

Exploring Personal Expressions Toward Homelessness Through Material, Surface Exploration, and Mixed Media Artwork: Integration of Information Systems in Creative Practices

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the personal expression of homeless individuals through the artist's use of materials and surfaces, with a focus on conveying the experience of homelessness in Georgetown, Penang. The primary objective is to determine how different materials can effectively evoke emotions and narratives associated with the homeless condition, enabling personal expression through artistic practice. Art-based research is employed, combining non-participatory observation and reviews of existing artworks. The Panofsky model, which emphasizes intrinsic artistic value, is used to analyze the meaning behind the materials. The research includes studio investigations, where various mediums and surfaces are experimented with to express the emotions and lived experiences of homeless people. The exploration of texture and composition aids in finding the right materials to reflect personal narratives. For theory, this research contributes to the understanding of how materiality in art serves not just an aesthetic function but also a communicative one.

Keywords: medium, emotion, homeless, material, surface.

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INTRODUCTION

Art has long served as a powerful form of expression, offering a mirror to the society we inhabit. Through the thoughtful use of color, texture, space, and materials, artists create works that not only engage the senses but also convey deeper meanings. Effective composition and adherence to the fundamental principles of art are key to this process, allowing artistic creations to communicate complex ideas and emotions. An "artist" can be defined as an independent and drawing-based personality who comments on personal and social issues through art (Hocking, 2021). This artist is using materials of painting, doing collages, or using a piece, an object to sculpt emotions and stories of homelessness. The roles of an artist do not tend to produce beautiful art pieces but also to send a number of messages by the application of different media. Mixed media is therefore art that is created using several forms of media and which brings together different armed practices (Okonkwo, 2023). Today, mixed media is a wonderful area that seems to be subversive of the conventional painting, sculpture and other forms of art and it provides the artist with another different language of communicating the Personal and the Social.

Homelessness has driven the artist to harness her creativity in order to raise awareness, evoke empathy, and challenge societal perceptions. She was confronted with the harsh reality of homelessness when she encountered individuals seeking shelter under tattered blankets, hidden in the shadows of towering buildings. The haunting expressions and intense gazes of these individuals left a deep impression on her, sparking a desire to take meaningful action. Feeling a strong sense of responsibility, the artist sought to channel these emotions and experiences into her artwork. Through various mediums and forms of visual expression, she conveys the complex emotions associated with homelessness, aiming to communicate a powerful message to her audience.

In this research, a series of artworks created to convey the personal expression of the homeless through the exploration of materials and surfaces. In this study, materials and materials that can convey the artist's personal expression are used in artworks that express the ideas and emotions of homeless people in Georgetown, Penang. To analyze the meaning embedded in these artworks, the research applies the method of artistic inquiry. Artistic inquiry, within the context of fine arts, involves a process of questioning, researching, and experimenting with various perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the subject matter. In this case, it entailed exploring how different materials—such as recycled objects, rough textures, and organic surfaces—could evoke the harsh realities of homelessness. The use of unconventional materials was crucial in reflecting the vulnerability and impermanence of life on the streets. For example, the artist used worn-out fabrics, rusted metal, and discarded wood to represent both the physical environment of homelessness and the emotional weight carried by individuals experiencing it. In addition to material exploration, the study also examines how different techniques and styles contribute to the overall message. The research aligns this artistic approach with the Panofsky Model, which is based on the interpretation of visual art through a layered understanding of iconography and intrinsic meaning. By using the Panofsky Model as a framework, the study delves into how the artist's choice of materials and surfaces imbues the artwork with deeper significance, enhancing the narrative of homelessness. Ultimately, this inquiry aims to show how artistic choices—whether in surface texture, color, or form—can communicate complex social and emotional issues, offering a unique lens through which to understand the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS THROUGH MATERIALITY

Homelessness is a multifaceted social issue which is not well known, primarily caused by social, economic issues and discrimination. The elements of homelessness and materiality can function as a way by which artists address this matter, paying particular attention to the individuals' stories (Lee et al., 2021). As studies have pointed out, formerly homeless persons face complex, multidimensional needs that include poverty in addition to mental illness and social isolation and Community rejection. Exploration of materiality as a conceptual idea within an art practice has provided a means to engage with such large complex concerns. Artists can use such things as scraps or other items that are left, as a symbol of what such individuals are usually thrown away or which are not cared for because they are homeless – to pass on a message in their artworks.

