
The Emotional Burden of Artmaking

Aaron Kim

Abstract

This paper discusses the patterns and differences between formal and emotional art in order to create a visualization for the burden on artists. After thoroughly reading through Moholy-Nagy's *Contribution of the Arts to Social Reconstruction* (27), I have broken down its themes and core conclusions. The modern world has become tunnel-visioned in art: the definition of it, the creation of it, and most importantly the view of it. As Moholy-Nagy states, those who become specialists in art created a society where that talent and specialization is required in every aspect of said art. Where people no longer use their potential abilities to read the world of its imagination and wonders to express themselves and instead developed a society where only "artist-specialists" can provide for those said expressions. A burden is put on artists more specifically, one which only the artists can carry. Art is not a specific skill or an ability only the most distinguished can practice, but as what Moholy-Nagy states, is a "community matter." Thus, in order to create a visualization of this burden, I created two artworks that display the patterns and differences between formal and emotional art. The differences and especially patterns that are prevalent in emotional art will be the burden.

Introduction

When viewing the art of notable artists, one can notice patterns of similarity and differences in their works. Some artists focus on paintings and the scene within them while others will create large structures of everyday objects or focus on the technique used rather than the creation itself. These patterns are derived from the artists' purpose, and their reason for creating the artwork. Two groups can be made from these patterns, emotional and formal artists. In formal art, an artist explores their environment, methods, and unique and unconventional materials. They explore their environment with its materials and the space it provides. The materials used are largely not seen in an artist's toolkit, steel, natural wood, specific-shaped canvas, etc. In emotional art, an artist conveys meaning or a collective emotion, in which they will focus on capturing a sentiment with scenes, color, and flow. Since the beginning of humanity's venture into art, we have depicted our feelings and the problems around us. Most artwork from the 20th century was inspired by tragic events such as World War II, in which the collective emotion of the world was mourning. Artists such as Mark Rothko took these collective emotions and created their most notable style. In our modern society, Moholy-Nagy states that artists' roles are heavily based in expressing the human emotion, to a point where it is a burden; through the patterns and differences that are displayed between formal and emotional art, one will be able to visualize the burden of expressing these collective societal emotions.

To explore the relationship between emotional and formal art and the burden of expressing art, I created two artworks, one made on the foundation of emotion and the other for formal reasons. To begin this process, I first created a list of unique artists that are specifically skilled in either two types of art, emotional or formal art; then, researched each single artist to organize them into the two groups; and once having a complete organized list of artists,

compiled their methods to determine patterns that correlate to their purposes. I then applied these patterns into my own art, as this would provide not only a physical representation of the difference in creating art for emotion and none at all, but also the effect of the burden of expressing society's collective emotions.

The people I chose to represent artists who use their feelings or society's collective emotions as their artwork's purpose are Salman Toor, Mark Rothko, Damien Hirst, Jackson Pollock, Maxim Vorobiev, and Alma Thomas. I chose these artists based on style, popularity, and time period. I first researched artists who were already well known and then artists I knew myself. This could be a reason why many of the artists I ended up researching were mainly American based even though I wanted a more global approach. I then filtered them based on whether they focused on one category of art or were diverse in formal and emotional. This left me with a list of a seemingly diverse group of artists who were focused on either emotional or formal art, allowing me to fully research their methods. Each of these artists create unique art, some differ from each other in style heavily, others utilize colors situationally, however, their backgrounds and purposes for creating artwork are all based in emotion. During my research, I also found that formal artists created emotional art, so I still classified them as emotional for their notable emotional works even if their larger works were mainly formal. For my emotional painting, I will be compiling methods these artists use and then apply them into my own work. The people I chose to represent artists who focus on exploring their space, their use of materials, or creating art for the sole reason of making art are Sol Lewitt, Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, and Kehinde Wiley. Not all these artists use paint, utilize people in their works, or create 3D works, but they create art for non-emotional purposes. For my formal art, I will be compiling methods these artists use and apply them in my own art making process.

Formalist and Emotional Approaches

To develop and create my own experimental formal and emotional art, I began by listing artists that I believed to be focusing on either one of the two art styles. Through these lists I categorized each one as either a formal or emotional artist. From this new categorization, I was able to gather the methods most commonly used in both art groups. This then allowed me to create my own artworks that would showcase the differences and similarities between the two arts. Below are the artists and how I came to sorting them into one of two groups.

Salman Toor is a Pakistani artist that I found through a local museum where I was attracted to his use of color and style. His focus on the joys and prejudices of queer South-Asian men categorizes him as an emotion based artist for this paper. For his methods, he uses an emerald green lighting, depictions of South-Asian men in everyday life, and waving textured walls.

