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# Subjectivity and Stylistic Transformation in Muhammad Hitler's Paintings: A Visual Analysis of Hyperrealism and Expressionism

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**Article information:**

**Manuscript received:** 7 May 2026; **Accepted:** 3 Jun 2026; **Published:** 23 Jul 2026

**Abstract:** Modern Iraqi painting has witnessed numerous changes in terms of plastic formations, technical invention, and the figural representation of individual and collective experience. Nonetheless, the question of the role of subjectivity in guiding stylistic change in the individual plastic practices of Iraqi painters has received little attention. This research is devoted to studying the plastic-structural transformations of the expressive sense of subjectivity in the painting of the contemporary Iraqi artist, Muhammad Hitler, between 2011 and 2022. A qualitative descriptive-analytical model was employed for analyzing 20 documented paintings that form the corpus, kept mainly in the possession of the artist. Two works have been purposely selected as typical examples of contrasting stylistic phases: *Girl and the flower basket* (2020), typical for Hyperrealism, and *The young man and the chair* (2022), typical for Expressionism. Parameters of analysis include representation, composition, color, technique, gesture, figure-ground relations, and specific psychological, ontological, and cultural semantic associations including, in the final stage, viewer orientation. Results show that subjectivity is present in both paintings, yet through different visual means. In the hyperrealist work, it is conveyed through expanded detail, optical precision, non-transparent composition, and hidden psychological ambiguity. In the expressionist work, it is activated through chromatic colors, visible brushwork, open composition, semitransparent and reconstituted identity, and the plastic gesture of the vulnerable and distressed bodily movement. The shift in style is, therefore, not from objectivity to subjectivity, but an internal restructuring of the presence of subjectivity from explicit to implicit and from the controlled to the expressive. The study aims to also document a so far under-researched existing Iraqi plastic practice, as well as shows how advances in technology, international artistic idioms, the role of the personal imaginary function, and the local frame of cultural experience interact in guiding the stylistic change of a contemporary painter.

**Keywords:** Subjectivity, contemporary Iraqi painting, expressive structure, Hyperrealism, Expressionism, visual analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Painting is always an abstraction, not a direct transcription of visual experience. Even a photograph crops, flattens, frames, and selectively emphasizes, surfaces, and textures. A painting's abstraction from reality is always contrapuntal with a tactile and sensory concreteness that invites a bodily response, moving the eyes across shapes, lines, color fields, spaces, and textures.

The artist's subjectivity is not some simply given, spontaneous, ineffable, ever-changing nebula of interiority. Observation, memory, relation to the historical past and

other artists, decisions about material, medium, tools, size, and presentation, and responses to the work in progress and when apparently finished, all enter into subject formation [1].

Nor should the viewer's response be limited to the immediate registering of shapes, colors, lines, and composition. The encounter also shapes spatial and temporal dynamics, emotional and intellectual responses, expectations, memories, comparisons, preferences, awareness, values, affects, and themselves. The contact with a work becomes a relationship and not just an immediate impression. The artist's sight involves construction of a world to be seen, recognized, and experienced.

Contrastingly, Expressionism reorganizes reality, not protecting its optical appearance, but amplifying affective connotations. Following these premises, bodies may be simplified, elongated, compressed or placed in unstable environments. Colors do not need to be linked to the description of the local color of objects, becoming structure of the emotional atmosphere. Negative emotions in art do not need to be off-putting, when emergent and registered by the viewer as open to interpretation. Emotional negativity may become formative in the aesthetic experience [2]. The emotional and the aesthetic negativity may be appreciated heteronomously(ousia), as positive aesthetic negativity. Ambiguity may also render the experience of art stronger: „David believed that ambiguity could maintain an artwork's attentional hold because a lack of closure motivated perceivers to fill in gaps and search for meaning.“. If viewers are not repelled but compelled by negative art, and if negative emotion is to some extent appreciated, why not foster ambivalence in general as a powerful art-producing-and-art-appreciating emotion? The deeper aspect of ambiguity is that it comes across stronger than the real influence of an emotion or a situation, and so it remains infinitely possible to read one's own insights in that which seems to conceal something.

