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Emotional Dynamics in Art Appreciation: Aesthetic Engagement with Realist and Surrealist Artworks

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Abstract

In a temporally extended perceptual encounter with an artwork, an ideal challenge presents a manageable degree of unpredictability. This unpredictability triggers emotional satisfaction derived from resolving perceptual uncertainties, which, in turn, leads to rewarding experiences that motivate further engagement. Here we simulated and amplified perceptual unpredictability across three stages: a blurred version of the artwork, a clear version, and prolonged exposure to the clear artwork, and measured viewers' dynamic emotional responses throughout this unfolding process. Our findings reveal significant associations between individuals' aesthetic experiences and shifts in their emotional responses, specifically concerning pleasure and arousal. Additionally, Participants exhibited stronger emotional changes related to pleasure and dominance when unfolding realist paintings (certainty expected), compared to surrealist artworks (uncertainty expected). Overall, the results suggest that viewers generally appreciate unpredictability and experiences that transcend their preconceived expectations, fostering deeper exploration of the scientific inquiry into the predictive processing in human aesthetic appreciation.