Mark Rothko is an American artist whose works are portrayed in large scale and color. His focus on using simplified shapes, color, and large scale to overwhelm the viewer and represent "human drama" categorize him as an emotion based artist. While his methods may seem difficult to understand as emotional, he will be considered an emotional artist as his intentions to express tragedy after being influenced by the events of World War II enforce this. He also states, in order to argue that he was not an abstractionist, "And the fact that a lot of

people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions.” (14)

Jackson Pollock is an American artist who is notable for his distinct drip style of painting. In which he would drip and pour paint onto large canvases to create abstract paintings. He would also do so while the canvas lay flat on the ground instead of the regular upright, stating that this method allowed him to be a part of the work. (16) While seemingly formal to the average eye, his paintings show his full body’s expression and emotion because of his method of action painting and so will be considered emotional for this paper.

Maxim Vorobiev is a Russian artist who mostly focused on architecture and formal types of art. However, he will be considered an emotional artist for this paper because of a specific piece of artwork he created after the death of his wife. He depicted the sudden and grief of the passing of his wife through the use of a painting of a tree being struck by lightning, using dark and harsh lighting.

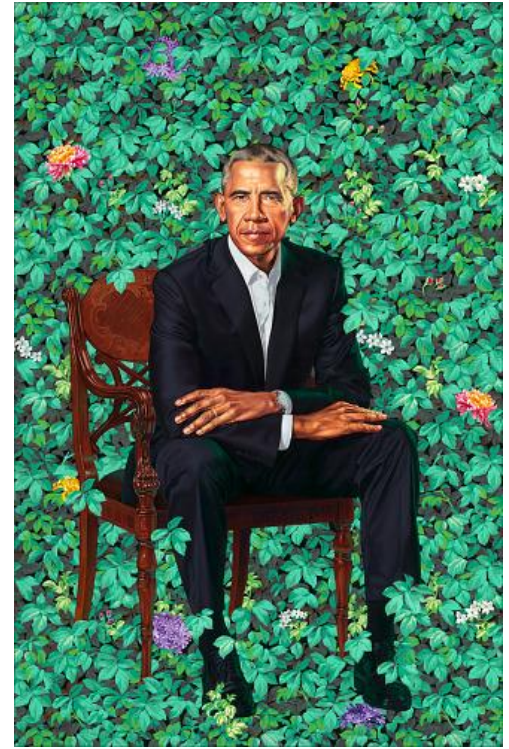
Alma Thomas is an African American artist who created notable colored abstractions. Her most famous works are based on the Moon landing and our planet, using bright and saturated colors in rows of rectangles to create reminders of life. She will be considered an emotional artist for this paper because of her inspiration being life and nature instead of an exploration of color usage.

Sol Lewitt is an American artist largely known as the founder of the Minimalist art style. He will be considered a formal artist for this paper because of his focus on creating 3D and 2D works for exploring their material and space around them instead of an emotional purpose. His most commonly used structures were the open cube and would then continue to change and experiment with size and material. His methods included using the space around the art, utilizing no people, using natural and artificial materials, and creating large structures.

Andy Warhol is an American artist largely known for his pop-art and who considered good business the best art. He will be considered a formal artist for this paper because of his creation of art not for the purpose of expressing emotion but to make business and display his, at the time, experimental pop art. His methods included utilizing vibrant colors, everyday objects, and the use of celebrities.

Frank Stella is an American artist who is notable for his geometric colored abstraction paintings and sculptures. He will be considered a formal artist for this paper because of his unique use of the canvas, natural and artificial materials in his sculptures, and noted for creating art to “search a new way to approach the canvas” and how “working systematically...emphasized his problem-solving approach.”(23)

Kehinde Wiley is a Nigerian American artist who is notable for his large scale portraits of famous individuals. While he may seem like an emotional artist because of his methods and use of figures and color, he will be considered a formal artist for this paper because of his notable works such as the Barack Obama portrait. Its purpose was to represent Barack Obama through art, not convey a message.



