

Uninvited guests, soul-filled skies and universes beneath my toes: Exploring *poiesis* at the confluence of the arts and self for arts therapy research

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Abstract

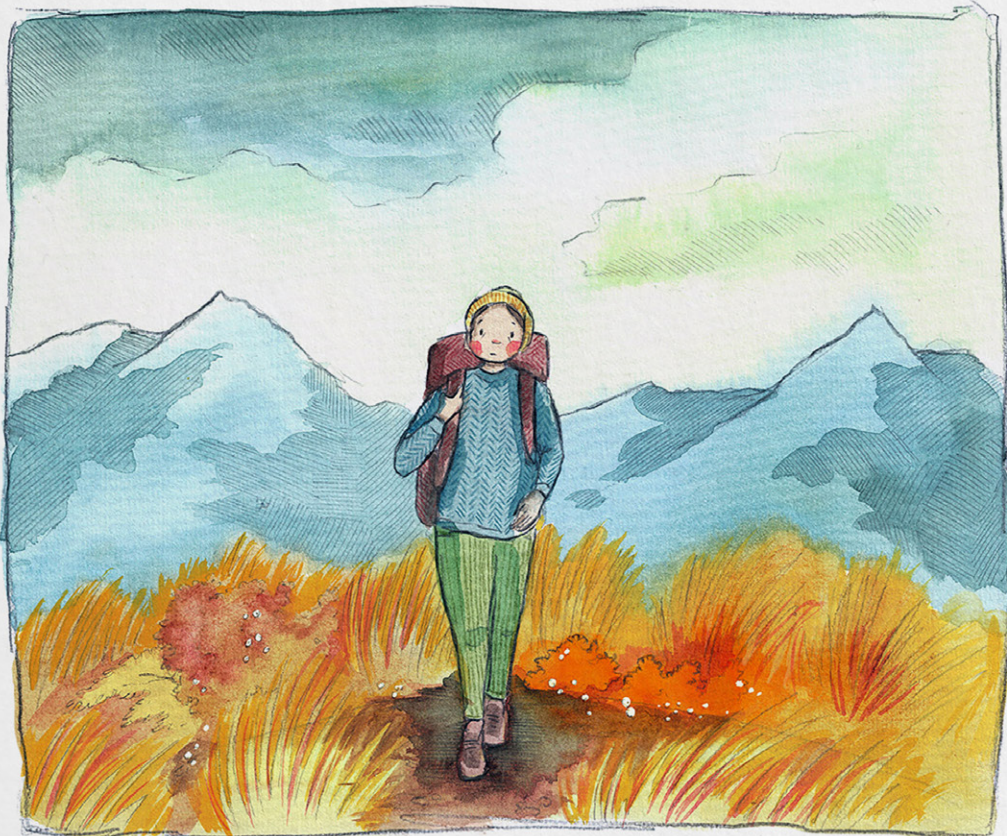
While camping upon a mountain top and struggling with depression, I experienced a series of unexpected arrivals: an uninvited guest, a soul-filled sky, and universes beneath my toes. These experiences reminded me of the power of the unexpected arrivals within creative arts therapy, and provoked the question: How much do I allow for the unexpected in arts therapy research? In what ways can I bring more of the unique knowings and processes of the arts in creative arts therapy into my research? Personal stories, artworks and illustrated short films tease and trouble some of the threads residing at the confluence of the arts and self, offering questions and considerations for the potential implications of these within arts therapy research.

Keywords

Self, *poiesis*, depression, arts-based research, autoethnography, self-reflexivity, abr+a, arts therapy research.

A Journey to the Mountains
Journal entries & sketches

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After a few prolonged hours of agony, burdened by large packs, pumping hearts, and the unanticipated steepness of our climb, my partner and I finally reached the summit of the mountain. Upon entrance to the tussock-laden opening, I felt eclipsed by a sudden silence; a barren, heaving stillness. I came here wanting relief from the sinking nothingness I felt within: depression.

Figure 1. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 1*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.



