

Uncertainty in Abstract Painting and Its Possibility of Stimulating Positive Feelings in Viewers

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Abstract

Starting from the theoretical definition of positive feelings and uncertainty, this paper discusses the research in the embodiment of the principle of pleasure brought by uncertainty in daily life and discusses its feasibility. By analyzing the pleasure of uncertainty in the field of musical artistic expression and the connection between music and abstract painting, the author explores the causes of positive feelings from uncertainty in abstract painting and its application. Through creative practice and related material experiments, the author achieves the result that there is potential for viewers to get positive feelings after experiencing the uncertainty in abstract painting works. This study aims to explore the application of abstract painting in the field of art therapy through this series of investigations.

Keywords

Positive Feelings, Uncertainty, Abstract Painting, Music, Art Therapy

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of society, an increasing number of people suffer from more or less anxiety, depression and other symptoms because of various pressures. The rise of art therapy offers more possibilities for treatment-related psychological problems. In the field of art, abstract painting is a form of artistic expression that might have few accurate directives and can have no connection with objective things, which means that abstract art can be inclusive and applicable to a wider range of people in the field of art therapy. If the creation methodology of abstract painting can be combined with some social phenomena and related scientific theories for practice, abstract painting may become an excellent

carrier of artistic healing and provide psychological help for more people. So, what are the possibilities of abstract painting that can bring positive emotional help to the participants? This paper aims to elaborate on the principle of positive feeling and its relationship to uncertainty. Thus, discussing the possibility that the uncertain elements in the abstract painting will bring positive feelings to the viewers.

Generally, positive feelings or emotions are synonymous with such terms like happiness, satisfaction, confidence and the expectation of success (Sasson, 2020). There are two popular ways of defining them. Celestine (2016) defines it as multi-component response tendencies, that last a short period of time, and Cabanac (1979) defines mental experiences that are both intense and pleasurable. At the same time, Hubbard (2020) defines uncertainty as: Uncertainty is a state of having limited knowledge where it is impossible to exactly describe existing state or future outcome, more than one possible outcome. From my point of view, positive feeling of uncertainty is an intense and pleasurable experience that audience can have after finding a part of artwork, which they can describe or understand in a certain way.

Both pain and pleasure can be experienced in the process of positive emotion generation. The need to translate uncertainty into certainty and reduce associated anxiety seems to be an integral part of many aspects of human behaviour. Individuals can collect information, inferences, and generate theories addressing uncertainty (Lee & Qiu, 2021). However, not all forms of uncertainty must be reversed. Uncertainty of events with positive prospects can lead to positive emotions (Wilson, 2005).

2. Positive Feelings and the Principles of Their Generation

2.1. Consumers' Possible Pleasure from Uncertainty in Daily Life

Some degree of research shows that individuals can indeed experience greater happiness from uncertainty than from certainty. Consumers usually prefer certainty to uncertainty, which leads them to avoid uncertainty. However, this study suggests that consumers faced with uncertainty (rather than certainty) associated with positive events (e.g. winning the lucky draw, but not knowing the exact prize to be won) can experience larger, more lasting positive emotions (Lee & Qiu, 2021).

In our context, in the face of an event (e.g. to win the lucky draw), whether certain (e.g. there are known prizes) or uncertain (e.g. there are a few potential prizes), people may experience positive feelings because of the favorable nature of the upcoming prospects. However, activation levels may vary, because uncertainty evokes greater physiological arousal than certainty, this further exacerbates the emotional response to positive events (Berns, McClure, Pagnoni, & Montague, 2001). This link between arousal and sensory emotion is particularly implied in the theory of transfer excitement, and proved in different fields (Rickwood & Price, 1988). For example, Gorn, Pham, and Sin (2001) found that, if the

tone of the ad is pleasant, consumers in a higher state of awareness will be more favorable to the evaluation of advertising. And [Dibben \(2004\)](#) shows, awakening increases the intensity of feeling when listening to music. Therefore, consumers are experiencing positive events e.g. without knowing the exact lucky draw (for a while), then certain events, when you know the exact prize, may experience larger, more direct positive emotions. Please note, for this pleasant uncertainty effect, certain uncertain prospects (e.g. the possibility of a prize) should be equally attractive. Otherwise, the difference in the attractiveness of the foreground may produce irrelevant feelings, entangled from the uncertainty effects we study. Therefore, we predict: Given equally attractive prospects (e.g. equally attractive prize possibilities from a lucky draw), uncertainty in positive events (e.g. winning a lucky draw without knowing the exact prize immediately) would elicit greater, immediate positive feelings than certainty in positive events would ([Lee & Qiu, 2021](#)).

