

Working with layers: A heuristic study utilising single-canvas art-making to illuminate personal responses of the therapist

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Abstract

This study explored the use of post-session art-making as a form of self-supervision for psychotherapists. Specifically, a single-canvas self-supervision model was conducted over a series of therapy sessions with a parent in a child-protection setting. Visual representations of personal responses such as countertransference of the therapist and layering images over previous images on a single canvas presented various tensions, deepened awareness, and illuminated felt experience, making visible the potential impact of the human self on the therapeutic relationship. The model has the potential to benefit psychotherapists seeking arts-based reflection and to integrate art-based methods into traditional supervision and case reflection.

Keywords

Post-session art, countertransference, supervision, art-based supervision, single-canvas painting

Introduction

Supervision, including art-based supervision, is the process used by therapists (including psychotherapists, counsellors, and creative arts therapists) to develop their clinical practice via consultation with an experienced practitioner. The capacity to reflect and question oneself is just as vital to their growth and quality as a practitioner as is their continued education and supervisory relationships (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012; Rober, 2021). Supervision can include working with a therapist's personal responses and struggles in therapy and countertransference within the therapeutic relationship between client and therapist. This illumination process can involve rich discussion with fellow therapists and their supervisors, and it can also involve other modalities such as art-making during individual or group supervision or art-making conducted from a therapist's own motivation (Brown et al., 2003; Fish, 2012, 2019). This continuum of reflective practices supports the exploration of therapist art-making as a form of valid self-supervision and as a complement to current supervision methods. This heuristic study by the first author, in the role of therapist as researcher, aims to showcase the experience of arts-based self-supervision within a structure that can be shared with other therapists for use in their practice.

Literature review

Noticing therapist responses

Psychotherapy aims to alleviate a person's emotional and psychological problems, process traumatic experience or improve functioning through the exploration of feelings, thoughts, desires, and life experiences (Cautin, 2011; Gill, 1985). Therapists providing psychotherapy are required to contain and reflect upon their own emotional and psychological responses to what they hear and see when working with clients seeking healing in the therapeutic space, aiming to balance compassion and empathy with their own self-care and self-preservation – one cannot simply be a neutral observer (Carlson, 2009). This leads to acknowledgement and acceptance of the experience of countertransference and personal reactions in the therapeutic relationship.

When conducting psychotherapy, therapists are confronted with often intense and powerful manifestations of transference, as a person's mind and body try to understand a current experience by examining it through the experience of other relationships (Makari, 1994). Transference, which refers to a client's unconscious projection of emotions and feelings onto the therapist, can elicit various responses from and within the therapist based on their own life experiences, known as countertransference (Hayes, 2004; Sehon, 2013). Hayes (2004) discusses an integrated definition of countertransference as any reactions to the client relationship that are based on the therapist's unresolved issues. This encompasses the therapist's unconscious response to the client in all forms – identification, intuition and/or automatic reactions (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Carlson, 2009; Jacobs, 1986; Racker, 1957).

As a general practice, therapists engage in professional supervision, receiving support and guidance from an experienced practitioner to ensure professional growth and to protect the wellbeing and safety of the client (Corey et al., 2010). Historically, supervision has developed in parallel with the psychotherapy modality being practised, with the aim of extending therapist learning and development (Beck et al., 2008; Hess, 2011) and supported by models attending specifically to transference phenomena such as the seven-eyed model of supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).

Countertransference ignored or denied can impinge on therapeutic work, and become a source of difficulty or bias if the issues presenting for both the client and the therapist remain unseen; moreover, these invisible factors could block the process of therapy (Chesner & Zografou, 2013; Rober, 2021). Being unable to process their personal responses or assumptions can cause the therapist to lose their capacity to provide containment for a client's intense feelings or enable harmful interactions to occur with the client (Beers Miller, 2007; Havsteen-Franklin & Camarena Altamirano, 2015; Schaverien, 2007). Equally, resonance of this nature enables a therapist to connect and join with their client in the therapeutic alliance, attending to the interplay between their own story and that of a client, allowing greater insight into a person's experience (Rober, 2021; Rundquist, 2014).

Post-session art-making

Arts therapy is a modality that draws upon the innate healing potential of art, using the creative process as a vehicle for reflection, awareness, and change; making visible the

thoughts and feelings of the self through metaphor and symbology; and bringing forth unconscious or unresolved issues (Schaverien in Malchiodi, 2012; McNeilly & Gilroy, 2011).

