

# A Visual Re-Narrating of Loneliness during the COVID-19: A Study of Painting Practice Based on Personal Isolation Experience

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**Abstract:** The background of this study is based on personal experiences during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2021 to 2022. At this stage, the epidemic has not completely ended, and social life is still in a state of repeated lockdown, home isolation, and travel restrictions. And the emotions in this state are longer, quieter, and more of an inner loneliness. This study focuses on the visual reconstruction of "loneliness emotions" in painting during the pandemic, exploring how painting can serve as a medium for emotional expression and memory retelling, transforming personal isolation experiences into visual images that are viewable, perceivable, and empathetic. The research adopts a qualitative research method based on studio practice and is carried out through three paths: visual research, visual analysis, and artistic creation. Secondly, by combining The constructive memory theory and the visual method of re-narration, the works "The Window" and "Sleep" were finally completed. Researchers collected the results by conducting questionnaires among professional artists and scholars. The research findings indicate that the loneliness during the epidemic is mainly expressed through visual elements such as enclosed Spaces, still figures, soft but depressing tones, Windows, beds, plants and sleeping states. Through painting, researchers not only re-narrated individuals' feelings of loneliness during the pandemic, but also transformed private memories into emotional images that resonate with society.

**Keywords:** Emotion of loneliness, Re-Narrating, Epidemic Painting.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the 2022 World Health Organization, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased significantly by 25% (Figure 4). Loneliness, fear of infection, suffering and death for oneself and loved ones, and the pain of losing a loved one are also regarded as stress sources leading to anxiety and depression. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, said: "The information we have now about the impact of COVID-19 on global mental health is just the tip of the iceberg, but it serves as a wake-up call for all countries to pay more attention to the field of mental health and better support the mental health of their people" (WHO, 2022).

In the context of the pandemic, loneliness is not merely a simple state of being alone, but a complex emotion created by public crises. It encompasses the sense of powerlessness after the body is restricted, the estrangement from the inability to interact with each other, the emptiness after the quietness of the city, and the mental exhaustion formed by individuals during long waiting periods.

For researcher, the loneliness at this stage has a very clear source of personal experience: the passing of family members has not been truly digested, cities remain silent and under control, outdoor activities have been cancelled, work suspension has caused income pressure, and individuals can only wait for changes in the epidemic situation in a closed indoor space. These experiences transformed loneliness from an abstract psychological state into a concrete spatial experience: a limited room, a door that cannot be opened and a body with nowhere to go, all of which together formed the realistic basis of loneliness during the pandemic.

As a visual expression medium, painting can transform this kind of loneliness experience that is difficult to describe completely in words into images. Compared with textual narration, painting can more directly trigger the emotional feelings of viewers through color, composition, light, objects and human postures (Damiano et al., 2023; Weng et al., 2024). During the epidemic, many artists recorded the living conditions of individuals in lockdown and isolation through their paintings. What they depict is not merely external events, but the psychological traces left after public crises enter private life. For researchers, painting is not only a way to record the experience of the epidemic, but also a method to reorganize traumatic memories, release suppressed emotions and establish self-narratives.

This study thus focuses on a core question: Through what visual elements can the "feeling of loneliness" in the middle of the epidemic be presented in paintings? And how do researchers create emotionally narrative paintings based on their own isolation experiences? Centering on these two issues, this article will be based on

The researcher's personal experience, combined with the analysis of visual materials and related artworks during the epidemic period, to explore the visualization path of loneliness emotions in painting, and further explain how the two works "The Window" and "Sleep" transform personal loneliness into visual experiences that can be perceived by the audience.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Contemporary Landscape Painting

The theory of constructive memory holds that memory is not a mechanical replication of past experiences, but rather a psychological process in which an individual reorganizes and reconstructs past experiences based on their existing knowledge structure, emotional state and real-life situation during the retrieval process. Memory is not a mechanical replication of past events. Instead, during the process of recall, an individual actively reorganizes and reconstructs fragments of past experiences based on current emotional states, cognitive schema, and real-life situations (Schacter & Thakral, 2024; Spens et al., 2024). In addition, Schacter & Addis (2007) published an article in *Nature*, taking a step closer to the explanation of constructive memory. They said, Memory that operates by piecing together past fragments may be more suitable for simulating future events than memory that stores perfect records (Schacter & Addis, 2007). A more in-depth exploration comes from Wagoner (2021), who states that constructive memory or reconstructive memory describes the process by which we construct memories based on new experiences and emotions. It has an advantage because it indicates that memory has the ability to be creative and adapt to a constantly changing world, and is closely related to imagination (Wagoner, 2021).

