

THE CRISIS OF EMPATHY IN MODERNITY THROUGH SURREALIST PAINTING

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Abstract. This art project is grounded in the phenomenon of declining empathy in modern society, characterized by individualism, social pressure, and cultural shifts driven by technological advancement and globalization. These conditions give rise to emotional alienation and the erosion of humanistic values. To conceptualize this issue, the project draws on theoretical frameworks related to empathy, modernity, and art aesthetics. A surrealist approach is employed in the creation of the artworks. The creative process utilizes tools such as an iPad, charcoal, brushes, and a palette, with materials including canvas, oil paint, brown acrylic paint, linseed oil, and turpentine. The applied technique is the impasto/opaque (plakat) technique using oil paint on canvas. The stages of creation consist of idea exploration, sketch development, visual elaboration, and final completion. The project results in six surrealist paintings that visualize a critique of the empathy crisis through the symbolism of the body, animals, and distorted objects. In conclusion, the project demonstrates that surrealism is an effective medium for philosophical and social reflection, as it is capable of revealing hidden meanings beneath modern reality. The resulting artworks are expected to encourage audiences to re-evaluate empathy as a fundamental value of human life.

Keywords: Empathy, Modernity, Surrealism

1. Introduction

The development of modernity, marked by technological advancement, globalization, and the rationalization of social life, has brought profound changes to the ways humans interact, construct identity, and interpret their own existence. Modernity is often understood as a phase of civilizational progress that promises efficiency, convenience, and an improved quality of life. However, behind this narrative of progress lie various humanitarian issues that instead indicate a decline in the ethical and emotional dimensions of human life, one of which is the weakening of empathy in social relations (Gulin, 2020).

Empathy is a fundamental human capacity to understand and share the emotional conditions of others, playing a crucial role in fostering meaningful and just social relationships (Davis, 2018). Within the context of modern society, empathy has increasingly eroded due to individualistic lifestyles, intense competition, and transactional social relations. This condition is described as liquid modernity, a social state characterized by fluidity, instability, and uncertainty, in which human bonds become fragile and superficial. As a result, modern individuals tend to experience emotional alienation despite being increasingly connected through technology (Bauman, 2012).

Various studies indicate that the development of digital technology and social media also contributes to the crisis of empathy. Screen-mediated interactions often diminish emotional presence and relational depth, while encouraging individuals to prioritize self-image over concern for others (Islamiy et al., 2018). Moreover, modernity has generated

forms of exploitation, dehumanization, and bodily commodification, in which humans are no longer perceived as whole subjects but as visual, economic, or symbolic objects. These phenomena affirm that the crisis of empathy is not merely an issue of individual morality, but a structural problem embedded within the logic of modernity itself (Dover, 2019).

In the context of art, the crisis of empathy in modernity is a relevant issue to be explored visually and symbolically. Painting, in particular, has the capacity to present critical reflections on social reality through a visual language that cannot always be articulated verbally. One approach that holds significant power in revealing inner conflicts and the paradoxes of modern life is surrealism. Surrealism positions dreams, the subconscious, and irrationality as sources of creation, while simultaneously functioning as a form of resistance against the dominance of modern rationality (Marianto et al., 2024).

Several studies and art critiques indicate that surrealism is effective as a medium for social criticism because it presents distorted realities rich in symbolic meaning. Through the juxtaposition of illogical objects, bodily distortion, and absurd atmospheres, surrealism enables artists to reveal the inner tensions of modern individuals, including alienation, anxiety, and the erosion of empathy. Nevertheless, studies that specifically address the crisis of empathy in modernity through the practice of surrealist painting remain relatively limited, particularly within the context of artistic creation as a form of artistic research (Nema, 2017).