I sank amongst the long grasses. My partner pranced off to collect firewood. A heavy hour passed as I listened to the silence. I watched the silence. Waiting, wanting, the mountains to somehow relieve the darkness within me. As soon as the sun dipped below the mountain edges, coolness swept the field and dove down into my coat. The night was near. Anxious burrowings flurried in my stomach as the immensity of space surrounding gradually dipped further into darkness. I wanted relief from my insides. I wanted relief from my harrowing thoughts. I wanted to be with my partner, and to be with the mountains, and I felt like I couldn't. I felt an impenetrable skin between me and the world. I regretted coming here. Why did I think this would help my depression? I wanted to disappear, from everything.

Figure 2. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 2*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.

My partner, perched by his joyful fire, sighed concernedly as I hurried past him, making my way to the illusive safety of our tent. Once the cacophonous sounds of squeaky-sleeping-bag-ness subsided, at last, I exhaled. I shut my eyes tight: hoping to escape from the mountains, to escape from the world, to escape from the concerned look in his eyes, and most of all, to escape from the nothingness I felt within.



My heartbeat woke me, hammering. Something large was scratching at our tent, trying to get in. Adrenalin leading, we flung ourselves feverously up and out of a multitude of zipping-zippers and into the dark. I couldn't see anything. Whatever it was, was gone. Silence crept in. It was very dark. But before my fear of the surroundings took hold, my partner whispered with urgency, "Turn off your head-torch". I did so, dreading the worst. Within moments my eyes registered what he was seeing: what lay beyond the darkness.

Figure 3. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 3*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.

We were enveloped by the endless expanse of a self-effulgent universe: piercing, glowing starlight. We stood under a billion sparklings, silenced. My soul was roaring.



Figure 4. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 4*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.

I woke the next morning into quiet, sideways, golden light, slicing through the surrounding forests and mountain peaks. Barefoot, tangly haired, and slightly apprehensive, I slowly sauntered across the tussocks, moving in and out of the frosty shaded corners and warming light-touched patches. The moss carpet padding gave generously beneath my steps. Such softness and embracing of my toes and heels: I felt welcomed. I looked down to this hospitable carpet, and as I came closer to it squeals burst uncontrollably from my lips: Teeny tiny lemon, star-shaped flowers! Minuscule ruby berries! Orange dotted, finger-like things poking up through! Minty miniature boat-shaped leaves, each with a little web woven inside!



Figure 5. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 5*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.

As I began to look around, the variety increased, the detail expanded. I ran, from one magical tiny world to the next, delighting in the endless uniqueness every inch contained. I couldn't understand how I hadn't seen these miniature universes beneath my toes until now. My movements whipped the long grasses, creating whistling sounds as I moved in-and-out between. My feet were greeted by grizzly rocks, imbued with shades of blue and Naples yellow, and decorated with fuzzy red details.



The trees overhanging had the look of Chinese Crested pups, with dripping peppermint moss. Small streams tickled through stones and microscopic forests, gathering gradual momentum as they made their way down the mountainside. I touched the soft waters with my fingers: cold and sparkling. I could not un-see what I now saw: a world so full of detail, even in the shadow of my inner mountains. There was no nothingness here.

Figure 6. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 6*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.



As we packed up our gear and began to make our way back down the mountain later that day, I popped my head into the old shepherd's tin hut, perching quietly and forgotten amongst those dripping peppermint-moss trees. On the wall was a message scratched in charcoal:

*'And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet
and the winds long to play with your hair.'*

(Gibran, 2019)

Figure 7. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 7*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration and text, 210 × 297mm.



Figure 8. Hilary Tapper, *Diary entry 8*, 2021, digital collage of watercolour illustration, 210 × 297mm.

Introduction

At the end of 2020, my partner and I embarked on a tramping trip into the mountains. I had just completed my Master of Arts in Creative Arts Therapy (Clinical) at Whitecliffe in Aotearoa New Zealand, and I felt depressed. This particular experience of depression was long and hard. I couldn't shake it, couldn't lighten it, it just stayed, thick and dark. Out of desperation, I convinced myself and my partner that going to the mountains would be a worthwhile solution. However, while at the top of that mountain I remained thick in my inner whirlpool. No matter how hard I tried to unravel myself from the harrowing thoughts and feelings within, I could not break free from them. It was when an uninvited guest and unanticipated experiences on top of that mountain came scratching for attention, that something new and unexpected occurred.