In art, this means that artists do not completely reproduce their experiences but rather reconstruct them, which is usually influenced by personal experiences, emotions and culture. Artistic memory is a flexible and imaginative process in which the past is constantly reinterpreted and transformed, thereby shaping new narratives (Bolland, 2019). As Hopking (2023) pointed out, painting itself from memory can enhance recall and is an artistic approach that embodies constructive memory. Research shows that drawing detailed images involves fine, dynamic and image components, which can enhance memory encoding and retrieval. Artists intuitively utilize these to convey rich emotional narratives (Hopking, 2023).

### 2.2 Re-narrating Visual Method

Emotion is the starting point for researchers to construct memory. Throughout the process, researcher will adopt the method of Re-narrating to express emotions in painting by using memory. The process of Re-narrating includes two methods: autobiography and interview. This process is a widely used method of learning and focusing on research topics established in daily experience (Steward, 1997 & 2007). An autobiographical approach allows artists to reveal their personal experiences by telling a life story. This autobiographical approach is a way of explaining how to explore (understand) artists (art practitioners) through the concepts of participation, identity, history, time, storytelling, interpretation, experience and knowledge (Puadi, MF, et al, 2020). David Herman is a professor at North Carolina University. He (2013) holds the same view, arguing that "Re-narrating" refers to the process of retelling or reinterpreting a narrative, which can provide new insights and understanding. Moreover, retelling plays a crucial role in human cognition. Through retelling stories, individuals can reconstruct new understandings and create new meanings (Herman David, 2013).

In the context of painting, "re-narrating" refers to the process of retelling and presenting a story through visual art (Bal, M., 2007). It is also mentioned in Visual Arts that re-narrating allows artists to explore their personal experiences to create works with profound thinking. By sharing their own stories, artists can establish a deeper connection with the audience and generate empathy.

## 3. Methodology

This research project adopts the studio practice research method and mainly unfolds from two core aspects. First, based on E.B. The "art criticism method" proposed by Feldman (1994) involves critical self-reflection. Second, conduct research through studio experiments.

### 3.1 Self-Critical Reflection

The critical reflection in this research project adopted the method proposed by E.B. Feldman (1994), which is more applicable to the study of artistic practice. Feldman's approach to art criticism is a method used for discovering and evaluating works of art, mainly following four principles: description, analysis, interpretation and judgment.

Description: At this stage, it is required to accurately describe what you see, in sufficient detail. The description should include the content and theme of the figurative work, as well as the abstract elements of

the non-figurative work, including (size, shape, texture, color, light source, medium, form, space, etc.).  
**Analysis:** At this stage, it is analyzed how these formal elements interact with each other to form the overall composition and aesthetic effect of the work. This step encourages the audience to think about how the artist uses these elements to convey meaning and emotion.  
**Interpretation:** This section explains the content and theme of the work, taking into account the artist's intention and possible symbolic meaning. This step helps the audience have a deeper communication with the work and develop their own understanding.  
**Judgment:** Based on the previous analysis, evaluate the work, taking into account its aesthetic value, emotional impact and cultural significance. This step encourages the audience to reflect on their reactions to the work and express their opinions.

### 3.2 Studio Experimentation

Studio-based research officially developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and now an increasing number of artists are using this method for artistic creation and research (Brown & Sorensen, 2009). Up to now, studio-based research remains an emerging form of research, usually practiced by those involved in creative and aesthetic work (Sullivan, 2006 & 2010; Marshall, 2010). Puadi, MF, Khairani, MZB and Othman, ANB (2020) in Studio Investigation: It is explained in "An Approach in Studio-Based Research" that studio-based research, like any other kind of research, contributes to science through the creative work of visual arts. In the practice studio, the research methods are divided into two stages, namely the data generation stage and the artwork stage (Puadi et al., 2020).