For clients engaged in art therapy, the art image and creative process can be vessels for containment of both conscious and unconscious content, providing awareness of the self when discovery is difficult to attain through verbal expression. Similarly, a therapist may find it difficult to achieve self-awareness via verbal processing as that can be fleeting, confronting, or intangible, and this is where art-making can prove valuable in supervision (Brown et al., 2003, 2007; Rundquist, 2014; Wadeson, 2003).

Therapist art-making has been found to improve empathy, provide a container to express strong feelings or clarify confusion, provide a buffer against vicarious trauma, guide therapy decisions and support creative and metaphorical interaction with the client (Fish, 2005, 2012; Moon, 1999; Rogers, 2002). It is particularly promoted for its ability to access the unconscious of the therapist, providing awareness of countertransference and bringing the implicit into full awareness (Fish, 2012, 2019; Robb & Miller, 2017; Rogers, 2002).

In recent decades, several terms and models have been used to describe therapist art-making for supervision purposes. Although the use of personal art-making in professional reflection or for self-care is not a new practice, such models are emerging in the art therapy field (Fenner, 1996; Fish, 2012; Wadeson, 2003). ‘Response art’ is a term for art made by a therapist in response to client work, during session or in response to client images, supporting the therapist to express and critique their experience of clinical work (Deaver & Shifflet, 2011; Fish, 2005, 2012, 2019; Moon, 1999). Post-session art-making is distinctive, as it relates to specific sessional content or is created in response to strong emotion as opposed to a general reflection. It illuminates countertransference immediately following time with a client (Fish, 2012; Wadeson, 2003) and keeps connection to the client–therapist–art triad. Such art is commonly created outside of formal professional supervision by a therapist. Nash (2020) has explored the use of post-session art in clinical practice, calling this ‘reflect piece imagery’, and supports the idea that the art-making process has the capacity to assist the therapist to engage with and navigate through their emotions and experience in response to clinical encounters. Notably, in recent years in particular, response art has been valuable when distance supervision is more readily available or required (Fish, 2019), and this has certainly been the first author’s own experience in the field, where art-based supervision is less accessible than traditional or workplace supervision. This research contributes to the exploration of arts-based methods in the form of self-supervision.

Layering/single-canvas

The novel approach by Miller (2012, 2021) to group supervision for art therapy students promotes the use of the response art concept of process painting – referred to more recently as the *el duende* process painting method (EDPP) – in the form of painting the same canvas multiple times over an extended period to mirror the layers of complexity within therapeutic relationships and the journey a therapist goes on as part of their growth and development. The concept of *duende* is that which “conveys a mysterious power which assumes many forms but is not always seen or explainable” (Miller, 2021, p.24).

The effect of layering on the canvas over time and pausing between art-making sessions can welcome tension, utilise the evolving relationship with the canvas as a source of reflection on the therapeutic work (Miller, 2012, p.167), and support a highly reflexive stance (Miller &

Robb, 2017). With layering and integrating a new with a previous image, the ongoing relationship between person and canvas invites artistic struggle. The tension in the process agitates the heightening of emotional expression by increasing spontaneity and risk-taking in the art-making process, pushing the artist into further depths and consequently transformative learning (Miller & Robb, 2017). The process of reviewing photographs of each layer in the company of the final canvas presents a vehicle to consciously reflect on learnings in retrospect of embodying *el duende*. At the time this research was conducted, in 2014, there was no published literature or model developed that used this layering approach for self-supervision in the context of a distinct client–therapist relationship. Further research by Miller and others has looked at the use of process painting as a tool to improve personal awareness in the supervisory space, as it continues to interest the field (Miller, 2020; Miller & Robb, 2017; Robb & Miller, 2017). This approach was also introduced in group supervision by the authors within the art therapy master’s degree program in Australia.

The first author was attracted to this process as they resonated with the layering as a potential parallel to the dynamics of a therapeutic relationship over time and the importance of illuminating their personal responses to client work given the context at the time of working in the child protection field as a therapist with other parents whilst experiencing the evolution of their own mothering role.

Methodology

This research involved an experiential trial of a proposed model of art-based self-supervision – single-canvas supervision – by the first author, under research supervision of the second author, alongside the clinical supervisor in the first author’s workplace. The model involves the combination of post-session art-making with the concepts and aims of Miller’s one-canvas process painting. Given this is a self-supervision model, the use of active imagination in the form of a dialogue with the image (Fish, 2005; McNiff, 1993) serves to support the engagement with and processing of the image by the therapist in the absence of direct support from a supervisor. The hypothesis is that this process can provide the therapist with timely expression of personal reactions and experiences, increase the depth and layers of understanding of therapist countertransference, and be utilised to enhance traditional supervision structures.