All the above cases reveal similar things to us. The use of uncertainty is like a catalyst of emotion, which makes the audience produce more intense and positive emotional feedback. The principle is to add uncertain parts to a certain predictable range, and the process of transforming uncertainty into certainty and reducing related anxiety may lead to positive emotions.

2.2. This Principle of Possibly Equal Effectiveness in Painting

People's consideration about colours, light and graphics is not as direct as that about natural, real, and concrete things. So, when they see some colour blocks, it often takes them some time to observe and think over about the feelings of the whole picture, painter's intent or any story behind them. The process of observation and the time of thinking can also be a space of uncertainty where people want to find answers, figure out what they cannot understand about the works, and try to think of what they feel familiar but cannot remember. Whatever result audiences can gain in this space, this will be an interesting, potentially positive experience compared to the plain and straightforward visual experience. The thrill of experiencing complexity and uncertainty, the unexpected sense of gain and the novelty of creative self-justification may all be positive emotions inspired by the individual interpretation of an abstract artwork.

3. The Pleasure of Appreciating the Uncertainty of Abstract Artworks

3.1. The Pleasure of Understanding Abstract Musical Uncertainty

There are groups such as [Bar-Anan, Wilson, and Gilbert \(2009\)](#) who believe that determination of uncertainty stimulates areas such as the nucleus accumbent, which Nadal calls "a generator of pleasurable sensations". Numerous studies, after all, have demonstrated that dopamine neurons quickly adapt to predictable rewards. If people know what's going to happen next, then they don't get excited. Therefore composers introduce the tonic note in the beginning of the song and

then studiously avoid it until the end. To demonstrate this psychological principle, the musicologist Meyer (2018), in his classic book *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, dissected fifty measures of Beethoven's masterpiece, showing how Beethoven begins with the clear statement of a rhythmic and harmonic pattern and then, in an intricate tonal dance, carefully avoids repeating it. What Beethoven does is preserve an element of uncertainty in his music, making our brains beg for the one chord he refuses to give us. Beethoven saves that chord for the end. The longer we feel uncertainty of the pattern in artwork, the greater the emotional release when the pattern get understood at last, safe and sound. That is when we get the positive emotion. In the book *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting, and Music*, Butler (2005) explained that most of the Western music with which we are acquainted is an artfully structured, formal process of events, which is designed to give us satisfaction. It can do this largely because in the tonal era at least, it incorporates a tension and release model (inherent in the harmonic procedures of the period) and this model can be used to account for the feelings of pleasure we can get from the dialectic between order and disorder in music, and the satisfaction we get from the feeling that its elements move towards a resolution. Butler (2005) gave us an example: "when I listen to a familiar work like Brahms's Second Symphony, I have the impression of a 'perfect order' in which every note counts. Nothing it seems could be added, nothing taken away. And only this Brahms symphony can do this for me—only this one will do". As the first movement of the work grows from its opening motif, Brahms's use of harmonic conventions sets up expectations; it delays, diverts, and satisfies them.

For most critics, specific emotions seem to be involved too: Hopkins's (1961) typical analysis of the work generalizes the movement as lyrical, sunny and serene qualities that sometimes warm to positive brilliance. He also shows the first page of the music, which may be just a "disarming melody", actually a "series of fragments", so each part or phrase of the melody is full of the potential to develop alone. The analysis here looks at the potential growth of a process, and once we have reasonable thinking in the harmonious process of western music, we can generate interest in results, visual enjoyment and satisfaction, even for an audience that does not listen to the analysis (Butler, 2005).