Arab and Iraqi modernity itself was due to the crossing of local cultural memories, academic training, international circulation, and regional politics. We must not forget that Arab modern art was not derivative or imitative of European originals; rather that it was adapting art from the world to memory locally inscribed, to the self with an identity claiming reinstitution, and according to profound local (and in the above case also regional) preoccupations; educating both community and individual [3], [4]. Iraqi modern artists have also struggled with the syncretism of academic training and the cultural memory of clay, script, and rug, alongside personal toils and pleasures, change in the world.

Although this trajectory is considered to be conceptually based on the synthesis of technical processes, no systematic study was identified in the literature reviewed that used a conception of subjectivity to compare the two phases. Substantial writing in English, well researched in European, American, and Arab sources, addresses each of the two principal orientations. To my knowledge, Hunacek is the only author in English who has addressed technical and theoretical issues in the work of Muhammad Hitler, focusing exclusively on his expressionist practice between 1996 and 2007. The basic problem, then, can be defined as an absence of tools for addressing the effectiveness of stylistic change in transforming the visual, emotional, and semantic organization of the represented human subject [5]. The principal research question can thus be summarized as follows: how does the expressive structure of subjectivity transform in Muhammad Hitler's representation of the human figure between 2011 and 2015? This question unfolds into a set of sub-questions: which formal and technical characteristics of the hyperrealist and expressionist approaches can be identified and theorized? How do these characteristics function differently with respect to the visual, emotional, and semantic attributes of the human subject? Most importantly, how do they function to communicate the visual, emotional, and semantic qualities of the depicted human subject as a lived experience?

In an age of distraction, it is not easy to settle into the responsible attentiveness that a very rewarding painting requires. It must be lived with, pondered over, revisited, noticed in changing light — it often has doors that do not casually admit the visitor. Awareness,

however effortful, leads to sensitivity and pleasure. Paintings are inclusive; they invite their viewers to learn their languages and find their routes. The reward for attention is not information, but arrival in a mobile, accomplished sensibility whose perceptions extend and nourish one's own. What pleasure is to a cat, Lucian Freud suggested, gratitude is to humans: paintings induce both. This is why they require close looking in a meditative spirit. The expressive structure of subjectivity is designed, like other autonomous works, to provoke cradling.

Representation and expression are different but not mutually exclusive terms. Representation means showing something recognizable, expressing indicates that the organization of form conveys an emotion, an attitude, or a character. A realistic figure can be more expressive depending on the use of light, the cropping, the surface texture, or the form of the eye; conversely, an expressionist figure would not lose all recognizability, even if the proportions of the model to its projected image are completely changed or the colours are entirely distorted. In this context, however, we should heed the warning from Gombrich not to see the visible stroke or configuration as a direct creative expression of the artist's psychological disposition or emotion, but to treat it as a sign that needs to be interpreted, is a rhetorical turn, and only becomes expressive in the context it creates. This is the reason why the present study is restricted to the analysis of perceivable visual characteristics and avoids potential aberrations concerning the artist's elusive irrational motives unless documentary evidence justifies them.

The recipient's role in the construction of meaning is becoming more and more apparent. Leder, Belke, Oeberst & Augustin, 2004, distinguish perceptual analysis, memory, classification, interpretation, and evaluation as part of aesthetic appreciation. Pelowski, Markey, Forster & Gerger, 2017, emphasized expectation, semantic-cognitive conflict, self-referential processing and their relevance for generating aesthetic experience [6]. These models can easily complement your own perception of looking at a painting: For example, a hyperrealist painting makes you first look at the skill and detail, and the expressive parts may then capture your attention; in an expressionist painting, the color and gestural elements will cause the immediate feelings, but the recognizable elements will also have to be "read." A further step will be implemented by accepting specific ambiguities. Muth & Carbon, 2013, have shown that understanding these types of paintings can lead to a greater aesthetic pleasure. And Menninghaus, Wagner, Hanich, Wassiliwizky, Jacobsen, and Koelsch have discussed how negatively charged expressive artworks might be transformed into a rewarding reflective aesthetic experience. Showing that the often negative feelings are transformed into a pleasant contemplation is important to Sylvian. According to him: "artworks that tend to be rated as more pleasant or affectively positive are also those that elicit emotions that are more complex and that are high in the components of an emotional experience that are closely related to interestingness." This has been the conceptual basis for his prediction that high beauty artworks are those that are high in interest, complexity and metacognitive experience components. The latest neuroaesthetic research has repeatedly linked aesthetic response to the sensory, the emotional/affective, the knowledge based, as well as the self-referential processing level.

