

Dialogue between Art and the Psyche: A Phenomenological Perspective on the Psychological Experience of Contemporary Painting Therapy

Yan Zhang

Tianjin Vocational Institute, Tianjin, 300350, China

Abstract: *In contemporary society psychological problems have become increasingly prominent. Because of its capacity to hold emotions, its openness for inner exploration, and its nonverbal mode of intervention, painting therapy has gradually become an important direction in psychological treatment. Grounded in a phenomenological perspective and focusing on "psychological experience," this paper examines painting therapy's psychotherapeutic function within the "art—thought dialogue" by tracing the experiential process of "bodily perception — image generation — meaning construction." By integrating phenomenological theories such as Husserl's "return to the things themselves," Merleau-Ponty's "embodied cognition," and Heidegger's "clearing of Being," the paper analyzes three dimensions — "present experience," "the integration of body and art," and "the reconstruction of self-meaning" — and proposes that the essence of painting therapy is to enable individuals to face their inner experiences directly, release suppressed emotions, and rebuild connections with the external world, thereby offering phenomenological-level interpretations and references for the practice and theoretical development of contemporary painting-based rehabilitation.*

Keywords: *Painting Therapy; Phenomenology; Psychological Experience; Embodied Cognition; Meaning Construction*

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly developing society, people face considerable pressure in work, life, and social interactions, and the resulting psychological problems impinge on quality of life. Traditional verbal therapies have their strengths, but when individuals cannot express complex emotions through language, expected therapeutic outcomes are difficult to achieve. Painting therapy has thus attracted attention for its appeal and therapeutic effects.

Phenomenology has gained renewed interest in recent years, emphasizing grasping the essence of things, individual subjective experience, and the structures of perception. Applying phenomenological principles to the study of painting therapy can provide new angles for understanding the psychological experiences involved in painting-based treatment. From a phenomenological standpoint, this study delves into the three stages individuals undergo in painting therapy — "bodily perception," "image generation," and "meaning construction" — to explore the internal psychological mechanisms and therapeutic effects.

This paper focuses on the experiential process "bodily perception — image generation — meaning construction." Bodily perception is the starting point of painting-based rehabilitation: when an individual engages with painting tools and adjusts posture, immediate bodily sensations are obtained; these sensations relate to mental states and can activate unconscious emotions and memories, thereby laying the groundwork for therapy [1,2].

2. The Rise of Contemporary Painting Therapy and the Possible Involvement of Phenomenology

Unlike traditional verbal therapy, painting therapy does not require professional artistic skills. What one needs to do is simply use the heart — through lines, colors, and composition — to express emotions, memories, and confusions, all of which can be externalized. Then, through the process of "manual creation — quiet appreciation of the artwork — gradual reflection," individuals may adjust and mend their souls. From clinical psychological counseling in hospitals, to mental health courses in schools, and even community-based healing workshops, painting therapy, with its distinctive

"nonverbal" characteristics, has gradually become a major avenue for modern people to free themselves from psychological predicaments [3].

However, most existing studies on painting therapy have focused on "effect verification" (for example, using experimental data to demonstrate its effectiveness in alleviating symptoms of anxiety, depression, and the like) and "technical guidance" (such as channeling emotions through specific drawings). In contrast, exploration of the "healing experience itself" has been relatively weak. That is: when a person holds a brush and paints on paper, what kind of resonance arises between body and mind? How do colors and lines transmit emotions that cannot be put into words? Once an image is produced, what kind of dialogical relationship develops between the individual and the art they create? Issues on the "experiential level" constitute the very core of painting therapy, while phenomenology's central proposition of "returning to the things themselves" provides important theoretical foundations for addressing these questions [4].

Phenomenology resists fragmenting experience through preconceived theoretical frameworks and instead advocates confronting the "primordially of experience" directly, that is, suspending prior concepts and focusing only on the "living experience" felt by the individual in a particular situation. This viewpoint aligns with the very essence of therapy: the value of painting therapy does not lie in "producing outstanding artworks," but in "undergoing a complete healing experience." Husserl's emphasis on "intentional experience" (experience always being directed toward specific objects — for instance, the combination of color and line in painting experiences), Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on "embodied experience" (the body as the foundation of cognition and experience — with hand movements and bodily gestures in the painting process generating meaning), and Heidegger's notion of "existential experience" (experience as a pathway for individuals to understand themselves — where the imagery in painting therapy reflects inquiries into one's own existence) all bring profound insights into interpreting the psychological experience of painting therapy.

