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Visual Representation of Social Issue Themed Animal Imagery by Chinese Artists

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Abstract: Artists express their observations, understanding, and questioning of society through various forms and contexts. The aim of this paper is to study the representation of social issues in artistic creation by contemporary Chinese artists through analyzing the diverse expressions of animal subjects, issues, cultural significance and artistic style. Based on content analysis methods, this study uses document analysis and artwork analysis to examine the diverse forms of animal imagery representation in artworks and their potential social significance. The analysis adopted Feldman's art criticism model to interpret the form and content to determine their social symbolic meaning. The research found that various types of animals are used as visual representations of social issues, especially the cultural, power, and economic contexts that occur in society based on artistic reflection, the experience, and the cultural values of each artist. In addition, mixed media installations are a significant form of presentation in articulating expression. Furthermore, the research will broaden the interpretive perspectives of artworks, providing a new pathway of social understanding and cultural change.

Keywords: Social Issue, Animal Imagery, Visual Representation, Chinese Artists

1. Introduction

Throughout history, animals have been depicted in human culture's art, literature, folklore, religion, and language. Consequently, they are significant symbols used by humans to understand the world and themselves. Symbols are things imbued with meaning by people; their significance depends on the cultural context in which they appear and influences how we perceive things. Biologist Edward Wilson once wrote that animals are "the natural vehicles for metaphor and myth," (McCausland, 2014). The symbolic attributes of animals make them excellent subjects for artists. They are used as decorative motifs, representing animals' real status in society and symbolizing other qualities in culture. Animal art can be traced back to the earliest forms of art in the Paleolithic era. In the cave paintings of Europe, dating back 30.000 years, animals appear more frequently than humans, reflecting their essential role in human life. With the advent of agriculture in the Neolithic era, domesticated animals began to replace wild animals as subjects in art. In medieval art, animals often appeared in jewelry, paintings, and utilitarian objects and were used to illustrate biblical and other religious texts. For example, lambs typically represented purity and the sacrifice of Jesus; doves expressed love; lions were depicted as guardians of the deceased; and medieval English coins were often adorned with animals (Aloi, 2012).

In the context of artistic creation, artists express their observations, understanding, and questioning of society through their works (Al-Abbas & Sedon, 2015). Natural symbols become sources of inspiration and are adapted according to their intent. The use of animal imagery is widely adopted internationally (Aloi, 2012). For many cultural and social groups in ancient China and later dynastic periods, animals also served as links between the human world and the cosmos. In China, animal imagery is widely used in proverbs, poetry, and visual art. According to Langer (2009), animals' lives are represented by emotions, whereas humans are represented by concepts, symbols, and language. Animals signal through symbols, but humans need more than these symbols; they require complex symbols as "tools of thought" to fully express and metaphorically convey deep insights and direct views on social issues (Razali et al., 2021). Thus, the use of animal symbols or any type of symbol can be interpreted in various ways. The aim of this study is to analyze and identify the form and content in contemporary Chinese artworks that use animal images to represent social themes in the context of issues, cultural relationships, and artistic expression.

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2. Literature Review

This section will investigate the diversity and complexity of animal imagery in artworks, as well as how artists use them as languages or symbols to convey various social issues. Firstly, Linda Kalof and Roel Sterckx's research delved into the different cultural perceptions of animals in Western countries and China. In the article "Looking at Animals in Human History," Kalof focused on animal cultural representations, discussing how these representations evolved with changing social conditions in Western history. She noted that during the Enlightenment period, the clear distinction between humans and animals emphasized human centrality and superiority (Kaye, 1998). In contrast, Sterckx discussed the cultural perception of animals in early Chinese thought in his paper "Early Chinese Animals and Monsters," emphasizing the continuity and mutual dependence between animals and humans (Razali et al., 2021). Additionally, Aloi focused on the role of animal imagery in Western art, aiming to challenge our past conceptions of animals through contemporary art. Aloi also explores various aspects of human-animal interactions in contemporary art practices, primarily focusing on artworks from Europe and the United States (Aloi, 2012).

