ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

Research on the Application of Soft Sculpture Materials in Contemporary Times

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Abstract: *Under the development trends of diversification, immersion and interactivity in contemporary art, the rigid creative forms and aesthetic paradigms of traditional hard sculpture materials such as stone and metal have gradually become unable to meet the innovative needs of modern art, and soft sculpture materials have therefore emerged as a new creative medium in the fields of contemporary sculpture and installation art. In this paper, soft sculpture materials were taken as the research object. First, the core concept and main categories of soft sculpture materials were defined, and their artistic characteristics that distinguish them from traditional rigid materials were reviewed. Second, from the dimensions of form creation, scene adaptation, and aesthetic expression, the unique creative advantages of soft sculpture materials were systematically analyzed, and their diversified application status was explored. Although the materials still present certain limitations in creation and application, such as insufficient weather resistance, the absence of preservation and restoration systems, and a low degree of process standardization, with the continuous optimization of artistic techniques and the continuous expansion of artistic scenarios, soft sculpture materials will possess broad prospects for development in the fields of contemporary public art and trendy installation art, thereby providing new ideas and references for innovative modern sculpture creation.*

Keywords: *soft sculpture materials, sculpture creation, material aesthetics, contemporary sculpture, public art*

1. Introduction

The development of sculpture art has always been closely symbiotic with the iterative renewal of material media. The physical properties, visual texture, and technological characteristics of materials are crucial to the formal language, aesthetic style, and site-specific expression of sculpture. In the long history of traditional sculpture art, rigid materials such as stone, metal, and ceramics have long occupied a dominant position, giving rise to a classic aesthetic system characterized by solemnity and solidity and establishing a stable artistic paradigm for traditional sculpture. However, with the diversified transformation of contemporary art, installation art, immersive art, and interactive public art have risen rapidly, and the aesthetic demands of the modern public have gradually shifted toward lightweight, flexible, diversified, and experiential values. The rigid, heavy, and fixed creative forms of traditional hard sculpture materials have become difficult to fully adapt to the pace of innovative development in contemporary art and the experiential needs of public spaces. Sculptors have therefore begun to consciously seek material media that are more elastic and closer to everyday experience, and it is against this background that soft sculpture materials have entered the horizon of contemporary art.

It should be emphasized that this shift in material conception is not a mere renewal of technique but rather a part of the overall paradigm transformation of contemporary art. When the focus of art moves from static visual appreciation to dynamic sensory participation, and from elitist easel display to life-oriented public engagement, the logic of material selection changes accordingly: it no longer serves only the solidity and permanence of form, but begins to serve the generation of process, the perception of the body, and the resonance of emotion. With their soft, plastic, and approachable physical qualities, soft sculpture materials respond to this shift and have therefore rapidly become a widely noticed new medium in the fields of contemporary sculpture and installation art.

On this basis, soft sculpture materials were taken as the core research object in this paper. Through literature review and case analysis, the conceptual scope and category characteristics of soft sculpture materials were clarified, their unique advantages in sculpture creation were systematically analyzed, their contemporary diversified application scenarios were sorted out, the various problems existing in the creation and practical application of soft materials were summarized, and targeted paths for

ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

innovative optimization and sustainable development were proposed. It is expected that this study can further improve the research system of contemporary sculpture materials, explore the aesthetic value and application potential of soft materials, and provide theoretical references and practical insights for the innovative creation and diversified development of contemporary sculpture.

2. Overview of Soft Sculpture Materials

2.1 Definition of Soft Sculpture Materials

Soft sculpture materials are a creative medium that has been gradually refined and established as an independent category in contemporary sculpture art, forming a material category in relation to traditional hard sculpture materials such as stone, wood, ceramics, and metal. From the perspective of physical properties, this type of material possesses the core characteristics of softness, bendability, foldability, and malleability, and can freely change its form under external forces, producing soft textures and dynamic forms that are loose, varied, and difficult to achieve with hard materials. From the perspective of artistic creation, soft sculpture materials generally refer to all soft media that can be used in sculpture creation to satisfy form modeling, spatial construction, and artistic expression, mainly including two categories: natural organic soft materials and synthetic soft materials. Different from the fixed, hard, and static material characteristics of traditional hard sculpture materials, soft materials break the constant traditional creative logic of sculpture art, are no longer confined to solid and static physical forms, and can present flowing and loose visual textures and tactile experiences through more diversified creative techniques. Relevant research has pointed out that the concept of "soft sculpture" was gradually formed under the influence of modernism and avant-garde art and was gradually incorporated into the scope of fiber art in the 1960s and 1970s [4], which provides an important reference for understanding the artistic genealogy of soft materials.

