ART IN THE SHADOWS: revealing, transforming, restoring

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A creative arts practice has much to contribute to wellbeing following sexual abuse and the losses and grief that surround it.

An invitation into a creative space is an invitation to engage with art and an artist, and to commune with others who have a shared experience. It is an invitation to leave the shadowy world of abuse to participate in life as a creative, functioning, self-esteemed and sociable human being.

This paper emerges from research and observations garnered through seven 12-week art projects I have facilitated with groups of women who have had this experience and which were undertaken with SECASA. The projects include mosaics, painting, and grief and loss using clay. Four groups have contributed to a PhD, and all have contributed to the now-annual SECASA calendars as well as to a growing body of research on art and wellbeing.

Art is not therapy, and an artist is not a therapist. These are important distinctions to make because I want to elucidate something of what art is and what art does; and by inference, suggest the place the artist occupies in the revelations, transformations and restorations that occur through the development and practice of visual language. Rather, I place this work in the realm of “Art and Health”, a growing area of interest and research which has as its focus health rather than ill-health, or in this case, with the person rather than the victim. Its firm foundations in practice and research begin to articulate what artists and participants have long observed about the immense value of art. My work with SECASA is a contribution to this knowledge.

I am a visual artist, I paint, work with clay, make sculpture and installations; my arts practice is fundamental to the work and to the transformations that occur through it. I chose as my subject matter some of the most difficult aspects of life - loss, grief, trauma and death. Peering deeply into these worlds, I use materials to transform what can be ugly and painful into art that is viewable and bearable. Art is not about “prettying” up the subject for public consumption; rather is a search for

meaning. The artist's eyes and hands bring to life and into view that which many prefer turn from and others yearn to understand, and in so doing the artwork makes an offer to the viewer, as a means to acknowledge and a place to mourn.

Feelings of hopeless inadequacy and unworthiness swamp victims, deadening their desires to feel, love, engage, express and communicate. They have unique and heartbreaking expressions to portray the dehumanising affects of trauma: *Me and the outside world* is one. It is at first shocking to hear, then deeply disheartening in its encapsulation of how many victims view themselves in relation to others and the world around them. Separate. Different. Disconnected. Alone. Another, a belief of being *bad all bad*, describes a view many hold of themself as an intrinsically stained human being. Women speak of *not existing*, of being *non-human*. When I asked one woman to describe what thought she was then, if not human, she replied: "a blob".

Their burden is carried in behaviours and attitudes that thwart wellbeing, such as the yearning for control and perfection, the incapacity to finish tasks or expose their vulnerabilities, in the denial of pleasure and a lack of focus. This is a roller coaster life that does not settle into any rhythm or harmony, a discordant existence lived in the shadows - in the spaces between trauma, the memories and impact surrounding the trauma, and in the blank spots where the memories should exist but don't.

The invitation into a creative practice is an invitation to imagine and an invitation to hope. Despite the incredible damage of abuse, women come to the creative space to nurture a kernel of inner belief that shyly, but determinately, sits alongside the dominating lack of self-belief: "I am hopeless at everything" but "I think I might be an artist". In that they reveal the resilience that makes them a survivor and brings them to the group. Many described the art groups as "an answer to my prayers", a "gift" which turned up "just when I needed it the most". It was the opportunity to see things through different eyes and thus, shift old perceptions. Most joined with little or no doubt that making art would be useful. For some art became a lifeline. As one recently said, "I used to want to self-harm, now I want to paint!"

Two themes, both relating to perception, consistently emerge when women describe the impact of their participation. The first concerns the physical presence of the object. When concepts, experiences and perceptions, that may or may not have been known, are given shape and take form, they occupy space and can literally be seen. The fervent belief that: “this is art I can say and do what I like” liberated participants to express with full intensity and without moderation, the thoughts and feelings that may have obeyed the logic of dreams or were secreted out of sight. Artworks may reflect the obvious, but more often they speak to the unspeakable: to the actuality of betrayal, loss, pain, shame, anger, isolation and those feelings of absolute desolation and emptiness, they open the door to the desire to not be defined by trauma, and to embryonic yearnings to be properly and intimately loved. “Feelings came through my fingers into my work and said exactly what I wanted to say”, said one. Even when participants didn’t have the words or thoughts: “It was just there – and it was right.”

Once brought into the light, into three-dimensionality, some perceptions are no longer abstract, but real. And once real, they are an embodiment of the truth: “This is my experience and this is how I feel about it.” The art objects heralded a resolve to be silent no longer. Further, putting the work into public spaces and into the calendar was for many, an affirmation of the veracity of their lived and felt experiences. Their artwork, the abuse and the person are all made visible by the creative practice.

The second theme concerns the capacity of art-making and participation to re-shape, reform or mould participants’ self-perception. This is illustrated by two projects where each participant put herself “on the canvas” as one described it: the first was a mosaic, the second, a painting. The mosaic, hinging on the concept of a self-portrait whilst not aiming for life-likeness, attempted to steer women towards thinking about themselves in terms other, or broader, than that of a victim, toward what they might like to be, or how they would like to define themselves in their own terms. This aimed to help redress a known vulnerability of abuse victims to allow their realities to be defined by others, which can foster a misperception that their abuse is the single most important factor in their identity. The painting was an exercise in tone.

Art projects can be quietly confronting and I have to admit, sometimes in ways I don't expect. As participants' view of their identity was challenged, if "I am more than just my trauma" then questions must arise: "who am I?" and "who or what I would like to be?". When one describes oneself as *a blob* or *non-human*, how then can the self be identified then represented in an artwork? I later saw the impossibility of imagining who one *might* be, without first knowing who one is. The mosaic project began with a simple plan, an outline cut out in timber and through the process of making the mosaic, *the self* emerged.