My experiences in the mountains remind me of the significance of the uninvited and the unanticipated in creative arts therapy. Such experiences of the arts are part of the very heartbeat of creative arts therapy, and have me wonder: how much do I allow for this in my arts therapy research? In what ways can I bring more of the unique knowings and processes of the arts in creative arts therapy into my research? Just as that uninvited guest came scratching at my tent, I am curious about the unexpected arrivals at the confluence of the arts and self, which is so at home in arts therapy processes, yet rather radical and emergent in research processes. With particular attention to the practice of *poiesis* for creative arts therapy research, within this essay I am hopeful to bring what occurred upon my mountain journey together with my ongoing explorations of the agency of the arts and their relationship to self within research.

Below I dip in and out of my moments upon the mountain top to hold and vivify some of my experiences encountering the unknown and the new in my arts therapy research. I explore art-making as *poiesis*, relational re-enworlding through *poiesis*, and the potential implications of this for self-reflexive practice within arts therapy research. Artworks, stories, short films and various questions are interwoven with arts therapy theory and literature, as well as theoretical perspectives of arts-based research and autoethnography. My hope here is

to bring increased curiosity and questions to the confluence of the arts and self, and the potential significance of emergent spaces not only for creative arts therapy research, but also for other disciplines. To follow, I revisit some of my recent experiences and explorations in creative arts therapy research, namely with arts-based research through autoethnography (*abr+a*). *Abr+a* is an investigational umbrella term identified by Deborah Green (Green et al., 2018), closely resembling the process of creative arts therapy. *Abr+a* brings together arts-based research, autoethnography, and the unique processes and knowings of creative arts therapy/ists: "It is emergent, born from a belief that something unique happens when arts therapists bring their arts-based and psychotherapeutic skills, knowings and sensitivities to arts-based and autoethnographic research" (Green, 2020b, p.2). My research explorations with *abr+a* continue to open my gaze and call my attention to the emergent spaces evoked by creative arts therapy processes, offering new ways of knowing and researching that sometimes trouble or even supersede my predetermined frameworks, through visceral, embodied attention to what is unfolding (Tapper, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

While I continue to research and create with my personal experience of depression (Tapper, 2019, 2020a, 2020b), and depression is referred to throughout here, this essay is not an exploration of depression. I gently hold my experience of depression as a *living experience* of my self, like a different flavour of myself, and I approach it herein with the perspective of how we each may experience the unique flavours of our own self/ves. Furthermore, my experiences of depression throughout my life continue to tease, challenge, and draw curiosity to my conception/s of self. Hence, in my work and within this essay, I continuously vivify and play with conceptions of self and identity. What significance can our conceptions of self have in arts therapy practice and research? What influence can the arts in therapy and in research have for the self?

Methodology

Autoethnography and arts-based research can offer relational and open methodological approaches to the arts and self in research. Within autoethnography, the role and position of 'I' is troubled. Gannon (2021) argues for "a relational autoethnographic

subjectivity... This is not a fixed but rather a moment-to-moment, negotiated, responsive location” (p.41). Gannon’s approach to the self and ‘I’ challenges conventional humanist approaches to methodology and envisions a relational approach to self through autoethnography. Arts-based research “has a rich history of being influenced by positivism” (Lapum, 2018, p.526), however, Lapum suggests arts-based methodologies invite the researcher “into an alternative epistemology, and a methodological design which is “organic and responsive” (pp.529–30). Both research approaches embrace relationality and creativity as key elements, and “privilege the subjectivity of the artist-researcher, the materiality of the researcher’s body, and the intersubjectivities that emerge through the researcher’s artistic encounters with the world” (Östersjö, 2017, as cited in Bartleet, 2021, p.133). Barone and Eisner (2008) claim that arts-based research does not adhere to a specific approach in methodology, and the aesthetic and the arts are primary (Conrad & Beck, 2015). Artistic autoethnography allows for improvisation to emerge, exploring unplanned and unexpected places (Bartleet, 2021). These relational, open, emergent spaces of autoethnography and arts-based research allow potential “extensive engagement of creativity” in research (Cole & Knowles, 2008, as cited in Lapum, 2018, p.530).