In the context of contemporary art, soft sculpture materials no longer exist merely as carriers of form; their own material characteristics have become an important part of artistic expression. They carry ideas and convey warmth, participate in spatial construction and intervene in viewers' perception, and constitute comprehensive artistic materials adapted to the diversified, life-oriented, and emotional needs of contemporary sculpture.

2.2 Main Categories of Soft Sculpture Materials

Based on material sources and physical properties, combined with the practical application of contemporary sculpture creation, soft sculpture materials can be divided into two major categories: natural soft sculpture materials and synthetic soft sculpture materials. The two categories each have distinctive characteristics in terms of texture, plasticity, stability, and artistic expressiveness, adapt to different sculpture creation requirements, and jointly constitute the material system of contemporary soft sculpture creation.

Natural soft sculpture materials were applied to soft sculpture creation earlier than synthetic materials and are mostly derived from natural materials, such as plant fiber soft materials (paper, cotton and linen, bamboo silk, rattan, etc.) and animal fiber soft materials (wool, leather, silk, animal fluff, etc.). Such materials carry natural texture and a sense of warmth, tend toward rustic and healing artistic expression, can combine softness with a three-dimensional sense, and are often used in creative installation production. The core advantages of natural soft materials lie in their rich humanistic texture and strong affinity; their shortcomings are that they are prone to moisture, abrasion, and weak aging resistance, making long-term outdoor preservation difficult.

Synthetic soft sculpture materials are the product of the development of contemporary industry and material technology and are also the mainstream materials of modern soft sculpture creation. Such materials are produced through chemical synthesis and possess stable physical properties. Common categories mainly include silicone, flexible foam, latex, and polymer clay. Compared with natural soft materials, synthetic soft materials have the characteristics of strong aging resistance and strong formal expressiveness, can achieve exaggerated, abstract, and surreal artistic effects, and also have the advantage of batch production, which fits the diversified development trend of contemporary art.

In actual creation, these two types of materials can be used separately or in combination: synthetic materials such as flexible foam and soft gel are used as support to ensure the three-dimensionality and durability of the work, while natural materials such as cotton, linen, and leather are used as surface

ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

texture to increase the natural artistic texture of the work. This composite creative form can both enhance the expressiveness of the work and possess good structural stability, making the work easier to realize. In addition, craft methods such as wrapping, coiling, sewing, and weaving are repeatedly used in the forming process of soft materials. Relevant research has specifically discussed the expression and application of the wrapping technique in the craft design of soft sculpture [3], indicating that craft techniques have become a key link for soft materials to release their formal potential. For creators, a clear understanding of material categories is the premise of creative conception, and the positioning of the creative theme and artistic style directly determines the choice of materials; in turn, the properties of the materials themselves also restrict and shape the final form and expressive effect of the work.

2.3 Core Differences Between Soft Materials and Traditional Hard Sculpture Materials

In the developmental system of sculpture art, traditional sculpture mostly adopts hard materials such as stone, metal, ceramics, and wood as media, forming a solid and durable aesthetic and creative logic. As an important carrier of contemporary artistic expression, soft sculpture materials differ from the former not only in the surface difference of hardness and softness, but more importantly in the structural difference of aesthetic paradigms and expressive logic.

At the level of form, hard sculpture materials pursue structural integrity and fixed physical form, with particular emphasis on contour modeling and the control and structural stability of the form; soft sculpture materials, by contrast, construct their forms through methods such as filling, sewing, splicing, and wrapping, and the creative process is mostly reversible and can be repeatedly modified and adjusted, placing more emphasis on the creation of dynamic rhythm and spatial tension. At the level of emotional expression, the aesthetic core of hard sculpture materials is solemnity, and the material itself carries a hard and rational visual temperament, which is suitable for grand narratives, commemorative and symbolic artistic expression, and serves as a widely used carrier in public memorial sculpture and easel sculpture. Soft sculpture materials, however, overturn this aesthetic system, taking softness and lightness as the core aesthetic characteristics. The material itself carries tactile warmth and a life-oriented texture, is suitable for expressing delicate and emotional themes, weakens the sense of distance in sculpture, and places more emphasis on the individual's emotional experience. The deep root of this difference lies in the different attitudes of the two types of materials toward "time" and "process": the forming of hard materials points to certainty and permanence, while the forming of soft materials retains the possibility of change and becoming; the latter is therefore more consistent with the pursuit of processuality, embodiment, and presence in contemporary art.