On the other hand, in contemporary Chinese art, Cheng (2007) coined the term "animal behavior" in her study titled "Animal Behavior in China" to define a performance art genre depicting animals as unwitting performers and/or manipulated artistic subjects. In her narrative, animal behavior reveals how humans position themselves in relation to other animals. Additionally, her perspective includes how people perceive and interact with animals during periods of rapid societal transformation. Her research combines the social context of China and the relationship between humans and animals, contributing to an overall depiction of animals in Chinese performance art and social issues.

Meanwhile, Fok (2012) in her study "Life and Death: Contemporary Chinese Art and the Body," focuses on the interaction between animals and Chinese performance artists. She examines contemporary Chinese performance artworks since the early 1990s that utilize live or deceased animals as mediums of expression and explores the roles animals play in these artistic practices. Winslett (2016) argues that the bodies of animals carry strong metaphorical significance and are often seen as substitutes for the human body in performance art, thereby allowing exploration of themes related to life, death, or sociocultural issues. In some instances, animals are indeed depicted as metaphorical with anthropomorphic characteristics. However, in other cases, artists utilize animals as a continuous artistic language and pay attention to the animals themselves in collaboration, gaining insights into their existence from a biological and non-anthropocentric perspective (Fox, 2012). Thus, this study suggests that the presence of animals in contemporary art is not merely a metaphorical space but, more importantly, reveals how artists perceive their relationship with societal issues.

Ashford research report, "Repositioning the 'Other' Animals in Contemporary Chinese Art," made a significant contribution to the focus on animals in the field of contemporary Chinese art. Ashford argues that for Chinese artists, physical engagement with animals is crucial as they adeptly navigate the globalization and exchange of the early 21st century, referencing Western conceptual works from the 20th century, such as those by Joseph Beuys. In this process, they also seek to establish a fundamental Chinese identity that can gain international recognition. Additionally, Ashford's research provides an ecological and political perspective. She believes that in artworks featuring animals as subjects, the relationship between humans and animals is more about maintaining and asserting power rather than developing aesthetics free from political control (Cui et al., 2023). Through a socio-political, ecological framework, Ashford's research offers theoretical insights into the diversity of animals in contemporary Chinese art. He further asserts the existence of speciesism structures in Chinese animal art (Fox, 2012).

Heinich emphasizes that artworks with animals as themes in contemporary art are complex case studies in the art world, illustrating various evaluation criteria and conflicting values. In her study titled "Art that Causes Pain," Heinich (2014) elucidates the relationship between artworks with animals as themes, moral boundaries, and audience acceptance. She believes that the transgression of boundaries is a critical factor in defining contemporary art, and the use of live animals in contemporary art has surpassed established boundaries recognized by systems such as aesthetics, ethics, and law. In particular, she examines Huang Yongping's "Theater of the World," which was exhibited at the Centre Pompidou but later withdrawn due to pressure from animal rights activists. Through analysis of this event, she points out the lack of understanding between critics and advocates, each holding different aesthetic, interpretive, and ethical values and thus perceiving reality differently.

3. Methodology

This study employed content analysis methods through document analysis and artwork analysis. The analysis of documents will include literature from books, journals, exhibition catalogs, magazines, and newspapers. On the other hand, analysis of artworks systematically interprets visual features, revealing how the arrangement and design of animal elements significantly influence the overall impression of the artworks. This study selected animal imagery works from five Chinese artists, aiming to interpret the animal imagery, prominent formal elements, and principles in each piece through formal analysis. Each selected work is considered to possess unique animal imagery elements and formal principles, thereby presenting different social issues. The analysis used Feldman's art criticism model, which is description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, to interpret the form and content to determine their social symbolic meaning. As proposed by Rosalind Ragans, Feldman's art criticism model's four interrelated steps can elucidate hidden meanings in certain artworks. The art criticism model is as follows: 1) Description: Involves examining the materials and

themes of the artwork; 2) Analysis: Explains the design elements and principles; 3) Interpretation: Clarifies the meaning of the artwork; and 4) Evaluation: Assesses the success of the artist's work, considering ideas, form, and content comprehensively.

Integrating both analytical methods into a systematic artwork analysis process will help to identify the correlation between animal imagery elements and the context of social reality (Cui et al., 2023). Through this comprehensive approach, the study can draw from multiple sources of data and validate the obtained results' effectiveness. These analyses will contribute to a better understanding of the formal characteristics of the artworks, the metaphors of animal elements, and how these features interact with the meaning and themes of the artworks.

