

Introduction

I started working with my current art therapist in 2020. I had been diagnosed with an autoimmune disease on top of ongoing chronic fatigue and severe Complex PTSD resulting from trauma. Prior to my autoimmune diagnosis, I was working in a leadership position professionally and excelling in this context. In the months following my diagnosis, it became apparent I was no longer able to work in the role and I had to resign. I was experiencing ongoing pain, severe fatigue and mental health challenges.

I have an extensive mental health history with multiple hospital admissions, different forms of therapies and ECT. My diagnosis of complex PTSD also included dissociative identity disorder and depersonalisation. This had been stable between 2018 and 2020. Unfortunately, being forced to resign from a job I was passionate about resulted in a re-emergence of dissociative symptoms, grief and an unclear sense of identity. I knew it was time to seek a therapist.



Why I chose art therapy over other therapies

I have always been an artist. Even in the midst of domestic violence, sexual trauma and a transient life, I drew. It was my escape from my trauma. As a child, we were not allowed to voice our feelings or show emotion. To do so resulted in beatings and emotional abuse. I learnt to hold them in and consequently developed a flat affect which was often misinterpreted as a sense of calm. I was known as a peaceful child who grew into a calm adult. I grew into an adult with limited interoception. Therapists would ask how I felt and I would either guess or say what I thought they wanted me to hear. For goodness sake, I could not even locate my foot without looking at the floor. I was not attached to my body or feelings. My drawings however, reflected something different.

I am an intellectual. Despite attending 14 schools and experiencing severe abuse, I somehow managed to obtain 3 university degrees. I lived in my head and had no attachment to any part of my body. Depression and anxiety were constant and I found myself in and out of therapist rooms—ACT, DBT, CBT, Hypnotherapy, talking therapies.....they did not seem to be working. I continued to be admitted to mental health facilities where ECT and TMS along with drug therapies were trialled. I reflect now and recognise these therapies did not work because I lived in my head and responded with what I assumed therapists wanted me to say. I could make the tables, come up with alternative scripts but they were not getting to where they needed: to my broken heart and soul.



I continued to explore art at home and found it was a safe release of emotions. Then, through serendipity I landed in a hospital which had an art therapist who I immediately bonded with and trusted. She got it. I worked with her as an inpatient and as an outpatient in day programs. So, when my world fell apart in 2020, I reached out to her. I wanted to see her privately but it was considered inappropriate. She did however know of someone and a referral was made to 'Anu', my current therapist.

I have been working with Anu since then. Life has not been kind, my health continues to decline and I have had many family challenges. Through it all, I have painted, sculpted and drawn my heart songs with Anu by my side.

My first challenge: meeting my therapist and a fear of abandonment

By the time I sat with Anu, I had done a lot of trauma therapy with a psychologist specialising in childhood trauma and dissociative challenges. This therapist and I had worked together for a long time to understand my many inner parts, to hear their voice and to give them agency. It was a multi-modal therapy. I did best when I could draw whilst talking. When we parted ways, I was broken hearted. I had grown to love my psychologist deeply and I was not sure I would manage on my own. She was always available to me via telephone or email. I coped well though, I flourished with less fragmentation and I excelled in my new job. However, losing my capacity to work meant the return of grief, lack of identity and depression.

During my initial meet with Anu I was very clear that I had "done the trauma work". My brief was to focus on the here and now. Do not unravel my knitted together coat of many colours (my dissociative identity disorder/DID). I immediately liked them, but was wary. What if they too abandoned me or worse made me unwell? Trust was slow and it wavered regularly when suicidality meant actioning safety plans. However, through art making we were always able to locate my fear of abandonment and repair the relationship.