This research was conducted using Moustakas’ heuristic qualitative research methodology (1990) to explore the personal experience of the researcher as therapist in the trial of the model. The heuristic methodology encourages the researcher to continually revisit, reflect and find meaning over time in the hope of gaining a deeper and authentic understanding of the topic or experience. This involved conducting the post-session art-making as per the model proposed and returning to the process by reviewing the series of images or layers made on the canvas.

Single-canvas supervision model

Resources required include:

- A blank canvas on a sturdy frame. A small to medium size is proposed due to time limitations in a busy workday and the need to maintain the same canvas over a period of time, being mindful of storage space, drying time, privacy and art-making space in the workplace environment.

- Art media such as pencils, pens, acrylic paint, pastels and collage, noting that the use of a canvas and the short time frame limits the breadth of materials able to be used.
- A camera to record the layers of images.
- Pencil and paper to record the dialogue and other observations of the experiences.
- A computer to store images or access printing.

The art-based self-supervision model consisted of the following steps:

- An art-making session of a maximum of 45 minutes where possible was completed immediately following an individual therapeutic session with a client.
- The question “What am I feeling, thinking and sensing within myself in reaction to the client session?” was used to prompt and target reflection.
- An active imagination dialogue was conducted with the image for a maximum of ten minutes following art-making. The dialogue was recorded verbatim, alongside the image.
- The dialogues and images were considered together, and reflections summarised into three thematic statements of a maximum of 25 words each and attached to a photograph of the image.
- Each image and thematic statement were shared with a practice supervisor during discussions about the client work and general supervision as per usual supervision procedures.
- The active imagination technique was used once again to dialogue with the series of images as a whole and with individual images in relation to others and then further engaged with on several occasions over a period of one month to summarise overall significant themes.

Findings

Findings are detailed as discovered during each phase of the heuristic process and written in the first person, as appropriate to this research approach.

Immersion phase

Post-session art-making was conducted during August and September 2014. Five art-making sessions occurred in response to five client sessions. The client sessions involved a young adolescent mother during the reunification process with her first-born infant child, who had been removed from her care at birth and was living with her kin. These sessions occurred during my professional role as a therapeutic clinician in the child protection setting with a focus on parental grief and loss, parenting abilities and enhancing attachment between mother and baby. The primary modality of intervention was narrative therapy and parent education with the use of art-based activities to enhance self-awareness, emotional processing, and parenting confidence. The relationship between myself and the client was new and the intervention was time limited.

A final image on canvas was created, consisting of five layers in total. All layers consisted of acrylic paint, applied with either a large brush or palette knife. On average, each session was

35 minutes in duration, consisting of 30 minutes art-making and five minutes active imagination dialogue.

Incubation phase

The canvas, images and written dialogue were placed out of sight for a period of two weeks. I felt comfortable with this and did not once think about the canvas.

Illumination and explication phase

During the illumination and explication phases, I re-engaged with the series of five images, via photographs and dialogue, and searched for significant overall themes or points of intrigue. This process was used to reflect on what can be seen and felt within each session's image and dialogue, as well as the finished canvas image to further articulate themes and find patterns of meaning. At this point symbolic, metaphorical, and archetypal themes were discovered across all the images.

I conducted an active imagination dialogue with the images as a whole. A dialogue occurred between the researcher and the images' personas, and highlighted the struggle between self-acceptance and self-doubt despite a contrasting feeling of confidence and professional skill, and the advice of "trusting the process".

Creative synthesis phase

This phase focused on the significant themes and the experiences that most intrigued me as well as the use of the single-canvas supervision process in practice, which will be the focus of the following discussion.

Discussion

Illumination

Key themes of countertransference were illuminated with several symbols and archetypes connecting me to thoughts and emotions about myself as a person, mother, and therapist.

In addition, different personas or objects emerged in each layer with which to dialogue: Mother Mary in Layers One and Three, Bob in Layer Two, The Sun in Layer Four and Red Balloon in Layer Five.

The Nurturing Container

The image of the container emerged via various symbols and concepts and provided a feeling of being nurtured throughout the process. The circle or the circular motion in one sense acts as a symbol of the container.