The researcher have made the following chart (figure 1) to guide the generation of the works in the fourth part on how to apply the theory to the works.

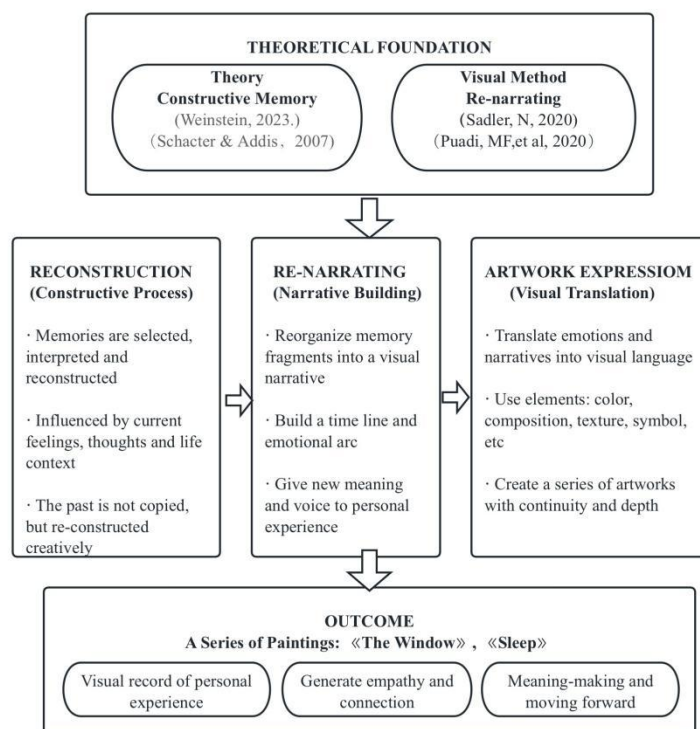


Figure 1: Theoretical guidance process

### 4. Studio Practice

In this chapter, based on the methodology and theories mentioned earlier, the research process will be implemented in more detail. The researcher created two works, "The Window" and "Sleep", centering on the emotion of "loneliness". Both works are derived from the isolation experience in the middle of the epidemic, but they focus on different psychological aspects. "The Window" emphasizes an individual's observation and yearning for the outside world in a confined space, while "Sleep" highlights the mental numbness and escape state that arise after long-term isolation.

#### 4.1 First Artwork: The Window

The Window can effectively evoke the sense of loneliness during the period of epidemic spread. The key lies in that the visual elements and emotional expressions are deeply in line with the social psychology and individual experiences at that time. First of all, the core visual symbols all come from real life scenes and long-neglected character images. Secondly, Windows have a strong symbolic meaning of loneliness during the epidemic. Youvan (2024) explores the complex relationship between urban life and emotional loneliness, mainly by examining how artists depict urban loneliness through various visual techniques such as light, space, and recurring window themes (Youvan, 2024). Windows are often regarded as symbols of psychological distance, isolation and loneliness in visual arts (Art UK, 2025).



Figure 2 (a, b, c): Researcher's picture from period of COVID

The original inspiration for this work came from a real photograph taken by the researcher during the quarantine (figure 2, a). The picture is a true record of researcher's isolation in a rented house. It was an afternoon that day, and the sunset was particularly beautiful. So, the researcher sat by the window with a chair, enjoying the view of the sky outside. In the corner of the balcony, there were dry plants that had not been watered for a long time. The researcher recalled the state of mind when taking this photo, longing to go out and feel the sunshine, longing to breathe fresh air, but at the same time, there was a sense of uncertainty and loneliness about how long they would be isolated. The picture (figure 2, b) records that during the period when the researcher was just quarantined, the plants he raised still had strong vitality. In sharp contrast to the picture (figure 2, c), after an unknown number of days of quarantine, The researcher's plants gradually began to wither under the prolonged numbness and neglect of the researcher. These details all became important references for the subsequent creative sketches.

