

THE PARADOX OF EMOTION AS A THEME FOR CREATING SURREALIST PAINTINGS

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Abstract. Emotional paradox describes the experience of conflicting emotions that occur simultaneously within an individual. This phenomenon appears when people express emotions that differ from their actual feelings in social interactions, creating a gap between external expressions and internal experiences. This project explores emotional paradox through painting to increase awareness of emotional honesty, reflection, and empathy. The project applies a practice-based research method in which artistic creation becomes the main process of knowledge development. The creation process includes four stages: exploration, design, realization, and finishing. The exploration stage involves observation and visual reference collection, while the design stage develops visual concepts through sketches. The realization stage applies painting techniques including blocking, layering, blending, splattering, sponge, and impasto, followed by detailing and varnishing in the finishing stage. The project produces four paintings entitled *Traitor*, *Fragile Freedom*, *Ruang yang Terbagi* (Divided Space), and *Unbalanced*. These artworks use surrealistic visual elements to represent emotional paradox and encourage reflection on emotional experiences.

Keywords: Emotions, Paradox of Emotions, Painting, Surrealism

1. Introduction

Emotions are a fundamental aspect of human life that play a role in shaping how individuals understand themselves, others, and their environment (Santrock, 2011). Emotions are not merely simple responses to events; they also involve complex psychological processes, including subjective experiences, physiological reactions, and behavioral tendencies. In everyday life, emotions influence the way individuals think, make decisions, and interact socially.

However, human emotional experiences are not always singular and linear. In various situations, individuals may experience more than one emotion simultaneously, even conflicting ones. This condition is known as the emotional paradox, which is a state in which a person feels opposing emotions at the same time, such as love and disappointment, longing and anger, or a sense of safety and fear. This phenomenon demonstrates that human emotional experiences are complex, ambivalent, and not always rationally explainable.

In the context of social life, emotional paradoxes are often reinforced by environmental demands that require individuals to display certain expressions. Individuals tend to adjust their emotional expressions to remain socially acceptable, leading to a tendency to hide the emotions they actually feel. This situation makes emotions not only an internal experience but also part of a social construct involving self-image and interactions with others.

Based on this understanding, the author observes that the paradox of emotions is not merely a theoretical phenomenon, but a tangible reality in social life. Many individuals appear strong, cheerful, and perfectly fine without any apparent problems, yet in reality they harbor unspoken sadness, disappointment, or 13 anger. However, the

choice of this topic is not solely based on observations of this social phenomenon. The author has also personally experienced the dynamics of the emotional paradox in his personal life, particularly in the context of family relationships and his immediate social circle.

The experience of losing mother marked a turning point of profound emotional change for the author. That loss not only brought grief, but also gave rise to a sense that her father's love and attention had diminished. When such a figure is lost or the relationship changes, an individual may experience emotional instability and a sense of losing one's way. The author felt a deep sense of loneliness, confusion, and uncertainty in navigating life after that loss.

The home, which is symbolically understood as a safe and comfortable space, a refuge from the pressures of the outside world, sometimes actually evokes a sense of emptiness and fear for the author. This is where the emotional paradox becomes palpable: love for the family remains, the bonds remain strong, yet at the same time a sense of alienation, silence, and not being entirely safe emerges.

In addition to loss within the family, the author also once had someone who was initially a stranger but later became a figure who meant a great deal in her emotional life. That person was consistently present, providing the support, encouragement, and sense of being heard that the author had long needed. That presence fostered a belief that not everyone would leave. However, reality shattered that belief once again; the person who had been considered one of the most precious in the author's life eventually left him suddenly. This event deepened the emotional wounds that already existed and intensified the ambivalence between the hope of being held on to and the reality of being left behind.

This experience fostered an awareness that the paradox of emotions is a complex and profound existential experience. This theme was chosen because it holds both personal and social relevance, and offers strong potential for visual exploration in painting. Many individuals experience a similar condition, hiding their true feelings behind seemingly normal expressions. This makes the emotional paradox an important phenomenon to address, not only as a personal experience but also as a reflection of the human condition in today's world.

Given these challenges, painting was chosen as the medium for this research project because the author feels that painting is the most honest and most direct way to convey what is difficult to express in words. Not all emotions can be explained verbally. There are feelings that are too complex, too deep, and even too painful to simply put into words. In such circumstances, visual language becomes an alternative space for expression.