Based on this background, this art project aims to visualize the crisis of empathy in modernity through the creation of surrealist paintings. The crisis of empathy is understood as a condition of emotional alienation arising from the characteristics of modern humans who live amid rapid change, uncertainty, and fragile social relations. Empathy, as an affective and cognitive ability to understand others, tends to weaken within the context of liquid modernity due to individualistic and defensive attitudes. Surrealism is chosen as the visual approach because of its capacity to reveal inner realities through symbolism, formal distortion, and metaphors rooted in the subconscious. The artworks are created using a surrealist approach with oil paint on canvas, resulting in works that are expected to function as a medium of critical reflection on the erosion of empathetic values in modern human life.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Eksploitasi



Figure 1.1: Eksploitasi

Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.1.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Eksploitasi
Media : Oil on Canvas
Size : 85 cm x 150 cm
Year : 2025

2.1.2 Artwork Description

This painting depicts a human figure lying supine with the abdomen and chest opened, exposing the internal organs, while a greenish fish-headed figure stands atop the body holding a knife and intestines, as if performing an act of cutting. Above this scene hangs a suspended line of meat cuts and bodily organs, with a red fruit placed near the mouth of the reclining figure, reinforcing the symbolic and surreal impression. The background features a golden-brown sky with soft clouds and dark mountain silhouettes, creating a calm contrast to the brutal scene, while gentle lighting and smooth color gradations in the background oppose the rough textures of flesh and fabric, emphasizing a visual tension between beauty and violence.

2.1.3 Formal Analysis

The artwork "Exploitation" intensively employs visual elements to construct a surreal and symbolic atmosphere through a combination of realistic forms and imaginative distortion. Soft yet firm lines define the anatomy of the human body and the fish-headed figure, while the dominance of red, brown, and cream tones creates a dramatic atmosphere that represents violence and suffering. The smooth texture produced by layered oil painting techniques (glazing) enhances the sense of realism in the skin, flesh, and fabric, reinforced by the interplay of light and shadow in the sky background, which creates spatial depth while directing attention to the central figures.

In terms of design principles, the work applies asymmetrical balance through a tense horizontal composition, positioning the human body as the focal point and the fish-headed figure as the dominant element. Visual rhythm emerges through the repetition of meat forms and red hues, while unity is achieved through warm color gradations and consistent brushwork. Emphasis is placed on the relationship between the fish-headed figure and the distorted human body, underscoring themes of power imbalance, exploitation, and the crisis of empathy in modern human life.

2.1.4 Message analysis

This artwork highlights the crisis of empathy in modern society through symbols of bodily exploitation, where the human body is treated as a commodity, represented by the exposed human figure, severed organs, and the fish-headed figure as a metaphor for a system devoid of conscience. The contrast between the violent imagery and the calm dusk-like background emphasizes how exploitation often occurs subtly and is normalized, while simultaneously inviting viewers to reflect on the erosion of human values in a world dominated by capital and consumption.

2.2 Yang Seharusnya Tidak Dilihat



Figure 1.2: Yang Seharusnya Tidak Dilihat
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.2.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Yang Seharusnya Tidak Dilihat
 Media : Oil on Canvas
 Size : 100 cm x 120 cm
 Year : 2025

2.2.2 Artwork Description

This painting depicts a large human head lying on green ground with a calm expression. On top of the head rests a dark red piece of flesh resembling a layer of fat, while pinkish organs encircle the lower part of the head. A yellowish-brown snail emerges from the folds of these organs and clings to the head, creating a surreal and symbolic impression. The background features bluish-green mountains, a softly clouded sky, and a stretch of green grass rendered with smooth gradations, contrasting with the denser textures of the flesh and the animal's body. The symmetrical composition reinforces the human head as the central focal point of the work.

2.2.3 Formal Analysis

This work explores surreal forms through the fusion of a human head with an insect-like body, creating a disturbing yet symbolic sense of metamorphosis. The human face is rendered realistically and anatomically, then combined with absurd non-human elements to emphasize a transformation of identity. The use of a limited color palette pinkish red, brown, and greenish tones constructs an ambiguous atmosphere between life and death, while the smooth texture of layered oil paint, organic curved lines, and the application of light and shadow enhance the sense of volume, spatial depth, and the isolation of the figure within a symbolic landscape.