From the isolation materials, researcher found that "gazing out of the window" was a common behavior during the period of isolation when the epidemic was spreading. For instance, the images of residents looking out of the window during the lockdown in a certain community in Shanghai and the sunrise outside the window taken by quarantined residents in Beijing were mentioned in the article. This further strengthened the researchers' creative direction. After sorting through personal photos and public social data, it was found that elements such as Windows and green plants are key elements in conveying a sense of loneliness, which clarified the core visual symbols for the sketch creation.



Figure 3: Sketch of "The Window". Researcher. 2025. Media: Mixed Media. Size: 35x35cm

When creating the sketch, the researcher determined the sketch based on the key elements extracted during the visual study - such as Windows, human postures, vines, sunlight, etc. (figure 3).

After determining the elements of the picture, it was finally decided to adopt a half-body composition, placing the figure slightly to the left of the center, and using a window frame to form a natural composition framework. The lines of the withered vines are exaggerated in the sketch to represent the self that is bound. The researcher employed the expression of gazing. The "gazing" action is highly emotionally tense - this kind of prolonged gaze without a clear purpose is a typical behavior in a state of loneliness. This "looking" is both an attempt to escape and an admission of loneliness. The addition of masks is also to respond to the special period of the spread of the epidemic. The entire process is both a re-narration of visual materials and a reconstruction of emotional memories.



Figure 4: "The Window". Researcher. 2025. Media: Oil painting. Size: 90x120cm

In "The Window" (figure 4), the researcher herself is the core subject. She wears a light olive green coat, wears transparent-framed glasses, her face is covered by a medical mask, her eyes gaze into the distance, and her facial expression is calm but slightly worried in the picture. A large number of withered brown vines extend from every corner of the picture, entwining around the characters' hair, faces and bodies. Some of the vines even pass through the seams of the masks, creating an atmosphere of being wrapped and bound. The background is a window with a wooden frame. The window frame naturally divides the picture into two Spaces, the interior and the exterior. The interior space is shrouded in grayish-blue shadows. Outside the window, there is a blurry grayish-white forest scene and sunlight. The vibrant scene outside the window contrasts sharply with the grayish-white walls inside.

Formally, the window frame plays a dividing role in the composition. It not only limits the range of the line of sight but also symbolizes isolation and boundaries. The dark shadows inside the room contrast sharply with the bright light outside the window, creating a "surrounded light and shade relationship" : although the figures are illuminated by the light, they are still in a closed space. The lines of the vines run through both inside and outside the window. They are soft and meandering, breaking the stiffness of the geometric composition. In terms of color, low-saturation shades of gray, olive green and brown are used as the main tones, with only a few bright colors dotted at the new buds of the vines. This color combination intensifies the oppressive and lonely atmosphere of the picture. In terms of spatial treatment, through the interweaving of vines from front to back and the layering of figures and background Windows, a three-dimensional space with depth is constructed. At the same time, the entanglement of vines breaks the boundaries of space, creating a sense of freedom that is restrained yet grows freely.

"The Window" is a metaphor for individual loneliness during the epidemic period. Windows here are not merely architectural elements but also the boundary between people and the world - they allow for "seeing" but prevent "contact". The postures and expressions of the characters reveal confusion and depression, which is a concentrated manifestation of individual loneliness and anxiety during the epidemic, and also reflects the inner self-dialogue. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, this gaze has become a symbol of psychological "self-imprisonment": people are forced to stay put and can only feel the flow of time and life through their Windows. The growth of vines symbolizes hope and continuation, as well as

restraint and entanglement. The serene atmosphere created by the picture contains the universal emotional memory of human beings - that kind of seemingly peaceful but internally anxious sense of loneliness. Through extremely restrained visual language, the work transforms the "fear of loneliness" during the epidemic into a visualized psychological experience, enabling viewers to re-recognize the complex emotions of "being trapped" and "longing" while watching.

