

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Nest Suspended:
artwork and poetry in response to Covid-19**

Joanne Sullivan

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'Nest Suspended' by Jo Sullivan, 2020. Mixed media on Watercolour paper. Dimensions 56 cm x 76 cm

Bird perched on its nest

Bird perched on its nest,
a place of beginnings, safety and rest.
Goodness, fullness, life as we knew,
teeters in uncertainty, unravelling upon view.

Down the rabbit hole fraught with distortions,
restricted and stretched to disturbing proportions.
Creativity helps explore and reimagination beckons,
internal wrestling is bared, as loss of control threatens.

Precautions fielding danger and death,
beware a snuffle, cough and outgoing breath.
A dark veil like shadow, in suspension is cast,
our chorus in angst - how long will this last!

An ocean of grief at the world come undone.
Keep your distance but don't leave me alone.
Fear, anxiety, grab and claw and protest.
Honour and courage must be pinned to our chest.

And the blue sky in boldness resounds,
helping restore sanity in leaps and bounds.
Nature yielding hope, comfort and beauty's truth.
Oh, to be like birds and flowers, with less worries too.

Change, loss and adjustments are digested in turn,
brings opportunity anew, to grow and to learn.
And when its near done, though painful passing through...
Remember, flowers grow well in excrement too.

Poem by Jo Sullivan, 2020.

Reflection

'Nest Suspended' is an artwork I felt compelled to create in response to Covid-19 global pandemic. As an experienced art psychotherapist living and working in Sydney, Australia, practising since 2004, this artwork provided the much needed container to help process and makes sense of some of my inner and outer experiences, as private and public worlds were turned upside down and inside out.

I am accustomed to making response art in art therapy sessions. This is part of the art making culture in one of my working contexts in a large adult mental health facility, where I sit alongside patients whose sense of reality and safety can be deeply disturbed. Through this I offer my art responses to support the process of containing and facilitating the individual and the group. While this artwork was not made in this context but in my own private studio, it feels as if I am navigating familiar territory of these disturbed sensibilities.

'Nest Suspended' helped to explore some of my experiences and adjustments to the changing landscape of doing art therapy and being an art therapist in such times. The image speaks to both the personal and collective sense of security, safety and normality as if being suspended up in the air due to the global crisis. The nest egg, as the poem suggests is 'goodness itself'. It refers to notions of all that might feel safe and familiar, whether in a therapy session or living in the world, that suddenly 'teeters in uncertainty' about to fall down the dark 'rabbit hole' into surreality and the unknown.

As an art therapist I was fortunate to continue to work face to face across hospitals and mental health clinic settings, while private practice clients moved to an online platform. Everything about the safety of the physical and emotional container of art therapy sessions, regardless of setting, felt threatened and disturbed in some way. In face to face work both patient and therapist were confronted with an invisible threat, which involved having to sanitise to be disinfected, rearranging tables and chairs to a safe enough distance and therapists wearing masks, concealing attuned facial expressions and muffling voices, a drastic departure from usual interpersonal communications. Rigid regulations about the use and choice of art materials were understandable but a huge adjustment that felt far from playful. Wariness about this meant that for some patients, materials could feel like a potential enemy. Indeed, if materials were shared or not disinfected properly, they could well be a point of viral transmission. Opportunities for individual purchase and ownership of own materials were thus given. Responsibility and added cleaning time for other materials felt tedious and burdensome for the therapist.

The evolution of 'Nest Suspended' began as an unconscious, spontaneous scrawl of an egg in a nest as a starting point. From this the image's dimensions unravelled and became distorted. The nest itself looks as if it has become prolapsed in some way, ending succinctly in folds of digestive tracts and an exposed colon. This felt fitting. The gestural scaffolding underneath the image took a minute to create. I felt as if the bare bones of the work were the start of something important, as if on the precipice of something bigger than myself, on the edges of knowing and not knowing, connecting to something both deeply containing and at the same time deeply undoing.

Over the next 5 months – a feat in itself for me, for someone used to working quite spontaneously on artworks no longer than a few hours over a few days – acrylic paint, oil and chalk pastels, coloured pencils and collage helped edge a way forward as the image came to life.

The collage image of the bird was selected because of its plucky yellow colour, providing a sense of hope and watchful calm. I since discover it is called a Silver Eye, apparently having migrated from other parts of the world to Australia, New Zealand and some surrounding South Pacific islands. In Maori its name means stranger and relevantly 'new arrival' (Wikipedia 2020).

'Nest Suspended', felt like a strange inside/outside world enforced upon us, that we were all new arrivals in. The unexplored emotional territory journeyed within the artwork, felt at times something to endure – was painstaking, overwhelming, on the edge of madness, with astounding moments of bravery, freedom and release. Both in the artwork and poetry there are references to medals of 'honour and courage must be pinned to our chests', as if awarded to both patient and therapist alike for enduring such change and uncertainty. Also, supervision reminders that treatment of both patient and therapist selves during such times called for kid gloves.

The poem 'Bird perched on a nest' was written in response to 'Nest Suspended' and produced at the artwork's completion. Imagery first, giving birth to words. I am reminded as with the processing of trauma that images being pre-verbal are processed first before words can be found. The poem serves as an accompaniment, exploring literal aspects of the pandemic as well as some of the visual metaphors held in the image.

The making of the artwork called forth feats of aesthetic intuition and trust in the face of not knowing, the likes I'd never before experienced in my creative journeys. I felt as if the artwork called to me, taught me how to paint and draw, encouraged me, held me, lifted me and released me to work through powerful feelings. All the while the artwork sang, birthed and grieved itself into life. I marvel at the depths of creativity, its capacity to hold and help resolve inner conflict.

Indeed, the compulsion to create both image and poem in response to the Covid-19 crisis was experienced as if necessary for survival, where invisible threats to safety and sanity called for boldness, courage, endurance and trust. These creative acts seemed not only for personal exploration and in response to supporting patients, but also about participating in a collective unconscious journey, simultaneously unravelling and yet mysteriously held.

While the floating nest, reminiscent of both personal and collective worlds in metamorphosis, is suspended in timeless uncertainty it casts a dark shadow – like the veil of the Covid crisis itself. The whole work, inclusive of its shadow, in turn appears ever held by the clear bright blue sky surrounding it. It is this holding of hope, that nature calmly

and boldly brings, where echoes of the sublime and the sacred, past present and future are imbued and continue to buoy us all.

About the Author

Jo Sullivan BSc, MA(ATh), AThR, is professionally registered with ANZACATA, trained as an Art Psychotherapist in 2003 in Sydney Australia, and has since been practicing across private and public adult mental health facilities, hospice settings and in private practice.

References

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/silvereye>; Web access 07/11/2020.