

The significance of engaging with materials and modes: A language of inner workings

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Abstract

The consideration that art therapy is the *process* of making art and not the product of the art, has echoed throughout my engagement in a Masters in Therapeutic Arts Practice. In my third unit of study, I undertook a personal arts-based inquiry to understand the significance of engaging with materials and modes. Through an autoethnographic perspective, I have learned *how* a creative practice can heal and lead to well-being through my own lived experience. Significantly, I have come to know that materials and modes translate the implicit inner world with astounding clarity, expanding the language of what it is to be human. As an emerging art therapist, I endeavour to share this practice as a path towards self-awareness, connection and belonging.

Keywords

Creativity, experiencing, materials, modes, multi-modal, art therapy

Introduction

Throughout my life, I have experienced the therapeutic benefits of creativity: for example, when a line of poetry encapsulates a feeling that I haven't been able to articulate, or when the union between myself, a fellow actor, and the audience in a theatre resonates. Remarkable moments of connection such as these have imbued emotional development and a sense of belonging. Throughout history, humanity has used painting, sculpture, music, dance, dramatic enactment, and other forms of imagination as a path to well-being (Malchiodi, 2020). Aristotle famously considered art as 'imitation', a representation of the unfulfilled ideals of mental, emotional, and spiritual human life (Tay & Pawelski, 2021). As an actor, I have trained to become attuned to the layers of narrative and character in order to translate the multi-faceted inner world into verbal and non-verbal expression. As an emerging art therapist, my curiosity rests in demystifying the benefits that exist within the process of creating from a rich inner world.

Expressive arts therapy is a process of discovering ourselves through any art form that comes from an emotional depth. It is not creating a 'pretty' picture. It is *not* a dance ready for the stage. It is *not* a poem written and rewritten to perfection. (Rogers, 2011, pp.1–2)

The consideration that art therapy is the *process* of making art and not the product of the art has echoed throughout my engagement in a Masters in Therapeutic Arts Practice. In my third unit of study, I undertook a personal arts-based inquiry to understand the significance of engaging with materials, including the use of the body as a resource, which I consider a mode. This research was based on knowledge as *poiesis*, knowing by creating, in contrast to *theoria*, knowing by reason (Östling et al., 2018). Through an autoethnographic approach, I investigated *how* embodied creativity can be healing. I experienced the use of materials and modes as a pathway towards making sense of my inner life and revealing insight into my

emotional patterns and behaviours. I came to realise that the way in which I engaged with the materials is indicative of my relationship with myself, and, in turn, the way that I relate to others and understand my place in the world. Most significantly, I have come to know that making art is healing because the materials and modes give language to the inner workings of implicit intelligence that can't readily be explained.

Arts-based inquiry

Access point

The access point for my inquiry was to represent myself as a maker, using materials and modes to reveal who I knew myself to be. The self-as-maker representations were never finite; throughout the unit they were revisited and reimagined.

Initially, my artistic exploration felt like vague attempts to define something that was out of reach. Attempting to bracket out literal and cognitive representation, I found it challenging to 'make just to make' for two reasons. Firstly, outside of my studies I had predominantly made art in collaboration or for a working outcome, producing something complete or aesthetically pleasing. Secondly, I was having an identity crisis that was exacerbated by the larger pressures and fears surrounding the pandemic. This unit of study coincided with Melbourne's sixth lockdown, and yet again I was out of work. The loss of career and community left me disconnected, and the prolonged isolation and financial instability was consuming. To relieve the pressure of attempting to 'represent myself' when I felt like a shell of myself, I took basic autoethnographic steps to inquire into myself as a maker and use my lived experience as the object of research (Gray, 2011). I considered *how* I engaged multi-modally and *why* I made the choices that I made; I reflected upon which materials or modes I was drawn to, and I sensed what informed these preferences. I journaled, "I am fascinated by layers upon layers, the feeling of imprinting, material on skin, the experience of dimension, water. I am guided by the sensation, drawn to poetry, vibrations of the voice, the meditative ritual. I like to work on the ground, take up space, to be in movement. I am realising that my spirituality is linked to my creativity". See Figure 1 for a selection of self-as-maker representations, a cluster of drawings and markings with pen and pencil on paper, as well as a visual representation of gesture and movement.



Figure 1. Iliana Contos, Self-as-maker cluster – *Seeing into Seeing*, 2021, multi-modal, 500 × 360mm.

