

Inter-being: Perspectives from a postgraduate art therapy trainee group art exhibition

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Abstract

The art in art therapy is an undeniable distinguishing feature of the discipline and of postgraduate training. This article elevates this distinctive feature, ushering it to centre stage through collaborative co-authorship with the programme leader and through illustrative perspectives of two newly graduated trainees from an ANZACATA-approved programme in Singapore. The significance of engaging in one's own art and art-making are showcased and pivoted around the most recent graduating cohort's group exhibition, *Inter-being*.

Keywords

Art therapy, art therapy training, art of the art therapist, art practice, exhibition.

Introduction: Installation – Art in postgraduate art therapy training

Art is the undeniable distinguishing feature of the discipline of art therapy and this naturally extends into postgraduate training. It is critical that art therapists and trainees develop and refine competencies in using a range of materials and media, have a diverse understanding of the traditions and perceptions of art and art-making within and between cultures, and to actively engage in their own art practice to actualise the core tenets of the discipline while working therapeutically with others (Cahn, 2000; Carolan & Stafford, 2018; Lay, 2020; McNiff, 1986; Moon, 2003, 2002; Robbins, 1987; Wix, 1996; Wong & Lay, 2021).

Through collaborative co-authorship of the programme leader and two recent graduates, this article highlights the perspectives of those graduates on the significance of art-making during their art therapy training which led to the group exhibition, *Inter-being* (Figure 1). The programme leader consolidated much of the context, rationale and theoretical underpinnings of the significance of art within art therapy training, while the two graduates contributed their individual perspectives within their distinct sections and provided input into the description and details of their group art exhibition. All the co-authors contributed to the 'Final thoughts' section of the article.

Evidencing core clinical competencies within postgraduate training is critical and at times may take priority over the development and enhancement of competencies around art, art-making and the facilitation of related processes including proficiencies with a range of materials and media. These reasons, among others, justify the rationale for some art therapy training programmes to fully integrate and inculcate art and art-making within the pedagogy (Cahn, 2000; Carolan & Stafford, 2018; Leigh, 2021; Moon, 2003; Wix, 1996). In fact, developing an artist identity is prioritised in many programmes and this strategically complements a comprehensive training and art therapist identity (Cahn, 2000; McNiff, 1986; Moon, 2003; Moon, 2002; Paton & Linnell, 2018).

A final art exhibition complements a postgraduate thesis and demonstrates the ever-growing creative and reflective abilities of art therapists in training; it validates the art in art therapy which is evidenced in their own art (Lachman-Chapin, 1993; Lay, 2020; Wong & Lay, 2021). The exhibition itself can be seen as a metaphoric holding or safe space, an opportunity to be 'seen', and/or as a parallel to the profound mechanisms experienced within the therapeutic encounter. Held within a group exhibition, the art of the art therapy trainee is contained and serves as a rich reservoir of complex experiences unique to those that created it. The art itself is a powerful and unique



Figure 1. *Inter-being*, 2021, Praxis Space, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

container of individual experience and expression, and holds potential for both client, therapist and artist-therapist (Cahn, 2000; Carolan & Stafford, 2018; Moon, 2003, 2002; Robbins, 1987; Wix, 1996).

There are considerable and transferable skill sets that trainees acquire through all aspects of participating in a group exhibition that can be beneficial to working with others therapeutically post graduation. Trainees strengthen skill sets linked to communication, negotiation, and decision making (including ethics) as they discuss the exhibition theme as well as the pragmatics of the installation, documentation and even publicity. Each of these will need to be carefully considered against informed consent and matters related to confidentiality, best practice and ethics, in the event that art therapy trainees or art therapists, upon discussion and agreement with client(s), decide to exhibit client artwork as part of their art therapy practice within given contexts.

The following sections provide insights into the latest art therapy exhibition in Singapore. An overarching description precedes the perspectives of two of the graduating students who were actively involved throughout the process, from the art-making within the final year research module to the installation of the artwork and, finally, to the exhibition itself.