In terms of design principles, the work applies asymmetrical balance, with emphasis placed on the point of contact between the human head and the insect body as the visual and conceptual focal point. Rhythm is created through the circular flow of the insect's form and the coiling flesh, while unity is achieved through color harmony and consistent texture. The contrast between human skin and the insect exoskeleton, along with the enlarged head proportions, intensifies the tension between human and animal, reflecting an existential anxiety surrounding identity transformation and the boundaries of humanity.

2.2.4 Message Analysis

This work presents a surreal exploration of identity metamorphosis through the fusion of a human head with an insect body, combining realistic anatomy with absurd elements. A limited color palette of red, brown, and greenish tones creates an ambiguous and oppressive atmosphere, supported by smooth textures, organic lines, and the use of light and shadow that generate depth and a sense of isolation. Asymmetrical balance, rhythmic circular forms, contrasts between human and insect materiality, and distorted proportions position the point of intersection between the two figures as the center of meaning, reflecting existential anxiety and the erosion of the boundaries of humanity.

2.3 Pencurian Identitas



Figure 1.3: Pencurian Identitas
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.3.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Pencurian Identitas
 Media : Oil on Canvas
 Size : 100 cm x 120 cm
 Year : 2025

2.3.2 Artwork Description

This painting depicts a surreal scene of a clothed dog leaping while biting a piece of meat, with exposed organs trailing from its body, confronting a shocked human figure who reaches out toward it. The contrast between the smooth texture of the fur, the dense colors of the organs, and soft lighting from the upper right emphasizes motion and visual tension, while the background of trees, dark mountains, and a gray sky frames the human–animal relationship in a dramatic atmosphere that feels both warm and unsettling.

2.3.3 Formal Analysis

The artwork employs the natural coloration of the Javan banteng through a monochromatic color scheme, using a single dominant hue to enhance realism by varying levels of brightness in accordance with the artist's intent. The evening sky background features analogous colors closely related hues such as dark red, brown, orange, and cream. Environmental elements, including mountains and grasslands, are rendered in monochromatic brown tones with differing brightness intensities. The mountains are depicted in brown with subtle orange gradations, while the arid grassland features brown tones with white gradations. To intensify the dramatic impression of death, dominant orange tones are applied for highlights and shadow effects. Dark tones and shadows are produced through highly contrasting lighting, allowing the primary subjects to emerge as the focal point of the composition. This painting combines realism and surrealism in a dynamic scene between a human and a dog, using diagonal lines and bodily forms to create a sense of movement, tension, and momentum. The symbolic distortion of the dog's body fused with human organs introduces an element of absurdity that reinforces the theme of the human–animal relationship. The dominance of pinkish red, brown, and green tones establishes a dramatic atmosphere, while the smooth texture of layered oil paint and the use of light and shadow direct focus toward the point of conflict between the dog's mouth and the floating piece of flesh.

In terms of design principles, the work applies asymmetrical balance and visual rhythm through repeated spiral forms and dynamic diagonal movement. Emphasis is placed on the interaction between the human and the dog as the core symbolic conflict, supported by the unity of a warm color palette and consistent brushwork. The distortion of proportions,

positioning the human figure smaller than the animal, underscores a shift in power relations, making the painting a reflection on destructive human instincts and uncontrolled violence.

2.3.4 Message analysis

This work represents the crisis of empathy and the loss of identity in modern humanity under the pressure of life and material demands, depicted through a screaming human figure desperately reaching for a fragmented sense of self. The animal carrying a piece of flesh symbolizes human values that have been "stolen" by necessity and ambition, while the dominance of red intensifies the emotional tension in contrast to the calm green mountainous background. Through the fusion of realistic and surreal visual elements, the painting reflects emotional exhaustion and subtle dehumanization, while inviting viewers to reconsider the extent to which empathy, morality, and selfhood have been eroded in the fast-paced conditions of modern life.