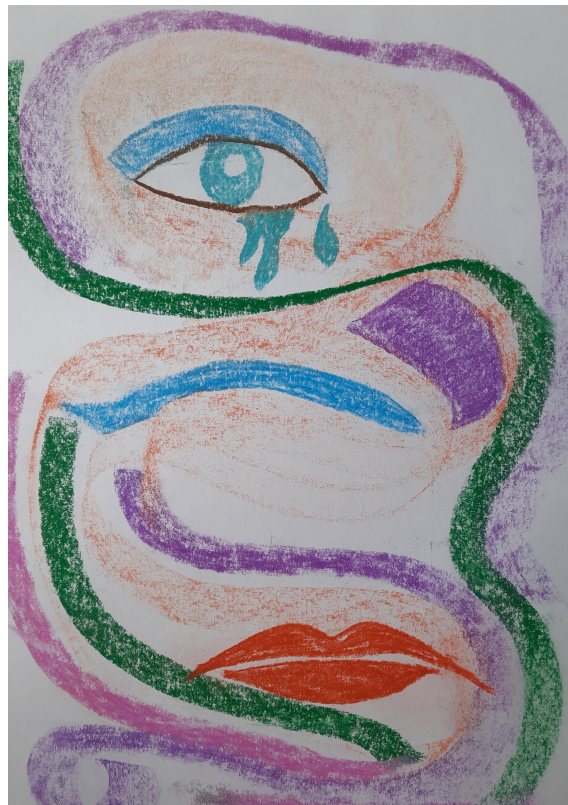


The most difficult thing for me was accepting Anu's professional boundaries. My last therapist was freely available but Anu indicated they were not. To be clear, I was constantly contacting them and when they could not reply, it distressed me. I felt abandoned and disliked. I had to learn that Anu's professional boundaries did not equal rejection. To help me understand this, we made art and an agreed form of diary making was explored.



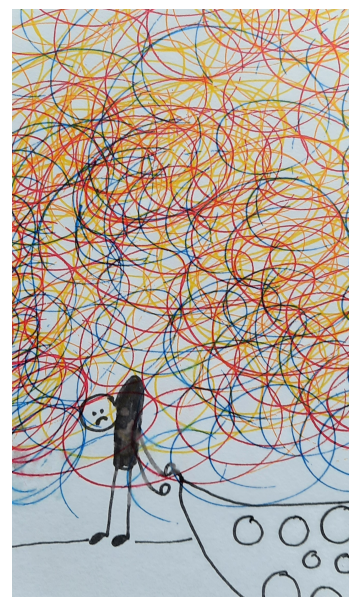


I did a lot of crying at this point. Through the art making I was able to locate the sense of abandonment which was felt to my core. I could voice how it played out in my adult relationships and the inherent distrust I had for all who professed to love me. This was the first time I had ever fully engaged with my emotions. It was scary but there was also a relief in the release.



What works for me and has gone well

Art therapy has been a powerful therapeutic modality for me. I find it difficult to locate emotions and often carry a heaviness or fluttering chest for what appears to be an unknow reason. For the rest of the time, there seems to be a void. In order to remain out of hospital I have deliberately had a “task oriented” approach to each day. I wake up and locate how I feel physically and then plan my day appropriately. It may mean plans are cancelled, including those I was looking forward to. It is an intellectual exercise which helps with the management of my symptoms. It does not however touch my emotions regarding how it may feel to cancel a friend’s visit or an outing to the zoo. These feelings come much later when I sit with Anu and the sense of despair and anger are expressed.



A powerful exercise I experienced in art therapy was locating an item in my studio to represent my body. I found a piece of drift wood. I expected to rage at this “stick body”, perhaps scribble on it, perhaps snap it into pieces. I know I am angry about having a broken body. Instead I found myself holding this jagged stick with compassion.



I rubbed it with almond oil and spoke kindly to it. I then wrapped her in cotton wool and strips of soft flannel before tying coloured, sparkly string around her weary bones.

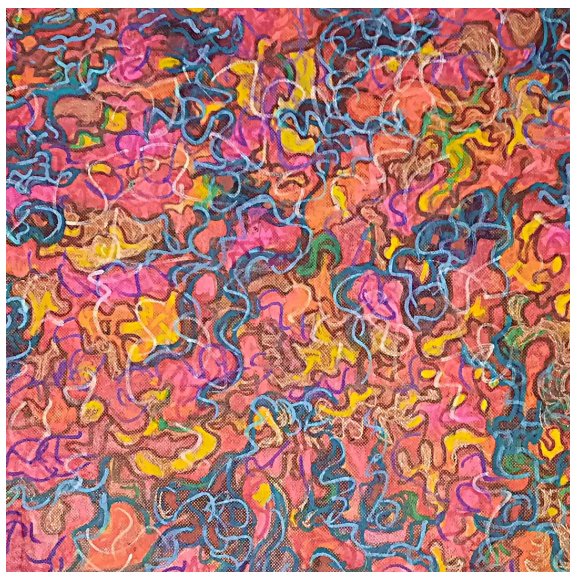
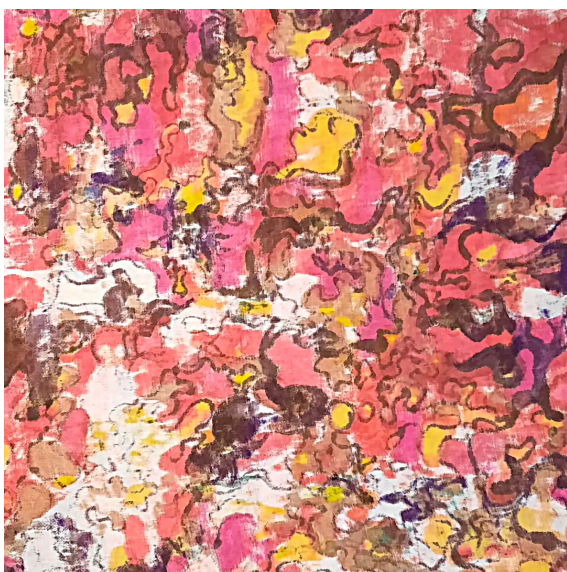


