

I see what I am – I am what I see

Photography and the inner self: A discussion and reflection on a heuristic art therapy final project

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The camera is a very flexible way to have a meeting with the same vs different reality. Jerry N. Olsman

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a heuristic art therapy research project which utilised photography to explore whether therapeutic engagement with photography, had the capacity to enhance self awareness. A three level tier which included photography, dialogue with the image and response drawing was created with heuristic and traditional phenomenology as the guiding theories of framework. The results showed a range of new awareness and understanding in relation to different aspects of the self, which in turn led to a positive change to the way of being in the world. The medium was found to act as a transitional object and provide therapeutic holding. It was concluded that photography may be a powerful tool through which to explore oneself in order to promote positive change and healing.

INTRODUCTION

Since the age of fourteen, I have been passionately involved with photography as my preferred form of creativity. Many of my photographs were ‘close-ups’, a term to describe the use of macro lenses which allow a close and clear details of very small subjects. Until my post graduate art therapy studies, I did not consciously understand the messages coded in my images. I had an instinctive desire to go out and photograph small pieces of the cosmos around me, but did not understand the connections between these images and my inner-self.

In my Master of Art Therapy research project at La Trobe University, I chose to explore whether engagement with photography had the capacity to enhance self awareness. Black-and-white film is by its very nature the

medium of personal expression in photography. This is due to the graduation in shades from black through endless subtle distinctions of grey to pure white. The result is the ability to see the subject more graphically, as made up of lines, shapes and tonal differences. I wanted to explore further the ability of black-and-white film to promote personal expression, extended beyond the technical elements of line, shape and tone, to deeper personal meanings.

THERAPEUTIC USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Rubin (2005) advocated the use of multi-expressive modalities when working as an art therapist. She expressed the importance of individual preferences as to what expressive medium was easier to engage with. She found photography to be useful when trying to help clients understand and solve conflicts in relations with others. She further added

that reconstructing events in the past may be achieved using familial photographs, and that taking current images and working with them may generate many possibilities for self-presentation for the client and therapist to explore.

Much of the literature in the use of photography in art therapy dates from the 1970s when a considerable body of research was conducted using photography. Ziller (1990) examined the effect of photography from a psycho-social perspective, viewing the camera as a communicator between inner and outer realities. He named the process auto-photography, and described it as 'a method of non-verbal communication which provided a frozen image with a message, in form of a sign couched in a metaphor' (p.13). Other writers also view photographs as metaphors which reveal the way a photographer view the world (Krauss, 1983; Marsh, 2003; Metz, 1985; Zwick, 1978).

Van-Vliet (1977) wrote about the ability of photography to permit the experience of relativity of things. For example, the size of an object in its environment can visually change depending on the lens, aperture and speed used to photograph it. This experience, he claimed, was able to be transferred into life, 'increasing our ability to accept the honest reality of the world around us' (p.93). With a similar focus on the process of photography and its parallels, internal processes in therapy, Krauss (1983) discussed the benefits of using similar methods used in visual art therapy. He argued that the similar processes used to interpret a client's drawing occurred in photography. Thus, the photograph's literal and symbolic statements may be seen as concepts that when explored, may lead to self-discovery.

Rosy (2001) and Weiser (2004) are two examples of current work done with photo therapy. Rosy (2001) in collaboration with Spence (1986) began the process of reconstructing of self through the creation of photographic images that explored the multi facets of one's identity. The pair successfully used the procedure of re-enactment of past photos and implemented role play to express suppressed issues, often relating to the relationships with another family member. Similarly, Weiser (2004) commented on the use of photography as a communicator about clients' various aspects of themselves as opposed to its photographic artistic qualities. She further stated that photography was useful when working with clients who had familial and/or social issues as it provided them with an objective presentation of themselves as part of a family or other social groups.