2.4 Kambing Hitam



Figure 1.4: Kambing Hitam

Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.4.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Kambing Hitam
Media : Oil on Canvas
Size : 100 cm x 120 cm
Year : 2025

2.4.2 Artwork Description

This painting presents a surreal portrait of a young man wearing a black-and-white striped shirt, facing forward, with a large metal hook piercing his cheek and two dark red hooks curving upward from below toward his face and bodily organs. The muted hilly landscape in the background and the presence of a rat standing among the grass create a symbolic atmosphere, while warm lighting and smooth paint textures with gentle color gradations enhance a sense of calm that sharply contrasts with the visual violence inflicted upon the central figure.

2.4.3 Formal Analysis

The painting "Scapegoat" depicts a human figure who passively accepts self-sacrifice as a symbol of atonement, rendered with realistic anatomy yet accompanied by distortions in the position of the head and hands that emphasize moral burden. Curved lines, the dominance of red–orange–cream tones, and the smooth texture of the skin contrasted with the roughness of exposed flesh create a tragic and sacred atmosphere. The interplay of light and shadow centers attention on the body as the locus of suffering, while the subdued background evokes a deep introspective mood.

In terms of design principles, the work applies a calm asymmetrical balance with emphasis placed on the head and hands as the core of symbolic action. Rhythm emerges through the repetition of curved forms and fabric folds, while unity is maintained through the consistent use of warm colors and textures. The contrasts between light and shadow, softness and roughness, as well as violence and serenity, reinforce the paradox of suffering accepted willingly, positioning the human figure as a "scapegoat" who bears collective guilt amid a crisis of empathy.

2.4.4 Message analysis

This work represents the figure of the "scapegoat" as a symbol of individuals who willingly or forcibly bear the faults of others in order to protect the interests of those in power. The human figure ensnared by metal hooks signifies control, manipulation, and the loss of personal freedom. The hanging flesh symbolizes sacrifice, while the rat in the background reflects opportunistic actors who remain hidden within the system. The contrast between the somber presence of the main figure and the tranquil mountainous landscape underscores the irony of injustice concealed beneath an appearance of calm, offering a critique of the erosion of empathy, courage, and truthful voices in modern society.

2.5 Beban Yang Menggerus



Figure 1.5: Beban Yang Menggerus
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.5.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Beban Yang Menggerus
Media : Oil on Canvas
Size : 100 cm x 120 cm
Year : 2025

2.5.2 Artwork Description

This painting presents a surreal scene featuring a large snail entwined with purplish red intestines set against a landscape of green mountains and a bluish gray sky, positioned alongside a red wheelbarrow containing the face of a young man gazing straight ahead. Elements of stone, grass, and dominant earth tones, combined with soft lighting, create a

balanced composition between human, animal, and nature, evoking a calm atmosphere that nonetheless carries underlying symbolic tension.

2.5.3 Formal Analysis

This painting presents a symbolic relationship between a human head placed inside a wheelbarrow and a large snail set within a tranquil landscape, where the spiral form of the snail contrasts with the passive expression of the human figure. Curved lines in the snail's body and a warm color palette dominated by browns, creams, and earthy greens create an atmosphere that is both serene and ironic, reinforced by smooth textures and soft light gradations that evoke a melancholic mood and draw focus to the interaction between the two figures.

In terms of design principles, the work applies a gentle asymmetrical balance, with emphasis placed on the human snail relationship as the core symbolic meaning. Visual rhythm emerges from the curved and spiral forms of the snail, while unity is achieved through consistent colors and textures. Distorted proportions and the contrast between the rigid wheelbarrow and the slow-moving snail generate a surreal quality, reflecting themes of burden, dependence, and human patience in confronting the rhythms of modern life.