#### 4.2 Second Artwork: Sleep

"Sleep" is derived from the researcher's own real-life records during the isolation period. In this work, the researcher aims to pay more attention to the subtle state during sleep, thereby retelling the collective experience of people being "physically trapped in bed and mentally trapped in loneliness" in the middle of the pandemic, allowing the audience to evoke similar memories of being entangled by insomnia and loneliness from familiar scenes.

The reason for choosing "sleep" as the expression medium of loneliness lies in the researcher's personal real experience of long-term isolation during the epidemic. There is a deep intrinsic connection between sleep and loneliness - according to a study by Gu et al (2021) involving 289 subjects, loneliness during the epidemic significantly reduces sleep quality, and sleep disorders in turn intensify the experience of loneliness, forming a vicious cycle of "loneliness - insomnia". This scientific connection makes sleep a natural "barometer" of loneliness emotions, which can accurately reflect the changes in an individual's psychological state (Gu et al., 2021). So, long periods of sleep are almost an experience that every quarantined person has. Based on this, it is appropriate to transform the "static posture" of "Sleep" into a symbol of lonely souls during the epidemic and make the transmission of loneliness emotions more penetrating.

The key to "Sleep" effectively evoking the sense of loneliness during the period of epidemic spread lies in its visual symbols and emotional expressions precisely aligning with the individual experiences and social psychology at that time. Firstly, the core elements in the work are derived from real-life scenes during the pandemic: beds and people almost completely wrapped in quilts, which is a typical state during quarantine. Secondly, using Sleep as a true portrayal of loneliness is precisely the genuine retelling of millions of people during the period of isolation, allowing the audience to instantly immerse themselves in their own memories of insomnia and generate a strong emotional resonance.



Figure 5 (a, b): The researcher was quarantined at home from period of COVID

Picture 5 a was taken on a certain day in 2022. After being quarantined for an unknown number of days, a family member of the researcher was approved to come to my rented house wearing a mask to meet the researcher. He casually recorded the researcher lying in bed playing with his mobile phone. In the researcher's memory, it was impossible to tell whether it was dawn or dusk. This could be a researcher who couldn't sleep until the morning due to insomnia, or it could be a researcher who was already feeling sleepy in the afternoon.

Picture 5 b records the researcher's bed isolated in a hotel. The recording was during the day, but the curtains were drawn and the bedside lamp was turned on to get a bit of warm yellow light. In memory, after taking this photo, the researcher repeatedly went to bed. After collecting a large number of real photos, "bed and quilt" became an important element for me to express the feeling of loneliness in "Sleep"



Figure 6: Sketch of "Sleep". Researcher. 2025. Media: Mixed Media. Size: 39x33cm

The sketch (figure 6) focuses on the relationship between the figure and the bed. How to arrange the proportion relationship between the character and the bed. The researcher used the composition method of leaving blank space, placing the sleeping figure in a very small proportion in the upper left corner of the picture to ensure that there was more space at the bottom of the picture. The purpose of doing this is to avoid presenting the entire body of the figure, but to guide the viewer's gaze to the curled bedding and the faint light from the head. This approach emphasizes the visual effects of "being wrapped up" and "hiding", making the characters seem to be swallowed up by the environment and reinforcing the psychological symbol of loneliness. In terms of color tone selection, to make the feeling of loneliness more intense, researcher completely used cold tones. Grayish blue, cold white, and grayish green were extensively used in the sketch. The cold quilt and the warm sunlight in the upper left corner formed a strong contrast, increasing the sense of loneliness in the picture.