This project applies a practice based research approach, in which the process of artistic creation becomes the main method for generating knowledge through artistic exploration, reflection, and evaluation. The painting creation process was conducted at the author's residence in Semarang, Indonesia, over approximately four months from April to July 2026. The process consisted of four stages: exploration, design, realization, and finishing. The exploration stage involved observing artworks, collecting visual references, and reflecting on personal experiences related to emotional paradox. The design stage focused on developing visual concepts through sketches as a guide for the creation process. The realization stage involved preparing materials, transferring sketches onto canvas, applying acrylic paint, and developing visual elements through techniques such as blocking, opaque painting, layering, blending, splattering, sponge application, and impasto. The final stage involved detailing and applying varnish to protect the completed artworks. The project utilized canvas and acrylic paint as the primary media,

with visual strategies including symbols, distorted forms, colors, and compositions to represent the complexity of emotional paradox through a surrealistic approach.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 The first artwork: Traitor

The first artwork entitled "Traitor" was created in 2026 using acrylic paint on canvas with dimensions of 80 cm × 100 cm. The artwork is presented in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The First Artwork: Traitor
Source: Personal Documentation, 2026

The painting entitled "Traitor" presents a composition centered on a large human hand with an open palm facing upward. Standing on the palm is a female figure wearing a white dress. The head of the female figure is covered by a brown paper bag displaying a simple smiling face consisting of two dots as eyes and a curved line as a mouth.

Surrounding the female figure are four weapons directed toward her body, consisting of two swords and two pistols. One sword is positioned on the upper left side with its tip pointing toward the female figure's body, while the other sword is located on the lower right side in a diagonal position directed toward the figure's heart. A semi-automatic pistol is positioned on the upper right side pointing toward the figure's head, while a revolver is placed on the lower left side with its barrel directed toward the figure's feet.

The background of the painting is dominated by black tones with dark red brushstrokes arranged in an abstract and irregular manner. The red strokes are distributed across several areas of the picture plane, creating visual texture within the background. The main object is positioned at the center of the picture plane, making it the focal point of the composition. The color contrast between the white dress, the human hand, the dark gray weapons, and the dark background makes each object appear clear and easily recognizable.

2.1.1 Form Analysis

The artwork *Traitor* applies a surrealistic visual approach by presenting objects that are realistic in appearance but arranged in unusual relationships to create a certain psychological atmosphere. The composition is centered on a female figure standing on a large human palm. Visually, the hand is associated with actions of protecting, supporting, or holding something considered valuable. The placement of the female figure on the palm illustrates the relationship between an object being supported and something that provides protection.

The female figure is depicted wearing a white dress that visually conveys a sense of

softness, purity, and calmness. The white color creates a contrast against the surrounding dark tones, making the female figure the main focal point. The head covered by a paper bag displaying a smiling face creates an ambiguous impression. The simple smile conceals the figure's actual face, suggesting the presence of hidden emotions or an identity that is not revealed to others. The four weapons directed toward the female figure's body create diagonal lines that generate visual tension. The direction of all weapons focusing on a single object creates the impression that the female figure is in a threatening situation. As a sharp weapon, the sword can be associated with wounds, pain, or direct attacks, while the pistol creates an impression of sudden and deadly threats. The presence of both types of weapons simultaneously strengthens the atmosphere of danger surrounding the main figure.

The background is dominated by black tones combined with abstract red brushstrokes. The color black creates a sense of darkness, silence, and uncertainty, while the irregular red strokes can be associated with blood, wounds, anger, fear, or emotional turmoil. The expressive brushstrokes without a specific pattern strengthen the chaotic atmosphere and psychological pressure.

Overall, the use of centralized composition, distorted scale, color contrast, diagonal lines formed by the direction of the weapons, and the abstract background construct a visual atmosphere filled with tension. These elements support each other in presenting an indication of emotional conflict, threat, and insecurity experienced by the main figure.

2.1.2 Interpretation of Artwork Meaning

The artwork "Traitor" is a visualization of emotional paradox that emerges when a sense of security and trust transforms into pain caused by betrayal. The title "Traitor", which means "pengkhianat" or "betrayer," was chosen to represent the emotional experience when someone who is trusted becomes the source of pain.

