

## Book review

### *Found objects in art therapy: Materials and process*

Edited by Daniel Wong and Ronald Lay

Jessica Kingsley, London, 2021

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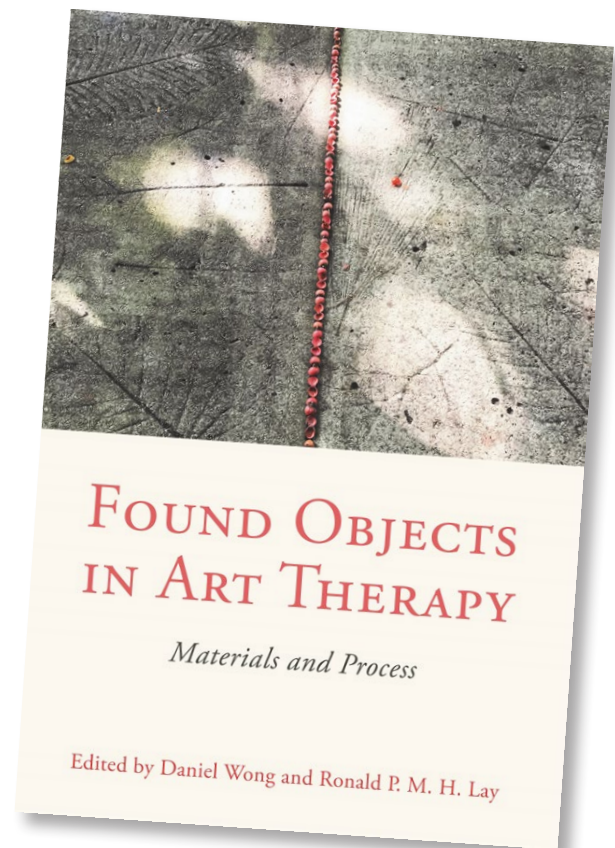
Reviewed by Han Li June

As my eye scans, the unconscious stirs, an aura of allure surrounds the prized find. A broken clock, an aged postcard, a used key... To whom did each belong, where have they come from? My senses amplify, transfixed by the specimens. My hands unwittingly reach out, forming a haptic union with a warm touch. Normality is momentarily suspended... an arresting affect ignites. These vivid thoughts pervaded my mind as I imagined myself immersed in a scene, drawn in by the reverie of finding while reading this stirring book.

It is timely that found objects are discussed as the protagonists in art therapy. The diverse expertise, viewpoints, and practice approaches offered by the authors from both east and west give the account an authoritative voice. Weaving case stories of clients together with research and clinical applications makes the book a moving and persuasive combination.

The book begins by connecting us to an age-old and powerful ritual of humanity – the seeking and collecting of curios. Sacred objects and art have always taken centre stage in rituals of reminiscences, spiritual worship, and story-telling, binding communities in meaning-making. Rituals and embodied objects provide the social coherence, cultural traditions, and collective wisdom that we rely on to weather the complexities of life.

It is not a surprise that we are turning to objects ranging from old, vintage treasures to junk more than ever before. Found objects have a broader impact as a response to the rise of hyper-rationalism, emotional rootlessness, and social alienation that characterises our living in a technology-driven age. Art therapy provides an excellent channel for embodied objects to arouse emotional connections, a



desire for healing, and a re-imagination of our lives. Humanity can benefit when we reacquaint ourselves with the neglected and bruised parts within us, to experience symbolic mending, repair, renewal, and restoration. This book is a treasure trove for mental health practitioners and educators looking to find breakthroughs in their craft and rekindle soulful meaning-making with their clients.

The found object's capability to disrupt, interrogate, disarm familiarity, and agitate for change yet bring about playful reverie, sets it apart from traditional art materials. Its value in bridging past and present, and internal and external worlds, as well as opening intersubjective spaces, is fascinating. Daniel Wong provides a multi-faceted overview of the artistic, anthropological, and psychological history in Part 1, explaining the therapeutic value imbued in

found objects in art and art therapy. Pamela Whitaker further expounds on the art of walking, where the physical environment serves as a fertile space to evoke objects of emotive association. Found objects are abundant, lying hidden in urban landscapes and nature, waiting to be discovered.

Siting art therapy beyond the art studio to external spaces highlights the potential for social action. Found objects sit provocatively at the intersection of personal, collective, cultural, historical, and political dimensions, and are hence a fitting muse to system-level reflections; e.g., etched into our landscapes are hints of social injustice, racism, and environmental destruction, etc. This lends fulfilment to art therapists who carry ambition beyond the intimacy of the art studio to influence change for larger communities. Art therapists in research, advocacy, and educational roles will find the systems aspect of the book illuminating.

Parts 2 and 3 relate the practice of using found objects in a myriad of settings. Each author deliberates on how therapeutic goals can be adapted considering setting characteristics, prevailing culture, the profile of clients, availability of materials, and ethical issues. I appreciate the priority placed on safeguarding client interest given the emotionally charged nature of using found objects. The chapter by Divya strikes a chord as she relates how doll-making opened a communication channel between her and the child client who was initially nonverbal. Of significance was Divya's intricate knowledge of the symbolic meanings behind materials used in doll-making, such as old fabric and rice filling. The maternal, protective covering of old clothing and nurturance of rice in an Asian context appeared to tend to the child and hug her metaphorically, altering the treatment trajectory. There are many culturally informed gems on how found objects in different parts of the world can be creatively integrated into clinical practices. Of note are two touching accounts of clients grappling with grief and loss, and finding special affinity with embodied objects. The ability of tissue paper, talcum powder, flowers made from discarded materials, and decaying objects found in nature to traverse dual meanings of fragility and permanence for the clients is enthralling to read.

As art therapists, we witness an array of raw emotions and traumatic materials, some of which leave marks that require careful excision. Part 4 plunges into the depths of personal care for therapists. The role of found objects as a source of solace when traditional materials fail is a common thread. I am intrigued by Ronald Lay's art practice where he gravitates towards materials "discarded, in tatters or near ruin". I surmise only these storied objects with their dramatic tales can suspend judgment and contain the intense projection by the therapists. In these circumstances, therapists experience the transformative powers of kinesthetic reconstruction, which transcends art to mend the therapists' wounds.

In education where the *raison d'être* is to reframe mindsets, found objects take their rightful place as asserted by Part 5. Denise Malis presents a convincing proposition that found objects in teaching open inroads into students' psychological self-constructs. Art-making in groups further enables intrapsychic understanding and empathetic processes to develop. Embodied pedagogy is vital to the training of art therapists, and in my opinion, any mental health practitioner, as it prepares for work in the realm of the unconscious and intersubjective. I would highly recommend educators read this segment.

As a pertinent ending to this beguiling book, I am inspired by Daniel Wong's analogy that found objects are akin to the Trojan horse that jolts us to go beyond borders of the norm, further afield from the benign, to see the situation anew. It is a poignant reminder that as art therapists, we often walk into encounters with clients, organisations, and systems that challenge our very identity, culture, and position, demanding mindful contemplation and creative response. Found objects, with their distinct qualities, are natural conduits and vessels for meaning-making and soul-searching when cognition fails us, shifting the habits of our mind, to free us from the conventional. This book is a testament that found objects reconnect us to our most human side, the side where compassion, creativity, and discernment sit, lulling us to the wisdom that life is always in the making and nothing is ever complete.

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