INFORMAL AESTHETIC, AND EMOTIONAL CULTURAL VALUES IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Aspects of informal aesthetic, and emotional values in photography were found to be an engrossing way of exploring the cultural aspect of the self. The notions of 'studium' and 'punctum', as termed by the photographer and cultural theorist, Barthes (2000), raised a continuing discussion in the photography world. 'Studium' described the informational and aesthetic value that the photograph may hold, and 'punctum' referred to the emotions evoked by the photograph. Barthes (2000) further argued that the 'studium' could be understood in the same way by people from the same cultural code. Clarke (1997) posited that these terms allow us to deconstruct, so to speak, those same terms of reference, and remind us of the role of the photographs

in reflecting the way we view the world in cultural terms.

However, not all agree with Barthes' (2000) division of the photograph's values. Cornin (1998) drew upon the research of Barnes & Sternberg (1989), which showed that people's ability to decode non-verbal cues in photographs, were not universal across the same culture. This point became evident in my own findings, although I did find the strong presence of evoked emotions as a result of engagement with the images. Cornin (1998) criticised Barthe's notion of the 'punctum' as being too narrow in that it viewed a person as a unit in a vacuum rather than a unit among others, all connected within the environment in which they existed.

Rather than taking one of the two view points, Marsh (2003), made an important point stating that the qualities or values carried by photographs are not the important thing, but rather the fact that the camera possesses an evidential force, in that it captures moments in time. In reflection on my inquiry, I identified with the ability of each image to represent a particular point in time, evidence of my presence there. In discussing meaning and interpretation in photography, Sekula (1975) posited that photographic communication exists in two ways; 'symbolic folk myth' and 'realist folk myth'. The symbolic folk myth emphasises meaning which is not necessarily seen in the content of the photograph, whilst the realist folk myth emphasises the viewing of a photograph as a copy of reality.

METHOD

A research method utilising heuristic and phenomenology approaches as the theoretical framework, was designed to encourage self

inquiry and the ability to look into the core of things to explore meanings. Heuristic based research is unique in that the researcher is also the sole participant. It engages an internal frame of reference (Moustakas & Douglas, 1995) requiring complete immersion in the research purpose. Through the procedures of incubation, indwelling, intuition, communication with, and re-visiting of the artwork, the participant increases her ability to gain deep insights in relations to the themes explored.