The human palm supporting the female figure is interpreted as a symbol of protection, a place of dependence, and a representation of a person or relationship that initially provides a sense of security. Standing on the palm indicates the presence of complete trust toward the party providing support. However, the presence of swords and pistols directed toward the female figure reveals the paradox that behind this sense of security, there is an unnoticed threat.

The female figure wearing a white dress symbolizes sincerity and the trust given to others. Meanwhile, the paper bag displaying a smiling face represents the effort to appear fine in front of others, even though the figure is actually experiencing inner pain. The smile shown is not a genuine expression of happiness, but rather a mask used to conceal disappointment and emotional hurt.

The swords and pistols are not intended as physical threats but as symbols of various forms of betrayal that wound emotions. These betrayals can occur through words, actions, or changes in attitude from someone who was previously trusted. The threats coming from different directions illustrate that the pain caused by betrayal can be continuously experienced and affect an individual's psychological condition.

The black background combined with red brushstrokes represents the inner conflict that emerges after trust has been destroyed. The color black symbolizes sadness, emptiness, and loneliness, while red represents emotional wounds, anger, and lingering pain. These two colors strengthen the psychological atmosphere intended to be presented in the artwork.

Through this artwork, the author aims to convey that emotional paradox can occur when individuals experience two opposing emotions simultaneously, namely trust and hurt. A person may continue to endure, smile, and even feel that they remain in a place considered safe, while at the same time experiencing betrayal from someone they have trusted. This concept becomes the core of Traitor, which depicts an inner conflict when a sense of security transforms into a source of emotional pain.

2.2 The second artwork: Fragile Freedom

The second artwork, entitled "Fragile Freedom", was created in 2026 using acrylic paint on canvas with dimensions of 80 cm × 100 cm. The artwork is presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Second Artwork: Fragile Freedom
Source: Personal Documentation, 2026

The painting entitled "Fragile Freedom" presents a female figure as the main object positioned at the center of the picture plane. The figure wears a white dress and is depicted in a floating body position with both arms extended sideways and the head slightly tilted upward. Both legs appear to be hanging without being supported by any surface.

The head of the female figure is covered by a brown paper bag displaying a simple smiling face consisting of two dots as eyes and a curved line as a mouth. On the figure's back, there is a pair of grayish-white wings. The condition of the wings appears incomplete, with several torn and perforated sections, as well as wing tips that appear broken.

Surrounding the female figure are several butterflies with various sizes and colors, including red, orange, bluish-white, pink, purple, yellow, and blue. The butterflies are distributed across different areas of the picture plane, surrounding the main object. The background of the painting is dominated by a green color gradient with vertical brushstrokes. The combination of dark green, light green, yellow, and a small amount of blue creates a simple background that makes the main object appear more prominent.

2.2.1 Form Analysis

The artwork "Fragile Freedom" applies a surrealistic approach by combining a human figure and wings to create a form that does not exist in real life. The combination of these objects represents a visual characteristic of surrealism that is used to construct meaning through symbolic elements.

The composition of the artwork applies an asymmetrical balance with the female figure as the center of interest. The floating body position, open arms, and slightly tilted body form diagonal lines that create a sense of lightness and appear as if the figure is moving upward. This arrangement creates an impression of an attempt to fly or achieve a certain goal.

The wings are the most dominant visual element after the female figure. In general, wings are associated with the ability to fly, freedom, hope, and release from attachment. However, the torn, perforated, and broken condition of the wings creates the impression that this ability is experiencing obstacles. The damaged wings suggest possible meanings related to limitation, helplessness, or the presence of something that

prevents the desire to move freely.

The butterflies surrounding the female figure become visual elements that provide contrast to the condition of the main figure's wings. Butterflies are commonly known as symbols of transformation, beauty, life, and freedom. The distribution of butterflies in various directions creates an impression of a broad and limitless space. The bright colors of the butterflies also create contrast against the female figure, which is dominated by white and gray tones, making their presence more visually prominent.

The background is dominated by green tones arranged through expressive vertical brushstrokes. The color green is often associated with nature, life, tranquility, and hope. The use of a background resembling a forest atmosphere creates an open space that is associated with freedom. Meanwhile, the irregular brushstrokes create visual texture that makes the background appear more alive without distracting attention from the main object.

