

A Philosophical Exploration of Symbolism and Meaning in Modern Artistic Practices

By Wanying Han

Author Biography

Wanying Han is a senior at Sage Hill High School in California. She is passionate about the interplay between philosophy and art. With a strong interest in understanding how contemporary artistic practices approach and advance intricate philosophical concepts, she aspires to investigate further the theoretical underpinnings of artistic styles and cultural influences. Besides academic endeavors, She also enjoys exploring the motifs of identity, self-expression, and existential anxiety through artwork.

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate relationship between art and philosophy, aiming to understand how contemporary artistic practices approach and convey philosophical ideas like identity, human existence, and cultural introspection through symbolism and meaning. Employing the case study approach to research, it analyzes the themes of identity and self-expression in Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939) and the motifs of existential anxiety and alienation in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893). The study findings demonstrate the significant role of art as a personal and philosophical means of exploring, conceptualizing, and expressing intricate abstract ideas in a tactile form. Thus, art and philosophy are deeply intertwined, with the former serving as a valuable medium for amplifying the abstract themes of the latter more compellingly. Discourses on the subject matter may benefit from further mixed-methods studies exploring potential interdisciplinary approaches for fostering the working relationship between two disciplines to generate valuable insight for fostering philosophy's continued inspiration of modern art to sustainably challenge societal perceptions, practices, and human experiences.

Keywords: art, philosophy, contemporary art, self-expression, identity, Frida Kahlo, the Two Fridas, Edvard Munch, The Scream.

Introduction

Art and philosophy are significantly intertwined, given that both disciplines contend with and explore the fundamental questions relating to the meaning of existence, the concept of identity, and the essence of life. Notably, philosophy strives to understand the nature of reality, morality, and consciousness. At the same time, art provides visual, auditory, and tactile media for expressing philosophical inquiries more concretely and emotively. The foundational ontological and epistemological question of "Who am I?" underpins philosophical endeavors and examines an individual's identity, values, and beliefs based on their life experiences and worldviews (Joshi et al., 2023). Thus, artists strive to answer this question through creative expressions and deep reflections. Aesthetic philosophy, concerned with the nature of beauty and appreciation of artistic expressions, provides an essential framework for exploring the subjective and objective facets of creative works. Examining the interplay between these fields and how contemporary artistic practices exemplify and convey philosophical ideas is crucial for understanding the role of symbolism and other creative techniques in expressing the concepts of self-identity, human existence, and societal contemplation.

Research Question

In what ways do contemporary artistic practices explore and communicate philosophical ideas like identity, human existence, and cultural introspection through symbolism and meaning?

Literature Review

Philosophical Influences on Art

The interrelationship and interdependence between art and philosophy trace their roots to ancient civilizations, where the former was a critical medium for conveying metaphysical concepts and spiritual beliefs. The philosophical influences on artistic expressions became explicit during the Renaissance era (14th century to 17th century), which emerged in Italy and spread across Europe,

significantly impacting many facets of society, including art, culture, and religion. Science, and classical philosophy of antiquity. At the core of this period of rebirth was the emergence of humanism, a movement that upheld human potential and achievements while striving to incorporate classical learning into modern thoughts (Onibere & Ottuh, 2024). Thus, humanists like Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374) and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1373) laid the foundation for a new approach to thinking that embraced individuality and secular worldviews while fostering a critical approach to learning. The philosophical underpinnings of the Renaissance era significantly influenced artistic innovations, marking a considerable departure from the stylistic protocols of the idle Ages. Haroon (2024) observed that this era was characterized by exploring societal perspectives and using light and shadow for artistic expressions. Renaissance artists like Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and Michelangelo (1475-1564) also utilized revolutionary techniques to advance the concept of realism and emotional depth. The revival of art, inspired by humanism and the need to advance individuality, demonstrates the philosophical influences on the discipline.