This is a typical attempt to describe some of the musical events of the symphony movement by looking at them as expressions of mental state, again very much like the weather—such as "carefree", "dissolved", "brooding", "flowering", and then "advised" and "burst". It also emphasizes continuity and development and encourages awareness of thematic processes and change. This seems to involve a call for narrative understanding that gives music a causal relationship that is considered very similar to dramatic events. So, Hopkins points out some ways that we can have fun from our feelings, melody as music makes a psychological interesting progress (Aschmuckler, 1989).

The comfortable summer wind blows through the ear, and the bright sun pe-

netrates the leaves. This is how lots of people feel when they listen to the music of Joe Hisaishi. Even if we are not familiar with the background of these melodies and the trend of the whole melody is unknown, when we hear part of the song, our brain can still quickly fill up the atmosphere and emotion of the whole song and waits for the other parts while enjoying the rest of the tune that meet our expectation or enjoying the unexpected surprise that come from the remaining portion. This is a manifestation of uncertainty in music that can bring pleasure to the listeners.

3.2. The Connection between Music and Abstract Painting

Nineteenth-century painters were eager to free their art from the bondage of narrative. They viewed music as an art form that could influence the audience without the need for images or stories or any form of expression (Vergo, 2021). In the process of art making, we can feel that music and abstract art have many similarities. There is no direct and specific narrative, and there is a lack of direct copying or imitation of natural things. Hence the emotional influence on the audience is purer.

In the book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky and Sadleir (2008) argued that artist who sees that the imitation of natural appearances, no matter how artistic, is not for him—the kind of creative artist who wants to, and has to, express his own inner world—sees with envy how naturally and easily such goals can be attained in music, the least material of the arts today. Around that time, Kandinsky began to give his paintings musical names (Figure 1), calling them “Improvisations”, “Compositions”—even, on one later occasion, “Fugue”. Of these, his *Composition IV* of 1911 is particularly important, being one of the few works he has described or analysed in detail. Interestingly, he found many objects in places that might be mistaken for “abstract” pictures, such as fighting, castles on the mountains, spears. These same patterns can also be seen in a smaller painting called *Cossacks*, which reproduces the left-hand part of the larger composition in an almost literal way. He also wrote some space about the pure



Figure 1. *Cossacks* (Kandinsky, 1910).

emotional effects of the colours and forms he used, describing the lines of creating motion as “corners” and “sharp”, and describing colours as “light”, “cold” and “sweet”. Whether or not objects exist, Kandinsky clearly hopes that the “abstract” elements of the picture will directly affect the audience, just like the tone of the music (Vergo, 2021).

Kandinsky’s book mentions a lot of music, and he gives music titles to three groups between 1909 and 1914: improvisation, impression, and composition. Frank Kupka also named some of his works in the musical terms of nocturne and fugue. Therefore, the critics of the time stood before the work they had never seen, tightly around the theme of music, and used music to explain the abstract painting. It was so frequent that Kandinsky was forced to say in the 1913 catalogue and in his 1914 speech “I don’t want to draw music. I don’t want to paint my mood”. By contrast, it is necessary to borrow the title of Henry Rovel’s 1908 article in *Les Tendances Nouvelles*, “the harmonic law in painting and music is the same” (Vergo, 2021).

In this respect, abstract painting is indeed like the “absolute music” of the previous century in that it claims to obey its own internal laws, and can make similar claims to emotional expressiveness. Hence Kandinsky’s ideas of the “inner necessity” of feeling, or the claims to affect made for the abstract expressionism of the New York School. Abstract paintings were taken to express all sorts of psychological conditions—such as existentialist angst—within the artist, not easily to be transmitted to the viewer, but certainly supposed to be understood as part of the “meaning” of the work. Wols and Pollock are obvious examples.

This parallelism between painting and music art is based, on the one hand, on its inherent law of creation, on the other hand, on their role in the field of human sensation, called soul (Vergo, 2021). Therefore, the close relationship between music and abstract painting can help us to study whether and how uncertainty can bring pleasure to the audiences.