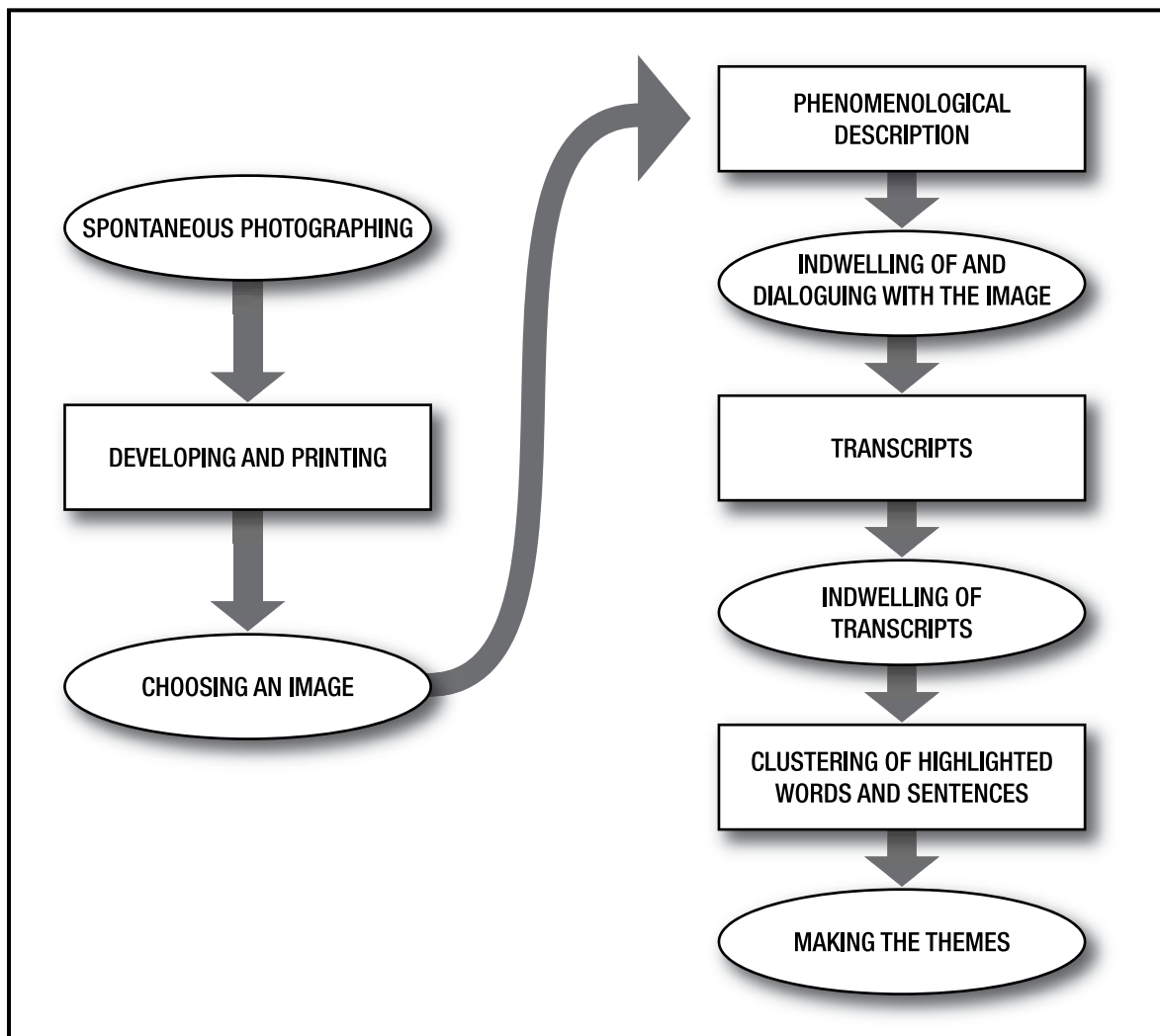
It was also felt that the use of classical phenomenology theory was very appropriate for the research as phenomenology refers to the discipline of gaining understanding through the act of relating what is perceived, sensed, and known in one's immediate awareness and experience (Heidegger, 1977; Husserl, 1977, Moustakas, 1994). Thus, by combining aspects of phenomenology and heuristic approaches, I was able to relate to my photographs as lived experiences which were then indwelt to reveal new layers of understanding. Phenomenology requires the viewing of a phenomenon in an open manner without bias, describing it rather than interpreting it (Spinelli, 1989). This involved undertaking a process of intense focusing, almost meditation, in order to suspend beliefs and biases that may act as pre-understanding and may therefore, affect the results.

The research procedure involved taking a series of spontaneous black and white photographs on a weekly basis, for a period of six weeks. Spontaneous photography was a means to achieve true and unbiased presentations of the environments I chose to photograph. I therefore spent some time quietly to allow for possible locations to surface into my consciousness. At other times I went out

driving or walking until a particular place or event would catch my attention. On reflection, I have come to realise that places with historical buildings, nature and cultural events were unconsciously chosen to provide safe places from which to begin exploration of the self.

A three tier method which included photography, dialogue with the image and response drawing was designed to allow three levels of communication with the images. The following diagram details the procedures

undertaken to maximise communication with each image given the time limits and other constraints. On reflection, it was found that the method was unconsciously designed to suit the layered meanings, which characterised the images indwelt in this inquiry. Thus, as a participant, I engaged with the photographic image several times and in different ways each time. Each way provided important data which was then indwelt again and organised into themes.



RESULTS

The results are presented here as they were found week by week, theme by theme. The overall theme of light and dark reflected the ever changing process of personal identity development and growth. A comprehensive understanding of the findings may be gained by reading the full dissertation, including the transcripts of the indwelling processes that show the emerging understandings.