The Enlightenment's rationalist philosophy also profoundly shaped Western artists, conditioning them to prioritize reason, symmetry, order, and social critique in their works. This philosophical standpoint underpinned neo-classicism, an art movement that emerged in the mid-18th century as a response to the beautiful and elaborate styles of the Baroque and Rococo eras. Neo-classicism, defined by reconsidering the conventional ideals of symmetry, simplicity, and proportion, was inspired by ancient Greek and Roman artistic and architectural practices. It focused on mythology and history and utilized linear perspective to create depth while subduing the color palette. Sadikhova (2024) observes that the Baroque (17th century) and Classical (mid-18th century) arts, although sequential, are characterized by contrasting stylistic approaches, underscoring the distinctions between their underpinning philosophical and aesthetic ideologies. While the former exhibits emotional intensity, dynamic compositions, and dramatic use of color and light, the latter prioritizes ancient Greek and Roman artworks' simplicity, balance, and harmony. The variations in the Baroque

and classical art forms highlight the role of philosophy in the world's artistic development over time.

Philosophical Movements' Role in Contemporary Art

Specific philosophical movements, including existentialism, surrealism, and postmodernism, significantly influenced the development of contemporary art. Thus, modern art relies on philosophical constructs to challenge conventional societal perspectives. For instance, postmodern-era thinkers like Jacques Derrida questioned the stability of meaning and disrupted conventional aesthetic frameworks, re-evaluating the societal role of art (Asare-Aboagye et al., 2023). Consequently, existentialist philosophy, advanced by notable thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre, influenced artistic works exploring alienation, absurd, and freedom motifs. On the other hand, surrealist artists like Salvador Dalí depicted the subconscious mind by incorporating Freudian psychoanalysis in their creative works, using it as a source of inspiration and an impactful tool for exploring the human psyche (Caraccio & Kryger, 2023). In addition, postmodernism, characterized by the cynicism of grand narratives, confronted customary aesthetics, midwifing conceptual art that preferred ideas over form. The influence of existentialism, surrealism, and postmodernism on modern art's development demonstrates philosophy's pivotal role in shaping art as a discipline.

Notable Philosophical Concepts in Contemporary Art

Modern artworks incorporate philosophical concepts to enhance their aesthetic value and impactfully challenge societal norms. Notable philosophical ideas advanced by contemporary artists include identity and self-expression, symbolism and meaning, and human existence and alienation. Additionally, present-day artistry prioritizes human existence and alienation, the philosophical standpoint that humans can experience separation or a sense of engagement from self, society, or the products of their labor. A detailed review of these concepts is

necessary to understand their place in contemporary art.

Identity and Self-Expression

Contemporary art explores themes like identity and assertiveness, utilizing them to challenge societal norms and advance personal realities. Modern artistic expressions serve as archives for social identity, cultural practices, and other societal practices. Al-Zadjali (2024) observes that modern art is an effective tool for comprehending and appreciating multiculturalism. It depicts the intricacies and realities of multicultural communities, fosters communication, and recognizes ethnic plurality. Contemporary artists, such as Frida Kahlo (1907-1954), are known for their works that integrate themes of personal pain and passion with more profound reflections on the ideas of gender and cultural identity (Turkheimer et al., 2022). Consequently, Kahlo is often recognized as a champion of surrealism and a modern art icon due to her usage of visual symbolism of physical pain to advance the idea of emotional suffering. Through her works, the Mexican painter advances a dialogue between her inner world and eternal influences using symbolic elements, such as monkeys and thorns. Kahlo's paintings, symbolically reflecting her life experiences, Mexican culture, and other societal phenomena, highlight the integration of philosophical concepts of identity and self-expression in modern art.

Symbolism and Meaning

Contemporary artists have mastered the art of using symbolism to convey intricate, layered meanings, impactfully expressing their deepest fears, expectations, and hopes. The idea of symbolism in artistic expressions is a heterogeneous phenomenon that has evolved over centuries, depicting the intricacies of human thoughts, emotions, and cultural practices. As Abbar (2023) notes, symbolism has significantly influenced modernist art, providing creatives with a powerful tool to communicate complex ideas and emotions. Thus, contemporary artists adopt specific symbols to add layers of meaning to their work, managing to convey complex societal issues to the target audience. In their analysis

of Rupī Kaur's "The Sun and Her Flowers" (2017), Mughal et al. (2023) establish that the artist utilizes symbols and line art to craft a significant and multi-dimensional experience that resonates with the contemporary audience. Thus, manages to explore themes of self-discovery, human experience, and empowerment through symbolism, demonstrating the interdependence between art and philosophy.

