

THE SERVICE OF ART

This paper is a reflection upon the service art can provide to mourning. It is a vignette; a glimpse into how art and sharing in creative experiences of mourning can give expression to feelings of loss and grief; to that which can barely be thought and scarcely be spoken.

Others have contributed extensively to our understanding of grief and loss through their research and writing, and are clearly much better placed than I to illuminate these things from a clinical point of view. What I believe I can offer to a conversation about grief, is my lifetime's work in the arts - as a practising artist, a community artist, and as a researcher.

Artistically and personally, I immerse myself in what I believe are deeply important human considerations. I make art contemplative of trauma, grief and loss and of related emotions and responses, and I work creatively with others who lives have been cast in this shadow. The work considers pain and isolation; the amputation of feelings and experiences, and the potential for transformation.

I would like to show you a selection of artworks, each of which, through their various processes and materials, contributes in its own way to meaningful and constructive mourning. The selection includes artists - mine and others - work around the subject but predominantly it is work borne out of current research with women who have experienced sexual abuse.

I would like start by sharing one of the inspirations for this current work, the First World War and an artwork I made in response to a number of bewildering visits to the Western Front.

One thousand, five hundred lamps paint vibrant arabesque curls and lace across the floor in a Memorial to the Dead. The vibrancy and pattern draws attention to the cultural and religious breadth of participants in a war that wreaked havoc and despair across the world. The lace reminds us of the domestic; the curtain, the veil - the bride, who becomes a widow; the country upon whose land the war is fought and whose history is inextricably linked with this ancient craft.

In the lamps filled with olive oil, floats a wick that will burn for hours. We bend to light them in acts of mourning and remembrance - for the dead, and for whom the ripples of war still lap at the edge of their lives.

The flame endows the space with warmth and comfort, infusing the sombre, undercroft of the Shrine of Remembrance with light, colour and smell. The artwork weaves into the sacred setting; literally and figuratively illuminating what might otherwise remain dark and shadowy. It provides a place for pause, for contemplation and remembrance.

One thousand, five hundred individual, handmade, sometimes irregularly shaped, lamps offers a meditation upon the uniqueness of each one of the vast number who died; and a meditation on the grief felt by those who loved them.

The *Memorial for the Dead* is grounded in the immensity of the First World War; in the continuing feelings of loss that surrounds it, and in the inequality of remembrance. However, as its maker, I also understand that one expression of grief, triggers thoughts and memories of other losses. The Memorial, through its universal symbols, can embrace these, and provide a place for a broader expression of grief.

When lighting the oil lamps, I found an opportunity to exchange with viewers; many of whom made thoughtful observations about the artwork, the impact of war, and their own losses. "For ordinary people, tragedy, alienation and death do not appear to have a creative means of expression". (ref) When faced with distress or calamity, creativity can provide something of an oasis – through making, and through the appreciation of others' expression of powerful emotions" One man said he was glad there are people like me to express the feelings of people like him. Rather than interpret that as an egotistical response to my work, I saw and heard that art is capable of touching grief and articulating mourning; I saw and heard the yearning for space, meaning and beauty in the mourning and acceptance of loss.

It affirmed my belief that sometimes the need to mourn is not recognised until it is offered.

The Memorial to the Dead was a crucial step towards understanding the service art can provide to acknowledging and expressing grief; and it lead to this current PhD research, the investigation of what art can contribute to well being following trauma.

Individual responses to the experience of sexual trauma are often complex. The distress is not only about the violation; it extends to include the loss of self and one's place in the world.

In the aftermath of sexual abuse, most of the women in the research groups had withdrawn from the world around them. A recurrent expression of their disconnection, "Me and the outside world", is one I find disturbing in its stark summary of their isolation. I see and feel the impact of their losses.

The most represented form of abuse amongst these women is not rape in adulthood, but abuse protracted over many years - from very young childhood into adolescence. Now aged between 19 to 63; the women grieve for what was lost and/or for what was always absent.

Most have little contact with original families. Many experience bouts of mental illness. Education and / or work lives are disjointed – often leading to further isolation, poverty and early parenthood; drug and alcohol dependency are amongst the repertoire of coping strategies. Some rarely left the house and few had friends. Losses compound with the original trauma and each other to cause further loss and further disconnection.

Following the devastation of trauma, one way solace can be found is through creativity, another is through being part of a community of shared understanding. My offer to these women – to participate in two blocks of art workshops, each 3 hrs per week over 15 week – was made with the purpose of exploring creativity as way to acknowledge and repair some of these severed connections and thus, contribute to finding a place of comfort within.

The first series of workshops, mosaic making, focused on learning creative skills and being part of a community – or fictive-kin, as Jay Winter would say. The attention of second series, happening now, is Grief and Loss.

The intimacy of sharing art-making with other women who also know what it is to be vulnerable can provide potency and comfort. Knowing they are not alone in their distress, participants are building relationships founded on art, creativity and empathy – a bridge between “me” and “the outside world”. For those who go through it, the experience of trauma is one of deadening, and reduction. Creativity, on the other hand, is alive, enriching and full of possibilities.