Hyperrealism is related to optical accuracy, smooth shaping, amplifying detail, and a direct link to photography. The seeming objectivity masks the painterly decisions that determine the source, framing, scale, light, focal hierarchy, colour balance, and level of detail. The painting is not a reproduction; reality is reconstructed labour by labour. Isolation can be a form of subjectivity: isolating a figure, concentrating on texture, freezing movement, or underscoring the unconscious details neglected by ordinary perception. The viewer oscillates between the recognition of known forms or situations and the obsessive observation of a reality that serves as proof of performance.

Expressionism is the aesthetic form in which emotional truth, psychological reality, and true individuality give rise to such influence and intensity that distortions of natural

form are inevitable. Colour is most contingent upon the emotional state of the individual, as the symbolic impact of a colour is in its relationship with other colours and in its contextual association with object or state rather than as a universal reaction. The brushstroke could direct the viewer, become the rhythm of gesture, emanate the energy of the material, or infect the viewer with the rhythm of fear. The movement will be allied to colour, chassis, and mood. The body becomes a field of trial. The curve could read submission or hopelessness [7]. Parting the open hands or the held object could be a plea or fear. Bending and supporting could protect or isolate. The sense of move and constraint is compelling. Lyric series of fear fear by Iraqi artist Muhammad Ghani are in the same line of force although the Iraqi Classical has been urban and neoclassical in emphasis.

Complementary to those perspectives, existing research overall shows a series of apt comparisons that can be made between the two phases, despite being under-theorized and not systematically pursued. These possible continuities concern the role and function of Hitler's figural type in engaging heterogeneous forms of personal and socially mediated experience; his working process in translating such content from source to surface; and the specific forms of surface and organization produced by his handling of the medium. Clearly, however, none of this is systematically studied through a unified concept of subjectivity and exactly what, if anything, parallels between the two phases of the artist might indicate remains un-theorized. This paper therefore seeks to delve more deeply into these questions by theoretically understanding how subjective meanings can be proposed, developed, and analyzed across the two phases of an artist's work, and then by carrying out such a comparison.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study design was qualitative descriptive and analytical. It was qualitative because the goals were to understand and describe relationships between selected aspects of form evident within perceptual experience of the painting and to ascertain indicative patterns of change over time. It was descriptive because the inquiry aimed to report and summarize features of interest. The design was also analytical because the purpose was to try to understand connections between the described patterns. The objectives of descriptive and analytical studies are closely related with the latter, in this case, emphasizing depth and recognizably theoretical engagement.

Coming from art, the study design shares art's interest in interpretation but was more circumspect. Close visual analysis was the method used for philosophy first before social science, and is thus a disciplined method but still open to innovation, and user sensitivity to the subtlety and nuance of high-resolution digital imaging. The language was Rose's philosophical language of visual description, so nowhere does the paper claim direct access to meaning; rather its methods potentially give rise to truths influenced by the image. This is why the study is careful to exclude claims about intention or psychophysical state that are not tied directly or logically to detailed consideration of the optical image.