3. The Awakening of Bodily Perception: A Phenomenological Interpretation of “Embodied Experience” in Painting Therapy

Merleau-Ponty, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, proposed: “The body is not an object but a medium through which we have a world.” In the initial stages of therapy, the most crucial experience is the "awakening of bodily perception," that is, detaching the individual from the everyday mode of "thought-dominance" and returning to the sensory presence of the body. Through the interaction of brush and color, one experiences the fusion of body and artistic medium. Such "embodied experience" establishes a solid foundation for subsequent psychological healing.

3.1 The “Symbiosis” of Brush and Body: From “Tool Use” to “Perceptual Extension”

In daily life, people often regard the brush as an “external object” (for instance, in writing, the pen is merely a means of transmitting thought). Yet in therapy, the brush gradually becomes an “extension” of bodily perception. When the hand moves the brush across paper, the strength, speed, and direction of the stroke are no longer governed by rational control but instead change naturally with the flow of inner emotions. When one is tense, the brush may scratch rapid, forceful lines across the paper, even piercing it at times; in a calm state, the curves become soft and smooth, with more harmonious color coordination. From a phenomenological perspective, this "coexistence of body and brush" transcends the dualism of "subject versus object": the individual is no longer merely “controlling the brush,” nor is the brush simply a “manipulated object.” Together they form a complete "painting experience": tactile sensations of the hand (the weight of the brush, the texture of the paper), visual feedback (the layering of colors, the extension of lines), and even bodily posture (the tension of bending forward, the relaxation of stretching out) are all incorporated into experience, allowing one to become aware of the "present bodily state" [5].

For example, in art therapy sessions designed for patients with depression, many initially exhibit a sense of "stiffness" when picking up the brush: their arms tense, fingers grip excessively hard, and the lines drawn are mostly rigidly straight or awkwardly curved, often repeatedly corrected. This has nothing to do with lacking drawing skills but instead directly reflects how the body reveals repressed inner emotions: the psychological state of depressed patients often manifests as "self-closure" and "emotional rigidity," which is transmitted through the body into the hands, resulting in "rigidity" on the page. As therapy progresses, patients gradually let go of their worry about “whether the painting is good or bad” and shift attention to the "sensory experience of the brush tip moving on the paper." Their

bodies slowly relax: arms loosen, finger pressure balances, and even facial contours soften into curves. Such "bodily relaxation" is more than just a physical change; it is also a mental release: allowing the body to interact naturally with painting is equivalent to letting inner emotions flow out through physical movement. This "opening on the embodied level" is the first step toward psychological healing [6].

3.2 The "Resonance" of Color and Emotion: Returning to the "Primordially" of Perceptual Experience

The core of Husserl's phenomenological thought lies in "returning to the things themselves," that is, stripping away conceptual knowledge and returning to "primordial perceptual experience." In therapy, the experience of color represents just such a primordial perception: our responses to color often precede words and rational judgment. Seeing red may arouse a visceral excitement or unease; blue may evoke tranquility or loneliness; yellow may feel warm or, conversely, bring uneasiness. This "color-emotion resonance" transcends verbal mediation, linking directly to unconscious feelings and becoming the key to "nonverbal expression" in painting therapy.

Traditional psychological studies have often treated the relationship between color and emotion as a "universal rule" (e.g., red symbolizes passion, blue symbolizes calm). Phenomenological interpretations of color experience, however, emphasize "personal particularity": the meaning of a color for an individual derives from past life experiences and emotional memories. For example, for someone who grew up in the countryside frequently interacting with nature, green may evoke a sense of peace and safety. Yet for those who once endured being trapped in the mountains after a storm, surrounded only by soaked green trees, green may provoke fear and oppression. In therapy, the choice of color essentially manifests "unconscious emotions": there is no need to explain "why this color was chosen," as selection follows only an inner "perceptual impulse." Precisely because it bypasses verbal decision-making, suppressed emotions gain a "primordial expression" [7].