Processes

My artistic inquiry into self-as-maker relied on a phenomenological perspective: the study of things as they appear in consciousness (Stern, 2004). To strengthen this style of research, I was partnered with a companion to describe and witness my engagement within the processes, and I, in turn, supported their own arts-based inquiry. Finlay (2011) asserts that a phenomenological attitude promotes new perspective in research. Together, my companion and I navigated the interchanging use of multi-modal procedures, such as *amplification* and *reduction*, to uncover a more precise illustration of our self-as-maker explorations. Processes of amplification facilitate an opening up to wider explorations; they enlarge the scope of an artistic inquiry by producing more data. Processes of reduction are a distillation of an inquiry into key topics; they manage the scope and make sense of the data (Miecat, 2016). The rigorous and unfolding course of expanding and consolidating artistic representations induced new awareness that furthered my experience of materials and modes as a language of inner workings.

Prelude to the turning point

Towards the end of the unit, I experienced a turning point. I came to know the specificity of my emotions, and felt senses and behaviours on an interconnected, mind–body level. The experience was like stepping into a meditative portal of *kairos*: time slowed down and induced a monumental shift (Stern, 2004).

An artistic reduction of Figure 1, the self-as-maker cluster – *Seeing into Seeing*, was the nucleus of the shift. I wanted to evoke a spiral through the gesture of a fist: it felt important to see the texture of my hand, and to make it through an action of embossing. The tangible contact of skin and paint on paper was resonant. I yearned to feel connected. Lett (2011) asserts that big feelings always direct us to meanings. There was an emotive reason I was drawn to this representation, but I couldn't put it into words. See Figure 2 for a multi-modal reduction of my self-as-maker cluster.



Figure 2. Iliana Contos, *Cluster Title*, 2021, acrylic on paper with fist and index finger, 65 × 80mm.

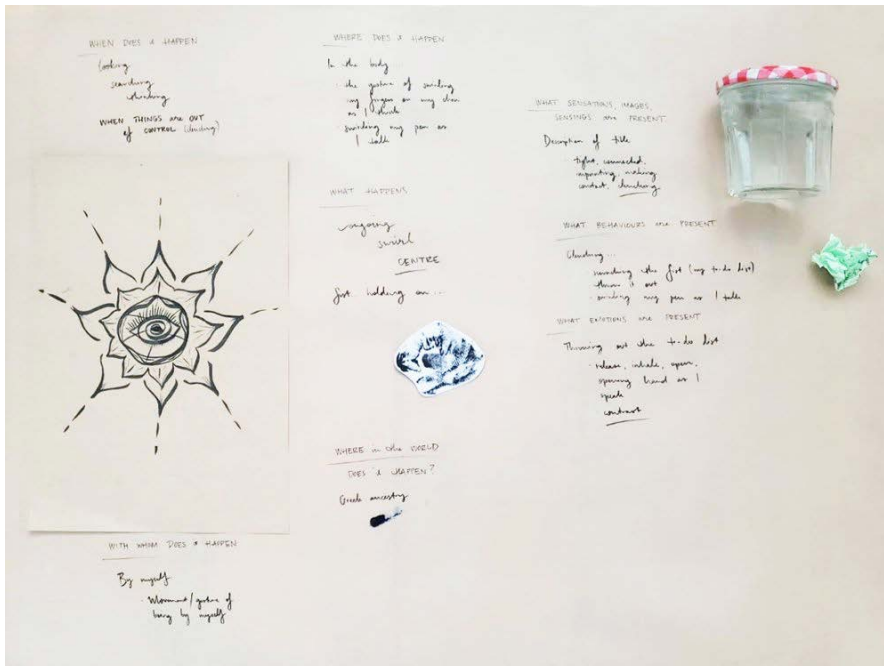


Figure 3. Iliana Contos, *Map of Cluster Title*, 2021, multi-modal, 750 × 1000mm.

The resonance from this reduction initiated the procedure of *mapping*: a process of amplification. Mapping develops a general inquiry towards more specific considerations of what may be implicitly known (Miecat, 2016). It can be used as a mindful observation of movements, sensations, impulses, gestures, emotions, and locations, not as a way of solving, but as a way of expansion (Ogden, 2009). It asks the following questions:

What happens?

When does it happen?

With whom does it happen?

Where in the world does it happen?

What sensations/images/sensings are present?

What emotions are present?

What needs are present?

What behaviour manifests?

What values/value conflicts are present?

I improvised and addressed these prompts in a non-linear sequence; every so often my companion would feed me the questions as I explored. I made artistic representations to respond rather than solely relying on cognitive discernment. See Figure 3 for a map of the cluster title.