Layer One (Figure 1) depicts an image of a cyclonic and circular-like 'womb' from a bird's-eye view, with the sky appearing like an ocean of towering waves and the lightning sharply piercing the womb but not injuring it. It includes the persona of Mother Mary and a container for a growing foetus, emerging as a symbol of the connection between females. I felt

confusion as to how the sky was not harming the womb and questioned my identity as a mother in comparison to another mother, feeling I was in the centre of the cyclone, being judged by myself and others.



Figure 1. Amanda Brown, *Layer One: Our Mother Wombs*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 400×400×35mm.

Layer Two (Figure 2) is a purple vase filled with red paint, illogically keeping the flowers alive. Behind the vase is a pair of wings. The red paint, which the angels had poured in, was enriching to the flowers. Feelings of self-doubt and anxiety were present alongside circular movements of my arms.



Figure 2. Amanda Brown, *Layer Two: Purple Vase*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 400×400×35mm.

Layer Four (Figure 3) brings the imaginary boat that I had placed myself in during the storm, feeling the protection that the circular shaped sun offered. The boat is in a turbulent sea, with thick storm clouds, rain pouring down and the sun shining above.

During dialogue with this image, I had placed myself in a boat in the sea; however, this was not visible on the canvas. This placement of myself did not evoke fear or worry, but curiosity, wonder and excitement, during and after the art-making process, despite the chaotic and dangerous scene. The dialogue centred on chaos in life, not trying to control nature, and avoiding extreme or narrow perspectives in life.



Figure 3. Amanda Brown, *Layer Four, In the Wonder of the Storm*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 400×400×35mm.

The Colour red

Every layer of image has the colour red, although not always as the focus of the image. Firstly, the small mark of red added onto Layer One in a compulsive action and the red paint in the vase. Layer Three (Figure 4) is predominately red, depicting a circular face with no human features surrounded by cascading wavy hair. There are cracks beginning from the centre of the face to the outer which were carved in using the end of a palette knife.



Figure 4. Amanda Brown, *Layer Three: Untitled*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 400×400×35mm.

I experienced an overwhelming feeling of awe and peace when looking at the finished but faceless image (Figure 4), but I also felt a sense of nervousness in response to the mysterious nature of the face. Dialogue centred on acknowledging pain and loss in life and trusting that there is also growth and joy in life, that all experiences form part of our identity.

The series of layers ends with Layer Five (Figure 5) and the central red balloon, surrounded by other balloons and being held together by string; with a shining sun.



Figure 5. Amanda Brown, *Layer Five: The Pink Balloon Behind the Red Balloon*, 2014, acrylic paint on canvas, 400×400×35mm.

In reflecting on the recurrence of the circular shape in all five layers and the obvious containers as well, I researched and sifted through literature to find theoretical direction as to

the symbolic meaning of the circle. It is found in the Chinese symbol of the Yin Yang as the oneness and cosmic essence of life that surrounds the unity and balance of opposite energies (Chia & Huang, 2002). It is seen as a symbol of perfection (Fontana, 1993) and is a shape seen in the natural world reflecting cycles of nature, or in human ritual and connection to ancestry (Bailey, 2010). The circle can be a symbol of wholeness or a rearranging of personality. A mandala can also be considered as a representation of the mother figure due to the protection it offers (Bailey, 2010; Jung, 1969a). The persona of Mother Mary and the image of the womb in my process are examples of the mother archetype emerging in image and dialogue, another common theme throughout the layers.

My sense of meaning did not feel complete; I needed to follow intuition into my personal meaning. I came to see these circular objects as containers for my self-doubt, causing anxiety to achieve perfection. As I reflected more, I saw the circle and the mother archetype occurring in unison, both representing these feelings and equally providing me with support and the nurturing mother's emotional refuelling (Henley, 2007) to manage the confrontation and process the feelings. Just like my client, I was a young first-time mother at the time of this process. I was consciously curious about how my identity as a mother would be portrayed and how it might impact on the client–therapist dynamic. My self-doubt likely birthed the active yet irrational procrastination I felt towards re-engaging with my images, and grounded in the tension of the *el duende*, I can see that the self-doubt related to both the professional and personal understanding of motherhood.

Having grown up in Australia, I am blessed to have family traditions and concepts from my Chinese heritage interwoven with my Australian identity. The colour red in Chinese culture signifies luck and happiness, a colour we use at celebrations and milestones. I often relate red to being attractive, strong, and confident. My intuition prompted a connection to my culture, and this led me to a text in my library at home, *The Secret Teaching of the Tao Te Ching*, a text detailing the teachings of Taoism and the ancient sage Lao Tzu. Red in this text is one of the five colours of healing, connected to the organ of the heart, with the belief that our emotions are regulated not just by the brain but the whole body, and the aim is to maintain balance in the body (Chia & Huang, 2002). I began to reflect on my own heart, both in a biological and an emotional sense. This sparked reflection on my own health and familial relationships.

