
iNVENTX Creative Exhibition

SUSTAINAISSANCE IN PRACTICE: Quiet Materials, Loud Meaning

Drowning in Silence

Naquefarhan Zainal Abidin
naquefarhan@uitm.edu.my
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia
ORCID iD: 0009-0009-7825-9884
(Corresponding Author)

Safwan Anwar Azizan
safwananwar@uitm.edu.my
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-7204-553X

Nurul Hazliana Noridin
nurulhazliana@tarc.edu.my
Universiti Pengurusan dan Teknologi Tunku Abdul Rahman (TARUMT), Malaysia
ORCID iD: 0009-0004-1310-8210

Abstract

Drowning in Silence is an watercolour painting that explores the silent tragedy of ocean pollution through the haunting image of three lifeless fish, each encased in translucent plastic. Arranged in diminishing size and depth foreground to background the composition evokes a sense of fading existence and ecological loss. The muted palette of deep blues and teals, contrasted by soft shafts of light, underscores the theme of suffocation in a once- thriving underwater world. The artwork expresses the voiceless suffering of marine life and reflects humanity's fragmented relationship with nature. The use of plastic as both material and metaphor symbolises the enduring imprint of human identity on the environment one marked by neglect and overconsumption. Emotionally, the painting evokes mourning, guilt, and helplessness. The stillness of the scene becomes a powerful expression, where absence speaks louder than action. Identity is subtly woven through the implied connection between viewer and victim, urging a personal reflection on our environmental impact. Drowning in Silence becomes not only a visual reflection on environmental loss, but a contemplative artistic response that invites viewers to consider the emotional and ethical dimensions of sustainability.

Keywords: Marine pollution; Sustainability; Environmental art, Ecological identity, Climate crisis, Visual metaphor

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Artist Statement

Concept and Theme

The painting *Drowning in Silence* emerges from a profound emotional engagement with the crisis of ocean pollution, specifically the pervasive suffocation of marine life due to plastic waste. This sentiment is echoed in Raatikainen et al., who emphasise how artistic expression can forge deeper connections with nature, providing a platform through which spectators can engage both intellectually and emotionally with issues of environmental degradation [1]. The haunting stillness of fish enveloped in plastic, a tragic yet common spectacle, is a potent visual metaphor that encapsulates humanity's indirect yet profound impact on marine ecosystems. As indicated by Woiwode et al., inner transformation is critical for fostering sustainable actions, echoing how experiencing this artwork could inspire viewers towards meaningful changes in their ecological footprints [2]. Furthermore, Li and Chen stress that art can serve as a rallying cry for social consciousness, which aligns closely with my intent in creating this piece [3].

The thematic resonance of *Drowning in Silence* with the concept of SUSTAINAISSANCE Emotion, Expression, Identity is underlined by the intricate interplay between aesthetics and ecological concerns. Oliver discusses how the intersection of artistic integrity and sustainability emphasises the artist's responsibility to convey potent messages [4]. My painting attempts to transcend mere representation, aiming instead to evoke a visceral response that prompts viewers to contemplate their contributions to environmental degradation. The grief and guilt that intersect within the artwork are not simply reactions; they are meant to cultivate a shared identity shaping how we perceive our role in relation to the oceans and their inhabitants, a notion reinforced by the findings of Bryhn et al., who explore the symbolic meanings attached to environmental art [5].

Approach and Process

Medium and Technique

Drowning in Silence was meticulously crafted using watercolour on textured paper, a medium chosen for its inherent characteristics that beautifully parallel the tranquility and fluidity of oceanic environments. Watercolour, known for its delicacy, provides an aesthetic quality that captures the nuances of light and depth, reflecting the often-overlooked beauty of marine ecosystems. The texture of the paper enhances this effect, creating a sense of movement and organic flow that embodies the ocean's rhythm. To establish the underwater atmosphere of the piece, I employed soft washes of blue and green, layering shades to evoke the serene yet melancholic environment beneath the surface. This choice is informed by findings in colour psychology, where hues of blue and green are often associated with calmness and nature, but also convey a sense of sadness and loss [6].