I am curious about the creative, emergent spaces that can unfold through the combination of autoethnography, arts-based research, and the ways of knowing within creative arts therapy. “The very foundation of art therapy is art itself”, states Rubin (2006, p.17), however, McNiff (1998) notes a common split between practice and research in arts therapy, and Green (2020a) finds that the variegated practice of arts therapy is “often researched using rigid and reductive processes” (p.4). McNiff (1998) states that “the process of research should correspond as closely as possible to the experience of therapy” (p.170). Inspired by this, Green entangles the poetic-praxis (2018) of autoethnography and arts-based research (ABR) as *abr+a*, giving form to “how we as arts therapists breathe our unique practice of art-as-therapy into the arts within ABR and our unique knowledge of psychotherapy into the psyche-of-self within autoethnography; and how engaging with these research forms may enhance our practice of arts

therapy” (2020a, p.5). The arts in autoethnography, and autoethnography in the arts, can offer unique ways of approaching the arts and the self in research. What opportunities are possible by bringing approaches to arts and self in creative arts therapy into research? Below I explore the practice of *poiesis* within creative arts therapy, and its potential relationship and significance for arts therapy research.

The uninvited guest | Art-making as *poiesis*

My heartbeat woke me, hammering. Something large was scratching at our tent, trying to get in.

When an unexpected visitor upon the mountain came scratching at my tent, I was invited (albeit, frightfully) to surrender control, following it out into the dark and not knowing where it would lead. Levine (2005, 2019) identifies art-making or the creative act within the expressive arts therapies as *poiesis*. The history of *poiesis* dates back to the early Greek works of Plato and Aristotle, and is further explored phenomenologically by Heidegger. Leaning into Heidegger’s approach, Levine presents *poiesis* as our creative capacity to respond “to others and the world” (Levine, 2019, p.49); a letting go of control and striving for a particular outcome, in favour of a willingness to surrender; a letting-be; and openness to what will arrive (Levine, 2019; Green, 2020a). “If we can follow what is emerging, instead of dominating and forcing it to go our way, then something new may emerge” (Levine, 2019, p.89). Something unexpected or new becomes possible through the generative and emergent nature of art-making; formlessness and uncertainty are welcomed (Levine, 2009). McNiff (1998) further invites trusting the process of art-making and letting the arts lead. Both Levine’s and McNiff’s invitations consider the position of self in relationship to the arts: they emphasise surrender, letting go, openness, trust. “Both therapy and art take place in the transitional space of experience in which the separateness of the ego or ‘I’ is temporarily suspended” (Levine, 2019, p.48). This perspective differs from utilitarian approaches to art-making, arts therapy and arts-based research, when the arts are engaged as tools in service to self, subordinating “artistic work to its instrumental capacity” (Rosiek, 2018, p.634). Orientating towards the arts, suspending the ‘I’

offers unique considerations not only for therapy, but also for research. Practising *poiesis* invites “intrinsically unique form to emerge from turmoil” (Green, 2021, p.83).

For my master’s research (Tapper, 2020b), I set out to explore the impact of art-making upon conceptions of self and identity. There were explosions at the confluence of the arts and self, as my reductive, rigid, Cartesian approaches to self and research were vivified by art-making that wanted to expand and billow out. The harder I tried to find self through art-making – as if it were something I was going to eventually ‘land’ on – the further I felt from its shores.



Figure 9. Hilary Tapper, *Nothingness*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 287 × 210mm.