Art. 1
President Barack Obama,
Kehinde Wiley, 2018



Art. 2
Bar Boy, Salman Toor, 2019



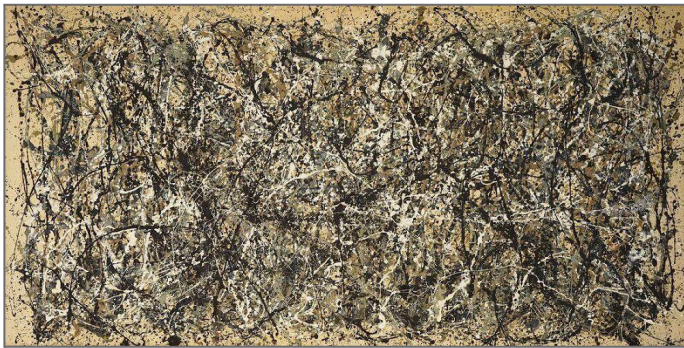
Art. 3
Spotch #15, Sol Lewitt, 2005



Art. 4
Chodorow II, Frank Stella, 1971



Art. 5
Oak Fractured by Lightning,
Maxim Vorobiev, 1842



Art. 6
Number One: 31, Jackson Pollock, 1950

Detailing Evidence and conclusion from artist

After an analysis of the researched artists, it can be stated that determining whether an art piece was created for emotion or formal reasons is usually impossible when viewed at face value. Its origins of creation, the original artists' intentions, and historical context are all required when creating a fair judgment, as shown by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Alma Thomas. These artists created works with simplistic appearances or minimal colors and can be seen as formal if only judged for their style, however, their reasons for being, origins, etc are what make them emotion purposed. Jackson Pollock's *One: Number 31* (Art. 6) has no people and is minimal in color, yet it is said that it is rhythmic like a modern city, that it is alive. (17) The same could be said for artists such as Kehinde Wiley who creates emotional artworks that contain elements of what is used to display emotion such as well posed people and use of a variety of colors, however, many of his works are also intended for a more formal representation. His portrait for Barack Obama (Art. 1) is a good example. It contains a variety of vibrant colors, a focal point on a person, and meaningful flowers in the background. Yet, the purpose and reasoning for the painting is not emotional but instead a depiction of one person in another's style. These elements or patterns, while they should not be the sole reflection of what an

artwork is representing, can provide an insight on what the artist's purpose is when creating specific artworks.

In works created for or from emotion, color, movement, posing of figures, lighting, and contrast are the main focus to evoke certain feelings. Salman Toor and Mark Rothko use specific colors in their backgrounds to create certain emotions. Salman Toor especially has a tendency to use an emerald green hue in most of his art such as in *Bar Boy* (Art. 2) as he believes that it is a color that is between glamor and poison. Mark Rothko utilizes shape and specific colors such as red to paint the raw human emotion through a simplistic approach. Another method to evoke emotion through art is sharp contrasts, which creates a more dramatic atmosphere. This can be seen in Maxim Vorobiev's *Oak Fractured by Lightning* (Art. 5) in which he utilizes harsh contrast in lighting to emphasize how sudden death feels and dark colors to create a mood of sorrow.

When creating an artwork for more formal reasons than emotion, there is an emphasis on a lack of people, no shading, and a larger focus on the space and shape around the art. Large canvases or sculptures, a focus on the movement and flow of the colors, and a lack of people are a common pattern shown by artists such as Sol Lewitt and Frank Stella. Sol Lewitt's *Splotch #15* (Art. 3) is a good example, it explores the space around it with colorful architecture and sculpture for the sake of art.

Finally, there are exceptions for both formal and emotional methods, Kehinde Wiley creates work with figures though his intentions are more formal in nature, while Mark Rothko works with color fields in a formal method, though his intentions are to convey emotional experience and connection. The artists' original intention is ultimately what dictates the emotion, such as how Kehinde Wiley has said that his art is about "what it feels like to be Black and alive in the 21st century" (26) even though his most notable artworks seem to be formal, such as the Barack Obama portrait (Art. 1). These artists use techniques typically indicative of a different or opposite mode of expression and still accomplish their goal because of their original intentions. In the end people will perceive the art on how relatable certain elements are and the origins/reasons for its creation.

Artistic Experimentation and Methodology

Through these research methods, I was able to create two pieces of artwork that reflect emotional and formal purposes. For my emotional art, I first began with a prompt that reflected a sentiment I related heavily to and that felt common among my peers. The feeling of knowing that responsibilities are inescapable and inevitable despite any amount of time passing. To create this emotion in my own art I decided to use methods that were most common in melancholic art: contrasting colors, painting on canvas, harsh lighting, and textured backgrounds. Next was choosing an analogy or imagery that would be able to provide this sentiment, to which I chose an image I took of a large fan with a downward camera angle (Reference 1). As having to directly face my responsibilities reminds me of the overwhelming amount of wind I would feel under this same fan. For my formal art, I explored a medium that I felt most curious about, which was wood. It was a material that I myself had in my backyard and the artists Sol Lewitt and Frank Stella notably used natural materials in their works, and so I chose to draw wood on itself, using itself. Already having a large piece of ply-wood in my possessions, only charcoal was required. I first located a large log, took reference pictures, and removed pieces of its bark to burn. I purposely chose (Reference 2) because of its heavy emphasis in detail, creating a bigger space to explore. The first batch of charcoal was then used to draw the log it had come from on ply-wood.