**Table 1. Documentary information for the selected paintings**

| Artwork                            | Year | Medium            | Dimensions   | Style         | Collection                   |
|------------------------------------|------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Girl and the flower basket</i>  | 2020 | Oil on canvas     | 90 × 70 cm   | Hyperrealism  | Artist's personal collection |
| <i>The young man and the chair</i> | 2022 | Acrylic on canvas | 120 × 100 cm | Expressionism | Artist's personal collection |

The analysis drew on high-resolution images, all available documentary information, the artist's biographical archive, and literature on subjectivity, aesthetic experience, Hyperrealism, Expressionism, and Arab and Iraqi art, with visual evidence being primary and contextual information used to elucidate rather than supplant formal analysis. Observations were organized under seven domains on a visual-analysis sheet designed to elicit and structure responses: (1) figures, objects, setting, scale, and degree of realism; (2) composition, balance, movement, depth, and figure-ground relations; (3) colours, contrast, temperature, saturation, and light; (4) medium, modeling, texture, edges, and visible brushwork; (5) gaze, posture, gesture, tension, and atmosphere; (6) symbols, narrative, and personal and cultural intertwining; and (7) distance, access, self-implication, and ambiguity. Data were extended by exploring how each work addressed social visibility, as discussed by Meenakshi Thapan in relation to Geeta Kapur's theory of the aesthetic object.

To enhance interpretive rigor, both works were analyzed with the same structured sheet, and all observations of specific elements were described first before their implications were probed. Every suggestive interpretive claim was linked to descriptions of visible elements, and only description or generally recognized formal, aesthetic, and expressionistic effects were incorporated. The progression from observation through analysis and interpretation was punctuated by careful resistance to overreaching, convenient but unchecked assertions, or the unconscious reproduction of previous unjustified readings. The methodology usefully separates a descriptive level (what appears to be presented), an analytical level (how elements combine or function), and an interpretive level (what descriptions and analyses suggest). The relentless "may" be tautological or evasive, but it is necessary when the "is" without appropriate objectivity is wishful thinking. A methodology simply cannot say more than it actually indicates.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The comparison showed four related adjustments. First, the precise optical rendering was replaced by selective simplification and emotional exaggeration. Second, local colour lost its role of describing the surface and unifying the visual field to become a means of creating atmospheric space and emotional tension. Third, the human presence lost its stability and individual identity and became a vehicle for expressing psychological tensions and shared vulnerability [8]. Fourth, the role of the spectator was no longer that of careful scrutiny of a technically resolved image; rather, it was to witness and respond to an unresolved pictorial situation. These were changes of emphasis rather than a total repudiation of earlier achievements.

#### 3.1 *Girl and the flower basket*

The painting is in portrait orientation and portrays a small girl seated on a dark colored wooden chair. Her body is depicted in a three-quarter turn to the right as she tilts her head to look at the viewer. She is wearing a white blouse under a dark sleeveless top and a reddish-brown skirt [9]. A rather large, woven basket with green plant-like forms and small red objects is prominently featured in the lower-left and center of the painting and a smaller brown vase containing various flowering plants is seen in the background to the left. The rest of the background is minimal and dark with a warm yellow-green light cast from the upper left of the canvas.

The composition of the painting is slightly to the right of center and balanced by the forms on the left, especially the basket with its circular rim leading the viewer's eye to the girl's upper body and the vase on the extreme left. There is a mild amount of tension in the image due to her body turning away from and her head turning back toward the viewer. It seems as if the raised right hand is partially interrupting an action which is left to the viewer's imagination. The color scheme is limited to earthy colors of dark browns, olive green, white, and red while the girl's white blouse and the exposed skin on the left form

the focal point of the contrast. The high contrast between the brightly lit upper body and the dark background helps to isolate her from the environment. Light and shade are carefully handled to give a sense of form and texture and the whole effect is one of a nearly photorealistic painting except for the deliberately simplified and dark background which adds to the sense of isolation.