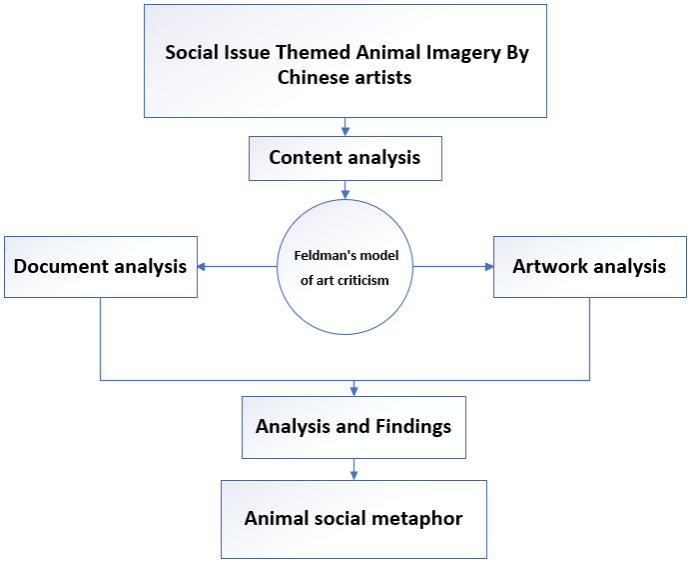


Fig. 1: Research framework

4. Results and Discussion

The installation in the picture occupies the central position of the exhibition space. It is an arched cage over ten meters long, supported by a black metal structure with a glass exterior, giving it a solid and cold texture. The overall color of the installation is in natural cool tones. The design of the cage emphasizes a panoramic view, allowing the audience to observe it from all around. Inside the long bridge-like cage, there are replicas of auspicious Qing Dynasty bronzes, dragons, Xuanwu, and toads. Below this long bridge-like cage, there is a turtle-back-shaped table cage, which is yellow and made of wood. The cage's interior has multiple drawers containing a large number of insects and reptiles (including locusts, lizards, centipedes, spiders, scorpions, crickets, cockroaches, millipedes, and geckos).

4.1 Huang Yongping

Huang Yongping's installation artwork "World Theater," created in 1993, is a highly controversial piece. The work is arched, resembling a moving snake and, at the same time, a bridge. Inside this "snake," there are real and fabricated animal images, including five real turtles and ten real snakes, as well as replicas of auspicious Qing Dynasty bronzes, dragons, Xuanwu, and toads borrowed from Chinese collections in Paris. Below the snake, in the "turtle table," there are multiple drawers containing hundreds of insects and reptiles devouring each other, reminiscent of the gladiatorial arenas of ancient Rome. After the exhibition opened, these animals were confined in cages, fighting inside while the audience observed the entire process from outside. This artwork debuted at the Pompidou Center in Paris at the end of 1994 but was eventually withdrawn due to protests from animal rights activists (Pan, 2020).



Fig. 2: Theater of The World, 1993

From a formal analysis of the work of art, "Theater of the World" employs various visual elements and design principles. The arched cage occupies a significant space, creating an enclosed and tense environment. The metal cage exudes a cold and oppressive feeling, whereas the live insects and reptiles add dynamism and realism to the piece. In terms of color, the cage uses cool tones that contrast with the natural colors of the animals, further enhancing the visual impact. The overall structural design provides the audience with a comprehensive view, allowing them to observe and reflect from various angles (Kleutghen, 2016).

Table 1: Social Coding, Theater of The World

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issues	Migration	Racism	Inequality

"Theater of the World" uses metaphorical techniques to explore conflicts and cultural differences in human society. The brutal fights and biting among the animals inside the cage straightforwardly depict the violence and cruelty of social competition, suggesting racial and cultural conflicts. The omnipotent perspective of the audience outside the cage raises questions about how humans perceive and handle these conflicts. Huang Yongping uses animal behavior to reflect the power structures and complex historical relationships in society, further exploring the issues of marginalization of individuals and groups, particularly his expression of Chinese cultural heritage and identity (Vial Kayser, 2017).