WEEK ONE – Figure 1

This image depicts an old door of one of the buildings at Montsalvat, the artist colony at Eltham, Melbourne. Riley (1994) stated that viewing self-created images may elicit metaphors that guide the artist to see different aspects of a person or situation. Indeed, the indwelling of week one brought the theme of the door that symbolised the start of this journey. I saw the door as an invitation to go into deeper levels of my inner-self and seek new understandings. On reflection, I realised that the door was metaphoric in that it represented a way which required active participation from me, thus, I needed to choose to open the door to begin the inquiry process.

I found that the four locks on the door seemed to reflect past attempts to engage in a similar process of self-understanding. At the end of the indwelling process, the locks were found to represent a highly guarded part of the self, but one which also communicated with the image.

Thus, the ability to understand the messages within the image acted as an encouragement to engage in this challenging heuristic process. The phenomenological description of the image drove an awareness in relation to the locks which were not apparent when the photograph was taken. This finding supported

Wolf's (1976) view that engagement with photography allows the rise of material from the unconscious to conscious level.

WEEK TWO – Figure 2

This photograph shows three indigenous dancers performing a cultural welcoming dance at an indigenous community event. Week two brought two themes; 'Duality' and 'The loss of the circle'. The theme of duality was represented by the connections I discovered between two of the dancers. This observation led to the realisation of duality which existed in my life, as an immigrant to Australia with two places to call home.

The interesting association with this particular indwelling, produced a representation of physical and emotional pain. The dark area underneath the left shoulder blade of the dancer on the left, represented the physical pain in my left shoulder, as a result of an accident I had a few years earlier. I viewed the circle created by the dancers as a representation of individuals united by culture and tradition. The loss of the circle was identified as the second theme because I felt I lost my place in the cultural and religious circle I was born to. This feeling linked to the emotional pain of missing my homeland and the beginning of a grieving process associated with what I have left behind.

In this indwelling, it became apparent that the photographs of objects and people in the environment, and the associations made between them and the self through image dialogue, led to emergent self-awareness. The socio-psychological view of photography as a means for enhanced self-understanding through selective attention to things in one's environment (Ziller, 1990) resonated with

the experience of my engagement with this image. Associations were drawn to the dancers, between the Indigenous Australian's representation of a particular aspect of culture, and my own culture. These associations produced a new awareness about how I viewed my self and culture.

WEEK THREE – Figure 3

I was drawn to an old style museum shop in Montsalvat, depicting the art of dress making in the early days of settlement. Nostalgic feelings overcame me and I felt the desire to capture the theatrical scene that the shop front presented. In this sense the 'punctum'; emotions evoked by the image, as termed by Barthes (2000) were strongly evident in my affective response to the dress maker's shop. On reflection I found that there had been a process of interpretation with the image, which began with the realist folk myth (Sekula, 1975) style of communication through the use of phenomenological description. The process of gaining meaning then deepened and the dresses became symbolic representations of femininity, utilising the symbolic folk myth approach to the image content.

The theme of femininity emerged from the photographic image. Levine (1994) stressed the importance of dialoguing with the image and viewing the image as something that has independent existence, and as a result of such a position, one may experience new levels of meaning and understanding. Through the week three indwelling process, the two dresses in the image came to represent two different aspects of my femininity; the princess role and the servant role. This was followed by a recognition of a link between culture, marriage and femininity.

The indwelling presented the difficult process of coming to terms with the fact that I had not had a classic wedding experience. I became aware of the symbolic quality of the white dress as the institution of marriage. The indwelling process led me to acknowledge that my views on the institution of marriage had changed over the years, and I now saw a classical wedding as an important and wonderful experience that I had missed out on. In addition, I had become aware of the symbolic quality of the grey dress as my need to care for and serve others around me, and how this need often impacted on my self-care. At the end of the indwelling process a new awareness of myself as a woman and the need for self-care emerged.

WEEK FOUR – Figure 4

This image shows trees in the foreground and an old Australian stone house in the background. The light created a circular shape on the ground between the trees. Engagement with this image led to the theme of 'Interwoven Whole'.