Art. 7 Untitled, Aaron Kim



Art. 8 Untitled 2, Aaron Kim



Reference 1, Aaron Kim



Reference 2, Aaron Kim

Artworks and Conclusions

To create art with emotion as its emphasis included and required a variety of feelings. The more I created from an emotional standpoint, the more I coincidentally felt burdened by knowing the art would have to reflect sentiment or it would have failed in its purpose. The pressure of making sure the painting gave the correct mood and tone felt constant. I truly felt like I had to provide for the emotions. (27) The main concept behind this painting kept switching between two ideas: One was the overwhelming nostalgia one gains from old childhood objects, the other was the consequences one would feel from running away from time's responsibilities. I began with nostalgia as the root idea, but the more progress I made, the more I began feeling and relating to the emotion of being overwhelmed. I especially had less time to think of the project because of the time commitment that comes with a new school year. Another part I look back on is the visual reference picture I used (Reference 1). To get such a view, I needed to use unconventional methods which caused the photo to be lesser in quality but I believed that with my impressionist style, it could stand without a great deal of detail. Despite that, I still needed detail on the close up fan, which made itself an obstacle. While I mainly speak of the obstacles I overcame during the process, there were other elements that were more positive during the creation of this painting. I learned better techniques to create moods and for the first time, I created art that was motivated purely by an emotion, and achieving emotional effectiveness rather than photorealism or preconceived ideas of how the painting should look. Frankly, my art benefits with no deadlines, but they did keep me on track which was much needed considering the workload I had outside of this project. If I could go back and make changes, it would be to first settle on the idea of the consequences of avoiding responsibility and then to retake references for the fan. I generally feel that the painting's outcome was successful in achieving the emotional response I set out to, I was able to observe how I felt having to create a piece solely on emotion. Salman Toor's *Boy in Bar* (Art. 2) heavily inspired my backgrounds, with textured and directional walls. The dark and moody gray of the background create a looming sensation in (Art. 8) especially with the spotlight on the person below. The composition also creates the correct tone with the fan taking much more space on the canvas than the person, leaving them almost cornered.

Choosing to draw a log on ply-wood using homemade charcoal was a curious idea. It allowed me to explore a personally favored medium and created an interesting outcome. However, the process differed from what was expected. Problems began when the wood warped, despite it being kept in relatively favorable conditions, forcing me to adapt around the canvas. When using the homemade charcoal, it would create darker and much richer blacks than store-bought charcoal. However, this would only apply to a small amount of the homemade charcoal, as the majority of the pieces would be as impactful as old chalk. Positively, using a wood canvas quickened the process, as it applied a complicated wood texture to the entire artwork. Though, the homemade charcoal did not endure on the wood canvas as long as it would have on paper. Also, creating the artwork with largely no emotions and simply just logical thinking allowed for less stress. Having to focus more on where each line of the log should be carefully placed to align correctly with the others is more straightforward than questioning if an art piece is emitting the correct emotion. I generally feel that the charcoal art was successful in achieving a formal response, as I created it with no sentimental background and so created an artwork that explores its mediums rather than a philosophy.

Final Conclusion

While deciding whether an art piece was made for emotional or formal purposes at face value is usually impossible, specific method patterns in artwork can possibly support either purpose and thus show burden. Emotionally categorized artists Salman Toor, Maxim Vorobiev, Mark Rothco, and Alma Thomas in their emotion purposed art place an emphasis on depicting a scene or utilizing specific colors. As both these methods can help the viewer relate to an emotion or situation that the artist wants to convey. When creating my own artwork to replicate emotional emphasis, these methods had a heavy role in creating sentiment and atmosphere. The scene of a fan blowing downwards onto a small scaled person ([Art. 8](#)) creates a feeling of overwhelmingness and the lighting creates a mood of melancholy. While the regular viewer would not be able to completely grasp the entire purpose and emotional weight to the artwork, they can gain portions of its main sentiment. Formally categorized artists Sol Lewitt, Frank Stella, and Andy Warhol depicted everyday objects or used natural materials in their work in order to explore and define art. They were inspired by curiosity and so I had done the same by exploring the medium of wood in art. Frank Stella was also notable for his unconventional canvases such as in Chodorow II ([Art. 4](#)), where the canvas is not an average rectangle but multiple triangles, and so I was inspired to go further and drew the wood on itself, which taught me the unexpected uses of such a canvas. Instead of beginning with emotion, just like Sol Lewitt, I created a plan and began the wood project like creating a building. I gathered the material, began with a simple sketch, and built the wood up step by step. Without any of my sentiment enforcing my purpose to draw the wood, I was able to create a drawing that displayed exploration of a medium, wood, and acknowledged that meaningless purpose art is its own meaning. It can be for anything, even a simple display of human curiosity. The differences between formal art and emotional art can convey the burden of having to express emotion. While it is not definitive, my two artworks show that a depiction of a scene, purposeful use of color, creative use in lighting, a lack of exploration of space, and a lack of unconventional methods and materials are a visual aid of emotional burden on artists.