The turning point

For assessment, I was asked to consolidate the elements of the map into a sentence. This procedure of reduction is called a *thematic statement* (Miecat, 2016). Its purpose is to clearly describe a pattern of being in one sentence:

When (something happens), I feel (emotion or felt sense), then I (behaviour) and as a result I (behaviour or emotion).

I thought, “Where is the through-line in all of this? How does this translate into a neat statement?” I glanced over at a stone on my desk; I took it and squeezed it in my hand to evoke the map’s multi-modal title. See Figure 4 for a gestural representation of the cluster title.

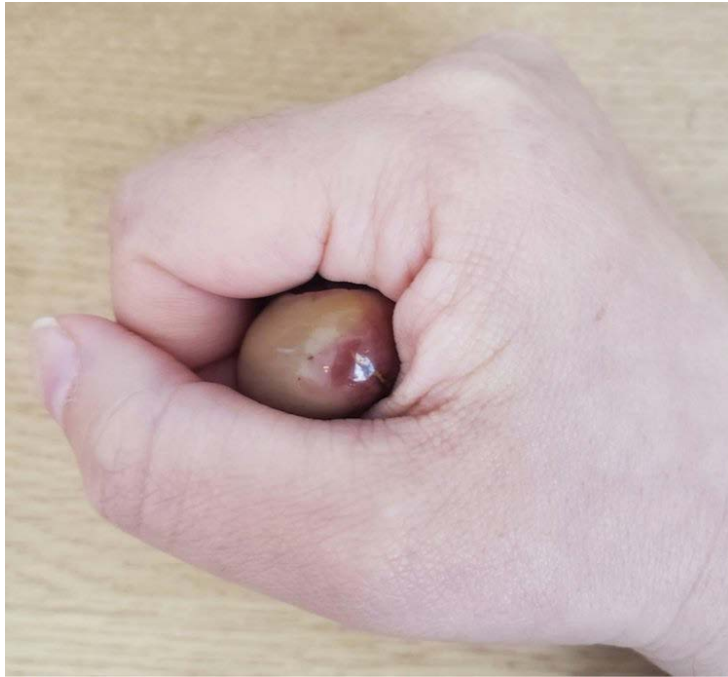


Figure 4. Iliana Contos, *Artistic Response*, 2021, gesture with stone in hand, 65 × 80mm.

I informed my companion that I intended to bracket in movement and gesture. As an actor, I have always found the kinaesthetic experience to be revealing. I tuned into the felt sense of rubbing the stone with my thumb, which I had begun doing instinctively; the cool, firm surface was beginning to warm, and the heat and weight felt soothing. Tufnell and Crickmay (2004) describe this as improvising: “we feel our way into conversation with our materials and listen out for an emergent form to appear... the impulse towards what we choose may be very slight, perhaps something our body senses and does before we realise it” (p.69). Noticing the way that I engaged with the stone began the flow of conversation between myself and the materials. See Figure 5 for an amplification of Figure 4.