Despite being removed from the exhibition due to protests from animal rights activists, "Theater of the World" is undoubtedly a successful artwork (Kleutghen, 2016). Through his creation that transcends censorship standards, Huang Yongping cleverly triggers the audience's thinking and discussion on social issues. The work not only challenges traditional aesthetic and ethical concepts but also successfully provokes deep reflections on racial conflicts and cultural differences (Zhou, 2015). As Iris Murdoch observes the value of great art, it is often ‘impersonal’ because it shows us the real world (Kalof, 2007). "Theater of the World," with its stunning visual effects and profound social metaphors, transcends the limitations of art, providing the audience with ample space for contemplation and emotional resonance.

4.2 Xu Bing

The installation in the picture presents a corner of a pigsty made of a mix of wood and metal materials, displaying a rustic and primitive texture. A pig stands inside, with many fabricated texts on its back and its feet trampling on a pile of Chinese and English books. The pigsty is surrounded by a crowd of onlookers. The audience can visually perceive the overall layout of the work and the pig's activities, and they can also feel the presence of the books by touching them. The colors in the work mainly consist of the natural hues of wood and metal, as well as the inherent colors of the books, without any particularly striking lighting effects.



Fig. 3: A case study of transference, 1994

On the other hand, through Xu Bing's installation works, he focuses on stylistic differences by juxtaposing animals and cultures, exploring the potential transformation of individuals between different cultures in a globalized context (Kaye, 1998). In the work " A Case Study of Transference," Xu Bing constructed a temporary pigpen with over 800 kilograms of Chinese and English books scattered on the ground. The protagonists were a boar and a sow; they represented the first-generation cross-breed of the American York (father's side) and Chinese Changbai (mother's side), with 'the ideal combination of Eastern and Western genes.' This work was exhibited at the Hanmo Art Center, an alternative art space in Beijing, with around 200 invited spectators, most of whom were art professionals. The two pigs in the piece have fabricated languages on their backs, with the sow adorned with meaningless Chinese characters. During the performance, the two pigs mate regardless of cultural background, causing embarrassment and discomfort among intellectuals witnessing this behavior (Pan, 2020).

Table 2: Social Coding, Case Studies In Empathy

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Culture	Fusion	Fragmentation

This artwork evidently addresses social issues such as cultural conflicts, gender problems, and power relations. The two pigs in the pigpen symbolize the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, and their behavior reveals societal attitudes toward cultural exchange and integration. The audience's discomfort and unease with the pigs' behavior suggest obstacles to communication and integration between heterogeneous cultures. Through observing the pigs' mating behavior and the audience's reactions, the artist attempts to explore human society's cultural identity and cultural differences and how these differences influence people's views and attitudes towards social issues (Pan, 2020). The cultural symbols within the pigpen and the pigs' behavior serve as a metaphor, illustrating cultural conflicts and misunderstandings in society.

This artwork offers two main interpretations. First is the advent of the 1990s; most domestic critics interpreted it as reflecting the challenges faced by Chinese culture in the post-colonial era dominated by Western culture. This interpretation is reasonable, as the artist points explicitly out that these pigs are a new hybrid breed of Chinese Changbai pigs, symbolizing the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, with the American "Yorkshire" representing Western influence. On the other hand, Western critics such as Brita Erickson and David Elliott explicitly pointed out that the actual theme of this work is the audience's reaction to such "unrestrained" animal behavior. The pigs' disregard for the books on the ground highlights the incompetence of culture. As Xu Bing explained in "American Pigs: Q&A," "pigs" are "cultural animals." Carving symbols onto animals symbolizes the evolution, civilization, communication, and mixture of species, demonstrating the conceptual significance of culture as a form of tattooing. These two culturally symbolic animals lack human consciousness but attempt to communicate in the most instinctive way, with simplicity, directness, and almost unbelievable effectiveness (Kaye, 1998).

As Kalof (2007) pointed out in early research, the apparent distinction between humans and animals emphasizes human centrality and superiority. Research on animals in human history focuses on their cultural representations and how these representations have evolved with changes in social conditions over history. This artwork emphasizes the essence of humans as cultural animals, reflecting the complex interaction between culture and social issues such as gender and power (Kaye, 1998).