2.2.2 Interpretation of Artwork Meaning

The artwork "Fragile Freedom" represents the emotional paradox between the desire to achieve freedom and the feeling of love that still binds an individual to their family. The title "Fragile Freedom" was chosen because it describes the desired freedom, yet one that remains fragile and has not been fully realized.

The female figure in this artwork represents the author's self, who has the desire to leave home as a place that creates emotional pressure. This desire is visualized through the floating body position, which appears as if the figure wants to fly toward another place.

The torn and broken wings symbolize the desire for freedom that has not yet been achieved. Although there is an urge to leave, various emotional conditions prevent this action from being fully carried out. The damaged wings become a symbol that freedom is still obstructed by something stronger than the desire to fly.

The butterflies surrounding the female figure represent the life desired by the author. Butterflies are able to fly freely, move from one place to another, and live their lives without attachment. The presence of butterflies becomes a representation of the freedom that is always desired but has not yet been possessed by the main figure.

Through this artwork, the author aims to convey that there is a conflict between two feelings that exist simultaneously. On one side, there is a strong desire to leave home immediately in order to gain peace and freedom. However, on the other side, feelings of love, affection, and concern for family make this decision very difficult to carry out. The paradox between the desire for freedom and emotional attachment to family becomes the main idea in the artwork *Fragile Freedom*. This conflict shows that freedom cannot always be achieved merely through desire, because sometimes affection becomes an obstacle that causes someone to remain in a place that is emotionally painful.

2.3 The third artwork: Ruang yang Terbagi (Divided Space)

The third artwork, entitled "Ruang yang Terbagi", was created in 2026 using acrylic paint on canvas with dimensions of 80 cm × 100 cm. The artwork is presented in Figure 3.



Figure 3: The Third Artwork: Ruang yang Terbagi (Divided Space)

Source: Personal Documentation, 2026

The painting entitled “Ruang yang Terbagi” presents two oval-shaped planes positioned at different heights and connected by a staircase. The first plane is located on the lower left side of the composition, while the second plane is positioned on the upper right side. Both planes have a black-and-white checkered floor pattern.

On the first plane, there is a female figure standing alone. The figure wears a white dress, and her head is covered by a brown paper bag displaying a smiling face. Both hands of the figure embrace a rectangular frame held in front of her chest.

On the second plane, there is a round dining table with three figures sitting around it. The three figures consist of two rabbit-headed figures and one sheep-headed figure. Each figure wears clothing in red, orange, and pink colors. The three figures appear to be facing toward the dining table.

The background of the painting is dominated by a night atmosphere with a gradient of dark blue to black tones. In the upper part, a full moon can be seen partially covered by clouds, accompanied by a sky filled with small stars. In the lower part and on the left and right sides of the painting, there are silhouettes of leafless trees that occupy almost the entire background. The overall composition uses a combination of dark colors with the main objects placed on two separate planes, directing the viewer’s attention toward the relationship between the two spaces.

2.3.1 Form Analysis

The artwork “Ruang yang Terbagi” applies a surrealistic approach through the arrangement of unrealistic spaces. Two oval-shaped planes floating in the air and connected by a staircase create an imaginative space that does not exist in real life. This spatial arrangement becomes one of the visual characteristics of surrealism, which aims to convey meaning through symbols.

The composition of the artwork applies an asymmetrical balance. The first plane is positioned on the lower left side as the place where the female figure stands, while the second plane is located on the upper right side and occupied by three figures surrounding a dining table. The staircase connecting the two planes forms a diagonal line, creating a visual direction from the female figure toward the group of figures above. This visual relationship creates the impression that the two spaces remain connected despite being located in different places.

The female figure becomes the focal point because of its larger size compared to the other figures and its placement within a separate space. The body position holding the frame creates an impression of protecting or maintaining something considered valuable.

The presence of the dining table on the second plane becomes a dominant visual

element. The round-shaped table with three chairs creates an impression of gathering, togetherness, and interaction between figures. The three rabbit-headed and sheep-headed figures represent the deformation of humans into animals, which is a characteristic of surrealism. The use of animal heads prevents the identities of the figures from being directly displayed, but instead presents them through symbols.