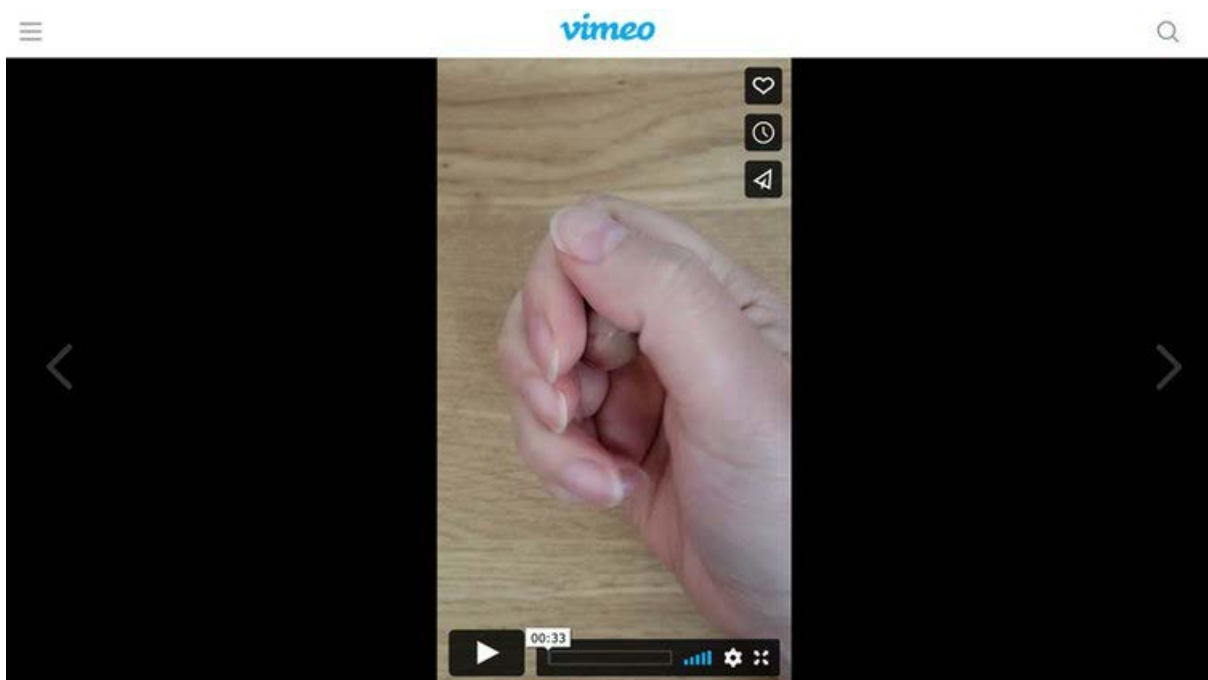


Figure 5. Iliana Contos, *Amplification of Artistic Response*, 2021, movement.

I realised I was using my dominant side; I was curious as to what would happen if I moved the stone into my left hand. I spent time recreating the movement in the non-dominant fingers, and I described to my companion that there was “less dexterity and control.” The words “less... control” hit me right in the centre of the chest; the sensation of pressure began to build. Without thought, my right hand started rubbing and soothing the surface of my chest, as if to alleviate the tension. I associated this felt sense in the chest as, “I’m losing control.” This can be understood as interoception – the ability to perceive within (Siegel & Sieff, 2015) – a sixth sense that becomes sharpened with theatrical training. My companion referred to the prompts and encouraged me to consider what behaviour might be present. I looked up to the top left corner of my field of vision searching for the answer. “What is the behaviour? I know the behaviour... don’t I? Why can’t I name it?” The sensation in my chest diffused. I became confused as I mulled over its significance and the correct words, sifting for the right answer. Confusion felt like tension in the head, although the rest of my body was numb, and my eyes were darting around the room as if I were to find the answer written on the wall. Fredman (2004) considers the body as a communicator of feelings that gives us clues so that we can notice and make sense. This physiological and emotional change was a sign my body was withdrawing. I now understand this as a *choice-moment*.

When all the sense awareness drained from me and a mental perplexity emerged, I realised I was moving further away from an embodied knowing. I examined what was happening; I was looking up, somewhere outside of myself for an answer. Through engaging in the process of reflexivity, the method of reflecting *in* experience (Reis, 2011), I was able to recognise this and distinguish alternative paths forward. Tufnell and Crickmay (2004) consider that the more we discriminate, the more choices we have available to us. I could continue doing what I was doing: verbally constructing and intellectualising an assumption. Or alternatively, I could trust that resonant insight would emerge clearly if I used materials or modes to make the implicit visible (Lett, 2011). I chose to follow the latter. With my companion’s guidance, I amplified this key moment by using movement to illustrate the sensation of pressure in the chest. Unexpectedly, I found that the representation for ‘losing control’ was no movement at all, but rather to stop breathing and freeze. As I described this to my partner, we became conscious that I non-consciously made a gesture of fists in front of my chest, indicative of the initial representation: the nucleus of the map. I translated this as clenching and holding on. The words emerged, “When I am losing control, I feel pressure to hold on tight.”

The wisdom demonstrated by my gestures and movements uncovered an awareness my body knew implicitly but that remained cognitively elusive. Ogden (2009) asserts that:

Most human behaviour is driven by procedural memory... the “how” rather than the “what” or “why”... early attachment experiences and unresolved trauma both leave their imprint on the body’s procedural memory system, shaping the posture, gestures, and movements of the body. (p.5)

Wallin (2007) describes it as “enactment” and goes on to say that evocation and embodiment are the way people communicate what they know but have not thought – and therefore cannot talk about (p.122). By following felt sense, by allowing gesture and movement to describe, and by opening to the imaginal expression of movement, the thematic statement started to write itself. The words arrived readily. See Figure 6 for my thematic statement: a reduction of the map.