Inter-being – the group art exhibition, The LASALLE Show 2021

The senior art therapy cohort has always participated in The LASALLE Show, an annual college-wide series of exhibitions and performances by the graduating students. The Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore (ICAS) orchestrates this large-scale prestigious event, that attracts local and international audiences, through collaboration across the LASALLE College of the Arts including involvement of students. Although we have cemented our place within the larger exhibition, there have been discussions about whether the art of the art therapy students should be exhibited. This has been effectively resolved partly by the programme leadership team's passionate insistence, partly by the resoundingly positive response by local and international audiences, and most definitely by the sheer excellence and professionalism of the art therapy cohort's dedication to their art practice. There have been similar debates at other institutions that are primarily arts-based, however, the art therapy programmes there have been able to successfully assert inclusion (Lachman-Chapin, 1993).

At LASALLE, student representatives are identified by their cohort and liaise directly with ICAS for logistical and installation pragmatics, the Division of Communications for editorial input and final approval of their student-designed

exhibition catalogue, and with others related to the pragmatics of such an endeavour. Throughout their final year, students further arrange themselves into other student-led teams that are responsible for photographing the headshots of each student, facilitating the logistics of the scheduled photoshoot of their artwork, and designing their exhibition catalogue. There is a team that reviews each of the student artist statements and biographies that will be integrated both online and into the exhibition catalogue.

Art proposals, artist statements and the selection of the group exhibition theme are aspects of the studio component of the year-long senior research module. A professional artist is contracted to facilitate the art practice leading to exhibition. A strategic rationale for this is to further assert the importance of art as part of the art therapy trainee's practice and identity as artist, art therapist, and artist-therapist.

To celebrate the completion of the two-year-long training, the 2021 exhibition was titled *Inter-being*, hyphenated to acknowledge the collective growth and connectedness that emerged. The definition of the term *Inter-being* is cited in the exhibition e-catalogue (LASALLE College of the Arts, 2021):

According to Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeing simply means to be. It implies how each of us interdependently co-exist within the universe, and the term recognizes the dependence of any one person or thing as to all other people and objects. He said 'you cannot just be by yourself alone... you have to inter-be with every other thing' (Srinivasan, 2010, p.127).

Every artwork was carefully curated to complement the theme, *Inter-being*, and to celebrate the growth and success of the graduating cohort. The group art exhibition took place from 21 May to 20 June at the Praxis Space in the LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore (Figure 1). The exhibition catalogue is available online.

[click here](#)

Sharing of best practices is a component of ethical practice, hence the impetus for this article. Two of the graduating trainees, Michelle Baraba and Khoo Ling In, decided to expand their interactions

with exhibition audiences by writing about their experiences and perspectives, and they invited the programme leader to co-author this article. It was the authors' intent to acknowledge an important milestone in art therapy training, and to invite other trainees, educators and practitioners outside of this particular training programme to witness, observe and welcome the new art therapists to the larger community.

Samoupoznavanje: Self-Knowing – Michelle Baraba's perspective

As a self-taught artist, I had limited exposure to the vast variety of non-traditional art modalities, and so my art-making practice was heavily restricted prior to postgraduate art therapy training. My artistic expression mainly consisted of precisely planned drawings using black ink pens, with occasional incorporation of acrylic paints for colour. My artworks were directly executed on canvases of size A3 or larger, always with the intention of being displayed. My method of working was unfortunately unforgiving, and allowed little room for creative experimentation and play. Art-making was a stressful process and I often became stuck in creative blocks due to my fear of failure and inability to be satisfied by anything I created.

As a postgraduate art therapy trainee, I observed the rapid growth and development of both my personal and professional identities with the continuous integration of art throughout my art therapy training. The Introduction to Art Therapy (Studio) module in the first term provided a significant foundation for the programme (Cahn, 2000; Wong & Lay, 2021). The emotional, psychological, and physiological properties of a variety of artistic modalities (such as clay, lino printing, and body sculpting, to name a few) were demonstrated through experiential means. It was through this module that I discovered my preference for collage, watercolour, and engagement with natural materials such as seashells, stones, branches, and dried flowers and foliage.