The night background filled with dry trees strengthens the quiet atmosphere of the artwork. The leafless trees create an impression of emptiness, silence, and the loss of life. The clouds partially covering the sky, along with the dominance of dark blue and black tones, create an atmosphere that is calm yet melancholic. The moonlight becomes the only source of illumination, providing contrast against the darkness of the background.

The use of white on the female figure's clothing makes the main object appear more prominent compared to its surroundings. Meanwhile, the combination of black, dark blue, and gray dominates the overall composition, creating an emotional atmosphere that feels calm yet lonely. Visual elements such as line, shape, color, space, texture, balance, contrast, and emphasis support each other in constructing possible meanings related to separation, emotional distance, and longing for togetherness.

2.3.2 Interpretation of Artwork Meaning

The artwork "Ruang yang Terbagi" represents the author's emotional experiences regarding feelings of loss, longing for the presence of a mother figure, and emotional distance felt within the home after changes in family conditions. The title "Ruang yang Terbagi" was chosen to illustrate that although living in the same house, each family member seems to exist within different spaces.

The female figure standing alone represents the author's self. The frame held tightly in front of the chest symbolizes a photograph of the deceased mother, which remains a source of longing and memories. The position of holding the photograph represents an attempt to maintain emotional closeness with the mother figure who is no longer physically present.

The two separated planes that are still connected by a staircase illustrate a relationship that continues to exist but is no longer as close as before. The staircase becomes a symbol that the relationship has not been completely broken, yet there is a distance that makes emotional closeness difficult to experience.

On the second plane, there are two rabbit-headed figures and one sheep-headed figure representing the father, his new wife, and the child from his new family. The three figures are depicted sitting together at a dining table as a symbol of warmth, togetherness, and time spent together as a family.

Meanwhile, the female figure does not exist in the same space as them. The placement of the main figure on a different plane represents a feeling of alienation despite still living in the same house. The author aims to show that loneliness does not always mean living alone, but can also be experienced when someone is no longer part of the warmth that was once possessed.

The night background with dry trees strengthens the inner atmosphere experienced by the main figure. Night symbolizes silence and loneliness, while leafless trees become symbols of the loss of life and warmth. The clouds covering the sky represent feelings that remain filled with sadness, causing hope to appear obscured.

Through this artwork, the author aims to convey an emotional paradox in the form of a conflict between the desire to remain part of the family and the reality of feeling emotionally separated. Although still living in the same house with the father, attention and togetherness are more often directed toward the father's new family. This condition creates a deep longing for the mother figure while also generating feelings of loneliness within a home that was once a place filled with warmth.

2.4 The fourth artwork: Unbalanced

The fourth artwork, entitled "Unbalanced", was created in 2026 using acrylic paint on canvas with dimensions of 80 cm × 100 cm. The artwork is presented in Figure 4.



Figure 4: The Fourth Artwork: Unbalanced
Source: Personal Documentation, 2026

The painting entitled "Unbalanced" presents a composition centered on a female figure standing upright on a circular golden platform. The female figure wears a white dress, and her head is covered by a brown paper bag displaying a simple smiling face consisting of two dots as eyes and a curved line as a mouth.

Both hands of the female figure hold a golden balance scale. The scale on the left hand appears to be positioned lower than the scale on the right hand, indicating a condition of imbalance. Behind the figure, there is a chain extending diagonally from the upper left side toward the lower right side.

At both ends of the chain, there are two classical-style clocks with semicircular shapes. The clock on the upper left side is decorated with white frangipani flowers with yellow centers and several green leaves. Meanwhile, the clock on the lower right side is decorated with white daisy flowers with green stems and leaves.

2.4.1 Form Analysis

The artwork "Unbalanced" applies a surrealistic visual approach by presenting realistic objects arranged in unusual relationships, creating a particular psychological atmosphere. The composition is centered on a female figure standing on a circular platform while holding two balance scales. The placement of the figure in the center creates a strong focal point, while other elements surrounding it strengthen the visual focus on the main figure.

The balance scales held in both hands become the most dominant visual element after the female figure. The unequal positions of both sides of the scales create a visual impression of imbalance. The form of the scales, which is generally associated with balance, is instead presented in a tilted condition, producing a visual paradox that strengthens the theme of the artwork.