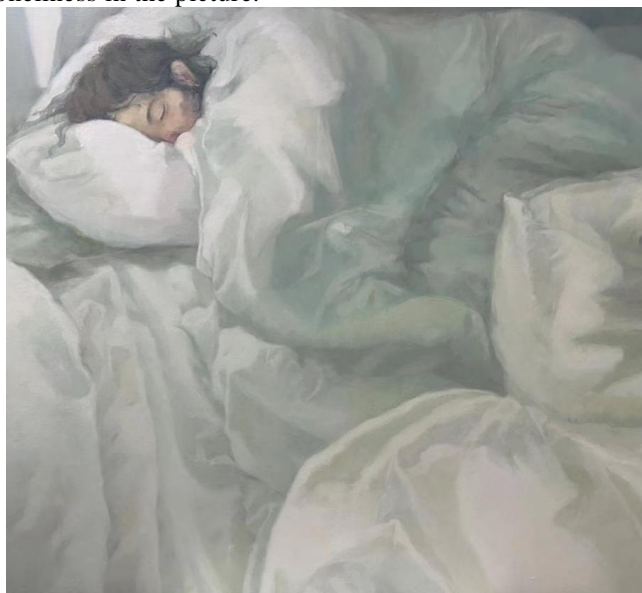


Figure 7: "Sleep". Researcher. 2025. Media: Oil painting. Size: 110x120cm

The final work "Sleep" takes an individual sleeping in bed as its core subject. The picture is almost filled with bedding, with no extra objects or background. The character is curled up in a quilt spread in a light grayish-green tone, with his head buried in a white pillow, only part of his face exposed. In the picture, large areas of bedding occupy the visual space, and the pleated fabric presents soft light and shadow changes. The overall color tone is mainly low-saturation grayish green and off-white, creating a

quiet yet depressing atmosphere. The entire composition presents a sense of stillness frozen by time. The viewer's gaze is guided by the soft tones and the wrinkled curves, eventually resting on the slightly flushed face of the figure, thus sensing a gentle yet profound sense of loneliness.

The emotional power of "Sleep" stems from the compatibility of its composition and the restraint of its color tones. The picture adopts a close-up perspective and asymmetrical composition. The figure is confined within the encirclement of the bedding, and this sense of "crowding" in the space creates a psychological visual oppression. In terms of color, low-saturation grayish green, grayish blue and cold white are used as the main tones. There is no sharp color contrast. This color choice intensifies the lonely and depressing atmosphere of the picture. And the faces illuminated by the sun offer a brief comfort to the viewers.

"Sleep" uses the daily behavior of "sleep" as a metaphor for human mental escape and psychological self-isolation during the epidemic. The character's curled-up posture symbolizes psychological defense. In the midst of loneliness and anxiety, the individual attempts to seek refuge through sleep. The loneliness during the epidemic is not merely physical isolation, but rather a psychological state of "forced stillness". It does not adopt exaggerated posture contrasts, but rather creates a kind of "gentle loneliness" through delicate composition, restrained colors and soft light.

### 5. Conclusion

Based on personal experiences during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2021 to 2022, this study explores how the emotion of loneliness is visualized, reconstructed and re-narrated through painting. Research has found that the loneliness in the middle of the epidemic is not simply being alone, but a complex psychological state caused by repeated lockdowns, home isolation, travel restrictions, the loss of loved ones, work suspensions and the stagnation of the pace of life. It is manifested as the sense of powerlessness after the body is restricted, the sense of alienation after the person is disconnected from the outside world, and the mental exhaustion formed by the individual during the long wait.

Through the theory of constructive memory and the method of re-narrative vision, this study demonstrates that painting is not a direct replication of the pandemic experience, but rather a visual expression formed by researchers after recalling, screening and reorganizing personal experiences. The feeling of loneliness is transformed into visual elements such as Windows, beds, plants, human postures, low-saturation tones and enclosed Spaces during the creative process, thereby obtaining visual and perceptible image forms.

In The studio practice, "The Window" and "Sleep" respectively present different aspects of loneliness during the epidemic. "The Window" expresses an individual's perception, yearning and sense of being bound towards the outside world through Windows, gazing figures and vines. "Sleep" expresses the mental numbness, psychological defense and self-isolation after a long period of isolation through beds, bedding, curled bodies and cold tones.

Therefore, this study holds that painting can effectively carry the experience of loneliness during the epidemic and transform private memories into emotional images that resonate with society. The work not only records the psychological state of the researcher during the epidemic, but also reflects the loneliness, waiting and powerlessness that people have experienced together in the face of public crises. Through this creative practice, this study provides a feasible visual research approach for emotional expression, memory restatement and art therapy in the post-pandemic era.

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