Since the beginning of the training we were also highly encouraged to engage in a creative journal, which was a relatively new practice for me. The purpose of this was to reflect on any ongoing processes during the emotionally and psychologically intensive training, as well as to learn to express ourselves using various art media (Franklin, 2021).

It was through this visual journaling practice that I discovered my creative spark – both as an artist and art therapist in training. I was amazed at how allowing myself to explore, experiment, and make mistakes unlocked my creative potential; all contained within the safety and boundary of the pages of my journal. This reflective visual journaling process also enabled me to identify my style and intrapersonal needs associated with my artistic preferences, which all shaped my artist identity and, consequently, my sense of self as an art therapist. Throughout the two-year training, I completed a total of nine creative journals, and have found it important to carry on this practice, even after the completion of the course, in order to continue feeding the powerful creative energy that has been ignited within me.



Figure 2. Michelle Baraba's mandala weaving process.

The practice of repetitively weaving yarn around wooden sticks is often referred to as a *God's eye*. I became deeply invested in this practice after my peer and co-author of this article, Ling In, initially demonstrated the process during our co-facilitation throughout the first-year clinical placement. Tamie Saita, a Mexican-based artist who teaches yarn mandala weaving through YouTube tutorials, was also a great inspiration to me. I became aware of the universal language of art as I watched Saita's videos

in Spanish (which I don't speak a word of), and learned complex techniques through replicating and doing. I was enchanted by the calming repetitive weaving process, soft texture of the yarn, and geometric symmetry (Figure 2). As the mandalas I was creating were usually between 15 centimetres to 40 centimetres in diameter, I wished to extend this practice to another level for my final artwork. In order to immerse myself in the meditative weaving experience, I became determined to create my biggest mandala yet to acknowledge the immense growth and development I experienced throughout my art therapy training.

The transformative and healing power of art has always been appreciated and utilised in Hinduism and Buddhism to foster joy, self-awareness, and peace of mind. In Buddhism, creation of a mandala is said to allow an individual to 'experience unity – and with it security, confidence, power and bliss' (Brauen, 1997, p.123) through the repetitive process of creating a symmetrical design. C.G. Jung (1989) understood the mandala as an archetypal image symbolising the wholeness of the self, and believed that creating mandalas is a natural part of individuation which he described as the process of transforming one's psyche by bringing the personal and collective unconscious into conscious.

Mindfulness is one of the key elements in meditation practice as one draws their attention to the here and now in order to bring clarity to that experience. Mindfulness possesses the ability to improve the capacity to regulate emotion, to combat



Figure 3. Michelle Baraba, *Samoupoznavanje: Self-Knowing*, 2021, yarn, wooden sticks, shells, glue, 1 × 1m.

emotional dysfunction, to improve patterns of thinking, and to reduce negative mindsets (Siegel, 2017). Breath work and mindfulness techniques were employed before, during, and after my art-making to regulate the nervous system and allow for a profounder weaving experience. The artistic process took place in contemplative silence to strengthen the effect of the mindfulness practice, which is quite different from my previous approaches to art-making where I mostly listened to music.

Shells hold sentimental value for me as a reminder of the humble Croatian fisherman's village of Njivice from which I originated. As a child I spent hours diving in the ocean, and eventually developed a diverse shell collection which is continued even today. Although I didn't initially plan to add shells to my mandala, I felt an intense need for their presence. The silent weaving process prompted memories of my culture and feelings of sadness arising from not being able to visit due to the current Covid-19 pandemic. The specific shells I included in my artwork are cowrie shells, which are used as currency in Africa, where they represent the goddess protection, and the elixir due to their resemblance to the female life-giving organ. Cowrie shells are also used in magic rituals for healing, good luck, and fertility throughout the Middle East, Egypt, the South Pacific, and Mediterranean, and these are also themes that often emerge in my artworks.

