



# The Poetic Expression of “Urban Ruins” in Paintings

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**Abstract.** Today, with a high degree of urbanisation, ‘demolition’ has become a hot topic of discussion, and the product of urban change and renewal is the ‘urban ruin’, which has been developed throughout painting to the present day. The product of urban change and renewal is the ‘urban ruin’, which has been a part of the development of painting up to the present day. The city is full of mystery and is a collection of all kinds of human ‘drama’. As multifaceted beings, urban ruins are a mixture of extinction and solitude, life and poetry. In this paper, we explore how different artists’ paintings on urban themes have recreated the beauty of ‘urban ruins’ and used art forms to bridge the gap between architecture, society and human beings in the urban matrix, which also awakens the artists’ spiritual and emotional attachment, as well as their reflection on the relationship between human beings and society. The rich pictorial expressions in urban ruins are worthy of deeper exploration.

**Keywords:** painting · urban ruins · poetry

## 1 Introduction

The rapid urbanisation process, the rapid economic development and the continuous expansion of cities, in this state of high speed and high load development, people enjoy the convenience and beauty brought by the city, on the contrary, the reality of human existence is exceptionally real. “Painting, at its root, is a concrete art, so it can only cover the expression of real and actual things, it is an all material language, every word in this language involves visible and tangible objects, if an object is abstract, invisible and does not exist, then it does not belong to the scope of painting” [1], the value of painting plays a pivotal role.

‘Urban Ruins’ is a collection of urban demolition and urban broken walls and wreckage. It is a memory of the depths of the city. The contrast between this urban state and modern high-rise buildings exudes a unique and charming charm and contains strong emotional value and spiritual realization. The expression of urban ruins in paintings is also liberated from the appearance of urban ruins, and more reflects the social reality, the living state of human beings, and the Chinese and the West take urban ruins as the main body for different forms of artistic expression, which are affected by the living environment and society. Influenced by factors such as the system, history and

culture, the Western painting creation with the theme of urban ruins was earlier than China. Throughout the paintings showing the theme of urban ruins, the composition, atmosphere, language, texture, etc. of the paintings inject a mysterious power into the ruins. Artists' language of expression of urban ruins tends to be different. The 'urban ruins' in different paintings have a poetic expression. The author uses the differences in the expression of 'urban ruins' in different paintings to extract urban ruins. A visual turn from 'war ruins' to 'modern urban survival ruins' is also closely related to the development of urban themed paintings.

## **2 The Poet Under the Desolation and Rubble - Anselm Kiefer**

The social devastation and mental trauma caused by the Second World War has made the ruins one of the most powerful visual impacts of the devastation caused by the war. Anselm Kiefer constantly reflects on the history of the Second World War in a visual way, and the ruins, both as a symbol and as a vehicle, are one of the most representative images in his work. "I don't build ruins, but I feel that ruins are the moment when things reveal themselves," says Kiefer. "A ruin is not a disaster, but a moment when things can start again." His visual experience for the viewer is mysterious and symbolic; the landscapes in Kiefer's work are essentially ruins and barren places, while at the same time Kiefer's work is a concentration of the ruins of an ancient civilization. His use and choice of materials is also very varied, using a wide range of paint, resin, latex, steel, cement, lead, etc., as well as a combination of natural materials such as straw, straw, ashes, stones and leaves. In each of his works, he does not stick to a formal language, nor does he limit himself to the expression of his individual experience. His focus is extremely broad, and his expressions of destruction, contradiction, helplessness, death, and conflict stand in the midst of "ruins" to interpret the desire for renewal.

Are progressing with human development? The social disasters and mental traumas caused by World War II, and the ruins have become the most powerful visual impact on the society caused by wars. Anselm Kiefer constantly reflects on the history of World War II in a visual way, and the ruins, which are both symbols and carriers, are one of the most representative images in his works. Kiefer said: "I don't build ruins, but I think ruins are the moment when things show themselves. Ruins are not disasters, but the moment when things can start again." The visual experience he brings to the viewer is mysterious and symbolic. The landscapes in Kiefer's works are basically ruins and barren places, and at the same time, Kiefer's works are a concentrated expression of the ruins of an ancient civilization. The use and selection of materials in his works are also very rich, using a large number of pigments, resins, latex, steel, cement, and lead, etc. as well as natural materials such as straw, wheat straw, ashes, stones, and leaves. In each of his creations, he will not be constrained by a formal language, nor will he be limited to the expression of individual experience. He pays attention to an extremely broad field of vision. The destruction, contradiction, helplessness, death, and conflict he expresses stand in the 'ruin'. It interprets the desire for a new life.

