

ART IN THE SHADOWS. Art that reveals, transforms and restores **Anne Riggs.**

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my work and observations with you.

This visual presentation is about the relationship between creative arts practice and the shadowy world of trauma, loss and grief, in particular sexual abuse and family violence. It is a snippet of how artmaking and the artist contribute to wellbeing in the aftermath of such experiences.

This paper emerges from a series of creative projects I conducted with communities of women who had been abused - some when they were young or very young children, and others when they were teenagers and adults. All carried the pain of abuse for years afterwards. Insights are offered into how and why artmaking and working with an artist uplifts participants to live a more satisfying life, to better communicate and function within the world, and reduce debilitating feelings of inadequacy, loneliness and depression. It is art which offers, then delivers hope, belief and skills for a happier future, and empowers participants to think, behave and relate in ways that, until their immersion into it, had been elusive - remarkable shifts for those who frequently teetered on brink of life and death.

The presentation touches on the work of the artist: how we delve into the shadows of what hurts, disturbs and stultifies, in order to offer something back that reveals, transforms and restores.

Art is not therapy. An artist is not a therapist. Art therapy is not art. These are important statements make because I want to elucidate something of what art is and what art does; and draw attention to the artist at the centre who facilitates the shifts, transformations and revelations through the rigorous development of visual language.

I am a visual artist; I paint, work with clay, make sculpture and installations. My entire living and way of life is dedicated to art-making. I exhibit, am commissioned to create public artworks, I set up and conduct community arts programs and in this capacity work principally with the most vulnerable people in society. I put my work, and me with it, into the public realm. 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. This process is not about "prettying" up the subject for public consumption; rather is a search for meaning; using the artist eyes and hands to bring to life and into view that which many would rather turn away from and others yearn to understand. In so doing the artist makes an offering to the viewer – a means to acknowledge and a place to mourn.

I consider my artist practice fundamental to the community work and to the transformations I will describe. It is this 'putting myself on the line' as a practicing artist that I believe is the single most important delineator between this work and art therapy, between the artist and the art therapist, between purging one's feelings and creativity.

I'd like to introduce you to a new word. Unlike many new words of the 21st century, this one does not begin with 'i' or 'e'. In fact, it may be the antithesis of such words and the self-centredness they evoke. *Chaoisis* emerged from observations I made of women attending these mosaic and ceramic groups. I have also observed *chaosis* in carers of, and people with mental illness, and those in grief. It describes a particular distressed state – mostly observed at their arrival and for the first period of the session.

Women have their own unique and heartbreaking expressions to describe the dehumanising affects of trauma. "Me and the outside world" was at first shocking to hear, then deeply disheartening in

encapsulating what many victims feel about themselves in relation to others. Separate. Different. Disconnected. Alone. Futile. Another, being "bad all bad" describes the self-belief of being an intrinsically stained human being. They speak of "not existing", of being "non-human". When I asked one to describe what she thought she was, if not human, she replied: "a blob".

Women came in this state of chaos from arguments with spouses and children, periods of hospitalisation from illness and self-harm, days spent in bed in depression, from homes unable to be kept tidy. Theirs was a roller coaster life that did not settle into any rhythm or harmony; a discordant existence lived in the shadows - in the spaces between trauma, the memories surrounding the trauma, in the blank spot where the memories should exist but don't, and the lived experiences of how this plays out in everyday life, in every circumstance, with every human being.

Chaos is an intermittent way of being, the result of unsuccessful attempts to cope without the necessary skills, support, history, education or money to do so well. It describes the realities of living with trauma: anxiety, white noise, irrational movement and behaviour, a lack of focus that comes from trying to manage whilst being overwhelmed by the past and the present.

None of the participants enjoyed living in this state of chaos. Many tried to subdue it with drugs, alcohol, sex, food and self-harm at one end of the spectrum, and with support groups, counselling and medication at the other. Despite the incredible damage of abuse, I nonetheless noticed in most participants a seed of an inner belief that determinately sat alongside the heartbreaking lack of self-belief; "I am hopeless at everything" displayed in the chaos, but "I might be an artist" – the core of their resilience that brought them to the group. Many considered the offering of this art group was "an answer to my prayers".

One participant's desire to "put myself on the canvas" vividly illuminates how abuse deadens and art enlivens. I devised a project around this comment which I called *Putting Myself in the Picture*. It hinged on the concept of the self-portrait whilst not aiming for life-likeness. I attempted to steer women towards thinking about themselves in terms other, or broader, than that of a victim; to consider what they might like to be, or how they would like to define themselves in their own terms. Many people with a history of abuse are vulnerable to allowing their realities to be defined by others, and this can foster a misperception that their abuse is the single most important factor about their identity¹. I thought the artwork could bring to life their aspirations and passions, to move them away from the role of victim and onto another plane.

Rather than being light and fun as I anticipated, this project was quietly confronting. Participants' view of their identity was challenged: if "I am more than just my trauma", then the question 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 is the self to be identified, and then represented, in an artwork? I later saw the impossibility of imagining who one *might* be, without first knowing who one is.