Human Existence and Alienation

The themes of alienation and human existence are philosophical ideas often expressed artistically in today's society. Contemporary artists creatively explore these concepts and profoundly arouse their target audiences to reflect on their experiences. Edvard Munch's "The Scream" vividly highlights the motif of existential anxiety and dread, describing how he felt in the company of friends (Pettersen, 2022). Thus, the painting symbolizes the darkly troubled times the Norwegian artists experienced as they dealt with mental health issues and trauma, alienating them from the rest of society. It is imperative to note that Munch struggled with depression and anxiety in his entire life. Therefore, historians often perceive "The Scream" as a pictorial depiction of the artist's psyche. The rapid urbanization and technological developments of the 19th century created a sense of alienation, a motif that runs through "The Scream" (1893), (Pettersen, 2022). Thus, Munch's iconic artwork symbolizes the anguish and estrangement of contemporary existence. Modern installations usually utilize immersive environments to compel the audience to reflect on the intricacies of existence.

Methodology

This paper adopts a descriptive case study research approach to explore the manifestation of philosophical constructs like identity, symbolism, and human existence in contemporary artistic practices. This method allows for an in-depth and contextual analysis of specific artworks, providing a better understanding of the philosophy-modern art intersection and valuable insights for answering the research question. Focusing on individual cases allows a more targeted analysis to demonstrate the unique expression of abstract philosophical themes

through the selected artworks (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021). Thus, a case study provides a contextual framework for analyzing and interpreting the symbolic depictions of the selected artworks' philosophical underpinnings. It allows for comparison of their styles and techniques, ultimately enriching the discussion and answering the research question. The study considers two case studies, including Frida Kahlo's self-portraits and Edvard Munch's "The Scream." The former helps clarify how the artist advances the themes of identity and self-expression in her work. At the same time, the latter provides insights into the ideas of existential anxiety and the motif of alienation. The paper utilizes thematic and content analysis techniques to qualitatively explore relevant texts and images of the two cases, focusing on their artistic styles and philosophical meanings. The selected case studies are ideal for answering the research question because they offer diverse but complementary insights into the intersection of art and philosophy.

Findings and Discussion

The Themes of Identity and Self-expression in Frida Kahlo's Self-Portraits

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits significantly advance the philosophical themes of identity and self-expression, conveying the Mexican artist's lived experiences, physical and emotional pain, and resilience in a highly patriarchal society. Self-portraits showcase how Kahlo interprets or communicates with herself, enabling the audience to understand the artist better. One of Kahlo's iconic artworks, *The Two Fridas* (1939) (see Figure 1), illustrates two juxtaposed versions of her, connected by a vein, symbolizing the duality of her personality or identity. The traditional Mexican Frida donned in a Tehuana costume with a broken heart sits next to a modern, independent, European-influenced Frida. It is imperative to note that Frida created the double self-portrait oil painting shortly after divorcing Diego Rivera (Li, 2020). *The Two Fridas*, fraternal twins except in their attire, depict the artist's identity in different cultures. For instance, before marrying Rivera, the professional photographer and a revered

Mexican muralist, in 1929, Kahlo often wore modern European dresses, which is evident in *The Two Frida* (1939). However, due to Rivera's influence, she embraced traditional Mexican attire, which became a source of her heartbreak (see Figure 1). Thus, Frida successfully illustrates her dual personality, personal suffering, and emotional vulnerability using vivid hues and intricate symbolism. *The Two Frida* aligns with the philosophical constructs of selfhood and individuality, as Kahlo utilizes art to convey her inner feelings, physical pain, and emotional anguish to the audience.