The creative ideas contained in many of Kiefer's works have been influenced by the Jewish poet Paul Celan, German philosophers, German composers and masters of music, painters, etc., which awakens people's review of history. Facing history is also

what people should be brave to face. “Margarita” created in 1981 borrowed the content of Paul Celan’s poem “Death Fugue”, in this semi-abstract work “Margarita”, “Kiefer used oil paint combined with wheat straw, yellow straw. The flames on it reminded people of the ambiguous hair in “Death Fugue”. Kiefer boldly combined poems and landscapes to express his artistic purpose. He extracted the symbolic meaning from the abstract language of wheat straw to express his own emotion” [2], he collages industrially-made images in a unique form of wooden collage, and then uses latex to cover them for secondary creation, showing a strong sense of order, a composite material created in 1980 The work “Interior View” is a model of this creative method; “Dissolve” created in 2010, from which we can feel that Kiefer tried to use alchemical materials, the picture is full of a sense of heaviness and flow, through the corrosion of chemical reagents Sex, the dramatic effect of alchemy and the repeated production in various tedious ways can form a strong visual tension.

The expression of ruins as a direct result of war, and some ruins as a direct result of human activity, but also as a synthesis of decay, destruction and eternity, makes this ruin an important theme of expression in Kiefer’s work. When he talks about the ruins himself, he says that the ruins are in fact an end, and that to many people the end is destruction, but he believes that the end is actually the beginning, and the beginning is also the end, which is a reciprocal cycle. Its not expressing the result of war as a pure death, a sad result that in Kiefer’s case spawns something new.

The rapid development of urbanization, the squeezing of urban buildings, the shortage of urban living space and the coexistence of concrete forests have constituted a kind of visual conflict between cities, buildings and ruins, which carry history, traces and the passage of time. The phenomenon of urban ‘demolition’ is nowadays the most appropriate interpretation of urban ruins, a keen mapping of the ongoing process of destruction and construction. Artists often try to unravel the mystery of the city through their artistic creations, full of mysterious urban images, the interweaving of reality and unreality in the modern city, the city is full of uncertainties: loneliness, silence, absurdity, contradictions, etc. Different artists have made metaphorical “statements” about the multifaceted urban landscape through its surface. The city is full of uncertainties: loneliness, silence, absurdity, contradictions, etc.

### **3 The Ordinary Power in Urban Loneliness - Edward Hopper**

In today’s society, we are experiencing urban expansion and fast-paced life. In the context of contemporary painting, there is an artist who vividly interprets the loneliness of a modern city. It is the great American realist artist Edward Hopper. He is obsessed with using vision to convey the sense of loneliness in the city. Most of the people in the pictures are isolated individuals who seem out of place. As the surrounding cities change, they deviate from the city in society and space. Constitutes his record of American urban landscapes in the early 20th century.

“Solitude is a particularly special place, and from the solitude of the city a number of wonderful things emerge: what takes shape in solitude can often be used to redeem it too”. Loneliness is perhaps a constant symbol in the artist’s mind, allowing us to appreciate the poetic expression of loneliness in Edward Hopper’s images through a unique perspective.

In “Night Traveler” created in 1942, in the dark and deserted street, a brightly lit American restaurant is still open. The sense of order in the picture is very strong. In the brightest part of the picture, a man and a woman are sitting side by side, with the opposite one. A man is communicating, and the center of the picture is a man with his back to the viewer standing alone in front of the bar, which constitutes a very contradictory state. However, the coexistence of the lonely building and the transparent glass, the bright restaurant lights and the dark atmosphere of the street create a strong sense of isolation, forming a lonely city image in the artist’s eyes. In Hopper Drawing, Whitney Museum curator Carter Foster points out that: “Hopper’s work repeatedly presents a certain space and spatial experience that is commonplace in New York. This is because although the physical distance between the characters in the painting and others is very short, they are separated by a series of factors including movement, structure, windows, walls, light and darkness” [3]. The unique perspective of Hopper’s work recreates an experience of loneliness, always asking questions that only the audience can answer, and as Hobbes says of the artist’s later work, his success lies in “forcing the audience out of their seats, play the character Hopper wrote for them” [4].