One trauma survivor, during painting therapy, covered the entire canvas in black, leaving only a small corner blank. When asked by the therapist, "What does black make you think of?" she initially could not speak, only describing a "choking sensation" in her chest. After creating several more paintings, she gradually recalled the scene: "Other than the light seeping through the cracks in the roof, I could see nothing." This case illustrates that color experience possesses "primordially," directly connected to one's "lived experience." Through the medium of color as imagery, painful memories were "first touched" without the need for verbal elaboration. The unconscious emotion was transformed from "invisible" to "visible," thereby laying a firm foundation for psychological treatment [8].

3.3 The "Emergence" of Bodily Memory: From "Forgetting" to "Awareness"

From a phenomenological perspective, the body is not only an "organ of perception" but also a "carrier of memory." Traumas that have been perceptually forgotten and unprocessed emotions are often stored as "bodily memory" in muscles, nerves, and postures. The concrete symptoms manifest as bodily pain, stiffness, or discomfort. During therapy, the act of painting frequently triggers such "forgotten bodily recollections," enabling individuals to reconnect with suppressed emotions and thereby "become aware of the body."

For example, one woman under great work-related pressure unconsciously placed her right hand on her right shoulder before drawing a line at the start of therapy. The therapist noticed this subtle action and redirected her attention to the "sensation of the right shoulder." She realized that her right shoulder had not relaxed for a long time and even felt sore. These "physical discomforts" were, in fact, the result of overwhelming work pressure, which had cultivated a pattern of "self-repression" (symbolically, the "right shoulder bearing responsibility" at work, striving to do everything flawlessly while fearing mistakes). In subsequent drawings, the therapist asked her to sketch the sensation of her right shoulder. Initially, she drew a straight, upward line, then surrounded it with short, straight strokes, which resembled "tangled ropes." Staring at the picture, she suddenly realized: "These lines look like all the burdens of work pressing on me, making my shoulders unable to breathe." At that moment, physical pain and psychological tension "connected" through imagery, allowing her to gain a clearer understanding of her mental state.

This "emergence of bodily memory" constitutes what phenomenology calls an "awakening of existence." The individual no longer regards the body as a "shell irrelevant to the mind," but instead recognizes the inseparability of body and psyche: bodily sensations are reflections of mental states, and

changes in the psyche manifest through the body. In therapy, through awareness of bodily movements, postures, and sensations, individuals achieve a transformation from “forgetting the body” to “becoming aware of the body.” Its therapeutic effect lies in re-establishing the connection between self and body, and this reconstruction of connection becomes the very foundation for constructing personal identity.

4. Dialogue of Image Generation: The Experiential Dimension of “Subject–Object Fusion” in Art Therapy

After the awakening of bodily perception, art therapy enters its central stage of “image generation.” At this stage, individuals use lines, colors, and compositions to transform inner feelings and memories into tangible forms (such as houses, trees, figures, or abstract shapes). From a phenomenological perspective, this process is not simply a one-way act of “the subject generating an object.” Rather, it resembles a two-way dialogue between subject and object: while individuals create images, the images in turn “speak back” to them. The image not only carries symbolic meaning but also expresses an inner truth. This “dialogical experience” of “subject–object fusion” is a crucial step toward spiritual healing through art therapy.

4.1 The Autonomy of Images: From “Deliberate Design” to “Spontaneous Emergence”

Husserl’s theory of “intentionality” points out that consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” a self-directed act. In art therapy, an individual’s “creative consciousness” consistently points toward “inner feelings and memories.” The emergence of imagery thus becomes a visualized expression of intentionality. However, unlike conventional artworks, images in art therapy are not primarily the product of “deliberate design,” but more often “spontaneously emergent.” The individual does not need to predetermine “what to draw” but can simply follow inner sensations; the image gradually unfolds with the movement of the brush. This “autonomy of images,” in the phenomenological sense, suggests that images are not merely “appendages of the subject,” but independent existences with their own “capacity to speak.”

For instance, one mother, burdened by conflicts between her parents, initially intended to depict “a family dining together” during art therapy. Yet, as soon as she picked up the brush, she unconsciously drew a thick vertical line down the middle of the paper, dividing the scene into left and right. On the left appeared a small figure with its head lowered (herself), while on the right stood a tall back figure (her child). At first, she felt this was far from the “warm scene” she had “deliberately designed.” But as she gazed at the picture, she suddenly realized: “This vertical line seems like an invisible wall between me and my child, as if there is always a barrier that separates us.” Such a spontaneously emergent image reflected her true parental feelings far more profoundly than any deliberately composed picture.