For example, artists can use objects that homeless people could possibly interact with or come across in their day to day lives and transform these objects into meaningful pieces that force viewers into acknowledging the extent of homelessness (Ozsváth, 2022). These materials can be seen as carriers of messages of survival and these same materials can and do talk about suffering and holding on to hope from a perspective of the so-called waste. Through the choice of materials, one can express oneself emotionally, and, therefore, trigger concern for homeless people in the society. The choice of the materials allows one to express not only the physical state of homeless people, but their emotional state; they feel the anxiety, fear and isolation inherent in such life.

In addition, the act of creating with such materials can raise the issue of eradicating homelessness while providing healing for the artists themselves, in regards to their conception of homelessness in the world (Margarida, 2021). This could aid in the concept of developing a bond with the object of their work thus making it beyond a simple act of observation. The stories behind these Fine Arts can therefore be subversive of the audience's perspective and provoke a reflection on the systems that maintain homelessness (Della Foresta, 2023).

Material exploration contributes to the extension of the control of the aesthetic production and, therefore, to the discussion of the simplistic management of homelessness, proposing a different representation of the subject. It means that art can turn what might be seen as repulsive, repelling, and

uninteresting into that which generates deeper empathy and neighborly concern. For instance, use of articles such as clothes, photos, or written statements about homeless people make the audience develop an emotional feeling and easily accept the true life experiences of the homeless people. It also goes hand in hand with raising awareness not only of the audience but also helps to bring people together to fight that problem. Through the very use of different materialities in art, advocacy could therefore be used to foster policy understandings among the diverse groups in societies. Moreover, by engaging homeless people in making art, there are possibilities to reduce the effect of stigma, as well as help those, who experience it. Artist invites participants into the artistic process and in so doing, helps to offer voice and testimonial to their narratives. Apart from fostering the appropriate badge of ownership in homeless people, this approach is defining that there was a social purpose and achievement, as well as adding more to the narrative of the artwork. Therefore, art becomes an essential cross rather than that can be used to link two different classes or groups of people, bringing humane hearts together. Amplifying the voices of those who are often marginalized, art can play a critical role in reshaping societal perceptions, promoting awareness, and inspiring action that prioritizes the needs of vulnerable populations.

The study also explores the broader role of conventional materials in artistic practice. Traditional mediums, such as canvas, paint, and paper, have long been used by artists in Penang to create works that reflect the cultural and social fabric of the city. These materials serve not only as a link to the past but also as a foundation for contemporary experimentation. Artists in Penang, for instance, have used canvas to depict scenes that capture the essence of local life, from the vibrant street art seen around Georgetown to the exploration of daily struggles faced by its residents. In doing so, they connect the rich cultural heritage of the area with the present moment, using traditional materials to communicate evolving social concerns. By drawing on these established materials, artists maintain a connection to Penang's historical and cultural roots, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of their artistic practices, ensuring that their work remains relevant and responsive to current issues.

In this study, artistic finding on linkages between discarded mosaic tiles to the concepts of home with watercolor portrait painting of homeless elderly in Georgetown, Penang. This research discovered the possibilities of watercolor painting on mosaic tiles as an expression for artists towards specific issues.

The research reveals how watercolor painting on mosaic tiles can be a compelling artistic tool for expressing environmentalism and humanitarianism. By using reclaimed materials, the artist not only breathes new life into objects that would otherwise be thrown away but also underscores the importance of sustainability in art. This act of reusing discarded tiles, combined with the emotional power of watercolor, gives voice to the homeless and brings attention to their often-invisible struggles. Through this creative method, the artist highlights the intersection of social issues, environmental consciousness, and the power of art to provoke empathy and dialogue.

In sum, this research highlights the potential for unconventional mediums, like watercolor on mosaic tiles, to serve as a powerful form of artistic expression that engages with important social issues. It also emphasizes the importance of traditional materials as a means to preserve cultural continuity while encouraging innovation. Both approaches demonstrate how art can be a dynamic tool for reflection, activism, and change. One of the key findings of the research is how this approach to art can increase awareness of homelessness, foster empathy, and inspire social change.