2.5.4 Message Analysis

This work reflects the struggle of modern humans trapped under the pressures of life through the symbol of a snail pushing a wheelbarrow containing a living human head, representing consciousness that continues to endure even as the body and energy are depleted. Conceptually, the wheelbarrow functions as a metaphor for existential burden, while the relationship between the snail and the human head highlights the loss of balance between spiritual and material needs in a life centered on productivity and the demands of the modern age.

2.6 Hidangan Sosial



Figure 1.6: Hidangan Sosial
Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

2.6.1 Artwork Specifications

Title : Hidangan Sosial
 Media : Oil on Canvas
 Size : 100 cm x 120 cm
 Year : 2025

2.6.2 Artwork Description

This painting depicts two figures seated side by side at a wooden table: a man wearing yellow glasses, a white shirt, and a red tie, alongside a humanoid figure with the head of a gray cat and green eyes. On the table in front of each figure are chopping boards holding raw meat, accompanied by a small glass and an ashtray. The greenish gray background with dark leafy patterns and soft lighting accentuates the textures of fabric, skin, and flesh, creating a calm yet uncanny surreal atmosphere.

2.6.3 Formal Analysis

This painting presents two figures seated side by side a neatly dressed man and a large cat within an uncanny formal setting that juxtaposes politeness and absurdity. The rigid, proportional human body contrasts with the oversized, sharp cat's head, reinforced by the combination of firm lines in the suit and table with softer lines in the cat's fur. The dominance of dark red, brown, and gray tones creates an elegant yet cold atmosphere, while the red cuts of meat on the table function as a point of symbolic contrast. Focused lighting on the faces and table, along with the smooth texture of oil paint, emphasizes the underlying tension.

In terms of design principles, a loose symmetrical composition establishes a sense of stability that is disrupted by the exaggerated proportions of the cat, directing emphasis to the center of the table as a symbol of power relations, consumption, and morality. Rhythm emerges through the repetition of clothing folds, fur textures, and meat forms, while unity is achieved through a consistent dark palette and cohesive textures. The contrast between human rationality and animal instinct strengthens the surreal quality and conveys a critique of the fading of empathy and humanity beneath the façade of modern civility.

2.6.4 Message Analysis

This painting satirizes the behavior of modern humans who are willing to sacrifice dignity and integrity in pursuit of power and recognition, represented by the cat headed figure as a subordinate submitting to the bespectacled human figure as a symbol of authority. The meat placed on the table signifies the self worth that is willingly offered or relinquished, while the calm and formal atmosphere creates an irony that conceals underlying moral unease. Through imbalanced power relations and surreal symbolism, the work invites viewers to reflect on the erosion of empathy, humanity, and sincerity within modern social systems driven by ambition, hierarchy, and opportunistic attitudes.

3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the crisis of empathy in modernity can be effectively represented through the creation of surrealist paintings. Through visual symbolism, bodily distortion, and the juxtaposition of absurd elements, the resulting works reflect conditions of emotional alienation, dehumanization, and psychological pressure experienced by modern humans. The crisis of empathy is revealed not merely as an individual moral issue, but as a structural consequence of modernity characterized by instrumental rationality, individualism, and transactional social relations.

The surrealist approach enables the exploration of empathy-related issues in a non-literal manner, employing visual metaphors rooted in the subconscious. Distortions of the human body and the loss of figurative identity function as symbols of the declining human values within modern social systems. These findings affirm that painting serves not only as a medium of aesthetic expression, but also as a vehicle for social critique and philosophical reflection on contemporary human conditions.

Theoretically, this research reinforces critical perspectives that link the crisis of empathy to practices of dehumanization and social instability within modernity, as articulated by Bauman, Foucault, and other critical thinkers. Practically, this study contributes to the development of

contemporary art practices by positioning artistic creation as a form of artistic research with academic value.

Therefore, this research is expected to open a space for audience awareness to re-reflect on empathy as a fundamental value in human life, while also expanding the discourse of fine art as a medium of social critique in response to the conditions of modern society.

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