

CONTINUOUSLY EVOLVING VISUAL ENVIRONMENTS



A Framework Emerging from Moving Paintings in Healthcare Settings

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This framework emerges from more than sixteen years of artistic development and observation through the Moving Paintings practice, including over 3,000 limited-edition works placed in private collections and dozens of healthcare environments such as hospitals, clinics, and veterans centers.

Over the past sixteen years, I have been developing a body of work known as Moving Paintings — slowly evolving visual environments created from original hand-painted artworks.

What began as an artistic experiment gradually revealed something unexpected: viewers often remained engaged with these images for unusually long periods of time, often in quiet observation. Unlike traditional video or television media, the imagery evolves slowly and continuously without narrative escalation, rapid edits, or abrupt visual transitions.

Over time it became clear that the structure of the work was producing a different kind of attentional experience.

Rather than competing for attention through stimulation, the imagery appeared to hold attention gently, allowing viewers to remain engaged without the constant cognitive resetting typical of modern screen-based media.

This observation led to a broader question:

Could slowly evolving visual environments influence the psychological atmosphere of shared spaces, particularly in environments where people are already experiencing stress or uncertainty?

Healthcare environments quickly emerged as one of the most interesting contexts in which to explore this question.

The Challenge of Screen-Based Media in Waiting Areas

Many waiting rooms rely on television programming or continuously changing informational displays. While these systems provide useful information and entertainment, they also introduce a constant stream of rapid visual changes.

From the perspective of the visual system, these characteristics can activate what neuroscientists refer to as the orienting response — the brain's reflexive reaction to sudden motion or unexpected visual change.

Rapid edits, high contrast shifts, and narrative tension repeatedly reset the viewer's attention.

Even when people are sitting quietly, this type of media can maintain a subtle level of alertness within the nervous system.

In environments where patients may already be experiencing anxiety or uncertainty, this continuous stimulation may not always be ideal.

Continuously Evolving Visual Environments

The moving paintings operate according to a very different visual structure.

Each piece begins as a traditional hand-painted artwork.

Using digital techniques, certain elements of the painting are then animated so that the imagery evolves slowly over time.

The motion unfolds gradually, often across several minutes rather than seconds.

These environments intentionally avoid many of the visual signals that typically trigger alertness, including:

- sudden motion
- abrupt transitions
- narrative escalation
- rapid editing

Instead, the imagery contains:

- slow evolving movement
- stable visual anchors
- gradual shifts in color and light
- continuous visual continuity



The result is an image that remains visually alive without continually demanding attention. Viewers can look away and return again without losing continuity, yet the imagery continues evolving in ways that create a subtle sense of anticipation about what may unfold next.

Observed Viewer Response

Over more than a decade of gallery installations and healthcare placements, a number of consistent viewing behaviors have been observed.

Viewers often become quietly attentive when watching the imagery.

In gallery environments, visitors sometimes remain seated watching the work for extended periods of time — occasionally an hour or more.

In some cases viewers even fall asleep while watching the imagery.

This behavior was initially surprising, particularly to gallery consultants accustomed to traditional art viewing patterns.

The experience appears to resemble what environmental psychologists sometimes describe as soft fascination — a form of attention that holds awareness gently without requiring effort.

Natural environments often produce similar responses when people observe slowly changing phenomena such as waves, clouds, or fire.

Alignment with Environmental Psychology

Although Moving Paintings were not originally designed with scientific frameworks in mind, the observed viewer responses appear to align with several well-established concepts in environmental psychology and neuroscience.

Research on Attention Restoration Theory, developed by psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, suggests that certain environments can engage attention in ways that allow the mind to recover from directed cognitive effort. Their work identifies “soft fascination” — the gentle, effortless engagement produced by slowly changing natural environments — as a key restorative mechanism. The viewing behaviors observed around Moving Paintings closely parallel the responses Kaplan and Kaplan describe.