The existence of this emotional burden on artists only proves what Moholy Nagy stated. The idea that people have become tunnel-visioned with art, especially the belief that only “artist-specialists” can provide for emotional expression. In reality, everyone can or should do art, as this emotional burden is just the manifestation of believing in the idea that only artists can express society’s collective emotions. If anything should be taken from the existence of an emotional burden on artists is that more people should see art as a community matter instead of something only artists can do.



Bibliography

1. "Barack Obama." *National Portrait Gallery*, National Portrait Gallery , https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.2018.16.
2. Toor, Salman. "Salman Toor: Bar Boy." *Salman Toor | Bar Boy | Whitney Museum of American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, <https://whitney.org/collection/works/63300>.
3. Nast, Condé. "© 2005 Sol LewittARS, NY. Photograph: Mark Morosse, the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Architectural Digest*, Architectural Digest, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/contributor/2005-sol-lewittars-ny-photograph-mark-morosse-the-metropolitan-museum-of-art>.
4. "Chodorow II." *Art Object Page*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.74826.html>.
5. Vorobiev, Maxim. "Oak Fractured by a Lightning. Allegory on the Artist's Wife Death, 1842 - Maxim Vorobiev." *Www.wikiart.org*, 1 Jan. 1970, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/maxim-vorobiev/oak-fractured-by-a-lightning-allegory-on-the-artist-s-wife-death-1842>.
6. "Jackson Pollock. One: Number 31, 1950. 1950: Moma." *The Museum of Modern Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78386>.
7. "Untitled" Provided by the artist
8. "Untitled 2" Provided by the artist
9. "Reference 1" Provided by the artist
10. "Reference 2" Provided by the artist
11. Smith, Roberta. "Salman Toor, a Painter at Home in Two Worlds." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 23 Dec. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/23/arts/design/salman-toor-whitney-museum.html>.
12. "Salman Toor: No Ordinary Love." *Baltimore Museum of Art*, <https://artbma.org/exhibition/salman-toor-no-ordinary-love/>.
13. "Mark Rothko." *Mark Rothko: Introduction*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/features/mark-rothko.html>.
14. "Mark Rothko: Moma." *The Museum of Modern Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/5047>.
15. "Jackson Pollock and His Paintings." *Jackson Pollock: 100 Famous Paintings Analysis and Biography*, <https://www.jackson-pollock.org/>.



16. "Jackson Pollock: Moma." *The Museum of Modern Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/artists/4675>.
17. "Jackson Pollock. One: Number 31, 1950. 1950: Moma." *The Museum of Modern Art*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78386>.
18. "Maxim Vorobiev Archives." *Ruzhnikov*, Ruzhnikov, <https://www.ruzhnikov.com/artists/maxim-vorobiev/>.
19. Robert T. Muller / October 17, 2018 / Leave a comment / Arts & Culture. "Fractured by Lightning." *The Trauma & Mental Health Report*, YorkU, 17 Oct. 2018, <https://trauma.blog.yorku.ca/2018/10/fractured-by-lightning/>.
20. "Alma Thomas." *Artist Info*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1926.html#works>.
21. "Alma Thomas." *Smithsonian American Art Museum*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/alma-thomas-4778>.
22. "Sol LeWitt." *Artist Info*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.4705.html>
23. "Andy Warhol." *Artist Info*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1966.html>
24. "Frank Stella." *Artist Info*, National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.1903.html>
25. "Kehinde Wiley Studio KW Studio." *Kehinde Wiley Studio*, Kehinde Wiley Studio, <https://kehindewiley.com/>.
26. "Artist Kehinde Wiley: 'the New Work Is about What It Feels like to Be Young, Black and Alive in the 21st Century'." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 21 Nov. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/nov/21/artist-kehinde-wiley-prelude-nation>
27. Kostelanetz, Richard. "The Contribution of the Arts to Social Reconstruction." *Moholy-Nagy: An Anthology*, A Da Capo Paperback, New York, 1970.