The brushwork is not as visible and appears more subdued in order to mimic the effect of a photograph. But this is an illusion for the painting is tightly controlled by the artist so that the background is not just an afterthought but is deliberately chosen by the artist to suit his purpose as is evident in the contrast between the beautifully rendered elements like the girl's hair, skin, wooden chair, woven basket and the roughly sketched dark and implicit forms [10]. The girl is the central figure in this composition and her scrutiny is felt by the viewer who is at once confronted with the directness of her gaze and yet unable to penetrate her thoughts. This is because as is usual with Harnett the psychological import of the image is left ambiguous and the symbols of growth and care, perhaps suggested by the girl, flowers, and basket and the delicate play of light would not be immediately apparent to the viewer who would be caught by the apparent beauty of the child and her environment. The child seems to be asking a question or answering one and her raised hand indicates the unsure nature of the action.



**Figure 1.** Show painted Girl and the flower basket (2020)

### 3.2 *The young man and the chair*

The painting is horizontally oriented and depicts two male figures in a blue environment. One is on the left, standing with his head thrown back, torso falling backwards, and arms outstretched. The second is seated in a chair on the right, his head also reclined, arms falling outward, and legs stretching towards the viewer [11]. Both figures wear light blue shirts and dark pants. The facial features are obscured by shadow, simplified modeling, or paint handling. The environment is filled with vertical strokes and there are minimal yellow, orange, and red accents to be found around the hands, limbs, and clothing.

It makes for an unequal but interdependent relationship between the two figures. The standing figure creates a narrow vertical movement of appeal or protest, the sitting figure a broader diagonal movement of collapse or exhaustion. The chair simultaneously relieves and encumbers the seated man, who sustains and contains himself in it. The outward appeal of the standing figure and the collapsing form of the man is what creates this opposition and tension.

The space is very shallow, while verticals also connote walls, rain, falling light, or repeated traces. Bodies and ambient are in almost the same blue tonality, so they blur into the environment. Lower right gives no secure footing and consists of broken darks. Darks beneath intensify the spatial instability and diagonal against verticals elicit psychic

imbalance. The ground is rushy and seems to close. Blue dominates background, reflected light, clothing and body, from cyan and turquoise to navy and black. Warms occasionally impede the rhythm of descent, direct attention, ground flight, or emanate pain. Blue is not symbolic but structurally binds. It highlights obscured faces, supports the use of descenders for signs, cools the treatment of bodies, sets off no marks, and results in contrasts the likely marks [12].

The work displays hints of paint handling and of having been painted. Broadly directive strokes signify various features, while irregular edges gently dissolve the outlines of the figures into the surroundings. Optically, because the faces are obscured, gesture and pose dominate. Hands raised seem to push away or apply, head raised seems to appeal, shock, deny, question; torso falling and separating seems to push away, appply, pan, condemn; legs sprawling and prone seem to flee, faint, resist, submit; seated man seems to consent. It may be interpreted as two actions or two contrasting poses of one involved man. The closest appear to be requesting hand and adopting pose.



**Figure 2.** Show Painted *The young man and the chair* (2022)

### 3.3 Comparative analysis

**Table 2. Transformation of the expressive structure of subjectivity**

| Dimension           | Girl and the flower basket<br>(2020)                | The young man and the chair<br>(2022)             |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Style               | Hyperrealist representation                         | Expressionist alteration                          |
| Composition         | Stable vertical organization and balanced asymmetry | Dynamic horizontal distribution and unstable axes |
| Human figure        | Individually recognizable and carefully modelled    | Generalized, obscured, and defined by gesture     |
| Face and gaze       | Detailed face and near-direct gaze                  | Obscured faces and indirect orientation           |
| Colour              | Descriptive earth palette with restrained accents   | Dominant blue field with warm points of tension   |
| Brushwork           | Mostly concealed                                    | Visible and directional                           |
| Figure-ground       | Clear separation                                    | Partial merging                                   |
| Space               | Coherent but reduced setting                        | Ambiguous and unstable environment                |
| Emotional intensity | Restrained and psychologically ambiguous            | Heightened, dramatic, and unresolved              |
| Viewer position     | Close observation and silent encounter              | Witnessing and interpretive implication           |
| Subjective mode     | Controlled visibility                               | Expressive intensification                        |

The comparison illustrates that the shift is not simply from realistic to non-realistic modes, as both paintings display figurative characteristics [13]. Rather, the transformation involves reconsidering the function of figuration. In the first painting, figuration serves to consolidate the presence of a specific individual by creating an image that possesses coherent anatomical structure, descriptive material cues, and spatially stabilizing compositional elements. In the second painting, figuration is transformed in such a way that the constitution of identity is rendered less definite and the body image is reconfigured in terms of gesturality, atmospheric conditions, and spatial pressure.