3. Core Creative Advantages of Soft Sculpture Materials

3.1 Advantages in Form

Limited by their material properties, hard sculpture materials can only create solid forms with regular contours and hard structures, making it difficult to create loose and varied dynamic visual effects; their formal logic is fixed and their fault tolerance is low. Soft sculpture materials, in contrast, possess the characteristics of stretchability, bendability, and wrappability. Their forms are not restricted, and they can better accomplish formal effects such as natural folds, suspension, and draping, resulting in richer visual expression. Creators can rely on the characteristics of the material to shape sculpture forms that are dynamic and relaxed, enabling static sculpture to produce dynamic visual associations and thus extending a more prolonged visual rhythm within a limited volume. At the same time, soft sculpture materials are reversible in the creative process; their state can be adjusted and details modified at any time during modeling, greatly reducing the creative loss caused by formal errors and leaving ample room for repeated deliberation and improvisation, fully satisfying the formal needs of contemporary avant-garde artists in abstract art, healing art, and other fields.

3.2 Advantages in Expression

Traditional hard sculpture materials have a strong sense of distance and authority; soft sculpture materials, on the other hand, are mainly composed of fiber, fabric, silicone, and flexible polymer materials. They are soft in texture and loose in form, can create a healing, light, and gentle artistic atmosphere, form touchable and interactive artistic forms, possess unique sensory advantages, and break the barrier of "being viewed only from a distance." This enables soft sculpture materials to be more adept at conveying delicate and warm emotional cores, fitting the aesthetic trend of the

ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

contemporary public's pursuit of relaxation and life-oriented emotional resonance. Existing research has approached the relationship between female sculptors and soft sculpture, and it has been pointed out that soft materials provide a unique carrier for delicate and emotional narratives [1]; other scholars have taken specific artists as examples to analyze the narrative expression and life-oriented aesthetic characteristics of soft sculpture [2]. Both confirm the irreplaceability of soft materials in emotional communication. At the operational level, soft sculpture materials are more practical in creation, with richer creative methods, flexible modes, and higher degrees of freedom; in contrast, sculpture with traditional hard materials places higher demands on creators, has a long learning cycle and high cost, is difficult for ordinary creators to master, and makes it difficult to achieve the varied and natural effects of soft sculpture materials.

3.3 Advantages in Practical Application

Contemporary sculpture art is no longer confined to the single form of easel sculpture, but is developing toward cross-disciplinary integration and scene empowerment. At the level of practical application, soft sculpture has the prominent advantage of being lightweight: it is relatively safe and convenient in storage and transportation, and even large sculpture works can be realized in a lightweight manner, greatly reducing cost and construction difficulty. At the same time, due to the characteristics of the material, soft sculpture generally has no sharp edges and corners, is not easy to break, and is soft in texture, making it more suitable for special scenes such as children's spaces and indoor public spaces; its convenience also satisfies the need for rapid renewal and operation of contemporary commercial spaces, and it has outstanding practical value in the present era of frequent exhibition iteration. In terms of installation efficiency, soft works can be assembled and disassembled flexibly, and their form and position can be adjusted immediately according to spatial conditions, providing curatorial and operational flexibility that traditional hard sculpture cannot match. In addition, soft materials often possess functional attributes such as sound insulation and sound absorption, and can play a practical role in space optimization in commercial spaces and public buildings, thus achieving a good balance between function and aesthetics.

4. Exploration of Contemporary Application Scenarios of Soft Sculpture Materials

Soft sculpture materials have gradually penetrated from niche experimental art media into multiple fields, such as contemporary installation art and public space. Different materials correspond to differentiated application scenarios, forming a contemporary application system that combines artistic value and practical value, fully reflecting the strong adaptability to the times and innovative vitality of soft sculpture materials, and leaving ample room for exploration in both contemporary artistic practice and design realization.

In contemporary artistic practice, natural soft fiber materials are often used in the creation of conceptual installations. Creators use the characteristics of materials such as silk thread and cotton and linen for winding, weaving, or stacking to construct complex and entangled spatial relationships; alternatively, they use the flexibility and draping characteristics of natural soft materials to create suspended soft sculpture installations, interpreting the creative concept of "anti-form" by relying on the naturally falling state of the material itself and breaking the traditional perception that sculpture must stand in three dimensions. Synthetic materials are mostly used in avant-garde experimental installations and artistic exhibitions. For example, silicone, flexible foam, and elastic polymer materials can shape hyperrealistic and deformable sculpture forms, are suitable for interaction with audiences, possess strong artistic expressiveness, openness, and inclusiveness, and are a relatively popular display form in contemporary art museums. In the field of public art, fiber art intervenes in public space in multiple ways, including wall forms, soft sculpture forms, and installation forms, and has become an important expressive form of modern public art [5], expanding the social and cultural functions of soft materials. Such works often respond to the history and warmth of the site with the softness of the material, transforming public space from a functional container into a perceptible emotional field where people can stay.