4.3 Cai Guoqiang

The installation in the picture presents a striking scene composed of 99 life-sized wolf sculptures and a glass wall, creating a dynamic installation. In the exhibition space, the arrangement of the sculptures and the glass wall highlights the interaction between the wolves and the barrier. The wolves are made with realistic fur, while the glass wall has a transparent and reflective surface. This combination of materials creates a contrast between the solidity of the wolves and the transparency of the glass, enhancing the visual effect of the installation. The color tones are mainly warm, similar to the color of the wolves' fur, and lighting is used to illuminate the space and highlight the installation, creating shadows and reflections that add to the overall atmosphere. The wolves are constantly jumping and colliding with the glass wall, forming an arch-like bridge, with the work presenting repetitive and cyclical motion. The repetitive movement of the wolves creates a sense of tension and urgency, conveying the concept of eternal struggle and conflict.



Fig. 4: Head on, 2006

This artwork centers around animals as its key elements. Artist Cai Guoqiang's installation piece "Head On" consists of 99 life-sized wolf models crafted from stitched sheepskins and filled with straw and metal wire. These wolves continuously tumble through the air, relentlessly charging toward a glass wall in an endless cycle. The synchronized wolves collide forcefully with the empty wall, causing some to rebound onto the ground injured or dead, their arcs upon impact leaving viewers breathless. The wolves leap and collide with the glass wall repeatedly, creating a perpetual loop

that showcases a powerful visual impact. Created in 2006, this piece premiered at the Deutsche Guggenheim Museum in Berlin (Wockenfuss, 2011).

The artwork employs dynamic artistic elements, such as the wolves' jumping and the transparent material of the glass wall, to create a dramatic effect. The wolves symbolize group and societal forces, whereas the glass wall represents psychological and cultural barriers. These elements interact to present the theme and symbolic significance of the artwork. As Cai states, "This work was inspired by his reflections after seeing the Berlin Wall, where he noticed that tangible walls can be easily pushed, but intangible walls can stand in people's hearts and society, which is why the wall is made of transparent glass, highlighting the presence of these intangible barriers that appear to be fragile, but yet have extraordinary resilience (Cheng, 2008).

Table 3: Social Coding, Head On

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issues	Culture	Ideology	Estrangement

Through the continuous jumping and collision of the wolves, the artwork metaphorically alludes to the destructive power of conformity and misguided guidance in society, prompting viewers to reflect deeply on the invisible barriers present in both the mind and society. The transparent nature of the glass wall highlights the existence of these invisible barriers, deepening the symbolic meaning of the piece (Pan, 2020). "Head On" powerfully reveals the profound issues of societal, psychological barriers, and cultural conflicts through its emotional and dramatic artistic expression. The artwork successfully stimulates viewers to pay attention to and contemplate the impact of invisible barriers on society, serving as a reminder to be wary of their influence (Cheng, 2008).

4.4 Gu Wenda

In the exhibition space depicted in the picture, three cages stand out, evenly spaced on the ground, with red arrows marked on the floor. The cages use a Greek temple-like structure and are dark red in color. In front of each cage, there are mousetraps and poisonous food. The overall lighting of the work is dim, with light focused on key parts to enhance the sense of scrutiny. While the installation appears static on the surface, the environment conveys a sense of tension and discomfort.



Fig. 5: Three and three others, 1988

Gu Wenda's artwork " Three and Three Others" was exhibited at the "New Traditions" exhibition in Oslo, Norway. This piece marked Gu Wenda's first use of live animals in his artistic creations and was the first artwork by a contemporary Chinese artist involving live animals. The installation prominently featured three live mice. These three hungry animals were each confined within red cages resembling Greek temple structures, with three mousetraps containing poisonous food placed in front of each cage. Upon opening the cages, the mice would gain their freedom, but the toxic food would quickly lead to their demise. This controversial artwork sparked protests from the Norwegian agricultural sector and local animal rights organizations, eventually resulting in the release of the three mice back into the wild (Cheng, 2008).

The spatial and environmental settings of the artwork created a controlled and tense atmosphere, emphasizing the discomfort associated with the piece. The use of cages designed in the structure of a Greek temple juxtaposed traditional elements with modern ones, reflecting cultural conflicts. The color scheme likely employed dark red tones, with focused lighting on the cages and mice, enhancing visual impact and scrutiny. The structured form of the cages contrasted with the unfolding chaotic and tragic narrative, highlighting the tension between order and chaos (Cheng, 2008).