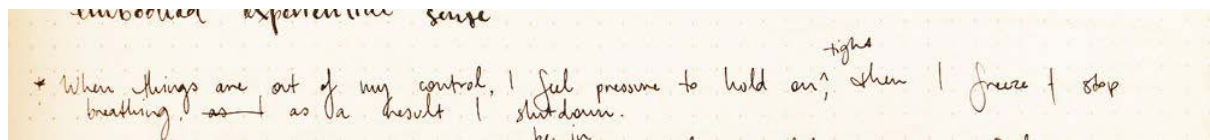


Figure 6. Iliana Contos, *Thematic Statement*, 2021, pen on paper, 40 × 200mm.

The insights felt significant and compelling because the body was guiding, and the mind was clear; the physical sensations were sharp and there was no confused mental narrative. I was listening intently, and I could hear a unified mind–body response. The modes of gesture and movement unveiled deeper insight; I understood what happens when I feel like things are out of my control on a deep, visceral level. I discerned a congruent behavioural response to the loss of stability and livelihood in lockdown. Moreover, I could, and still can, recognise an ingrained pattern of being that was present throughout much of my life: the tendency to hold in feelings and the pressure to be an unwavering wall of strength in response to grief. The way in which I engaged with the modes began to reveal profound aspects of my relationship with self, with others, and the world at large.

Reflection of key moments

While the process of creating the thematic statement was emergent and surprising, in retrospect I can see strong parallels with information that was already in the map. The impulse of swirling and twirling the stone in my fingers – the movement that launched the sequence of events – is comparable to a gesture that I noted in my map of “swirling my fingers on my chin as I think”.

The resonance I felt in my chest from the words ‘less control’ is akin to what I marked on the “When does it happen?” section of the map, “When things are out of control”.

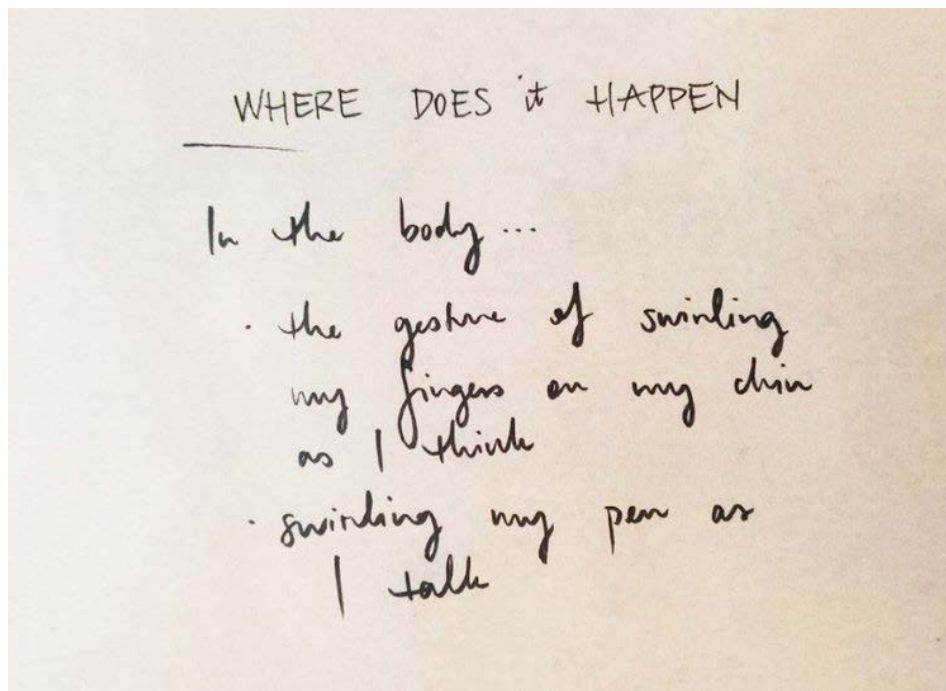


Figure 7. Iliana Contos, *Map*, 2021, pen on paper, 110 × 160mm.

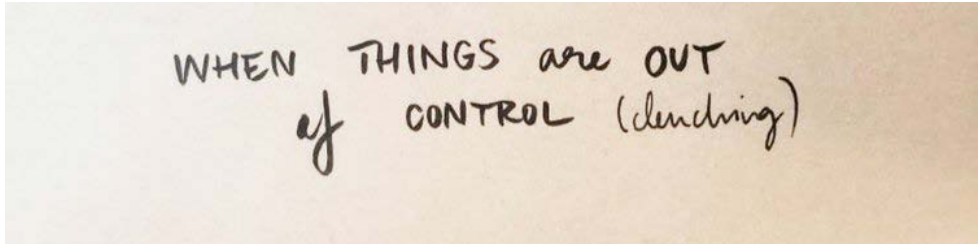


Figure 8. Iliana Contos, *Map*, 2021, pen on paper, 60 × 100mm

The notation, “looking, searching, thinking”, and illustration are indicative of the moment when I looked and searched for the answer outside of myself during the thematic statement process.