3.3. Sense of Access in Appreciating the Uncertainty in Abstract Paintings

How to excavate feelings and how to explore the influence of feelings on human beings is a broad problem for artists. Feelings are like an instrument playing the song of life, a metaphor that allows artists to re-examine their media. Scientists assert that colour and hue have a direct and verifiable impact on everyone, so artists begin to explore the vast field of feeling and feeling art through colour and hue, thus producing a new form of artistic expression. The artist can play on the harp of the soul, now pull one string, and pull another string, now it sounds together. This inner music, “in which the tonality is completely suspended”, in which the “jump point, so that each tone that sounds (or draws) can stand independently”, is the direct touch of the soul. Therefore, the works created are pure music or pure painting, without intermediary and without any form of imitation (mythology, religious philosophy, history, or genre) invading the world of thought. It is pure music or pure painting of pure feeling in the artist using colours and tones that

stimulate pure feelings in the audience.

On this basis, if abstract painters use colours and materials to change people's inherent views on the attributes of a certain thing, it is possible to create some uncertainty on the picture. For example, many people have completely different feelings about circles and squares. Square gives people a feeling of hard, and circle gives people more feelings of soft. This stereotype will give the viewer a psychological prejudgment at the first moment of viewing these paintings. But if the figure is specially handled by the painter, feelings of them might be different: the painter uses soft materials such as cotton to draw a square, blur its edge line, and use warm colours to enhance its soft and soothing feeling. At the same time, hard materials and sharp and clear edge lines are used to draw circles, then cold colours, rendering a rigid and sharp feeling to the circles. In this way, even viewers make a prediction a second ago, when they continue to observe the work, they will find that some different feelings appear on the picture, which is a kind of uncertainty about the feeling of the picture. At this moment, they will have some doubts, curiosity, and excitement about unknown feelings of the work. After that, when they continue to observe the picture, figuring out the source of strange feelings, they might suddenly harvest some surprise. This process can be the positive feeling of uncertainty in abstract paintings.

4. The Causes of Positive Feelings after Comprehending the Uncertainty in Abstract Paintings

In the process of exploring how uncertainty in painting brings pleasure to the viewer, there is often a problem in front of us. Different people have different life experiences and emotional experiences. It is true that different people feel different about the content of the painting. But as mentioned above, abstract painting is more about graphics, lines, and colours. Removing those direct narratives, using materials and a certain degree of methods is more likely to create uncertainty in the painting and bring pleasure of it to the audience. Compared with other painting forms, abstract painting is purer. Removing narrative and direct emotional communication, abstract painting has more space to play in the manufacture of uncertainty.

Therefore, the transition from presentation to abstraction in the history of painting depends to a large extent on our learning to obtain pleasant emotional responses from many later painters who became simple geometric shapes, irregular shapes, or solid colors. But how can this non-representative element and its color combination alone arouse our inner feelings and make us happy? They don't let us participate in drama: they are not representations of objects or situations (such as Monet's scenery), which gives us pleasure outside of art. They also do not often or obviously or directly suggest pleasant physical feelings derived from our contact with the world—as Impressionists do for the light. In the painter's direct experience of color, it seems to have taken another step on the road to pure feeling, without being contaminated by any concept used to represent natural "objects", which tastes more than wine. For abstractions in art, from expres-

sion to many different distances, by definition, it plays with and negates our desire to rationalize our responses by naming and analyzing situations and natural objects (Butler, 2005).