Table 4: Social coding, Three And Three Others

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Culture	Fusion	Prejudice

The materials and textures of the artwork - Greek temple-style cages, traps, and poisonous bait - symbolized the intersection of cultural traditions and contemporary issues. The use of dark red tones and focused lighting directed attention to crucial parts of the artwork, reinforcing themes of control and death. The static appearance of the installation, juxtaposed with the potential tension and dynamism when the cages were opened, metaphorically conveyed the transience of freedom and the inevitability of fate. The multisensory experience created through visual, olfactory, and auditory elements challenged and provoked audiences on multiple levels (Cheng, 2008).

Gu Wenda's "Three and Three Others" serves as a powerful commentary on societal issues and cultural conflicts. The use of live animals and the controversy it sparked highlighted differing views on animal rights between Eastern and Western cultures. Through symbolism and sensory engagement, the artwork stimulates profound reflection on human-animal relationships, as well as societal biases and misconceptions. This piece stands as a significant example of how contemporary art challenges and bridges cultural divides, prompting audiences to reconsider their values and beliefs (Zhou, 2015).

4.5 Sun Yuan & Peng Yu

The exhibition space in the picture features eight non-motorized treadmills, with eight pit bulls arranged in two rows, standing on the treadmills. The two rows of dogs are positioned face-to-face, separated by the treadmills and partitions. The overall color scheme is simple, primarily in warm tones, highlighting the pit bulls and the treadmills. In the picture, the dogs can be seen continuously running on the treadmills, but their movement is restricted by the treadmills, emphasizing the futility of their efforts. It can be imagined that the audience can see the dogs' movements and the space is filled with the sounds of the dogs panting and the treadmills, further increasing the sense of tension.



Fig. 6: The dog you can't touch, 2003

Sun Yuan and Peng Yu are Chinese conceptual artists known for their confrontational and provocative works. Their piece "The Dog You Can't Touch" was exhibited at the first Beijing Biennale's parallel exhibition "post-sensibility." In this artwork, 8 pit bulls were arranged in two rows on specially designed non-motorized treadmills, with facing barriers preventing direct visual contact, showcasing the contrast between intense conflict and futile pursuit. Pit bulls are banned in China due to their role in dog fighting, known for their rapid hormone secretion that allows them to endure pain and fight for extended periods. When these dogs faced each other, tethered on the treadmills, they continuously lunged toward the opposing dog but were restrained from making physical contact. Nevertheless, they instinctively persisted in running forward, displaying an irrepressible primal drive. Ultimately, this controversial artwork was forced to be withdrawn from the exhibition (Cheng, 2008).

Table 5: Social Coding, The Dog You Can't Touch

Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4
Social issue	Power	Economy	Capitalism

The spatial and environmental setting of the artwork created a tense and confrontational visual scene within the exhibition space. By manipulating the behavior of the dogs, the artists highlighted the contrast between surface-level conflict and actual futile pursuit. The piece metaphorically depicts the fierce competition among individuals in China's rapidly expanding economy through the aggressive behavior of pit bulls (Sterckx, 2002). The artwork has been interpreted as a critique of power and control systems. Despite sparking protests, the piece did not cause actual harm to the animals,

reflecting the artists' concern for animal welfare. The piece successfully prompted viewers to reflect on societal competition and power dynamics (Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2017). Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's work stimulates viewers to contemplate societal competition and power dynamics through intense visual conflict and profound symbolism. As argued in Cheng's study, animal behavior reveals how humans position themselves in relation to other animals (Cheng, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The diverse artistic representations of animal imagery in artists' works not only enrich artistic expression but also serve as profound reflections and calls to address contemporary social issues such as racial conflict, cultural clash, the relationship between humans and nature, power structures, and social values, which demonstrates a strong sense of social awareness. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that all artworks explore a variety of visual characteristics in terms of artistic style and technique and use installation as a presentation approach. The significance of this research lies in its revelation of how artworks use animal imagery to reflect and critique social phenomena, prompting audiences to think about and pay attention to these issues. This not only helps to advance art theory but also positively contributes to the enhancement of social awareness and new insights for addressing real social problems.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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