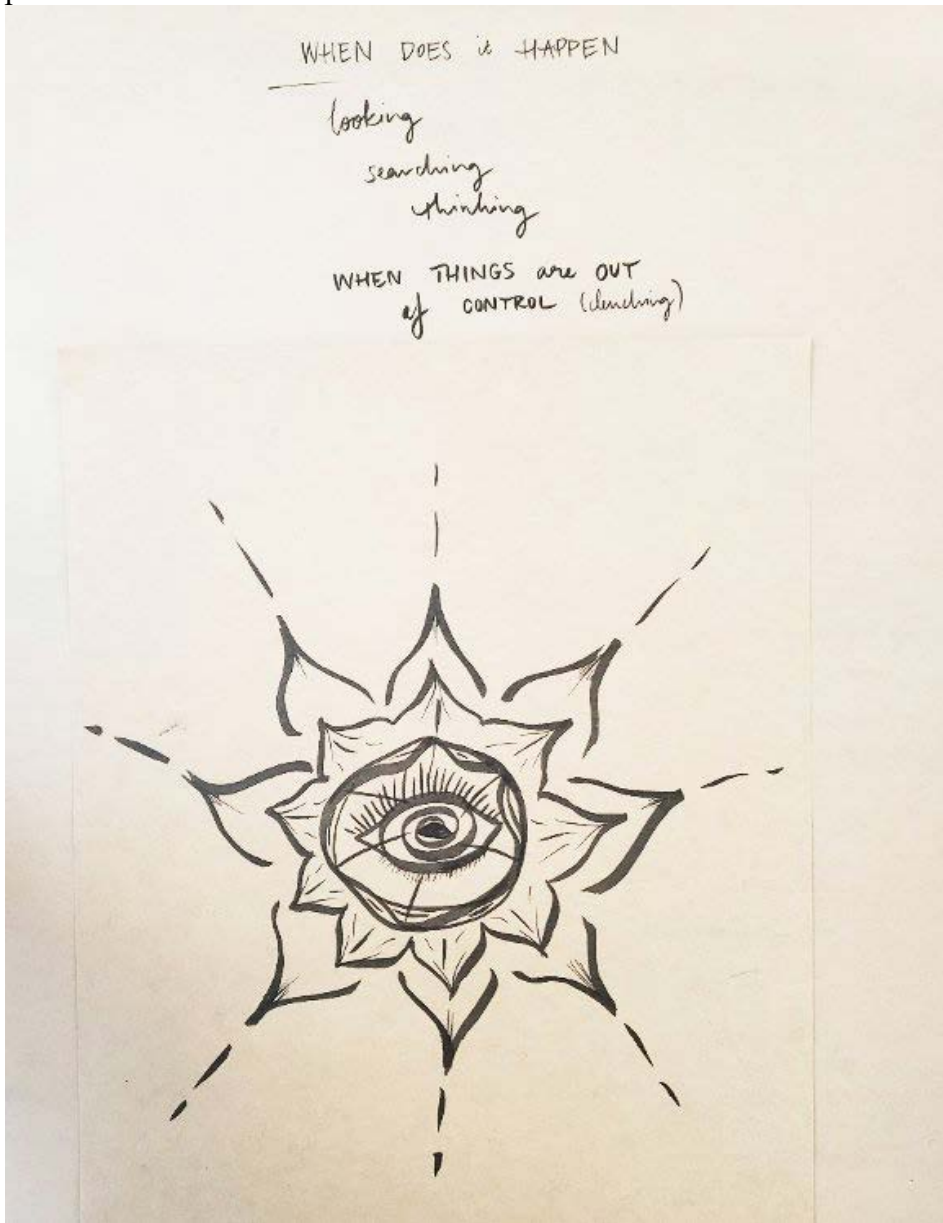


Figure 9. Iliana Contos, *Map*, 2021, pen on paper, 300 × 210mm.