The “autonomy of images” arises from the unconscious process of “self-presentation.” As long as individuals release “rational control” and allow their brush to move freely, emotions and memories embedded in the subconscious can break through the defenses of consciousness and manifest as images. In this sense, the image is no longer merely a “means of expression,” but becomes the “voice of the psyche.” It brings forth emotions that one may be unwilling to acknowledge or confront at the conscious level, enabling individuals to directly face their inner truths through a dialogue with the image. Such experiential engagement with the “language of images” helps dismantle the psychological defenses of self-deception, laying a solid foundation for subsequent emotional catharsis and semantic reconstruction.

4.2 The Reflexivity of Gaze: From “Viewing the Image” to “Being Viewed by the Image”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarded “seeing” not as a one-way act of “the subject gazing at an object,” but as a reciprocal process of “subject and object mutually gazing at each other.” When we observe something, what “looks back” at us are our memories, emotions, and thoughts. In art therapy, once an image has been created, the act of “gazing at one’s own image” becomes a form of mutual gaze: while individuals look at their drawings, the drawings, through their lines and colors, evoke reflection and emotional resonance. This act of gazing, accompanied by introspection, constitutes the core of deep dialogue between self and image.

Many participants in art therapy instinctively linger over their finished works, often focusing on small details—a curve, a shadow, a forgotten memory, or an unnoticed emotion. For example, one middle-aged man drew a house without windows. As he stared at the closed structure, he suddenly

recalled being locked inside his home as a child by his parents. To him, the “windowless house” was not merely an architectural form, but a symbol of childhood loneliness and repression. Realizing this, he recognized both his fear of enclosed spaces and its roots in his past.

This “thinking-through-gaze” ultimately becomes a dialogue between self and self. It is both an external manifestation of the inner world and a mediator of self-knowledge. Through images, individuals can calmly examine their inner life as though observing another’s narrative, thus gaining a more objective and clearer understanding of themselves. From a phenomenological standpoint, “reflection” is not a cold, rational dissection, but an “empathetic re-experiencing.” Through imagery, hidden emotions are once again felt. Such “re-experiencing” serves as self-consolation: for the gentleman above, once he realized the “windowless house” was tied to childhood pain, he ceased to be a “suppressed victim” and became someone who “understands the source of repression.” Only through this realization could he approach past suffering with equanimity.

4.3 The Interactivity of Modification: From “Correcting Errors” to “Regulating Emotions”

In art therapy, the act of “modifying” an image is common—old colors may be covered, new elements added, or some parts erased. In traditional art, “correction” is often seen as fixing mistakes. In therapy, however, “modification” becomes a crucial pathway of “human–image interaction.” Each modification serves as an emotional re-adjustment, each adjustment as a renewed dialogue between individual and image. On a phenomenological level, this “interactive modification” manifests as “experiential dynamism”: therapeutic engagement with images is not static but unfolds as a process of change and deepening through ongoing interaction.

For instance, a young woman heartbroken from a failed relationship painted a dark-blue sky, devoid of sun or clouds. The more she gazed at it, the sadder she became, until she decided to alter it: she added tiny stars near the clouds, then a faint golden glow at the horizon. After the change, she felt less sorrow, realizing that even under a dark sky, starlight and light still exist; even after separation, life still holds hope. Gradually, she expanded the light, reduced the clouds, and finally painted a small sun rising—this transformation reflected not only the image itself but also her shift from “grief and despair” to “gradual recovery.”

Such “interactive modification” shows that therapeutic images are not “static works” but “dynamic carriers of emotion.” By adjusting the image, individuals adjust their emotions, and the altered image, in turn, reshapes their feelings. For example, one man burdened by work stress initially drew a small, fragile figure in the corner, believing it reflected his insignificance. In the course of modification, however, he unconsciously used bold black strokes to redefine the figure and placed a pen uplifted in its hand. Confronting this revised image, he realized that despite hardship, he still held a “tool of transformation.” This gave him renewed courage to face difficulties. From a phenomenological perspective, this cycle of “modification–feedback–remodification” is essentially a process of “mutual adjustment” between self and inner world: the image becomes a mirror of the spirit, and in reshaping the mirror, individuals reconstruct their self-understanding, allowing suppressed emotions to be released and inner chaos to gradually give way to clarity.