Frida Kahlo. (1939). *The Two Fridas*. [oil on canvas]. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico

Existential Anxiety in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893)

Munch's *The Scream* (1893) symbolizes existential anxiety, fear, alienation, and inner turmoil, vividly reflecting human existence's fragility. This lone figure wandering against a swirling, crimson sky has increasingly become a universal emblem of contemporary despair. As shown in Figure 2, the painting captures an individual on a bridge, clutching their face in excruciating anguish amid swirling colors and distorted forms, creating a turbulent atmosphere. The chaotic scenes surrounding the portrait's central figure evoke a sense of inner turmoil and alienation from the world. The swirling imagery resonates with the artist's deep-seated mental illnesses and how existential philosophy and symbolist aesthetics explain the enduring impact of anxiety and depression on the artist. As Paulson (n.d.) notes, Edward Munch's life was characterized by profound personal losses, including losing his mother and elder sister to tuberculosis when he was just 5 years old. Thus, the sense of looming darkness defined by death, illness, and insanity, which characterized his childhood, often dominates the artist's oeuvre. Even though *The Scream* (1893) predates the primary elements of 20th-century existential philosophy, it aligns with the ideas advanced by contemporary thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jean-Paul Sartre regarding existential anxiety and alienation.

Edvard Munch. (1893). *The Scream*. [tempera and oil on cardboard]. National Gallery, Oslo, Norway.

Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard extensively explore the individual's battle with the mental issues of despair and isolation in a cosmic void. *The Scream* (1893)'s swirling, blood-red sky symbolizes the cosmic coldness, while the protagonist's mesmerized expression illustrates an inexpressible encounter with meaninglessness. Thus, the artwork embodies a feeling of alienation and existential anxiety that characterized the 19th century, following the era's rapid urbanization and technological upheavals (Paulson, n.d.). The lone figure is alienated from the two vague silhouettes featured in the portrait's background, suggesting social and emotional estrangement. The painting's genderless and near-skeletal features underscore its universality – an ideal depiction of contemporary humans battling the existential challenges of anxiety and depression. In *The Scream* (1893), Edvard Munch advances the philosophical questions of existentialism and contemporary alienation by underscoring alienation, fear, and cosmic vastness long before the concepts became mainstream in the discipline.

Comparative Analysis of Insights and Meanings in Kahlo's and Munch's Works

Kahlo and Munch creatively utilize symbolism in their artistic works to convey their lived experiences, translating philosophical concepts into visual forms. However, the creators also differ in their scope and the artistic techniques they utilize to achieve their objectives. For instance, *The Two Fridas* (1939) emphasizes identity and self-expression, blending the artist's experiences and cross-cultural narratives. The vein in this double self-portrait oil painting links the two figures, depicting the artist's inner struggle and shattered identity. On the other hand, in *The Scream* (1893), swirling lines universally symbolize the chaotic nature of existential anxiety. The two artworks vividly illustrate how contemporary artists utilize symbolism to leverage the interrelationship and interdependence between art and philosophy, providing the audience with a theoretical and

practical framework for contemplation and self-awareness. Artwork is valuable for visualizing and conveying complex philosophical concepts more compellingly.

These findings demonstrate the significant role of art as a personal and philosophical means of exploring, conceptualizing, and expressing intricate abstract ideas in a tactile form. Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939) and Munch's *The Scream* (1893) underscore the art's ability to evoke profound emotional and intellectual reactions, offering an essential platform for advancing diverse philosophical discourses. The analysis also demonstrates that contextual considerations are essential ingredients for interpreting artworks, as contemporary artists tend to draw substantially from their personal experiences and sociocultural influences. The case studies corroborate that modern artworks advance philosophical themes and significantly influence cultural storylines and societal contemplation, confirming the dynamic intersection between the two disciplines.