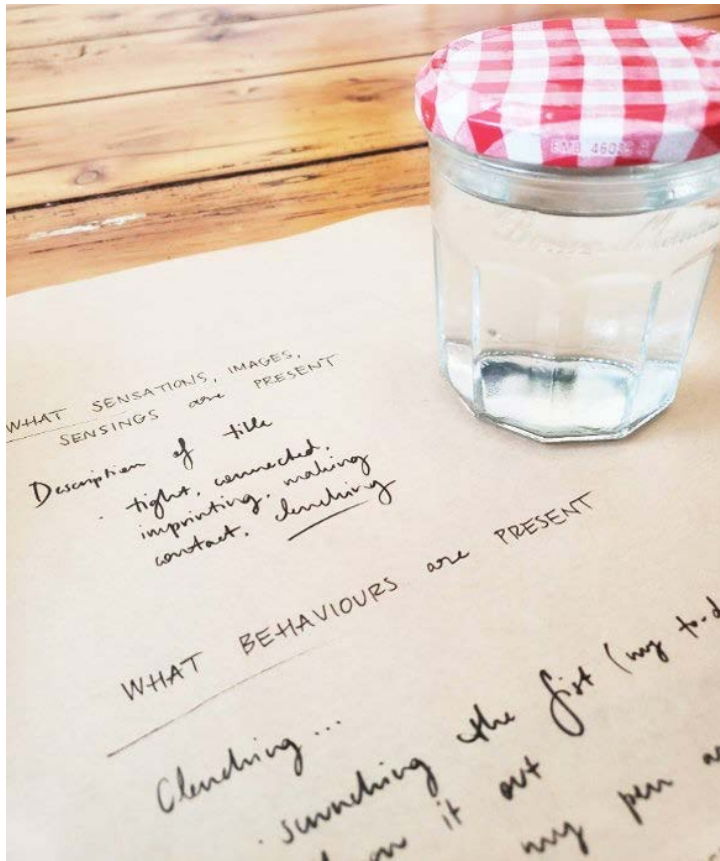


Figure 10. Iliana Contos, *Map*, 2021, pen on paper and water in jar, 300 × 260mm.

The gesture of clenching fists and the verbal description of ‘hold on tight’ that was revealed during the thematic statement, were already a theme in the map. The water contained in the jar was a representation I made for the sensation that was present during mapping: the feeling of “containing”.

Before undergoing the process of developing the thematic statement, the information in the map seemed out of focus and confused. I had a sense it was significant, but I wasn’t sure how; I couldn’t translate it into a succinct statement. Malchiodi (2020) highlights that a key advantage of the expressive arts in trauma intervention is the ability to circumvent the limits of language and provide additional channels and opportunities for communication when words are not possible. The experience of listening to felt sense, gesture and movement sharpened what I was communicating to myself into focus.

Integration of the turning point

During the latter stages of the thematic statement development, after the moment of profound insight, I moved through an irrepressible outpouring of tears. It felt like a release of the pressured sensation that I had been previously holding in the chest. My companion invited me to use materials to represent what I was feeling; I glanced over at a jar of water that was sitting on my bench and took a brush to paint the water on the skin of my wrist, evoking the feeling of tears on a sensitive part of the body. I became fascinated by the way that the water clung to the surface of the skin: its shape and weight, its reflection of light, the way it moved down the curve of my forearm, its warming sensation as it moved, the glimmer and shimmer of the path that it left behind. Rather than trying to verbally describe the outpouring of grief that I was feeling internally, I found it more comforting to represent it outside of me. My

tears ceased as I continued to soothingly paint. Malchiodi (2020) refers to this as externalising implicit experiences without words: self-regulation is nurtured by giving individuals ways to separate from what is going on internally, while experiencing a pleasurable or novel creative experience. I felt supported by my companion, who was mirroring the activity rather than watching me; we engaged with materials in a shared, intersubjective experience. Schore and Sieff (2015) concur that healing follows from the implicit connection between two individuals. Additionally, Fredman (2004) considers that instead of primarily focusing on cognitive interpretation as companions and therapists, we can position ourselves to listen with our bodies. See Figures 11 and 12 for the artistic response shared between myself and my companion.



Figure 11. Iliana Contos, *Artistic Response*, 2021, water on skin with brush, 280 × 100mm.



Figure 12. Companion, *Mirroring*, 2021, water on skin with brush, 110 × 70mm.

After the experience of rendering implicit sensing into an explicit representation during the thematic statement process, I reimagined my self-as-maker piece once again. This time, it no longer felt ambiguous; I was in a reverie of presence as the brush met the paint, the water and paper. Time slowed down; I was captivated by the dimension of the liquid in movement, holding its shape as it reflected the light. See Figure 13 for the recreation of my self-as-maker.