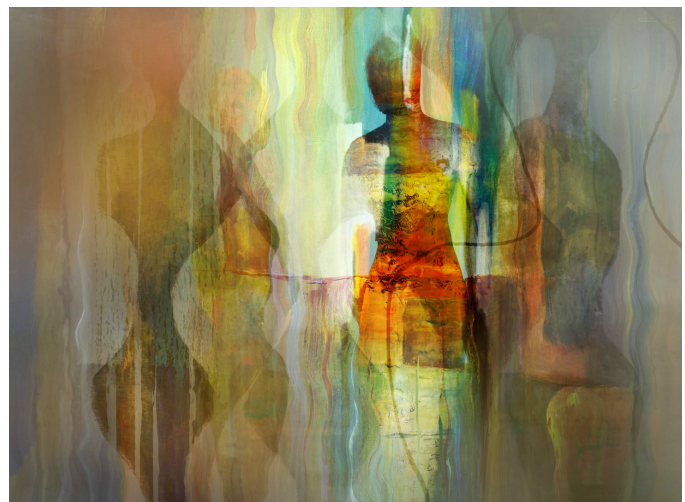
Similarly, research in predictive processing frameworks suggests that the brain is constantly generating predictions about its environment. When those predictions are repeatedly disrupted by sudden or unexpected changes, the brain increases its alertness level. Slowly evolving visual environments appear to behave differently: because the imagery changes gradually and predictably, the brain’s expectations are rarely violated, and the viewer can remain comfortably engaged without continuous vigilance. These frameworks suggest that visual environments which evolve slowly and predictably may create conditions supportive of nervous system regulation — a quality of particular relevance in clinical settings.

Current Deployments

Over the past sixteen years, more than 3,000 limited-edition Moving Paintings have been installed in private homes through gallery representation across the United States, Canada, and Australia. Many collectors describe returning to these works regularly as part of personal routines of relaxation or reflection.

At the same time, the work has been adopted at institutional scale across the American healthcare system. Current placements include:

- 19 locations within the NYC Health + Hospitals system — the largest public hospital network in the United States
- 8 Veterans Affairs hospitals across the country
- Dozens of private practice physicians and wellness centers across the US, Canada, and Australia



In these settings the imagery is used in patient waiting areas, infusion rooms, and quiet spaces where the goal is to create a calmer visual atmosphere. The installations continue to grow.

“As the Director of Geriatric Fracture Care at Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center I have throughout my career read many articles and papers stating that visualization along with soothing natural sounds aid in decreasing blood pressure, stress, illnesses, and anxiety. When a patient views a Moving Painting during chemotherapy or dialysis the patient is more relaxed and they get to a different place — it is possible for them to experience less pain which in turn would require less medication. These Moving Paintings are therapeutic and I have confidence they offer the best quality to a patient’s complete treatment plan. Not only does Steve Matson bring his paintings to life but I feel he brings life to my patients.”

— Anthony J. Balsamo MD, Director of Geriatric Fracture Care, Geisinger Health, Wyoming Valley PA

Moving Forward

The goal of this document is not to present a finalized theory, but to articulate a framework emerging from years of real-world observation. The concept of continuously evolving visual environments may represent a meaningful complement to existing approaches within healthcare design — particularly in settings where visual media plays a role in shaping the atmosphere of shared spaces.

Further exploration may help clarify how slowly evolving visual environments influence attention, perception of time, and the overall psychological tone of clinical environments. Ongoing installations across major healthcare systems provide a growing foundation for more formal observation and, in time, structured evaluation.

Healthcare spaces carry a particular weight. People arrive uncertain, anxious, and often vulnerable. The environments they wait in either add to that burden or quietly ease it. For over a decade, Moving Paintings have demonstrated — in hospitals, veterans centers, and clinics across the country — that a slowly evolving visual environment can shift the atmosphere of a room in ways that matter to the people inside it.