Again and again, I encountered in my art a feeling of the absence of self. The result? Depression, hard and scathing. I resolved to move away from the art as quickly as possible, to move away from the darkness I felt within me, and towards sense-making, conjuring up a theoretical interpretation of my experiences. My supervisor responded warmly, gently inviting me to “return to the art.” I responded, un-warmly,

“no!” Her repeated invitations towards letting the art lead eventually led me to a burst of art-making – videos, movement, body painting, sculpture – where I went further with and into the darkness unfolding through my abr+ a search for self. This rupture marked a seeming departure from my known structures, as I leant further into the art, further into the unknown, and close-in to my felt-experiencing. My desire to discover and find something that fit my predetermined frameworks gave way to new curiosities and attentiveness to what was unfolding, occurring and emerging in my art-making and in my body. My research became a process. Instead of a search for self, the tone shifted to address the question posed by Marsalis (2005): “How do we embrace ourselves?” (as cited in Spry, 2016, p.27).

Rather than a process of discovery, the arts took me on an experiential journey, and my process has thus been one of evocation and emergence. I cannot say anything was ‘found’ in this study; but instead, my arts-based inquiry was profoundly felt; scathingly and frighteningly, expansively and complexly. ... culminat[ing] in an experience beyond my anticipation and pre-conceived notions of self. (Tapper, 2020b, p.9)

Similar experiences continued throughout my dissertation; the arts opened into new and unexpected terrain, with, and in response to, what was occurring in the materials and in my body. One particular moment was simple and by coincidence: I came upon two of my paintings laid out on the table. Each of the two images was about facing the darkness of depression, the darkness of self I felt within. I had abandoned both images earlier

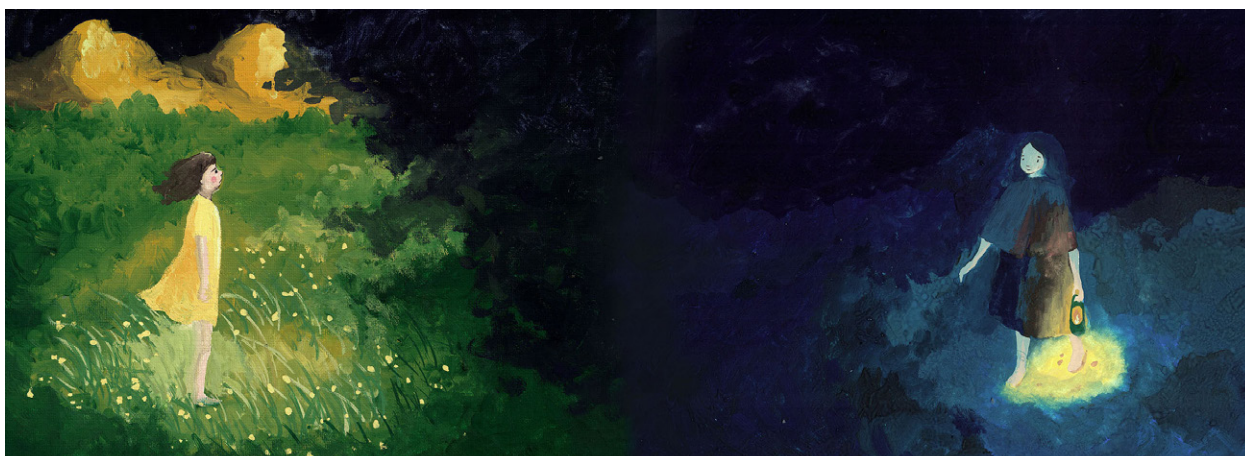


Figure 10. Hilary Tapper, *Facing the darkness*, 2021, gouache on canvas board, 600 × 210mm.

in my research process, as I found them difficult to stay with. Both paintings were unintentionally positioned on the table next to one another. Upon seeing this unexpected combination of images, I was overcome with emotion. What I saw, in perceiving their combined imagery, was something I had not previously conceived. Suddenly I saw that both figures, in facing their darkness, were facing each other. In witnessing these united images, as small and as accidental as the moment was, I saw and experienced myself and identity in a light I had not felt before. In walking towards the darkness within, I wasn't walking towards forever-darkness, but the possibility of walking towards *something new*: a light, a friend, a change.

Engaging with abr+a, with consistent reminders from my supervisor to return to the arts and stay close-in, my Cartesian-self-worlding became momentarily visceral and troubled. There were moments where I began to listen to what was emerging in relationship with the arts; when I moved towards the arts, rather than I controlling/interpreting/moving the arts.