The comparison makes this dynamic easiest to observe in terms of the facial image. The face is the region of the hyperrealist painting where the image is most finely grained and given the greatest sense of luminous intensity. It is the site of interpersonal exchange but the locus of psychological information is held back [14]. In the expressionist painting, the faces are less present, and instead the body as a whole assumes meaning. The face and the identity of the individual thus become less focal as regards presence and visibility. Gestural invention, instead of the facial countenance and the individually specific body, becomes the bearer of subjectivity. Posture, gesture, and the projection of wound feel and responses of unguarded vulnerability therefore bring about the shift of subjectivity from the presence of the face and the individuation of the body into an open and collective visibility.

The role of colour in the transformation parallels this shift. In the first painting, colour does much to specify the different kinds of skin, fabric, wood, plant, and ground distinguishing the various elements while also contributing to the formal impression of material specificity and descriptive illusion. In the second painting, blue in particular de-differentiates these categories and blurs the distinction between body and environment [15]. Colour therefore moves from a primarily descriptive function to one in which it serves to affectively extend the artwork, supporting the structural organization of the work as a whole. Brushwork shifts from invisible residence in the depicted world to the thickly encrusted, dense deposits of material on the surface of the work. The colour field exists in a tension between the saturated mass of the pigmented surface and the embracing atmosphere that the coloured space produces.

#### 4. Conclusions

The comparative analysis shows that subjectivity was central to Muhammad Hitler painting despite a significant stylistic change. In *Girl and the flower basket*, subjectivity is enhanced through controlled visibility: accurate modeling, detailed texture, stable composition, restrained color, and a returned gaze, produce a presence of a specific individual, yet preserve psychological ambiguity. In *The young man and the chair*, subjectivity is enhanced through expressive intensification: dominant blue, visible brushwork, unstable space, obscured faces, and strained gestures, transform the figures into carriers of a more general condition of vulnerability and distress. The shift cannot be characterized as a passage from objectivity to subjectivity, as both paintings depend on subjective selection and construction. It is a shift in the modality of subject construction. The hyperrealist painting mediates the figure's affective charge by efficient technical solution and selectiveness; the expressionist by means of bodily instability, chromatic tension, material gesture, and environmental immersion. The previous technical knowledge is not forgotten. Anatomy, portraiture, modeling, and compositional organization are still present in the later works but are re-functioned from the optical truth of surface appearance toward emotional and semantic resonance. The figure remains a concern, but its perceived function changes from the clearly recognizable object of vision to a generalized body of vulnerability and loss.

In term of color and view activation, descriptive color becomes a structural, affective one, and the viewer moves from witnessing a visual, self-contained individual toward a situation left unresolved. The answer to the first research question is, therefore, the shift

from the controlled subjectivity of individually visible figures toward a more open, collectively suggestive, and unstable language.

The artist's oeuvre was fully catalogued in order to provide accurate titles, dates, media, dimensions, collections, exhibition history, photographs, and statements. Subsequent investigations will need to gather a larger, more evenly distributed sample to determine if Hyperrealism and Expressionism were in fact stylistic sequence, a temporary hiatus, or an abiding tandem. An interview with the artist was recorded. If future inquiries are pursued, additional interviews should be conducted to substantiate claims regarding technical evolution, photographic source material, artistic influence, the shift to Expressionism, as well as the link between the personal and the Iraqi. Examination of the actual paintings is especially crucial in this instance given that digital images do not adequately present size, texture, paint application, quality of line, or color. The latter is especially important as some surfaces have been varnished, flattening the chromatic intensity of underlying paint.

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