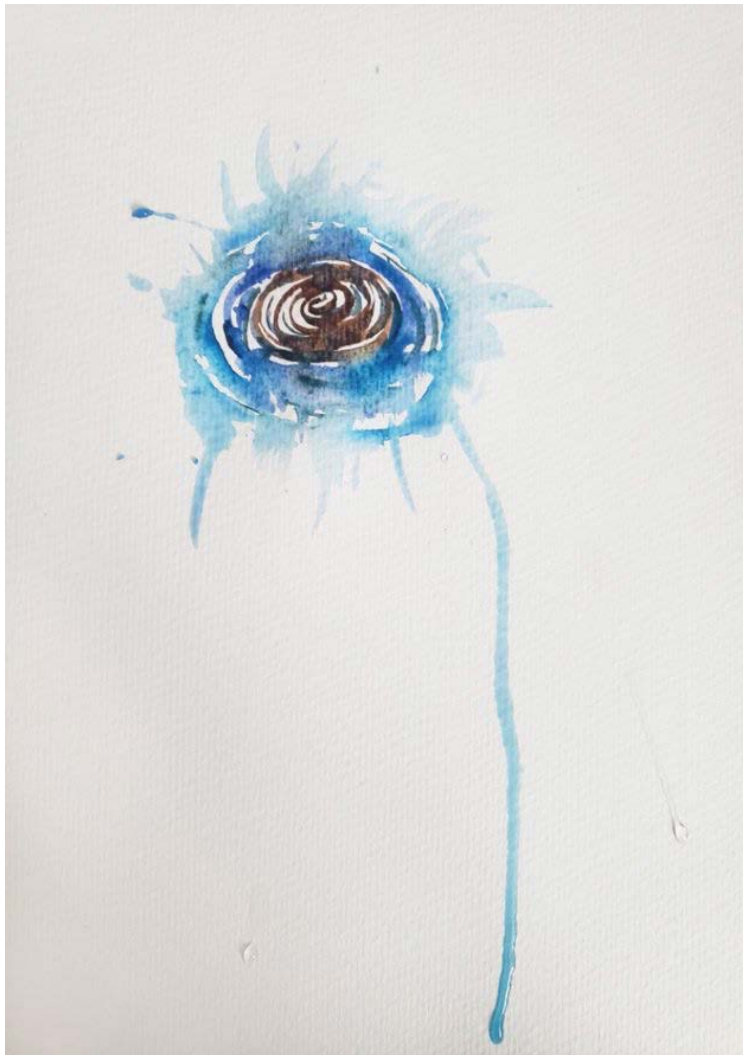


Figure 13. Iliana Contos, Self-as-maker – *Seeing into Me*, 2021, watercolour on paper, 300 × 210 mm.

I can attest that after the thematic statement turning point, and during the self-as-maker reimagining, I experienced the materials as an emotional liberation. The watercolour was the sadness that I had controlled and suppressed until it was revealed through the cyclical process of amplification and reduction in an arts-based therapeutic approach. Whilst painting I began to come to terms with my circumstances, and, by making, I started to feel comforted and soothed. Therapeutic change does not occur in reflection; it happens when *in* the experience of emotion and through learning different ways to be with that feeling (Schoore & Sieff, 2015). My inquiry into myself as a maker captured a defining and altering moment of my context in time. This is how I have come to know that making art is healing; the materials and modes are a vessel for transformation and growth.

Conclusion

Through an arts-based autoethnographic approach, I have learned that materials and modes can translate my implicit inner world with astounding clarity. Wallin (2007) considers that “beneath the words there is a flow of critically important experience that provides the underlying context for the words... this unarticulated experience is often where we find the greatest leverage for therapeutic change” (p.115). The practice of delving beneath ‘what is said’ or ‘assumed to be known’ has stretched my awareness of a deeply ingrained behavioural pattern. Habitually, I have learned to hold in grief as a way of survival. Now, I am relearning how to navigate the feeling of sadness without withdrawing from my immediate environment.

Embodied creativity is a channel for healing because materials and modes move the body’s procedural and implicit memory into external expression. This experience of poiesis, coming to know through making, has inspired emotional growth and enlightened my emerging practice as an art therapist. Etymologically, the term poiesis shares its root and meaning with the word ‘poetry’ in Greek (Östling et al., 2018); the path towards self-awareness is inherently creative. Most significantly, art therapy expands communication because it translates the workings of rich inner worlds into a language that can be universally understood. As I move further into my studies, this is what I endeavour to share within a therapeutic relationship: a path towards healing and well-being through the process of experiencing materials and modes.

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