One woman who described a life of "being abused almost from the womb" drew herself as a child of five or six years old. The years and aftermath of sexual abuse had reconstructed her as a depressed and traumatised adult. Details of the trauma were already known; less understood were all the unnamed and unidentified memories and feelings that caused her limitless pain and distress. She frequently spent days in bed distraught at the failure she believed herself to be. The mosaic, made with tiny pieces of tiles carefully cut and positioned, brought memories of her childhood into sharp focus, and something shifted "like a key turning" or "a spirit coming in", she later told me. "When I was a child, I was quite creative. In the effort to deal with everything, that part of me got lost. This was like reigniting something that had been part of me. I realised I was not who I thought I was, I was not being the real me. This was kind of an acknowledgement of me*".*

Art sometimes takes women back and in so doing, moves them forward. Revelations are not always happy; not because their artworks shone a light onto the abuse event, but because its impact was being truly acknowledged. Whilst this may seem a negative aspect of creativity, no participant believed it was. It was instead experienced and viewed as part of a process, a recognition that in order to heal, one first has to feel, to see and to acknowledge: not only pain but potential too.

Participants noted that restoration thought art "was so quick, because it happened so slowly", as one said. Any fears that than emotions might rush and overwhelm participants were dissipated by the slow processes of Art-making, and in the meditation and contemplation intrinsic to creativity that stills the mind and encourages living in the present.

Similar responses emerged from a self-portrait painting project designed to teach about tone. "I had to really look at myself", said one, and "it really challenged my thoughts. Is that really me? The

painting allowed me to acknowledge that I *am* alive, that I *am* a human being." Another said it allowed her to "make her mark. It showed that I am real."

Creativity had helped deconstruct the reconstruction, if you like. It enabled women to really look at and into themselves to first challenge their self-view, then their world-view. "Everything about this piece was totally out of the norm for me", one said describing a work exuding the femininity she dreamt of but did not recognise as one of her own characteristics. The beauty and tantalising qualities of the materials prompted an exploration of the feminine, especially the feminine form that she, like others, mostly denied as evidenced by the shapeless, oversized clothes they wore.

Whereas sometimes discoveries were gentle, at other times participants creatively confronted their most challenging feelings. The mosaic (and again during the clay projects) persuaded women to acknowledge the human, particularly female, body in an open, unsexual and sexual context and manner. They considered its form and also its beauty, desires, fecundity and decline. The vexed relationship most with her body and with others' bodies, had led to a disconnect from her own; the sensual relationship with the materials, a most particularly the clay, enabled a reconnection with it. As artworks and conversations about bodies, their size, functions and illnesses were shared, the women connected as we often do, through experience and empathy.

For some, their creativity practice also enabled a brazen investigation of the male body. For others it was the language to enable a conversation about profound loneliness, extreme pain and their shackled anger. In the research conversations about the projects, most women named the self-portraits as heralding a fundamental shift in self-perception.

Whilst viewers may describe the artworks as "abstractions", participants felt they "accurately and realistically" represent them. They describe how not only was their self-perception transformed through the process of making, they fully inhabit this changed view. They began to see things differently: "I might be good at this", and with that a mistrust of negative perceptions grew, helping them understand that they were not *ugly, non-human, non-existent*, or a *blob*, nor were they *bad all bad,* or *hopeless at everything*.

Two important things are happening: firstly art offers the freedom to explore and express and secondly, it provides the language in which to do so. Those who live or work with trauma will know how very difficult it can be for victims to verbalise about the experience and that this is an immense impediment to recovery. The language of art - materials and their transformation, particularly in tension, enabled big shifts of perception. Take this heart for example. It began as a scrunched up ball of paper held inside a chicken wire armature with raggedly sharp edges. "This represents my pain", says the participant. She then wrapped, indeed encased it, with fabric embedded with clay. Layer upon layer, she bandaged her wounds. She knew that as the work was fired, the paper would burn away and the wire would be diminished, she also knew the clay would be transformed to become durable. In this work she used the language of art to articulate her pain and her capacity to heal herself though her own creativity.

Many will attest that creativity is an innate human activity, that our capacity to imagine, then adapt, has been essential to our survival. When we consider this work in those terms, perhaps it becomes clearer why women feel so strongly about their creative practice.

There are many pleasures in learning and making art, particularly when part of a group, which contribute to wellbeing. The sensuality of the materials, rising to creative challenges, doing something for the self, artworks being affirmed by others, participating in discussions and being in an ambient environment all contribute to being uplifting and enjoyable experience. A common response to being part of the group was the realisation "I am not alone". Participants saw their own vulnerabilities, efforts, talents and pain mirrored in the other women. In meeting fellow group members with empathy, they experienced a shared kindness and were able to show a new gentleness towards their own efforts to cope and heal. One woman who had felt isolated and shamed by the abuse she believed wore like a stigmata, looked into the "ordinariness" of the eclectic group of women in the creative space and found her own innocence. In realising "in their ordinariness" they all couldn't possibly be dirty, responsible and inexcusably bad; the penny finally dropped: neither was she.

Feelings of inadequacy, the inability to cope, fears and depression were gradually replaced as a growing body of increasingly sophisticated and expressive artworks affirming their creativity, capacity to learn, to focus, their growing competencies in art and other skills, and as healthy relationships were built on shared interests, respect and trust. The movement towards wholeness achieved from each project specifically and art-making generally is described by psychiatrist Dr George Halasz, a trauma specialist, as "similar in importance to the child's progression from crawling to walking." Art-making enables victims to see the world from a different vantage point, and once achieved, it is impossible to view the world as it had been known before.

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