Conclusion

Using personal experiences and sociocultural influences, modern artists visualize and simplify complex philosophical themes, such as identity, self-expression, existential anxiety, and alienation, in a tactile manner, mobilizing the audience into introspection and self-awareness. Thus, art and philosophy are deeply intertwined, with the former serving as a valuable medium for amplifying the abstract themes of the latter more compellingly. Therefore, there is a need for further mixed-methods research to explore promising interdisciplinary approaches for fostering the working relationship between two disciplines, ensuring that philosophy continues to inspire modern art to challenge societal perceptions, practices, and human experiences.

References

Abbar, E. M. (2023). A critical analysis of symbolism in modernist literature concerning T.S. Eliot and Roland Barthes. *South Asian Res J Art Lang Lit*, 5(4), 138-142.

https://sarpublishment.com/media/articles/SARJALL_54_138-142.pdf

Al-Zadjali, Z. (2024). The significance of art in revealing a culture's identity and multiculturalism. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(1), 232-250. <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=130687>

Asare-Aboagye, I., Adom, D., Kquofi, S., Adu-Agyem, J. (2023). The development of aesthetics as a philosophical concept: An explanatory theoretical perspective. Adom D. Publications. <https://doi.org/10.60129/adompubl.bs00123>

Caraccio, M. & Kryger, M. H. (2023). Salvador Dali: Hypnagogic hallucinations in art. *Sleep Health*, 9(1), 1-2. [https://www.sleephealthjournal.org/article/S2352-7218\(2023\)2900014-1/fulltext](https://www.sleephealthjournal.org/article/S2352-7218(2023)2900014-1/fulltext)

FridaKahlo.org. (n.d.). *The Two Fridas, 1939 by Frida Kahlo*. <https://www.fridakahlo.org/the-two-fridas.jsp>

Haroon, H. (2024). Reviving ancient techniques: The contemporary renaissance in art. *Al-Behishat Research Archive*, 2(1), 8-13. <https://al-behishat.rjmss.com/index.php/20/article/view/18/35>

Joshi, A., Roy, S., Manik, R. K., & Kumar, S. (2024). Scientific philosophy: Exploring existential, metaphysical, and ethical research philosophy behind the question "Who am I?" *Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results*, 14(3), 2023. <https://dx.doi.org/10.47750/pnr.2023.14.03.215>

Li, Y. (2020). The transition in Frida Kahlo's self-portrait: Before and after 1939. *Advances in Social Science, Education, and Humanities Research*, 415, 199-209. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Martinsuo, M. & Huemann, M. (2021). Reporting case studies for making an impact. *International Journal of Project Management*, 39(8), 827-833. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2021.11.005>

Mughal, K. S., Niaz, F., Fazil, N., & Sarwer, S. (2023). Exploring the role of visual art in enhancing popularity and meaning: Semiotics and visual perspective. *Journal of Asian Development Studies*, 12(4), 1162-1173.
<https://doi.org/10.62345/jads.2023.12.4.94>

Onibere, V. & Ottuh, P. O. O. (2024). Transcendence and tradition: exploring the intersection of art, religion, and philosophy in the Renaissance era. *Abraka Journal of Religion and Philosophy*, 4(1), 186-201.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/384635198_TRANSCENDENCE_AND_TRADITION_EXPLORING_THE_INTERSECTION_OF_ART_RELIGION_AND_PHILOSOPHY_IN_THE_RENAISSANCE_ERA

Paulson, N. (n.d.). Edvard Munch, The Scream. Smarthistory.
<https://smarthistory.org/munch-the-scream/>

Pettersen, P. (2022). Edvard Munch – The Scream. *International Journal of Conservation Science*, 13(1), 1405-1420.
https://ijcs.ro/public/IJCS-22-104_Pettersen.pdf

Sadikhova, S. N. (2024). Contrasting splendor: A comparative study of baroque and classical styles in visual arts. *Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum*, 1(2), 144-154.
<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.01024076>

Turkheimer, F. E., Liu, J., Fagerholm, E. D., Dazzan, P., Loggia, M. L., & Bettelheim, E. (2022). The art of pain: A quantitative color analysis of the self-portraits of Frida Kahlo. *Frontiers of Human Neuroscience*, 16, 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2022.1000656>