Weaving the mandala shown in Figure 3 was indeed a process of individuation in which I interacted with deeper parts of myself (Beaumont, 2018). As a tribute to my Croatian heritage, the natural materials of yarn, wooden sticks, and shells were incorporated in my artistic individuation process. I further connected to my roots by choosing a Croatian word to describe my process: *Samoupoznavanje*. There is no direct English translation for this term, but *samo* refers to the self, and *upoznavanje* is the concept of knowing, meeting, or introducing. Together, *Samoupoznavanje* means 'self-knowing', and so my artwork can actually be conceptualised as a self-portrait that materialised as an artistic meditation to engage self-exploration, introspection, and self-awareness through mindfulness practice. The meditative and repetitive mandala-weaving process facilitated a connection with the authentic self through exploration of identity, existentialism, entanglements, and mindfulness.

Weave with Time – Khoo Ling In's perspective

My graduation artwork, *Weave with Time*, was exhibited as part of our cohort's group exhibition, *Inter-being* (Figures 4 and 5). Since the commencement of my postgraduate training in art therapy, art has become a great part of my daily routine. Prior to the training, I engaged mostly in art journaling with washi tapes and stickers as well as writing quotes. Embarking on this Master's course was my first time travelling alone, being away from my family, and leaving my hometown of Penang in Malaysia. Our graduating class consisted of three other international students, and we all shared the common experiences of adapting to the new culture, learning to be independent, adjusting to societal norms, and getting acquainted with the diverse ethnic cuisines of Singapore.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began in March 2020, I experienced additional challenges that required immediate change. I needed to adjust to the new lifestyle and the mandatory safety measures and restrictions, which are still ongoing at the time of writing this article. Art was the only avenue that I could turn to: to reduce boredom and to manage the feeling of isolation during the lockdown as other means, such as social gathering, were restricted at that time. I always had art materials with me since I enjoy art journaling, therefore, it was natural for me to turn to art and art-making at times like this; after all, this is critical to the discipline of art therapy (Moon, 2002; Robbins, 1987).

Similar to my co-author and peer, Michelle, my art practice primarily involves experimenting and exploring various art media such as drawing tools, painting tools and crafts. This process of engaging with art media encourages a form of regulation, emotionally and psychologically, and develops awareness of the self and others (Franklin, 2021). As a form of response art, my postgraduate art-making practice was an outlet for self-care, reflection, and expression, especially during challenging moments of vulnerability where my creative output reflected my inner and external worlds.

In my final postgraduate semester, I found myself drawn to embroidery and crocheting as the slow process provided a form of internal regulation through engaging in repetitive weaving with a variety of media. With the weekly progression of the

weaving process, a specific thought kept recurring: 'to start is to end; the end is the beginning.' The meaning of it clearly resonated with my two-year art therapy journey in Singapore, and I felt compelled to incorporate these genuine experiences into a tangible artwork for the final exhibition. *Weave with Time* (Figures 4 and 5) is a mixed media textile installation, created through careful introspection of the here-and-now state, primarily reflecting my feelings and thoughts after clinical placement. My choice of yarn and the manner in which I wove and embroidered the hoop reflected how I was feeling in the moment. The authentic creative processes reflected every encounter I experienced in my art therapy training that contributed to my growth, development, and transformation: both in regard to the personal and professional self (Wong & Lay, 2021).

Thich Nhat Hanh explained that as beings we are always connected to one another, inter-being with all life and objects in the universe (Srinivasnan, 2010). My process of inter-weaving and the intentionally arranged tulle flowing on the floor, pillar, and wall, metaphorically represent a form of inter-being interconnectedness that was built upon time and space (Figure 4). The interconnectedness I encountered throughout my art therapy journey enabled me to foster meaningful relationships and friendships with the people with which I crossed paths. As time progressed, these relationships motivated and inspired a transformation in my internal and external states of being, in both personal and professional dimensions.