Digital Enhancement and Hybrid Methodology

After the initial watercolour composition was complete, I scanned the artwork and engaged in digital enhancement to refine aspects of light, depth, and contrast. This hybrid approach combining traditional painting techniques with modern digital editing enabled me to preserve the organic feel of watercolour while enhancing the visual and symbolic clarity of the work. Digital manipulation allows for subtle adjustments that can amplify the emotional resonance of the piece without compromising the integrity of the original watercolour medium. This blending of forms draws on the concept of multimedia as a powerful tool for communication and engagement in environmental art [7].

Meaning and Impact

Through *Drowning in Silence*, the artwork reflects on the quiet and often overlooked consequences of ocean pollution. The image of lifeless fish wrapped in plastic symbolises how human-made waste infiltrates and suffocates natural life. The stillness of the underwater scene symbolically represents the absence of visible response to marine degradation, emphasising the often-unseen nature of ecological loss. It presents a visual narrative of fragility and loss, highlighting the subtle yet enduring impact of human consumption on marine environments.

Intended Impact on Viewers

This artwork is intended to evoke a sense of reflection and emotional awareness in response to environmental change. By blending emotion and symbolism, the artwork explores how human actions are intertwined with environmental conditions. The piece invites viewers to reflect on environmental issues through a personal and empathetic lens, fostering greater awareness of the relationship between human activity and ecological systems.

Materials and Techniques

In creating the artwork "*Drowning in Silence*," I utilised a blend of traditional watercolour techniques and modern digital processes, each choice carefully selected to enhance the work's thematic depth and visual impact.

Traditional Medium: Watercolour and Paper

The primary medium for *Drowning in Silence* is watercolour, applied on high-quality watercolour paper. The choice of watercolour as a medium is pivotal for conveying transparency and ethereal qualities, which reflect themes of ecological fragility and marine life. **Watercolour Paint:** The selection of colours whites, greens, yellows, and various shades of blue was specifically chosen to evoke an underwater environment.

Techniques such as glazing and layering were employed to achieve depth and luminosity, crucial for creating varying hues of ocean colour (The mixing of colours, especially the overlapping of greens and blues, enhanced the depiction of water and its inherent complexities **Watercolour Paper:** Utilising rough or cold-pressed watercolour paper allows for better water retention and texture, facilitating the fluid application of colours and enabling the desired transparency that underpins the oceanic theme of the artwork (Xia & Tirakoat, 2024). This type of paper supports the development of soft, blended edges, an essential characteristic of watercolour techniques that adds to the painterly effect.

Composition and Use of Colour

The composition of the piece involves arranging three lifeless fish in diminishing sizes, drawing the viewer's eye into the depths of the painting, symbolising fading existence amid pollution. This choice aligns with Gestalt principles, particularly the notion of similarity and proximity, guiding viewer perception and emotional response. Each fish is encased in translucent plastic, visually connecting the human role in ocean pollution to the portrayed marine life.

Colour Mixing and Symbolism: The emotional impact is further amplified by the juxtaposition of lighter colours (representing hope or life) against the darker tones of the underwater backdrop, contributing to the overarching theme of environmental anguish.

Digital Integration

Following the traditional watercolour application, I utilised Adobe Photoshop to refine and enhance the artwork. This digital approach allows for several enhancements that contribute significantly to the piece's aesthetic:

- **Detail Refinement:** Details such as the textures of the plastic and the subtle gradients of light were further developed in Photoshop, bringing attention to the tension between the organic and the synthetic. The software enables precise adjustments to colour balance and contrast, ensuring that the emotional tones within the painting are aptly conveyed.
- **Layering Techniques:** By using layering tools in Photoshop, further depth and volume were achieved. This layering mimics the watercolour effect traditionally achieved on paper, yet allows for digital manipulation that can enhance luminosity and texture beyond the initial physical application. The digital process not only preserves the watercolour characteristics but also expands upon them, allowing for innovative expressions of the original watercolour techniques.

Overall Contribution to the Artwork

The combination of traditional watercolour methods with digital techniques culminates in an artwork that resonates with viewers on multiple levels. The choices of materials and techniques serve to represent both the beauty and vulnerability of the ocean, shaping the emotional tone and interpretive depth of the artwork. The translucency of the plastic encasing the fish serves as a metaphor for human negligence, while the overall muted colour palette amplifies feelings of mourning and guilt, compelling a confrontation with the viewer's own relationship with the environment.