In the process of indwelling, several layers of new associations, levels of meaning and understanding emerged. At first I concentrated on the natural environment represented in the image, discovering that the trees resembled sentinels that created a wall to hide the pain associated with leaving my homeland. At this stage I had ignored the stone house at the background, thinking it represented an Australian type of house with which I as yet did not identify. However, at the end of this indwelling, I became aware that the location of the stone house, was indeed an important symbol in that it assured me that the home I created for myself in Australia for the past twelve years, was strong and safe.



Figure 1: 'The Door', 2006, Montsalvat at Eltham, Melbourne. Black & White 400ISO, 8x12".



Figure 2: 'The Dance', 2006. at the front of Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne. Black & White 3200ISO, 8x10".



Figure 3: 'At The Old Dress Maker's Shop', 2006. Montsalvat at Eltham, Melbourne. Black & White 400ISO, 8x12".



Figure 4: 'Interwoven Whole' 2006. Montsalvat at Eltham Melbourne. Black &White 400ISO, 8x12".



Figure 5: 'The Trap' 2006, CERES Environmental Park. Northcote, Melbourne. Black & White 3200ISO, 8x12".



Figure 6: 'Balance' 2006, CERES Environmental Park. Northcote, Melbourne. Black &White 3200ISO, 8x12".

The overall experience of the indwelling with this image, was found to be similar to the notion of being 'at oneness' with the environment. Zwick (1978), used this term to describe the process where by one feels subjective self-awareness with the environment. The trees were found to be representative of myself, guarding my inner self from getting hurt. This process again highlighted feelings of pain associated with leaving my homeland. The notion of balance between different elements continued to emerge here as I expressed both feelings of missing my former homeland and feeling comfortable in my Australian home.

WEEK FIVE – Figure 5

In week five two themes emerged; the 'trap' and the 'good enough golden girl'. This photograph shows a close-up of a gnarled tree trunk, with small leafy green plant at the bottom of it.

On reflection, I observed that I had moved from using many trees to represent my inner-self (image 4), to a close-up of a part of one tree. The gnarled tree trunk evoked feeling of deep loss and pain. However, the green leafy flower seemed to represent a positive symbol, a sign of growth and change. I used the gnarled tree trunk to represent pain and loss, and thus created a reflective distance from these deep feelings.

This reflective distance allowed me to represent my fear of becoming ill as my mother did, and was represented by the mouldy web among the tree trunk. The distance from the image also enabled me to represent the deep sense of life I felt through the green leafy plant. Ganim's (2004) and Horovitz's (2001) discussion about the healing power of photography in working with loss, were found to be significant with

week five. The ability of the photographs to depict various representations of loss, enabled me to not only creatively express these feelings of loss, but also generate new self awareness.

The significant 'good enough golden girl' theme emerged from the green leafy plant and represented the child within me. Initial indwelling with the image evoked grief associated with the loss of my mother and the belief I carried as a child, thinking that I wasn't a good girl and that was why my mother had become ill and had been taken away from me. Winnicott's (1978) notion of the 'good enough mother' was borrowed to represent that I was now able to accept myself as a 'good enough daughter' and let go of the guilt associated with the painful belief I carried as a child, thinking that if I would be a 'good girl', then my mother would survive her illness.

The process of communicating with this image was a particularly difficult one, however, I believe that time, maturity and previous personal therapy, as well as engagement with the previous four images, had made me open to exploring and being attuned with my grief. It seems to me that this reflection may be seen as evidence of the powerful process of art therapy. Similarly to Ganim (2004), I found that the image had the power to express and work with feelings in a non-judgemental way, and as a result, I also found that working with this image helped release emotional pain and give it a face and a voice.