“Manhattan Bridge Loop” created in 1928, there is no one in the painting, which is different from “Nighthawks”, but the bridge in the picture slowly and silently crosses the other side horizontally from one side of the picture, the buildings, street lamps, steel in the picture. The frame structure constitutes a vertical form, the picture is full of stable factors, but the objects with a vertical tendency in the painting are subject to the artist’s subjective processing, and they are inclined in a certain direction. The composition of the picture is full of meaning. Hopper himself talked about the main intention of the painting, “Usually I decide that the subject matter of the painting will take a lot of time, and then I spend a lot of time considering factors such as the size and proportion of the painting, until the involved can meet my needs. The idea in my mind. “The feature of the painting “Manhattan Bridge Loop” is its unique horizontal structure, which is my new attempt to show a city that is constantly expanding and extending horizontally. The dominant horizontal level in the composition. The straight line that stretches all the way to the border of the picture without being almost interrupted is just to emphasize the idea and make the whole scene more complete. The artist has to achieve all this spatial awareness in the limited space of the object he wants to represent. And I think not all painters are aware of this” [5].

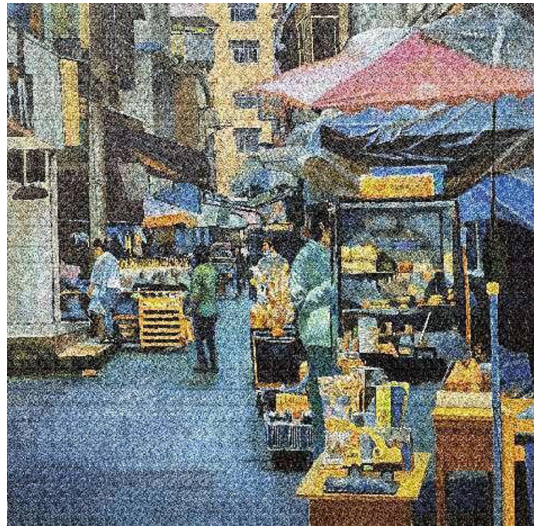
## 4 Conclusion

Through Anselm Kiefer standing on the double ruins of material and spirituality, Edward Hopper transcends the urban loneliness above geometric images, allowing the viewer to return to the poetry of life in “urban ruins”. “Urban ruins” as a strange form of urban architecture, ruins will always accompany the development of the city, it will continue to disappear, and it will continue to emerge. At the same time, it is a product of modernity. Because of the intensified progress of modern society, the things that have been eliminated are far from being eliminated. Leaving it far behind, it constitutes a local space and visual conflict that is not easily detectable by the expressions of our cities. Every ruin in a modern city has its own unique background story, which also reflects and metaphors the “forged reality” of the city’s appearance.

Collection of the author’s painting creation:



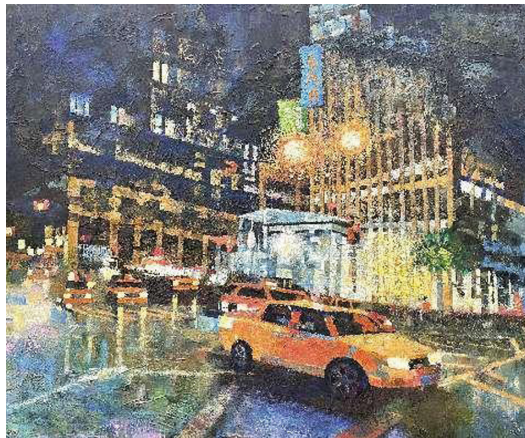
< Urban Legend-H.K. > 120\*120 cm



< Urban Ruin. > 150\*150 cm



< Urban Password > 120\*100 cm



< Urban Legend-Nocturne > 120\*100 cm

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