In the field of interior design, soft sculpture mostly appears in the form of small-scale artistic sculpture or wall fiber installations, with strong commodity attributes. In the field of trendy cultural and creative products, materials such as polymer clay and silicone are used to produce cultural and creative derivatives or trendy figurines, which are cute in form and highly approachable, and are popular among young consumer groups. In children's art education, soft materials fully exert their advantage of being

ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

safe and soft: children can create freely with simple methods and fully develop their imagination; at the same time, soft materials can be repeatedly modified and have high fault tolerance, which well protects children's creative enthusiasm. In addition, soft materials are also widely used in scenarios such as commercial displays, theme parks, and immersive exhibitions. Their detachable and reconfigurable characteristics can respond quickly to theme changes and inject sustained freshness into spatial experience. On the whole, the application fields of contemporary soft sculpture materials are no longer limited to art museums, but have permeated public spaces and private domains, placing more emphasis on the expression of artistic concepts and the creation of a humanistic atmosphere, and showing a clear trajectory from "elite exhibition" toward "daily intervention."

5. Existing Problems and Limitations in the Creation of Soft Sculpture Materials

5.1 Problems of Material Stability

Both natural soft materials and synthetic soft materials have inherent performance defects. They are sensitive to changes in the external environment, and it is difficult to achieve long-term, stable, and normalized display, which is the core creative limitation of soft sculpture. Natural fiber soft materials are not suitable for storage and display in humid environments, are prone to moisture, mold, insect damage, and deformation, and are prone to oxidative fading or fiber aging, loosening, and breaking when exposed to air for a long time. Although synthetic materials are superior to natural materials in waterproof and anti-corrosion performance, they also have obvious environmental adaptation defects: they are extremely prone to softening and deformation at high temperatures, become hard, brittle, and more likely to break at low temperatures, and suffer from oxidation and yellowing under long-term ultraviolet irradiation, greatly shortening their service life, which is far from the preservation effect of hundreds or even thousands of years achieved by traditional hard sculpture materials such as stone and metal. This means that soft works require more refined control over environmental parameters such as temperature, humidity, and light, and their display and collection conditions are therefore more demanding.

5.2 Difficulty of Work Preservation

Soft sculpture materials are complex in texture and diverse in types of damage, and a standardized preservation and restoration system has not yet been formed, which is the key factor restricting the enhancement of their academic value and artistic collection value. The restoration techniques for traditional hard materials are mature and the technology is well developed, and after professional restoration, the original style of the work can be restored to the greatest extent; however, the damage to soft sculpture materials is mostly manifested in problems such as fiber aging and overall deformation, and once structural damage occurs, it is difficult to precisely restore them. In addition, art museums and art institutions have no unified norms for the storage and display of soft material sculptures, and most soft material sculpture works can only be exhibited for a short period and are difficult to collect and preserve in the long term, making the problem of preservation a major difficulty. To break through this bottleneck, it is necessary for material science, cultural relic conservation, and contemporary art management to jointly establish restoration standards and collection processes adapted to the characteristics of soft materials.

5.3 Restricted Standardization of Creation

Compared with the mature standardized technological system of traditional hard material sculpture, soft sculpture creation is still mainly based on manual and experience-based production, lacking unified technological standards, which leads to great difficulty in reproducing works and difficulty in large-scale and industrialized realization. The production of natural soft materials is characterized by contingency, and the sewing, construction, and shaping of materials are highly dependent on the creator's experience, making it difficult to reproduce highly consistent finished products from the same scheme. Although synthetic soft materials can be shaped with the help of molds, soft materials themselves have problems such as rebound and deformation errors, and even with the help of supporting materials to maintain their form, it is difficult to achieve a very ideal state. On the whole, due to the above problems, soft sculpture has remained at the level of niche manual creation for a long time, making it difficult to form a mature industrial creative system and difficult to innovate creative forms, and it is relatively difficult to enter fields such as permanent urban public art and high-end art

ISSN 2618-1568 Vol. 8, Issue 4: 12-17, DOI: 10.25236/FAR.2026.080403

collections, which restricts the long-term development of soft sculpture.

6. Conclusion

On the whole, soft sculpture materials, as an important display medium for contemporary sculpture creation, possess artistic expressiveness that traditional hard materials cannot replace, have broad development space and great development potential, and are highly adaptable to the current era of diversification and change. Relevant research has also pointed out that soft sculpture continues to release artistic power through its flexible and approachable material language [6]. Although such materials still have many defects that cannot be ignored in contemporary creation, these existing problems are the main obstacles to the development of contemporary soft sculpture art, but they are also important breakthrough points for future industry optimization and innovation. With the development of material science and technology and the improvement of craft technology, soft sculpture is expected to achieve a state of balance among artistry, practicality, and durability, broaden the boundaries of cross-disciplinary application, and inject vitality into the diversified development and innovation of contemporary sculpture art.

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