WEEK SIX – Figure 6

The theme of week six was described as 'Balanced incomplete whole' since these words captured the feelings that arose in me. The photograph shows a view of reeds in the foreground with a pole crossing

them horizontally and blurred trees at the background. The reeds represented the present, their clarity symbolised myself, focusing and exploring aspects of my core self. The blurred trees in the background seemed to symbolise past experiences that have shaped me. I viewed the trees as vague memories that were not seen clearly yet were clear enough to be aware of their existence. The combination of the reeds and the trees created a sense of balance within the image and in myself. The ability to see different time frames in this one image, was similar to Lomax's (1994) concept that a single photographic image held many versions of time and that not all images may easily be put together to represent one version of life.

Further dialogue with the image evoked a sense of incompleteness since the pole which crossed the reeds horizontally, did not reach all the way across, and the tops of two trees at the background were cut off. This elicited an understanding that while I cannot see all there is in the past, that possibly the need not to know may at times be a healthy part of a balanced sense of the inner-self. At this stage, I felt I was ready to conclude the research knowing that the process will continue whenever I engage with the camera.

OVERALL THEME – LIGHT AND DARK

When the themes relevant to each image were identified, it was found that words associated with light and dark were repeated in the word clusters of each week. Whilst on one hand, it is logical to assume that light and dark are concepts which may be easily found when working with photography, a second layer of meaning existed. I was able to understand that I had initially chosen black and white photography because it carried the additional

meaning of inner balance. This understanding had deep implications on the research as it revealed the importance of balance in my life in order to achieve a sense of wholeness and well-being.

I was able to associate dark areas in my photographs with expression of pain, loss, fear and confusion. Light and dark represented tension versus balance and created a special balanced space for dialoguing with the image to occur and consequentially, meaning to emerge. For example, the dark cracks in the door in Figure 1, were a symbol of both fear and attraction to the unknown. In Figure 4, light and dark were needed to create the natural area on the ground, among the trees.

Week six was when the concepts of light and dark played a role which aided my self-understanding of how I am in the world. Thus, the overall theme of light and dark acted as a link, bringing individual meaning together where overall understanding, with its ongoing nature, emerged throughout the artwork.

CREATIVE SYNTHESIS PART A

The understanding that evolved in relation to the need for balance in my life, through the presence of light and dark in the images, led to the creation of a creative synthesis. 'Creative synthesis' was the term used by Moustakas (1990), to describe the stage where the research participant reaches a significant understanding that answers the research question. The understanding is so significant that the research participant is able to create a representation of the understanding, often in a form of a poem or an artwork. The following image (Figure 8), 'Whole', depicted a bird's view of a tree stump, and was chosen as the first part of my creative synthesis.

As I took the photograph, I felt that it represented the gestalt feeling of wholeness that emerged during my inquiry. The imperfections, such as the black holes, and the white spots on the surface of the stump, were all vital parts of the image as a representation of myself, of loss, failure, pain, and other feelings and events brought up by the inquiry. The circular line that emerged from the center, and its ending half way through the surface of the trunk, symbolised my core self and the constant growing element in my journey through self-discovery. Rhyne 's (1973) description of the role of the images in her experience, captured my attention since it was similar to my personal process experienced in this heuristic inquiry. 'They (images) show how I, as a mature person, can bring all these realisations together into the pattern of my own gestalt, whose every part is related to the



Figure 8: 'Whole'. 2006, Countryside Victoria. Black & White 3200ISO 10x12".

total configuration that is me – past, present, future – and that I and my environment are ever-changing and ever-interacting' (p.5).

CREATIVE SYNTHESIS PART B

Images 7 and 7.1 (Figures 7 and 7.1) were taken using a high speed film, that gives the photographs a grainy effect as if these were very old photographs. Image 7 shows parts of a baby held against his mother's body with his fingers touching her breast. Image 7.1 shows part of



Figure 7: 'Holding'. Black & White 3200ISO 10x12".



Figure 7.1: 'Holding'. Black & White 3200ISO 10x12".

the baby's face and hand as he is held over his mother's shoulder, watching the camera. These two images became the symbolic depiction of the holding I received from engagement with the heuristic inquiry and the photographs as transitional objects. The area of contact between the mother and the infant in both images captured the essence of the phenomenon I explored and experienced.