In conclusion, the fusion of watercolour medium and digital enhancements creates a powerful commentary on ecological issues. *Drowning in Silence* transcends mere visual representation it becomes a call to awareness and action regarding the silent tragedy of ocean pollution.



Figure 1. "Drowning in Silence"

References and Influences

This artwork is profoundly influenced by the pressing global challenge of marine pollution, especially the proliferation of plastic waste in oceans. The depiction of fish ensnared in plastic bags serves as a stark visual representation of how human disregard adversely affects marine ecosystems, forming a potent metaphor for suffocation and entrapment in a world increasingly shaped by consumerism. The piece may draw inspiration from contemporary eco-artists such as Chris Jordan, who employs visual metaphors to confront environmental crises, and Agnes Denes, renowned for intertwining conceptual

art with ecological themes. The surreal composition reflects elements of the Surrealist movement, utilising dream-like imagery to highlight the unsettling reality that lies beneath the surface. Additionally, the painting aligns with the Environmental Art movement, where artists leverage their work to encourage reflection and action regarding ecological degradation. The subdued colour palette and the expressive features of the fish instill empathy in the viewer, reminiscent of traditional symbolist art that uses objects to communicate profound moral or social messages. Through these diverse influences, the piece emerges as both a quiet protest and a compelling visual call for heightened environmental awareness.

Conclusion

The artwork *Drowning in Silence* powerfully highlights the devastating impact of plastic pollution on marine life. Drawing from environmental, surrealist, and conceptual art influences, it uses haunting imagery of fish trapped in plastic bags to evoke empathy and provoke awareness. The piece functions as a visual reflection on humanity's relationship with the environment, prompting contemplation of ecological responsibility through symbolic and emotional expression. Through symbolic expression and emotional depth, the artwork articulates themes of environmental fragility and the lasting consequences of human neglect.

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Authors' Bio

Naquefarhan Bin Zainal Abidin is a versatile and accomplished creative professional with a strong foundation in the fields of fine arts, 2D experimental animation, animation, graphic design, gaming, and education. He holds a Master's degree in Visual Communication and New Media from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), where his academic focus centered on 2D animation and concept art, complemented by a Bachelor's degree in Multimedia Technology with a specialisation in Computer Animation. He began his professional journey as a 2D background Artist at Inspidea Sdn. Bhd., where he honed his artistic and technical skills in animation production. He has contributed his expertise as a lecturer at various institutions, including KRU Academy, Limkokwing University and Universiti Kuala Lumpur (MIIT). Currently serving as a lecturer at UiTM, he is actively involved in teaching and developing curricula in 2D animation, game design, and digital media. His dedication to nurturing creative talent and advancing the digital arts reflects his influential presence in both academia and the creative industry.

Safwan Anwar Bin Azizan is a multimedia artist, animator, and educator with professional experience in animation, graphic design, games, and digital media. He holds a Master's degree in Visual Communication and New Media from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), as well as a Bachelor's Degree in Multimedia Technology (Computer Animation) and a Diploma in Animation from Universiti Kuala Lumpur (UniKL). His industry background includes roles as a 3D animator and designer at

Aniotek Sdn. Bhd., Animagis Sdn. Bhd., and Eplus Entertainment Sdn. Bhd. He has also served as a lecturer at several creative institutions and is currently a lecturer at UiTM, where he teaches 3D animation, game development, and digital media.

Nurul Hazliana Binti Noridin is a multimedia artist, designer, and educator specialising in creative design and digital media. She holds a Diploma and Bachelor's Degree in Multimedia from Universiti Kuala Lumpur Malaysian Institute of Information Technology (UniKL MIIT), and a Master's Degree in Art and Design from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam. Her professional experience includes work as a designer at Media Prima Digital and as a content creator at Industria Sdn Bhd, where she developed expertise in visual storytelling, brand communication, and multimedia production. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of culture and technology, with a particular focus on new media applications for cultural heritage. She is currently a Multimedia Lecturer at Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology (TARUMT), Kuala Lumpur.