrated that visual storytelling in digital media allows for expression that is more responsive to the inner dynamics of its creator.

Exploring imaginative animal symbols in digital art, particularly as representations of trauma, is rarely discussed explicitly. Yet, imagination plays a crucial role in cognitive and emotional processes. Cocquyt & Palombo (2023) explain that neural networks, such as the default mode network, support emotional simulations related to inner experiences. In the context of art, imaginative animals are often used as symbols of trauma, social critique, and psychological healing processes (Sunderland et al., 2022).

Digital image media was chosen for its flexibility in exploring shape, color, and texture. Digital technology also enables complex visual narratives and facilitates the expression of deep emotions (Zhu et al., 2022). This medium bridges personal experience and artistic expression, and enhances empathy for psychological issues.

Unlike works that depict legendary creatures for cultural or commercial purposes (Rizky, 2020; Fadli, 2025), this work focuses on psychological symbolism. The animal images are presented in a grotesque and surreal manner, with dark colors, rough textures, and distorted shapes. This style creates a mysterious atmosphere that reflects emotions that are difficult to express.

A similar approach is found in Bush's (2022) work, *Creature*, which presents imaginative creatures as metaphors for trauma and inner conflict. Similarly, in the study of Digital and Transnational Expressionism, animal symbols are used to express negative emotions through a dark art style (Idil Journal, 2023).

This work also aligns with Baker's (2025) view that imaginative illustration can help individuals, especially children, cope with trauma through symbolic narratives. In this context, imaginative animals serve as reflective symbols of personal wounds and collective suffering.

Unlike the technical approach of *Force: Animal Drawing* (Mattesi, 2021), which emphasizes movement and anatomy, this work is more symbolic and emotional. Furthermore, it stems from the personal experiences and social realities of Indonesian adults, rather than from a global context or for children. The goal of this creation is to utilize dark art-style digital images as a medium for processing trauma that is difficult to express verbally. Through imaginative animal symbols, complex emotions from the subconscious are visualized using a grotesque

approach. This work is expected to be a reflective and therapeutic tool for transforming emotional wounds into meaningful visual forms (Chambers et al., 2022; Marburger & Pickover, 2020).

Specifically, this work highlights how imaginative animals can inspire dark art, particularly as symbols of trauma and inner conflict. In this context, digital art is not only a personal expression, but also a tool for social reflection on mental health issues. According to Lowenfeld & Brittain (1987), art provides a free space to express inner experiences beyond the boundaries of language.

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2. Results and Discussion

This design resulted in two symmetrical portrait-style digital images, with a symbolic visual approach and a dark atmosphere. The visual elements in the works reflect human psychological states and emotions through form and metaphor. The dark art style employed creates a strong and reflective visual impression. These works are flexible and applicable, suitable for posters, album covers, merchandise, and other dark-themed visual media. Overall, these digital images convey psychological expressions relevant to the context of today's digital art.

2.1 Work 1



Figure 1: Work 1
Source: Author

Artwork Specifications

Title:	Guardian of the Gates of Darkness
Media	: Digital Printing on Paper
Technique	: Digital Drawing (Bitmap)
Size	: 85 cm x 85 cm
Year	: 2025

This artwork depicts a large owl with rich, dark bluish plumage and piercing red eyes, perched firmly on a weathered wooden beam amidst the remains of a ruined structure from the past. The surrounding area is shrouded in cracked Gothic architectural details, ominous blood-red brick walls, and diagonally shuttered wooden windows, as if warning that no more light will penetrate. Scattered human skulls and bones lie on the ground, alongside a small crow silently observing the silence to the left. In the upper left corner, a spider's web hangs as a poignant reminder of a space abandoned by time. The visual setting evokes a dramatic atmosphere: the owl-like protagonist on an unearthly stage, surrounded by the remains of a silent story. The deep red background blends terror with deep emotional resonance. The work depicts the contrast between life and death, inviting the viewer to contemplate presence and loss in a space seemingly alienated from time.