I found a pretty box and made a bed. She needed to rest. I needed to rest and I needed to be held with love. My broken body is playing out the story of years of trauma. Why would it not be broken?



Art making and art therapy has allowed me to locate emotions in a safe place, to express these as my therapist bears witness and to learn how to self regulate when emotionally heightened. I have come to trust Anu and often wait until I see them before unpacking that weight I carry. I still lack a little confidence to do it myself but it is happening, especially in my textile work which I will refer to later. I am convinced that the decrease in self harming thoughts, self harming behaviours and suicidality is a result of locating art as a way of expressing the emotions my brain and mouth cannot. It makes sense. I was punished regularly as a child for verbalising emotions, good and bad; why would I give words to them now? My brain and body are not wired that way.

I still find it difficult to sit by myself and to breathe into my art. My emotions still frighten me if I do not have a witness to be with me. This type of art is different to doll making or painting a beautiful sunset using a photograph as a guide. It is intuitive, raw, jagged and at times angry. They are big emotions for me to hold alone. I am yet to fully trust that I can keep myself safe whilst creating. Small steps are happening though. I recently explored the darkness and light related to living with a chronic illness. I scraped darks and light paints onto paper, creating new colours and textures. I talked about the process as I worked with Anu. I liked the outcome so much I later repeated the exercise on fabric. I took mono prints of the scraped paint, using calico. When it was dry I used posca pens to paint on top. The result was a perfect depiction of my cognitively challenged brain.



As a woman who has developed a disability after finally finding peace and passion in her life, there has been a great sense of loss and grief. I had no idea who I was separate to my occupation and my role as a mother and a wife. I had felt the most confident in my professional role. It was the one role I felt successful in. Art therapy has allowed me to explore who I am outside of my occupation. It is a theme which has been recurring because just as I have settled into a new sense of who I am and what my disability entails, the symptoms and challenges have increased. I have gone from a mobile person to one requiring a wheelchair. Then not only requiring a wheelchair but also experiencing a medically acquired movement disorder and at the writing of this piece a decline in cognition due to functional causes and a return of dissociative symptoms. I am told these are permanent. My cognition and concentration will always be impaired and I will need supports. There is always space in art therapy to explore this. I am learning I am a passionate and expressive person. I am creative and quick to apply traditional techniques and crafts to art. I am an artist who creates challenging work. It is not always liked but generally provokes a response. I am kind and giving. I am passionate about children's rights and the rights of minorities. I am quick to anger when discrimination occurs. I am an advocate. This is what art therapy has taught me. My disability does not minimise my value.





Challenges

I am a person who likes control. It has increased with my physical and cognitive challenges. I have routines, lists, diaries and systems. An outsider looking in may think I am controlling in the negative sense of the word. These are however, strategies which help me feel safe and give order in my unpredictable world. The structure of art therapy goes against all of what keeps me safe. There is the predictable beginning and end. There is a check in and a summary and reorientation to my external world at the end. It is what happens in the middle that can cause some emotional challenges and at times feeling unsafe. Unlike “talking therapies” where I could control the narrative a little, I am unable to manage my internal world. I never know what I am carrying and what will be explored. I can experience lack of control in the process, because I never really know where my mind will take me. I have to trust my therapist to keep me safe.