In describing the class as being “like a work environment”, one participant recognised the purposeful-ness of being in that space each week and the discipline being applied to the endeavours of the group.

“I think we all made something meaningful, ... we all worked towards making things that made us feel as though we were letting go of something. Or strengthening something.”

Mosaic was chosen as the medium because, unlike with painting or drawing, most people don’t have fixed opinions about what they consider to be “good” or “bad” within this artform. Therefore, those with little confidence find it easier to try. Mosaic also requires a useful blend of creativity and process, which again, is helpful especially for those doubtful of their own creativity. Finally, it has the wonderful in-built nature of producing something beautiful out of something that is broken.

Reflecting upon the mosaic project, and particularly on creating a piece that representative of herself, One participant says,

“It gave me something else to focus as well as something tangible to do with my hands and my mind, because you have got to think about this as well.

Even though I didn’t take a lot of my trauma stuff to group, it was there. I also did it when I couldn’t sleep, when I was upset, down in the dumps, or when I was lonely. I was able to construct something of value, instead of internalising it and being destructive to myself.

It was like a meditation. it got to the pain, the grief, the loss, the hurt, the anger, but it wasn’t trapping me.”

She had found a place in which to pour deep feelings associated with her trauma. Every aspect of the artwork – the design, the tiles, colours and method of making acted as a metaphor for her experience of trauma and evolving life. Through the process of making, she had also discovered a way to self-sooth.

Important is her realisation that the work is capable of holding both her grief and her belief in her emerging 'self' in a way that didn't provoke negativity. She explains,

" the only part that got dark was here – and I still respect my darkness, it's still me, even tho I have got so much light – I can feel it all around me – of course there are still days when of course I am going to feel low but I have this magnificent tool I can use"

Art displaced despair and inertia. Beauty replaced ugliness. There had been process of harnessing the richness of the emotion and all that lay behind it and within it. Holding the work in place was the knowledge of, rather than the pain itself.

The Joseph Beuys Archive is a testament of one artist's life's work and endeavour to acknowledge and attend to the wounds of the Second World War.

It is breathtaking. As one room of art unfolds into another, the fortitude Beuys showed in persuing his purpose is revealed. In its specificity and materiality, each artwork or group of artworks feeds into his over-arching desire to replant life and love into post-war Germany.

Beuys does not fall into sentimentality, or generalisation; rather he investigates very specific concerns – wounds and healing, for example, through stretching the boundaries of what art can be and art materials are; he utilised whatever materials were available or necessary to his investigation.

Of the 1000s of ideas and works found in the collection, some are beautifully crafted, some hewn from found and strange materials, others barely more than fragments. There are casts, drawings, made and found objects, and paintings. The Archive is at once engaging, repelling, mystifying, but mostly inspirational.

It was the last stop in a Mourning Memorials and Remembrance journey I recently made through Austria and Germany. After looking into, and being disturbed by the deep wounds and scars, I found it was the artist who made some sense of it for me. It was here, in this vast collection, that I found evidenced both the artist and the arts' unique value in acknowledging grief, in mourning and providing solace.

The memory feeds the second series and current work with the women – bringing artistic expression to the silence of their grief and loss.

Casting opened up enormous possibilities for examination and expression of pain. Every impression made into the clay will occur in the plaster cast; yet transformed into a mirror and opposite image – indentations will be raised, and raised areas become indentations. Left is Right. Up is down. negative becomes Positive.

It is incredibly difficult, when working in this reverse and opposite method to create in a way that is entirely predictable. Distortion is the norm. The process allows for the examination of trauma, and for the expression of the distortions that accompany it. Cause and effect.

The cast is more about evoking than telling; more about giving expression to rather than narrating what has been felt, silenced, unacknowledged, and perhaps un-understood.

As the young woman moved the clay into an organic form, she was totally immersed in the making. There is no story; nothing in the artwork that will reveal her violation and subsequent struggle to maintain a sense of self and connection. In the making of that piece she confides, "I touched my femininity", which had been held in denial as a result of the abuse. Indelible loss; incredible discovery.

One significant characteristic of the casting process is its capacity to express absence; to give form to something that was, and is no longer; And to that which *never* was. The nameable, tangible absences, a *real* father, a well supported education perhaps; and the amorphous absences – calm, security, love and consistency.

For women whose abuse occurred within the family, the absences of the lost childhood are very nearly insurmountable. For one participant, who told me "I was abused, almost from the womb", the expression of her grief is made through play and a joyful engagement with the materials. she endows the clay with abundance of marks that when cast, transform into a range of beguiling textures, which she enjoys touching.

"it seems to connect with the shut down part of my brain. In the effort to deal with everything, I got kind of suppressed and that part of me got lost. It was like re-igniting something that had been part of me as a child. It was like a kind of an acknowledgement of me really"

The work lingers and expresses itself beyond its making; "it does upset me" She said " but that's ok, because I usually don't *feel* anything."

Within the sanctuary of art, the burden of grief can be shared and lightened. Expression, and comfort can be given and received through the processes of creating and viewing.

Through the work of artists, through the making, and through the exchanges within communities of shared understanding, Creativity and Art are giving expression to the essence of what it is to be human.