To recount on the role of texture and materiality within the context within the studio practice, Anish Kapoor and Rachel Whiteread are quite informative in relation to these aspects and how they can be made to elicit powerful emotional responses (Weibel, 2021). Kapoor's sculptures also mark the use of light and space through the use of smooth surfaces coated with reflective material. His work focuses on the haptic qualities of objects suggesting that the spectators are to interact with their environment. Likewise, Whiteread techniques reassures concrete familiar objects and architectural spaces into poignant pieces that focus on the themes of loss and commemoration (Harrison, 2022). Studying these artists is beneficial in understanding how the students utilize texture and the materials involved in crafting work to add another layer of emotion to them where it becomes a point of reference for studios. This exploration aims at stressing that choice of materials is critical in fine art, therefore indicating to the new talented artists that they should impart multiple meanings and sentiments in their chosen materials. When artists involve in studio practice, studying of texture becomes a core part of the creation process of their artworks, and emotional bond they build with the observers.

The selection of material used and surfaces used in artwork is crucial, bearing the brunt of the comprehension of beauty and feeling in artwork. Some materials are bound to induce more or less reaction among the viewers and hence artists can always give the work a double meaning based on which material they choose. For instance, the surface characteristics of reclaimed and retro material or sound, such as wood or metal, is coarse, and it can be associated with themes like environmental deterioration or social abandonment. On the other hand, rough surfaces can convey a sense of conflict or chaos, while smooth polished surfaces can produce the opposite effect of calm or sophistication, which contrasts with the represented content. Frequently, artists experiment with an array of materials that are not typical for the art world, for example, cloth, paper, or objects, and such approach makes people think (Sachant et al., 2023). Such an approach to the relation with the materiality of objects evokes not only instinctive but also reasonable reaction among viewers with enhanced emotional response. When new kinds of media are offered in art it leads to the expansion of artistic opportunities and new ways to share meaning that challenges the audience's understanding of art and the actual meanings it can have (Rinehart & Ippolito, 2022). This shows that the deliberate employment of raw material forms a significant phase in elaborating multi-layered subjects in current aesthetics production.

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN ART

Art has long served as a powerful medium for expressing ideas, emotions, and social commentary. Throughout history, artists have used various forms of creative expression—such as visual art, literature, and music—to critique societal structures, challenge political power, and question established norms. Social criticism in art, in particular, is a way for artists to engage with and raise awareness of pressing social issues, offering a reflection of society and its complexities. As noted by Kuspit and Burton (2022), art can act as a catalyst for change, inviting audiences to question the status quo and consider alternative perspectives on important social concerns. Other artists, in contrast, turn to abstraction to convey their critiques, using bold colors, shapes, and forms to symbolize societal issues in a more interpretative manner. The abstract expressionists, such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, created works that, while not directly representational, evoke intense emotional responses that can challenge conventional views. These abstract works encourage viewers to think beyond literal interpretations and engage with the underlying emotional and psychological currents of social issues.

Art has traditionally served as an outlet for artists to have stayed informed about the social vices of society, among which are lack of fairness, prejudice, and despotism (Ghani & Fiske, 2020). In different ways, artists interact with their environment; they provide reflections of the world that make (or should make) people question everyday practice. Art criticism contains the message of censure and invokes people's reason through saturation, irony, and contrast with disturbing visual information (Celinscak & Hutt, 2021). Through these diverse approaches—realism, abstraction, and provocative imagery—artists contribute to the ongoing conversation about social issues. By highlighting the complexities and injustices of society, they create works that resonate with audiences, pushing them to reflect on and potentially challenge the systems that shape our lives. Art, in this way, becomes a means of both personal expression and collective engagement, offering new ways to understand and address the challenges of our time.

PORTRAIT SERIES ON DISCARDED TILES

This research was done by researcher to discover the possibilities of painting on ceramic tiles. Besides linking usage of old ceramic tiles with the subject which is homeless elderly in Georgetown, Penang, old ceramic tiles used also remind the concept of linking the arts to the environment which this can also encourage researchers to use the materials that might be old or forgotten by people to recreate and redefine into a new piece of art. In this study, the researcher explores the connection between discarded mosaic tiles and watercolor portrait paintings of elderly homeless individuals in Georgetown, Penang, examining themes of home and abandonment. The research focuses on how the use of unconventional materials, specifically discarded mosaic tiles, can serve as a powerful medium to convey these complex concepts. The artist's choice to paint portraits of homeless elderly individuals on these reclaimed tiles creates a poignant juxtaposition between the fragility of the human condition and the permanence of the materials, further enhancing the emotional depth of the work.