Furthermore, the inter-being encounters facilitated my transformation; this is depicted in the form of metaphors in my artwork as I gradually wove my moment-to-moment feelings and experiences into the embroidery hoop. These metaphors reflected significant and defining moments of change as I trained to be an art therapist. The clouds highlight the importance of practicing self-care, and hence the promotion of inner emotional regulation. The sun radiates hopes, dreams, wishes, passion, and motivation in my art therapy practices; having this positivity allowed me to constantly take up diverse opportunities, as well as have the courage to overcome my vulnerabilities and resistance. The seed reminded me of the psychodynamic concepts I was learning about: of being a good-enough therapist, therapeutic holding, containment, and attunement.



Figure 4. Khoo Ling In, *Weave with Time*, 2021, mixed media textile installation, 300 × 300 × 200mm.



Figure 5. Khoo Ling In, *Weave with Time*, 2021, detail.

Finally, the water represented the art I created regularly, as a daily practice and especially after my clinical work. All these aspects supported the growth of the seeds into a young tree. To me, the tree metaphorically symbolises my resilience and perseverance to thrive with change. As a result of being able to reflect upon the creative process behind

my artwork, *Weave with Time* (Figure 5), and have it showcased in the exhibition, I felt validated, reassured and affirmed of my accomplishment. Hence, creating art throughout my training provided me with confidence and motivation to continue to strive further in this art therapy field.

Final thoughts: De-installation – Learnings and legacy

As the above graduate perspectives demonstrate, art carries a plethora of personal symbols and metaphors, which through careful introspection allow awareness and an in-depth understanding of the artist's/trainee's inner and outer worlds (Carolan & Stafford, 2018; Jue & Ha, 2021; Moon, 2002; Robbins, 1987). Actively engaging in one's own art-making is considered a vital component of postgraduate art therapy training as it encourages trainees to refine their art practices through experimentation with various artistic modalities, and familiarisation with their own creative processes which further contributes to their professional identities as artists/artist-therapists (Leigh, 2021; McNiff, 2019; Moon, 2003; Wix, 1996; Wong & Lay, 2021). Art-making also manifests as a tangible and physical experience, enabling the trainee to capture and explore their conscious and unconscious, as well as to release and process excess tension and lethargy arising from their intensive training (Jue & Ha, 2021; Leigh, 2021; Robbins, 1987).

As regular art-making enables personal exploration and transformation (Franklin, 2021; Iliya, 2014; Moon, 2003; Wix, 1996), trainees are encouraged to consistently document their processes; especially those pertaining to their clinical placement experience. Reflective and introspective skills are enhanced through processing, learning, and observing not only one's own, but also clients' and classmates' art-making processes. Documentation also provides validation and reaffirmation of the trainees' own progress and transformation, therefore motivating them to strive further in their professional development. Engaging in one's own art and art-making, simply put, is just good practice in the discipline and training of art therapy. Such processes affirm the art in art therapy and contribute to our unique identity as art therapists who use creative and expressive means as part of our professional discipline.

Exhibiting artwork as part of a final process in art therapy training not only provides the opportunity to formally acknowledge the completion of a significant academic and professional milestone, it allows others to collectively witness the induction of a new generation. Typically, the annual exhibition opening functions as an art therapy celebration and reunion of sorts as generations of art therapy alumni, as well as those from arts and mental health communities, visit and interact with the graduating trainees. Since 2020, in response to the ongoing global pandemic, this has had to be temporarily suspended, however, shifting aspects of the exhibition, including the exhibition catalogue, online has proved successful in allowing a more global audience to witness and learn more about our graduates, their artwork and the profound work that is being undertaken in Singapore.

Theoretical and visual dialogues have been stimulated nationally and internationally, allowing us to truly experience a sense of inter-being with far-reaching communities, affirming our (inter) connectedness. We enthusiastically invite you to visit our exhibition in person and/or online as these too, are creative pursuits.

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The authors invite you to view our current exhibition catalogue online as well as our previous exhibitions: <https://www.lasalle.edu.sg/schools/school-creative-industries/ma-art-therapy-graduation-catalogue>

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