5. Conclusion

From a phenomenological perspective, the psychological experience of contemporary art therapy through painting reveals a clear underlying logic: the integrative chain of bodily perception – image generation – meaning construction establishes a bridge between art and the human psyche. Once sensory awareness is awakened, individuals are able to loosen the constraints of rationality and return to their most authentic sensory experiences. With brush and color, they touch forgotten emotions and memories. The ensuing dialogue with images dismantles the dualism of subject and object, allowing the image to serve as the “spokesperson” of the psyche. Through acts of gazing and modification, individuals confront their true selves; and through the interactive process of revision, therapeutic experience gains a dynamic vitality, enabling emotions to resonate and circulate within the reciprocal adjustment between self and image, ultimately restoring balance and healing to the soul.

The value of painting therapy has never resided in producing artworks through professional techniques, but rather in offering each person a space to “return to the self.” In this space, the constraints of language are transcended, emotions require no embellishment, and the self demands no concealment. Husserl’s call to “return to the things themselves” reveals the most authentic face of

therapeutic experience; Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodied cognition deepens our understanding of the inseparability of mind and body; and Heidegger's reflections on the "clarity of existence" remind us that painting itself can serve as a therapy of existential meaning.

In an era when psychological issues are increasingly pressing, painting-based therapy, with its distinct phenomenological qualities, has become an important path for individuals to reconstruct their connection with the world. It offers a gentle reminder: when burdened by inner troubles, one does not have to bear them alone. A brush and a sheet of paper can open a passage into the inner self; and within the interwoven colors and lines, solace for the soul is always possible.

References

- [1] RUIZHI ZHANG, BINWEN ZENG, WANG YI, et al. *Artificial Intelligence Painting: A New Efficient Tool and Skill for Art Therapy*[C]//*International Symposium on World Ecological Design: Proceedings of ISWED 2023, Guangzhou, China, 17 December 2023*. 2024:854-863.
- [2] RUI WANG, SHIMAN ZHANG, LI WAN, et al. *Mandala Painting Therapy and Its Potential Applications in UI Design of Healing Apps*[C]//*International Symposium on World Ecological Design: Proceedings of ISWED 2023, Guangzhou, China, 17 December 2023*. 2024:687-694.
- [3] BOZCUK, H., OZCAN, K., ERDOGAN, C., et al. *A comparative study of art therapy in cancer patients receiving chemotherapy and improvement in quality of life by watercolor painting*[J]. *Complementary therapies in medicine*, 2017, 30:67-72.
- [4] KROEZ, M., MEHL, A., DIDWISZUS, A., et al. *Reliability and first validity of the inner correspondence questionnaire for painting therapy (ICPTh) in a sample of breast cancer patients*[J]. *Complementary therapies in medicine*, 2019, 42:355-360.
- [5] DE BRUYCKER A., DE NEVE W., DAISNE J.-F., et al. *Disease Control and Late Toxicity in Adaptive Dose Painting by Numbers Versus Nonadaptive Radiation Therapy for Head and Neck Cancer: A Randomized Controlled Phase 2 Trial*[J]. *International Journal of Radiation Oncology, Biology, Physics*, 2024, 120(2):516-527.
- [6] MEHL, A., BRAUER, D., DIDWISZUS, A., et al. *The Anthroposophic Art Therapy Assessment Paint (AART-ASSESS-P) A peer-report instrument to assess patients' pictorial expression during Anthroposophic Painting Therapy*[J]. *Explore: the journal of science and healing*, 2021, 17(6):541-548.
- [7] LAVEY-KHAN, SHONA, REDDICK, DEAN. *Painting together: A parent-child dyadic art therapy group*[J]. *The Arts in psychotherapy*, 2020, 70:101687.
- [8] YUXI MAO, FANGTIAN YING, KUAI LIU. *Exploring the Impact of AI Painting Tools on Graphic Design Education for Hearing-Impaired Students*[C]//*Entertainment Computing - ICEC 2024*. 2025: 399-410.