In terms of unpredictability and mystery, Mark Rothko's work is an example that has to be mentioned the name Mark Rothko is synonymous with sensitive canvas, which arranges rectangular panes in bright tones. The painter is a skilled toner. The greatest pleasure in experiencing his paintings is to observe how colours, shapes and backgrounds interact, especially around the edges. Around his soft, hairy border gamut produces an emotion, while the central form is sharper and straighter, leading to another emotion. The alternating arrangement of similar or different tones (dark blue to dark purple shadows or bright red to brown shadows) causes distinct emotional responses. Rothko found infinite changes when adopting the signature structure (Cohen, 2021). In 1964, collectors John and Dominique de Menil commissioned Rothko to make canvases for a chapel in Houston. Considering the artist's love of church architecture, he was a perfect choice. He created 14 large paintings of purple and black shadows. The paintings are now mounted on the walls of the octagonal sanctuary. "They're sort of a window to beyond" chapel historian Suna Umari once explained to NPR. Rothko said that the bright colors sort of stop your vision at the canvas, where dark colours go beyond. And definitely you're looking at the beyond. You're looking at the infinite (Cohen, 2021).

Large areas and unknown boundaries of color gamut intertwined, seemingly simple composition, but easy to produce different angles of visual differences to produce different angles of visual differences, which may also be seen as a factor in creating picture uncertainty. Thus, the audience can experience a strong sense of mystery and spiritual or emotional shock.

All these aspects of abstract art pose problems for our pleasant response, this is in some ways parallel to the music we found above. If we look at the reaction to Mark Rothko's later work (from about 1950), we can see this. I chose Rothko as an example of an extension (Figure 2), partly because his atmospheric paintings transcend Monet's abstraction. Here, the rectangle of the canvas is a monochrome



Figure 2. Untitled (Seagram Mural) (Rothko, 1959).

ground, visible along the edge, occasionally, openings between three or four horizontal color blocks with brush faces and hairy boundaries (Cohen, 2021). These shapes bleed to their ground, fused into a single plane. In a series like this, not so much geometry, more like the emotional content or effect of the work, and most works are different. Rothko's rectangular color, this is immaterial, cloudy, the atmosphere (weather metaphors seem inevitable again), often darken, towards red brown, close to the end of his career. The consensus seems to be, these later canvases were lighter, and the older ones were more "sad", even "tragedy". Rothko's early paintings were generally regarded as calm, passive and hidden, Even inferiority complex: later more uneasy. Although Pollock is often in permanent, often agitated motion, Rothko can give a static impression, and the scale of his work, so that many viewers in his image produced a sense of nobility that cannot be analyzed. In the series, the color relationship of his canvas seems to be part of a repeated attempt to define something mysterious, and mysterious things are purely internal. They have no obvious imitation or instrumental relationship with the outside world (Cohen, 2021). If they can promote withdrawal to a state of contemplation or even mystery, that would be better.

One might think that Rothko and Steven (1990) were looking for a pure "string" feeling in the basic colors of their paintings. A similarity between this abstract art and music is often translated by Rothko—however, he emphasizes that his emotional influence means transcending pure quasi-music pleasure: "I am interested only in expressing the basic humane motions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on—and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate with these basic humane motions. The people who weep before my pictures have the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say are moved only by their colour relationships, then you miss the point!" (Rothko and Stevens, 1990). It is as doubtful that a Rothko painting can present anything like a "tragic" situation, as it is that the recapitulation of the first movement of the Choral Symphony can be concerned with biblical "apocalypse". But some of Rothko's interpreters nevertheless try to indicate a hidden cause for these grander emotions, and they typically do this by suggesting that they are partly brought about by a perhaps subliminal reaction to an indirectly represented object, which can then carry its usual cultural import (Rothko & Stevens, 1990). The mysterious nature of Rothko's paintings and the strong emotional range of unpredictable trends shock the viewer.

5. Application of Positive Feelings after Comprehending the Uncertainty in Abstract Paintings

5.1. The Application of Uncertainty in Individual Creative Practice

Painting has been closely related to the real world or the spiritual world of human beings since its emergence, and many opposing elements in painting works, such as bright, dark, soft and hard, constantly interact with the feelings of the viewer to varying degrees in the process of presentation. How does the opposite

element in painting affect the viewer's experience? And if they are adjusted, can they achieve a balanced comfort by transforming and balancing them?