What is the significance of performative research methodologies and methods not bound by or limited to the self? What is the significance of performative research methodologies and methods that lean into the unknown, into creation, into *poiesis*? I thought I understood abr+a at the outset of my dissertation; I thought I understood how to let the arts lead, to trust the process of the arts. My dissertation experience vivified not only my assumptions about research and about self, but furthermore, the power of the arts to potentially disrupt these assumptions. Vagle (2018) describes turning oneself over “to openness, wonder and inquiry” in research, suggesting that as “we try to stop being so certain of what we know and think... we let go” (p.xvi). The practice of *poiesis* can help facilitate a letting go, not just as a cognitive act of will, but with the arts themselves *showing me, moving me, turning me*. I have experienced in abr+a a methodology stronger than my predetermined frameworks, particularly when approaching art-making like I have learnt in creative arts therapy. In continuing to be invited by my supervisor and the arts to trust the process and let the arts lead, my gaze slowly began to turn towards the arts in my dissertation. I experienced my own self differently in this light: not as the controller and determiner of knowledge, but secondary to phenomena and

experience. What becomes possible for the self when engaging with the arts? When that unexpected visitor came scratching at my tent upon the mountain, much like an unanticipated experience in art-making, I was called out of my comfort and known structures, into the unknown, and into the possibility of something new.

Star-soaked skies and souls | Relational re-enworlding

My partner whispered with urgency, “Turn off your head-torch.” I did so, fearing the worst. Within moments my eyes registered what he was seeing: what lay beyond the darkness. We were enveloped by the endless expanse of a self-effulgent universe: piercing, glowing starlight. We stood under a billion sparklings, silenced. My soul was roaring.

I would likely have missed the wonder of the stars that night if it wasn't for that uninvited guest scratching at our tent, and my partner's vision beyond the blinding light of my headlamp. I often try to figure my way through life, my head and thoughts leading, blinding out the world, others, my body. My experiences of *poiesis* in therapy and research continue to remind me of different ways of knowing and the arts as a way of knowing (Allen, 1995). The paradigm of the arts is relational (Heron & Reason, 1997; Wilson, 2008); the arts open the universe to “becoming-other”, into a “more-than-human world” (Grosz, 2008, p.24). The experience of relational otherness within art-making reminds me that I am not a lone, singular being, trying to figure my way out in the world, but inextricably interwoven and entangled. “Giving an account of oneself always and already involves an account of who we are with others” (Spry, 2016, p.39). Based on the work of Merleau-Ponty, Jacoby states that “life rests upon and is bound in a co-habitation... an unending circuit between the human being, the other and the world” (2003, p.90). The arts can make visible and visceral our co-habitation and interconnectivity, especially when one is willing to lean into and follow what is emerging. Green (2021) draws parallels between this experience of art-making in creative arts therapy and Haraway's (2016) *sympoiesis*, describing the process as soul-building, as “I-make-the-art-and-the-art-makes-me” (Green, 2021, p.88). Barad (2007) sees that “individuals emerge through and as part of their

entangled intra-relating”, and that “existence is not an individual affair” (p.ix). What implications might these perspectives on art-making, as relational re-enworlding, possibly have for arts therapy research?

Jacoby (2003) explores the arts, expression and *poiesis* as founded on a principle of paradox. Highlighting Merleau-Ponty’s book chapter, “The intertwining – the chiasm”, she describes how art-making can rupture the familiar, opening to otherness, and that expression unfolds through this experience. “Artistic expression opens to the otherness inherent not only to itself, but also to daily living” (Jacoby, 2017, p.94). Unexpected arrivals and experiences of otherness within art-making can suggest and generate a feeling of relationality and interconnection. I have adapted and extracted some sections of Jacoby’s (2003) text, illustrated, and edited it into a short film, to explore further the ways art-making can be viewed as relationally re-enworlding (see Figure 10 and *The poietic basis of being*, video).

watch here



Figure 11. Hilary Tapper, *Hello*, 2021, ink on paper, 150 × 150mm.