Through this exploration, the researcher discovers the potential of watercolor painting on mosaic tiles as a unique and expressive artistic approach. This technique not only offers new possibilities for artistic expression but also raises awareness about the pressing issue of homelessness, particularly among

elderly populations in Georgetown. By focusing on homeless elderly individuals, the artist brings attention to a marginalized group often overlooked in society, evoking empathy and encouraging viewers to reflect on their own perceptions of homelessness and aging. The use of discarded mosaic tiles as a medium adds another layer of meaning to the artwork. These tiles, typically considered waste, are repurposed to create portraits of those who have been abandoned by society. This choice underscores themes of environmentalism, as the artist breathes new life into materials that would otherwise be discarded, and also reflects a sense of humanitarianism. By reclaiming these tiles, the artwork becomes a commentary on both the environmental impact of waste and the social responsibility to care for vulnerable populations.

The artist began the painting process by connecting discarded mosaic tiles with watercolor portraits of elderly homeless individuals in Georgetown, Penang, exploring the themes of home and abandonment. The act of painting on these tiles mirrors the process of building a home, requiring careful attention, patience, and a sense of dedication. Each watercolor stroke on the mosaic fragments reflects this deliberate effort, symbolizing the emotional investment involved in creating a space of belonging and comfort. The individual shape and placement of each tile are unique, with no preordained plan, which mirrors the diversity of experiences among the homeless elderly population. Each fragment, though part of a larger whole, carries its own story—much like each person experiencing homelessness. The uneven, fragmented nature of the mosaics can be seen as a visual metaphor for the lives of homeless individuals, whose experiences are shaped by hardship and isolation. This choice of medium enhances the emotional resonance of the portraits, connecting the physical and emotional landscapes of the homeless elderly to the artwork itself. In this way, the artist's use of discarded mosaics transforms these forgotten materials into a poignant commentary on the fragmentation of home, identity, and community.

Moreover, the watercolor wash effect, commonly employed in mosaic art, serves as a compelling metaphor for the impermanence of old age and the transient nature of life. Watercolors, by their very nature, blend and diffuse over time, creating soft, fluid transitions between colors that evoke a sense of temporality. Similarly, the hues within the mosaic tiles, particularly as they age and weather, may gradually lose their vibrancy and definition. This fading of color in the tiles mirrors the physical and emotional changes that accompany the aging process, where the once-vivid aspects of life—whether in terms of health, vitality, or personal circumstances—may dull or shift with time. This fading effect in both watercolor and mosaic tiles also underscores the concept of vulnerability, especially in the context of elderly individuals. As individuals grow older, their physical and mental faculties may diminish, paralleling the gradual loss of sharpness and clarity seen in both watercolor paintings and aging mosaic materials. The tiles, which once had a defined structure and function, become worn and less distinct, reflecting how the passage of time impacts not only the body but also one's sense of home, identity, and stability. In the broader context of homes and aging, this interplay between the watercolor wash and the fading mosaics symbolizes the fragility of the spaces we inhabit. As homes age, their once-crisp features may erode, their colors may fade, and their materials may deteriorate. Likewise, the elderly experience changes in their living environments, whether through physical deterioration or the loss of personal connections.

CONCLUSION

In creating artwork that addresses the issue of homelessness in Georgetown, Penang, the artist develops a deep sense of empathy for the living conditions of homeless individuals. Through her work, she seeks to give a voice to those who are often overlooked, shedding light on their struggles and encouraging viewers to reflect on the broader social, economic, and political factors that contribute to homelessness. This engagement with the subject matter goes beyond mere representation; it aims to provoke thought and action regarding the pressing issues surrounding homelessness in urban environments. In this study, materials and materials that can convey the artist's personal expression are used in artworks that express the ideas and emotions of homeless people in Georgetown, Penang the integration of found objects, such as cardboard and newspaper, further enriches the artistic narrative surrounding homelessness. Furthermore, this research indirectly promotes environmental awareness by advocating for the reuse and recycling of materials in artistic practice. The artist's decision to incorporate discarded mosaic tiles and other repurposed materials into her artwork reflects a commitment to sustainability and environmental responsibility. By transforming what would otherwise be considered waste into

meaningful works of art, the artist challenges both societal attitudes toward consumption and the value of materials, suggesting that even discarded items can be reintegrated into society in a meaningful way. This approach encourages other artists to consider how they, too, can incorporate sustainable practices into their creative processes, reducing waste while producing thought-provoking art. These materials are often associated with the realities of living on the streets, serving as makeshift bedding and shelters.