The images in the inquiry held me in a sense that they provided a safe place for the expression of inner self. Image 7.1 depicted the overall sense of holding experienced after completion of this project, thus, I was able to step away from the inquiry process and see my self as the infant being held by the images. The area of touch between mother and infant in Image 7, represented the power of creative artwork to provide a transitional space where images could be explored safely. Thus, the images in the inquiry acted as transitional objects in the sense that whilst I took the photographs, they were also separated subjects from myself, with whom communication about self was carried, and an enhanced sense of identity emerged.

Weiser (2004) also viewed the photograph as a transitional object and believed that one's mind cannot separate the viewing of the visual content of a photograph and the visual facts themselves. As a result, the photograph represented a quality of proof that was both certain and untrue at the same time. The above authors agreed that photography may provide a controlled regression to a child-like stage when instinctual needs find expression in a form that helps to achieve object constancy. Colson (1979) stated, "object constancy and a sense of mastery comes from efforts to make the subject disappear and reappear and to recover the object" (p.275).

Colson (1979) believed that a sense of control over time was one of the earliest functions of the ego. Thus, he believed that the photographer's need to stop and capture time was a continuation of early omnipotent feelings of the infant. The images produced by the camera acted as transitional objects, a bridge between the inner representational world and external realities. This was also my experience while indwelling in the images over the course of the inquiry, and this understanding led to the photographs of the infant held by his mother. Image 7 depicted the point of touch, thus representing the inquiry process. Image 7.1 depicted the whole face of the baby to represent the separation and individuation processes that occurred during the inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the research provided me with an enhanced awareness and understanding about different aspects of myself. Themes such as loss, grief, feminine sense of self, growth and cultural belonging emerged and were explored in the images. As these themes were indwelt through the images, a realisation of the importance of balance in my life surfaced.

This may be linked to Tikkun ha'olam; an underlining concept in the Jewish tradition, that translates to the 'mending of the world' and refers to the belief of a repairing each individual is sent to complete during her life time. For Levine (1994), who referred to this term in relation to her work, creativity was the way through which the world was 'repaired'. Similarly, I found that art has played an important role in the 'mending' of my world by acting as a container for loss and pain. Photography as a mode of creativity was found to be the moving force behind my

enhanced understanding of self, and as a result, I felt as though I 'mended' aspects of my sense of myself. I believe that an individual sense of wholeness has a broader connection and deeper implications to a collective sense of wholeness.

The research presents a body of work which demonstrated the therapeutic outcomes of using photography in dealing with universal issues such as loss, grief and mother/child relations. The findings may encourage other art therapists to utilise the medium of photography to explore the endless possibilities for self-exploration. While the process of developing and printing may be expensive, the availability of digital cameras and computers offer an alternative means which hold further variations to the therapeutic process. Possible benefits of this research include the ability to establish, as a result of improving self-understanding, dialogue across cultural differences when working therapeutically with people from different cultures.

No research is without limitations, and this heuristic inquiry posed its own limitations. It may be argued that given a longer time frame, other conclusions may have appeared. It may be further argued that the validation of the benefit of therapeutic photography found here, may appear less sufficient than research of a large group of people. The validity of the findings cannot be assumed for diverse populations for example, the mentally ill. Finally, this inquiry was designed from a western cultural perspective and as such the validity assigned to the findings was rooted in the same cultural perspective. The benefits of therapeutic photography or even the use of such a specific way of working therapeutically with people from other cultural backgrounds cannot be presumed.

In conclusion, the engagement in this heuristic research proved beneficial in promoting greater self-awareness. I engaged in this inquiry because I wanted to learn more about my self and the meanings of my artistic choices. I have moved from viewing my photographs as depictions of the world around me to representations of myself in my environment.

The learning of the need of an ongoing balance in my life had come from a genuine experience of this balance through engagement with the inquiry process. Finally, I have come out of this research grateful to, energised and inspired by the medium of photography and its therapeutic use in art therapy.

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