St. Pierre (2011) calls for “freeing oneself from the constraints of existing structures so that one can think the unthought” (p.623) in research, and invites *rethinking* ontology (2013). Practicing *poiesis* in arts-based, autoethnographic, arts therapy informed research can generate an experience of *sympoiesis* (Haraway, 2016): a re-enworlding of my relational existence, with attentiveness to what is unfolding in relationship. Upon the mountain top, I was startled by an unexpected visitor, freed from the constraints of my existing structures, and invited back into relationship with the world. What becomes possible when we lean a little further into the unknown with

the arts? Can the arts offer an experience of not only thinking the unthought, but *feeling* the unfelt, *re-feeling* ontology?

Universes beneath my toes | Analysis and reflexivity

*Teeny tiny lemon, star-shaped flowers!
Minuscule ruby berries! Orange dotted,
finger-like things poking up through!
Minty miniature boat-shaped leaves,
each with a little web woven inside!*

As creative arts therapists and researchers, I believe that we work in the quagmire of more-than-human realms. As long as the arts are in the room with us, with our clients, with our research participants, something unexpected or new may potentially be suggested by the arts. This generative and emergent nature of the arts is active the moment they are included. What does this mean for how I position, orient and reflexively engage my own self in the midst of the arts and art-making? What does this mean for how I approach analysis and meaning-making from my data? I often find myself approaching the arts and self within arts therapy research with perspectives and paradigms rather contradictory; I carry reductive, essentialist and humanist worldings alongside arts practices and process that expand, multiply, and contradict. Philosophies and practices of phenomenology, post-qualitative research, new materialism, post humanism, new empiricism, the ontological turn and the affective turn, including Indigenous philosophies (Rosiek, 2018), offer perspectives of self as embodied, intersubjective and entangled, in contrast to those of quantitative, or conventional humanist qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre, 2021). Amongst all this, I can’t help but wonder about the persistence of reductive, Cartesian, and foundationalist approaches to self in research. Mignolo (2007) warns the risk of remaining “within the confines of the modernist, Eurocentric project even while critiquing it” (p.452) in addressing post-colonial research, and I feel this has relevant concerns also for reflexive practice in arts therapy research. Interrogation of “the theoretical assumptions guiding our practice is vitally necessary, especially so when the taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes social research often undermine the effective use of arts-based inquiry” (Rosiek, 2018, p.633). I am curious about the limitations of our

capacities to interrogate our own assumptions, and what ways the arts may offer new ways of reflexive awareness. Furthermore, I am curious about what art-making, *poiesis*, and the agency of the arts can offer to an arts-based reflexivity and arts-based analysis, by potentially helping facilitate a living and tangible intra-active (Barad, 2007) engagement with matter and the unknown. What additionally can I bring to my research practice that is consistent with an arts-based paradigm? What is arts-based self-reflexive practice? For further exploration of these questions, as well as to bring together some of the curiosities, reflections and thinking woven throughout this article, I created another illustrated short film, *Making sense: Analysis & reflexivity*.

watch here



Figure 12. Hilary Tapper, *Ways of knowing*, 2021, ink on paper, 150 × 150mm.

Conclusion

I ventured to the top of a mountain hoping it would somehow fix my experience of depression. No matter how hard I tried, the feeling of depression stuck, low and heavy. It was the arrival of an unknown, unexpected, uninvited guest scratching at my tent, that woke me into the darkness, into the unknown, into the starlight, into the morning light, to the miniature universes beneath my toes, into my body, into the world. As I continue to journey with my emerging creative arts therapy practice, I continue to experience the significance of the unexpected arrivals through art-making in research. These arrivals shift my knowing, curiosity and attention to the edge, the unknown, the unfolding through the arts, and offer tangible *sympoietic* experiences: of relationality, interconnection, and entanglement. My experience of *poiesis* in therapy and research continues to restore soul to my world, to an experience of the world as alive, the arts as alive. My journey upon the mountain concluded with a brief visit to the old shepherd's hut, ancient and forgotten. That coal-scribbled message on the wall, "And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair" (Gibran, 2019, p.44), reminded me of the world I was intertwined with, related with, inseparable from, and creating with and into.

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