The presence of the chain connecting the two clocks forms a diagonal line that divides the picture plane. The diagonal line creates visual dynamics while connecting the elements positioned on the left and right sides of the composition. The clocks are depicted in incomplete forms, while the chain creates an impression of attachment or a connection that cannot be separated.

The frangipani and daisy flowers provide contrast to the dark atmosphere that dominates the artwork. The presence of both flowers with white and green colors introduces organic elements that create visual balance among metallic objects such as

the balance scales, chain, and clocks. The blooming form of the flowers also creates an impression of life within an atmosphere filled with tension.

The background is dominated by black tones with white brushstrokes and a small amount of red applied abstractly. The color black builds an atmosphere of silence, heaviness, and uncertainty. The irregular white strokes create expressive visual texture, giving an impression of inner turmoil. Meanwhile, the red splashes appearing in several areas of the picture plane become visual accents that strengthen the emotional atmosphere and tension within the composition.

2.4.2 Interpretation of Artwork Meaning

The artwork "Unbalanced" is a visualization of a life condition filled with various burdens, creating an imbalance between happiness and the difficulties experienced by an individual. The title "Unbalanced", which means "not balanced," was chosen to describe the paradox of life when someone must continue living despite emotional pressure dominating more than feelings of happiness.

The female figure represents an individual undergoing a life journey filled with various pressures. The balance scales held in both hands become the main symbol in this artwork. The unequal position of the scales represents a life that is more dominated by burdens, problems, and pressure compared to the happiness experienced.

This imbalance shows that in living life, individuals often feel that the struggles they face are much greater than the pleasant moments they obtain.

The clocks connected by a chain symbolize the journey of time that never stops. The chain illustrates that time continues to move and binds every phase of life, both the enjoyable and painful ones. Regardless of how difficult a person's condition may be, time will continue to move and bring the possibility of change toward a better situation.

The frangipani and daisy flowers become symbols of hope that continues to grow amid various difficulties. The presence of blooming flowers indicates that there is always an opportunity to rise and find happiness, even when life is experiencing a difficult phase. These flowers demonstrate that hope can continue to develop amidst pressure and uncertainty.

The black background combined with white brushstrokes represents an inner condition filled with various mixed emotions. The color black symbolizes sadness, loneliness, and the burdens of life, while the white strokes represent uncertain thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, the red splashes become symbols of the emergence of despair that has crossed the mind, including the desire to give up and end life. However, these elements are not intended as an encouragement, but rather as a representation of the intensity of inner conflict that has been experienced.

Through this artwork, the author aims to convey that life does not always proceed in a balanced state. An individual may experience burdens that are far greater than happiness, but time will continue to move and hope will always remain, like flowers that continue to bloom. This concept becomes the core of the artwork Unbalanced, which depicts the emotional paradox when an individual is in a condition filled with pressure while still maintaining hope to endure and find a better life.

3. Conclusion

The creation of the study project entitled "Emotional Paradox as a Theme in the Creation of Surrealistic Painting" originates from the author's emotional experiences and the phenomenon of emotional paradoxes commonly found in social life. Emotional paradox is understood as a condition in which an individual experiences two or more conflicting emotions simultaneously. This experience is then processed into an artistic idea and realized through a surrealistic painting approach.

The creation process was carried out through systematic stages, namely exploration, design, realization, and finishing. Through this project, the author successfully created four paintings. The titles of these artworks are: 1. Traitor, 2. Fragile Freedom, 3. Ruang yang Terbagi (Divided Space), and 4. Unbalanced.

The selection of painting as the medium of creation provides a broad space for the author to express emotional experiences that are difficult to convey through verbal language. Through visual elements such as form, color, composition, space, and surrealistic symbols, the experience of emotional paradox can be translated into metaphorical visual representations that remain open to various interpretations. The use of surrealism also provides the author with the freedom to combine realistic objects into illogical arrangements, allowing the complexity of human emotions to be represented more deeply.

Thus, the objective of the creation project has been achieved, namely producing surrealistic paintings that are able to visualize emotional paradox as a complex psychological experience as well as the author's personal experience. In addition to possessing aesthetic value, the resulting artworks are expected to serve as a medium of reflection for art viewers, demonstrating that every individual may hold emotional struggles that are not always visible through their external expressions. In this context, painting functions not only as a medium of expression but also as a medium of communication, empathy, and reflection on human experiences.

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