2.1.1 Formal Analysis

In "Penunggang Gerbang Gelap," principles of art such as harmony, contrast, balance, proportion, and rhythm are used to construct a powerful and dark visual atmosphere. Deep red, dark blue, and cream are combined in a balanced way to create a harmonious and expressive look. Elements such as old buildings, bones, and cobwebs are combined with subtle shading to create a unified texture. Color contrast is used to highlight details, such as the owl's eyes, which glow brightly against the dark background. The bright colors of the skull and crow emphasize focus and visual dynamics. The difference in size between the owl and the other objects creates an interesting visual hierarchy. The composition is dynamic by placing the large owl in the upper right as the center of attention, while elements in the lower left, such as the skull and crow, serve to balance the display. Architectural objects such as the broken window and cobwebs help direct the viewer's gaze through the visual flow from top to bottom. The scale in this work is constructed with a symbolic approach: the owl is made very large compared to the other objects to emphasize its presence. The other objects are arranged proportionally to maintain a sense of depth. Rhythm emerges from the repetition of shapes and shading, such as the pattern of the bird's feathers, the arrangement of bones, and the texture of the brick, which create a rhythmic flow of vision.

Overall, the visual principles in this work are used effectively to create an intense atmosphere and reinforce the message it wants to convey through the dark art style.

2.1.2 Meaning

This work is more than just a visual representation of a giant owl and a gloomy environment. It symbolizes ancient fear, eternal silence, and unseen dark forces that have long inhabited the empty spaces of the human imagination. The owl, considered in many cultures to be a harbinger of death or a supernatural omen, is transformed in this work into an imaginative animal with a supernatural aura. Its glowing red eyes are a metaphor for a vision that transcends the physical world; it seems as if it can see sins, fears, and even memories of the past that have decayed among the ruins of the buildings around it. The surrounding old buildings, skulls, cobwebs, and ruined land represent a world abandoned, forgotten, or perhaps cursed.

Every element in this image holds fragments of a story of death, destruction, and the decay of time. Yet beneath it all, there is an eerie stillness that allows the viewer to reflect on mortality, emptiness, and the dark side of oneself. The scattered crows and skulls add a symbolic layer of death and memory, representing the crow as a messenger of the end, and the skull as a remnant of what once was. Its presence is not merely ornamental, but part of a system of interconnected symbols.

With its dark art style, this work provokes the viewer to not only look but also feel the dark and deep psychological atmosphere. It takes us into a space often avoided: a silent space, a dead space, an unseen space. And it is in this space that this animal resides, as the gatekeeper between reality and the supernatural. "Gatekeeper Darkness" is a reflection of the human inner conflict between wanting to forget and being forced to remember, between tranquility and darkness, between life and death. It is a visual poem about a world that is shattered yet still holds power, represented by the gaze of a night bird that never sleeps.

2.2 Work 2



Figure 2: Work 2
Source: Author

Artwork Specifications

Title	: Guardian of Memories
Media	: Digital Printing on Paper
Technique	: Digital Drawing (Bitmap)
Size	: 85 cm x 85 cm
Year	: 2025

2.2.1 Description of the work

This artwork features an intricately detailed black bird perched majestically atop a spiral-shaped skull, surrounded by a series of other animal skulls, skeletons, piles of wood, and living plants thriving amidst the debris. The dark red gradient in the background creates a very gloomy atmosphere, while fluttering sheets of paper enhance the mysterious atmosphere. The bird has striking, glowing red eyes and a beak that mirrors the skull, reinforcing the impression of a haunting, imaginative entity. This composition is masterfully crafted in the dark art style, interweaving symbolic, grotesque, and surreal elements to create a captivating yet poetic effect.