Anu has helped with this by offering suggestions such holding a rock I have decorated or some body-based strategies such as pushing my feet into the ground. The presence of their professional skills and knowledge of me as a client has also helped. There is a knowing that they will only allow me to go places I am ready for. If I present as fatigued there may be the location of joy or what may be restful. Restful colours and soft materials are located to use. I have grown to trust that I will not be left “out of control”.



The other thing I notice is that I am actually the master or navigator of this ship called art therapy. I can determine the materials I bring to it and what it is I wish to explore. Generally it is a body-based issue which requires a name. I arrive with it and my materials and Anu is more of a facilitator and a witness to my processing. The result is deeper understanding and a richer array of art works. They are often less picture-like and more symbolic. This has been a key change in recent times. This new confidence brings with it a greater sense of safety without worrying about control.



I live in a regional town in Australia where access to allied health therapies is limited and priority is often given to children. We do not have an art therapist near my home. Anu was recommended to me. As far as I know, they live on my computer screen.

They are a friendly face, greeting me on a regular basis via Zoom. How amazing to have technology to allow this to happen. Zoom has allow access to a lovely supportive therapist, yet for me it has its limitations. It is really a personal thing and I don't believe it limits my art making in any way. I have a well resourced studio and all that is needed to create in a variety of ways. This may not be so for other individuals. My challenge is more along the lines of who is Anu, past their face and smile? How tall are they? What type of clothing do they like? What does their art making look like? Some may say this knowledge is not necessary for therapy; perhaps not. It is a wondering and I think it helps to build a greater sense of the person you are working with.

Another consideration for therapists working via Zoom is the issue of regulation. I have become dysregulated in Anu's sessions and I have been gently guided back to a grounded state. This has helped me to build capacity. I now have involuntary movements with myoclonic jerking which can occur as a result of emotional stress. If not settled quickly, I can be distressed. A person present in the room could firmly put a foot over mine and speak calmly or push firmly, breaking the neuro feedback loop. This is not possible via Zoom. It is something we are yet to navigate and I am sure some solutions will be found.

Looking ahead, applying art as therapy learnings in my daily living

I am in the very lucky position to have a well resourced art room with a lot of sunlight. It is a beautiful space yet, until recently, I had been reluctant to use it. Despite encouragement from Anu to spend 15 minutes a day art making about my day and feelings, I was very reluctant. I think it was because, without them there to guide me I was still unable to name my feelings. In recent months there has been a change and I use my room most days. I recognise I don't have to know the feeling to start. Sometimes the feeling, thought or solution emerges in the making. I find my art has shifted from making a visualised piece—knowing from the start what it is I want to make, to a process approach. I pull out what I intuitively want and play with the materials. As I work I find I naturally locate joy, anger or sadness. I feel safe in doing so because I can stop at any time and often have sensory tools such as headphones on. There is great enjoyment in viewing and reflecting on what has been created. The art making often lifts a burden I cannot name.

I think this will become increasingly important as I navigate my challenges with oral language. I write well but comprehending conversations, word finding and understanding social language is becoming increasingly difficult. I now identify my studio as a sacred space and a place of healing. It is my space. My space only. I have never had a space of my own.



New passions and identity

I firmly believe art therapy has led to me locating a new passion and a deeper sense of self. I notice I am very creative in my thinking, the way I express things and the way I dress. I have never been happy with the clothing available in retail stores. It is all the same and unethically made.

I have developed a passion for upcycling. Initially, I would buy clothing from OP shops and then re-piece items. That is, pulling sleeves off one item and adding them to another. This has shifted somewhat. The printing and drawing I do in art therapy has now become part of my textile making. I recently photographed a piece of process work and sent it to be made into a length of fabric. It was very exciting to receive my very own art on a length of fabric which will be made into “quirky” pants. The best thing was, I also supported a small Australian business and the cotton was recycled. It came from overseas where the workers were paid an appropriate wage. Not only did art therapy let my heart songs sing, it created a passion and helped feed a family.



Biography

Jac' has worked as an educator and welfare officer. She has enjoyed the opportunities these roles have presented to support children to express themselves authentically and to explore the value they bring to the world.

She is also a passionate advocate for the rights of children and other marginalised groups in society. She advocates through social media, engaging in robust conversations with others and contacting community groups to ensure access for all occurs. She does so in a quiet and considered way, allowing others to consider how the needs of others can be met.

Jac has developed creative arts practice over many years and is particularly interested in print making and painting.