In trying to create individuals with gamut and dividing lines, I found that different ways of dealing with gamut and dividing lines have the opposite effect. The degree of edge blur, the mixing of colour regions, the use of materials and so on will bring a very different experience of visual contradictions. For example, fuzzy and clear segmentation lines will bring soft and hard visual experience. In personal creation experiments, I found that the opposite visual perception experience of graphic communication is very direct, and square and circular are typical representatives. The use of squares and circles is very common all over the world. They have obvious contrast between their appearance characteristics and their inner meaning, which can bring strong feelings. In his book *Circle and Square*, Japanese writer Yasuhito Matsuda mentions that circles and squares seem to be inextricably linked to perception. They have profound cultural connotations of relativity and diversity.

A square symbolizes static, partial and principle, while a circle is integral and flexible. During the spring and autumn and warring States period of China, the place of heaven appeared: under the round sky, there was a square earth extending. As a result, circles become the representatives of nature and the universe, while squares become the artificial world that transcends the field of animals. According to psychologist Jung et al. (1983), the root of human spiritual experience can be expressed by "shapes" such as circle, square, cross, spiral and so on. These shapes are typical patterns that humans most easily associate with when thinking. However, with the development of my personal artistic creation practice, I find that square and circle have seemingly opposite properties, but through the adjustment of picture composition and the use of materials, they can achieve a harmonious sense of balance.

5.2. Material Experiments

In the study of opposing elements, most senses of opposition are closely related with soft and hard visual experience. For example, the blur of color gamut and edge segmentation lines can give a soft feeling. "Regions are things" Roscoe said in an interview. Not a removal but a symbolic substitution. My painting is not about space, I only use soft edges. They are some subtle atmosphere and thus inspire a response full of subtle atmosphere. It's an experience. As mentioned in the above study, the square gives a sense of rule, and the circle is smart. The sharp corners of the square and the structure of the square give a firm and hard feeling, while the circle gives a round and soft feeling. The attributes mentioned above are inherent in the elements themselves or given to them by people's stereotype thinking. Assuming that the definition of these opposing elements is universal, the superposition or adjustment of the mutual exclusion of the elements can change the visual perception experience transmitted by the opposite elements in the picture to a certain extent. For example, draw a circular color gamut with a hard and smooth paint to make its edges clear; blur the edges of a square with a halo or

soft and loose material. The proper use of this material may produce a transformation and balance of opposing elements. Bright and dark, reflective and matte, and light transmission is the opposing elements that I began to add in later personal creation. Light is very important for the feeling of the picture. In French poet Claude Rua's *Love of Painting*, Goya said angrily in the face of a painting by David on display in Bordeaux: "Always lines, never objects. But in nature, where do they see lines? In nature, I see only illuminated objects and unlit objects". The light transmittance of cellophane is good, the light can be irradiated from the back to the paint and the material is thinner, and the thicker part will be darker in the backlight.

When I draw on different layers of transparent cellophane and stack the paintings together, what the viewer observes changes over time. Coupled with the change of light, when the light behind the work becomes weaker, people can only see one or two layers of the work on the surface, and when the light becomes stronger, the bottom content will also appear. At the same time, the methodology mentioned above can change the inherent properties of an object or character through colours and materials, making the picture presents a part that does not match the prejudice of the audience. In this way, although the audience may be familiar with various techniques and materials and produce a prediction of the work in the head, but as the depth of observation and time goes on, many unexpected elements appear to the viewer with uncertainty. Eventually, when they realize the principle of "change", they reap a positive mood similar to that described in the previous article.

6. Conclusion

Abstract painting, as a purely spiritual practice, is produced by human awakening consciousness, and it also stimulates people's survival consciousness and imagination. Giordano Bruno, an Italian living in the Renaissance, created a series of abstract structural images that he believed would bring positive changes to those who used them. Bruno believes that by putting these images into memory, the imagination is imprinted in an ideal form, which could lead to a better personal transformation. Psychologist Jung's practice of Manda painting also shows that the symbolism of abstract painting can help a person gradually enter a deeper subconscious, and ultimately help the painter to experience a positive feeling of the unity of spirit and body. All these can promote the application of positive feelings brought by uncertainty in abstract painting in social practices such as artistic healing in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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