2.2.2 Formal Analysis

In the work "Penunggu Kenangan," the principles of fine art are utilized to create a gloomy yet serene atmosphere. Colors such as dark brown, maroon, pale blue, jet black, and olive green are chosen to create a sense of melancholy. Elements such as the bird, skull, paper, and wood are harmoniously arranged in a complementary color scheme. Color contrast is utilized to highlight important features. The brick-red skull stands out against the dark background, while the white paper becomes the center of attention because it stands out against the gloomy colors. This combination creates a dramatic yet emotionally profound impression. The objects are sized to draw the viewer's attention to the bird as the center of the story. Other objects such as the skull and paper support the flow of the viewer's gaze sequentially. The asymmetrical composition creates a dynamic feel in the image, where the dense left side is balanced by elements on the right. The proportions in this work are symbolic. The distortion of the bird and skull's shapes is not realistic, but rather emphasizes psychological and emotional meanings such as

trauma or lingering memories. Visual rhythm is created by the repetition of the woodcut shapes and the direction in which the paper floats, creating a gentle movement that leads the eye through the image. This rhythm reinforces the calm yet emotionally charged visual narrative. Overall, this work not only presents a dark, imaginative image, but also invites the audience to reflect on memories and unresolved emotional wounds.

2.2.3 Meaning

This work profoundly embodies the complex and often harrowing emotional experiences associated with trauma and the profound sense of inner devastation that is uniquely characteristic of the human condition, utilizing a rich tapestry of visual metaphors that prominently feature imaginative representations of animals alongside depictions of irreparably damaged landscapes. The birds depicted in this work, their heads resembling human skulls, serve as powerful symbols representing "keepers of memory," or can be interpreted as significant symbolic entities that encapsulate the unforgettable trauma that persists in our consciousness. The spiraling skulls present in the imagery can be interpreted as a manifestation of the cyclical nature of trauma, suggesting that these painful experiences continually resurface in a continuous loop, while the animal skulls and skeletal remains depicted vividly represent the haunting remnants of the past that have become indelibly etched into the fabric of human memory. The plants that emerge resiliently from the rubble and destruction symbolize a profound sense of hope and the potential for recovery, conveying the powerful message that even after devastating inner devastation, the essence of life has the remarkable ability to re-emerge and flourish once again. The flying sheets of paper scattered throughout the work poignantly symbolize memories or stories that have been fragmented and dissociated from their original unity, representing pieces of a personal narrative that, though no longer intact, continue to possess a certain vitality and presence in the individual's psyche.

Overall, this artistic endeavor serves as a profound symbolic expression of a post-traumatic psychological state, painting a picture of a world that is undeniably bleak, filled with the shadows of unpleasant past experiences, yet simultaneously brimming with potential for growth and profound reflection. Furthermore, the work also acts as a critical commentary on the broader environmental context, shedding light on the often-overlooked emotional and psychological suffering experienced by individuals, often overlooked in social discourse.

3. Conclusion

This dark art-style digital artwork effectively represents the traumatic experience of losing a father, an event that left deep emotional scars and shaped the author's perspective on absence, emptiness, and fear. This personal experience is reinforced by the stories of others experiencing similar inner turmoil, making this work a collective expression that gives voice to a profound grief that is difficult to express directly.

Using a surrealistic symbolic and visual approach, imaginative creatures are presented as representations of various psychological aspects, such as anxiety, isolation, and hidden emotional wounds. Visual elements such as glowing eyes, skeletal forms, archaic structures, and desolate landscapes are consciously used to create an atmosphere of a dark, silent, and neglected inner world. The creative process encompassed pre-production (concept and symbol development), production (drawing using an iPad, Apple Pencil, and the Procreate app), and post-production (visual refinement and printing on 85 cm x 85 cm luster paper).

The first work features a large owl with glowing red eyes standing amidst ruins, creating a symbolic contrast between presence and loss. The red background heightens the emotional tension, creating a contemplative space that touches on the meaning of human existence. The second work features a skull-headed bird, a damaged landscape, a spiral of skulls, and plants growing from the rubble, symbolism that illustrates trauma as a recurring cycle of suffering, yet still holds the potential for hope and healing.

Through these two works, trauma is presented not simply as an emotional wound, but as part of a complex and layered human journey. Both open up a space for reflection on often-overlooked psychological suffering, while emphasizing the importance of empathy and collective awareness of mental health issues. Thus, these works serve not only as a form of personal visual expression but also as a contemplative medium, inviting viewers to understand

the complexity of trauma and the value of emotional healing in everyday life.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author state that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article

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