This approach not only emphasizes the struggle for survival but also raises awareness of the broader societal issues related to homelessness. The unconventional use of everyday materials reinforces the message of environmentalism and humanitarianism, effectively challenging societal perceptions of homelessness. Techniques available when using watercolor include a vast range and the mode of art creates or may create nostalgia as well as compassion. The very watercolor that deletes incorporates into his work has the property of washing out details and when applied to his subject gives a timeworn feel that makes homelessness seem more like a relic of history than a modern problem. Even when diluted, the pigment of the direct layer is beneficial since, with the layer's thin thickness, its intensity under the following layers can be demonstrated as parts that are faded, worn, etc., thus deepening the work's feeling (Kong & Meng, 2022). Such technique is very helpful in portraying the suffering of homeless people because it promotes compassion and underlines the fact that this problem exists to this day. Through this artistic inquiry, it becomes evident that the choice of materials is instrumental in conveying personal expressions about homelessness in Georgetown, Penang. Each medium—whether watercolor or found objects—carries its own significance, enabling artists to engage with and represent the multifaceted nature of homelessness. By exploring these materials, artists can evoke empathy, inspire dialogue, and ultimately foster social change. This research not only highlights the importance of material selection in artistic practice but also underscores the potential of art to serve as a powerful vehicle for social commentary and personal expression.

This research not only emphasizes the significance of material selection in artistic practice but also highlights the transformative potential of art as a vehicle for social commentary and personal expression. The choice of medium plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and emotional resonance of a work. One of the defining qualities of watercolor is its ability to create texture and evoke a sense of age and history. When applied with care, watercolor can produce soft transitions between colors, mimicking the passage of time and the impermanence of materials. This is especially pertinent when addressing themes such as homelessness, where the subject matter inherently carries connotations of wear, deterioration, and enduring hardship. The subtle layering of watercolor—applying thin washes of paint to build up a delicate, faded appearance—can create a worn or weathered effect that aligns with the themes of displacement and marginalization. Such an aesthetic suggests that the subjects of the artwork have endured prolonged neglect or struggle, resonating with viewers on a deeply emotional level. This effect also mirrors the lived experiences of homeless individuals, whose lives are often marked by uncertainty and the erosion of their basic rights and dignities over time. Through this technique, the artist can evoke a sense of empathy and compassion, prompting viewers to reflect on the enduring nature of homelessness and the long-term impact it has on individuals and communities. This research not only highlights the importance of material selection in artistic practice but also underscores the potential of art to serve as a powerful vehicle for social commentary and personal expression.

In analyzing the artworks that express the realities of homelessness in Georgetown, Penang, Erwin Panofsky's model of art interpretation provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple layers of meaning within these artistic expressions. Panofsky's approach encompasses three primary layers: the pre-iconographical, the iconographical, and the iconological. By applying this model, we can explore how materials and their qualities contribute to the depth of expression regarding homelessness while focusing on the intricate relationship between materiality and meaning. The pre-iconographical layer focuses on the basic, formal aspects of the artwork—such as color, texture, shape, and composition—without considering their symbolic meaning. In this context, the materials chosen by the artist, such as discarded mosaic tiles or watercolor, are significant. The iconographical layer, on the other hand, delves into the specific subjects and symbols presented in the artwork, interpreting the cultural or historical significance behind them. In the case of portraits of homeless elderly individuals in Georgetown, the iconographical analysis would consider the symbolism of the subjects themselves—who they are, what they represent, and the broader social issues that these images speak to. For instance, the portrayal of elderly homeless individuals highlights issues of aging, poverty, and social neglect. Finally, the iconological layer addresses the broader, more profound meaning of the artwork—its

cultural, philosophical, or moral implications. This layer allows for a deeper exploration of how the artwork engages with the issue of homelessness on a conceptual level. The artist's use of materials and the emotional resonance of the work invite viewers to reflect not only on the individual circumstances of the homeless but also on the systemic factors that contribute to their situation. In applying Panofsky's model, this analysis of the artworks related to homelessness in Georgetown, Penang, reveals how the materials, subjects, and symbolism work together to create a multilayered narrative. This approach not only uncovers the deeper meanings within the artwork but also underscores the power of art to address complex social issues and inspire reflection on the societal structures that contribute to the suffering of marginalized communities.

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