Artworks began with a simple plan, an outline cut out in timber, and through the process of making the mosaic the self emerged. In art thoughts and feelings that are almost impossible to put into words or actions can be expressed freely with the full intensity of their emotion and without moderation. Many participants fervently believed that: "as this is Art I can say and do what I like" and this offered immense liberation.

¹ Gold, Steven N. 2000 *Not Trauma Alone. Therapy for Abuse Survivors in Family and Society Context*. Brunner/Routledge Philadelphia and Hove

One woman who had been sexually abused throughout her childhood drew herself as a child of about 5-6 years old. The years and aftermath of sexual abuse had reconstructed her as a depressed and traumatised adult. The pain of the trauma was already well known to her; less understood were all the unnamed and unidentified consequent feelings that caused her limitless disquiet and distress. She frequently spent days in bed distraught at the failure she believed she was. The mosaic making, done at home, and with tiny pieces of tiles, carefully cut and placed, brought the memory of her childhood into sharp focus; and something shifted, "like a key turning" or "a spirit coming in" she said.

When I was a child, I was quite creative. In the effort to deal with everything, it got suppressed and that part of me got lost. It was like reigniting something that had been part of me as a child. It was kind of an acknowledgement of me really.

The mosaic-making deconstructed the reconstruction, if you like, returning her to a place where she could begin a long journey towards self-belief. The artwork and the making of it, revealed her self, and truths that were unknown, or may have been known but were long since hidden and forgotten. She remembered educational and creative successes, prizes won and friends she had known - things re-emerging as she engaged with art. She understood the child's pain within and, finally, that she was not responsible for the abuse.

Art re-shaped participants' self view. "Everything about this piece was totally out of the norm for me", one said. Her work exudes the femininity she dreamt of but did not recognise as one of her own characteristics. The beauty and tantalising qualities of the materials prompted her to explore femininity, and her own feminine form that she, like others who have been abused, denied in the shapeless, oversized clothes she wore. Mosaics, and even more so the clay projects, enticed women to acknowledge the human, particularly feminine, body in an open, unsexual and sexual context and manner. They considered its form and also its adornment, beauty, desire and decline. The vexed relationships most had with their own and other's bodies led them to disconnect from their body; many displayed startling ignorance of its physiology, most were overweight and many had illnesses symptomatic of profound stress.

Whereas sometimes discoveries were gentle, such as in this beautiful butterfly woman; at other times participants creatively confronted their most difficult feelings. In class discussions participants' consideration was drawn towards using and developing metaphor to express clearly and to articulate their feelings whilst keeping them safe from those viewers who may not be respectful of a participants' exposed vulnerability.

One older participant viewed the project as a chance to immerse herself into the rebellious person she would have liked to be, and a means to step away from the anxious and frightened one she was. Feeling shamed by her past, she was mute in the verbal expression of her body and desires. In her artwork, she was fluent.

Art was the enabling language through which she confronted the decline of her once slender and beautiful body as well as her feelings of anger and loss. The portrait of her aged, flabby and unloved body expresses the loss of never having had a loving intimate life whilst also permits a flicker of hope that one might yet emerge. Contradiction and mixed messages exist throughout; one example is the seductively gesturing, "Come hither" hand, expressing her sexual desire yet also saying "if you do, I'll thump you". Smooth shells carefully chosen for the nipples purposefully invite touch, but surrounding them jagged tiles threaten peril for those who do. Complex feelings of rejection, anger, sensuality, yearning, and repulsion are simultaneously held in the work. Drawing on her knowledge of modern artists - particularly Matisse and Modigliani - to achieve her goals, she also uses these references to put the work into a context where it might also be read without the abuse narrative. Already possessing a sophisticated understanding of metaphor, she used it in this seemingly simple work to explore what had never been said in words; later she said she could "write a book about it" for all she expressed and all the mosaic revealed.

Two important things are happening here. First, is that art offers the freedom to explore and express and second, it provides the language 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 the single most difficult impediment to recovery.

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

Art sometimes took women back and in so doing, moved them forward. Revelations were not always happy as participants came face to face with their long buried and silenced sorrow, loss and anger. Whilst this may seem a negative aspect of creativity, no participant believed it was. Artmaking allowing them to access and acknowledge deep feelings, the denial of which had caused so much pain. Many commented how art moved them quickly, because it happened so slowly through the meditation and contemplation intrinsic to creativity that stills the mind and encourages living in the present.

I will add that there are many pleasures to be found in learning and making art, particularly in a group, which contribute to building resilience and wellbeing. The sensual touch of the materials, rising to the creative challenges offered by the artist, the pleasures of having the work affirmed by others, sharing food, participating in discussions, and listening to music all add to an experience that is uplifting and enjoyable.

Chaois is fuelled by feelings of inadequacy, the inability to cope, fears and depression. Over a period of weeks these feelings had been replaced as art objects affirmed creativity, the capacity to learn and competence; and as healthy relationships were built on shared interests, respect and trust. The movement towards wholeness achieved from *Putting Myself in the Picture* specifically and artmaking generally is profound. Psychiatrist Dr George Halasz, a trauma specialist, described these shifts as “similar in importance to the child’s progression from crawling to walking.” Art had enabled victims to see the world from a different vantage point, and once achieved, it is impossible to view the world as had it had been known before.

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