Although I had been exploring this within myself recently, the colour red prompted reflection on my hopes or desires for my client as a young woman in her own search for independence, family and the goal of her child being returned to her care, and ensuring I was being informed by her definitions of health and family and not my own.

In finalising my thoughts, I was stumped by a recurrent image I had not seen earlier in my reflections: The travelling white cloud that emerged in the dialogue of Layer One had re-emerged several times and finally behind the balloons in Layer Five (Figure 5).

Author: I am drawn to the bright white, it's like a cloud travelling through the sky, dipping down to touch the earth and taking with it some of its food. I want to fly on it like a magic carpet.

Mary: It will steal you away though and take you off track. The red centre of the twister will ground you.

The dialogue points to the red centre being a grounding force. When I think of the cloud I think of shadows and of impending storms, but I also see the never-ending possibilities of images within a cloud. If red gives me a sense of strength, could the clouds be a representation of my shadow self, or even of my ambition, on which I pride myself on? This is one aspect of the layers that I do not yet fully comprehend; however, I feel confident that the colour red will give me direction.

Polarity

I was struck by the recurrent theme of polarity appearing in all layers in many different guises, and at times being the core theme of both image and dialogue. Polarities of chaos and calm, sun and moon, shine and storm, shadow and light, heaven and earth, displayed connection and synchronicity through the layers. When reflecting on polarity, I felt a natural move towards the concept of balance in life and my connection to the Taoist symbol of Yin Yang, a circle of equal opposites; however, at times my images and dialogue challenged the belief of the opposites being in harmony and not in competition (Chia & Huang, 2002; Learmonth, 1999).

This project came at a time of great change in my personal and professional life, akin to the changes the client was experiencing. Jung's concept of the shadow in the psyche, the dark and unfavourable aspects of our personality and the process of integrating the shadow into the self for wholeness, bringing the opposites together, felt familiar to my own integration process as it was revealed in the images (Jung, 1969b). I felt resistance to integration, the process of finding balance amidst the changes in my personal life, in response to witnessing the changes in my client's life. Jung describes the concept of the shadow as the heart of creativity, representing the true spirit of life, but it is also the dark side of being and of the personal unconscious (Jung, 1963). I felt my most creative self in the layers where polarity is the obvious theme (Figure 3).

I found that being reminded of my shadow self during each session triggered me to reflect on my conduct in the corresponding client session and make informed choices about how I conducted myself in the next. It helped me gain perspective on my doubts and thoughts about how others may perceive my professional conduct in light of my sensitivity to my shadow parts, but also prompted me to acknowledge where my shadow might be a barrier in my practice.

Process

The processes experienced whilst engaging in single-canvas supervision helped me learn about the effect of art-making and the mechanisms that supported the illumination of personal responses.

Calming

I had the experience of emotional containment as evidenced by changes in body sensations, a release of tension and emotional states when engaged in the bottom-up and rhythmic movements (Van Der Kolk, 2014), and a feeling of security in myself. Certain body movements, such as the circular motion of the arms, connected with the symbols, with free-flowing and large arm movements in steady circular motions (Figure 1). A strong sense of my body sensations occurred during each art-making session and had a calming effect.

Frustration was ignited due to the textures on the canvas when coming to the final layer (Figure 5) but, through the sweeping body movements and the exacting strokes needed to achieve the contours of the balloons, I began to calm and the sinking feeling in my abdomen eased. The images functioned as receptacles for my emotions, acting as containers and providing me with welcomed emotional distance from my countertransference (Brown et al., 2007).

Equally, I found that each session and reflection on the layer provided an opportunity to process feelings from the immediate session and prepare for the next. Wadeson agrees that spontaneous post-session art-making supports the therapist emotionally in the moment and methodical art-making can be soothing (2003). This immediate processing gave me clarity which calmed any anxiety or confusion about the direction of my client work.

Grief

The process of layering brought several tensions in the use of media, style of technique, and frustrations with having to work on an uneven surface. At the time of making, when an image provided me with thought-provoking messages about the client work and self, I experienced a significant emotional response to having to layer over it, my own *el duende* of intense grief and hesitation. I feel this encouraged me to focus more on the countertransference in this moment, through the process of noticing the transition from one layer to another. In particular, as Layer Four (Figure 3) was covered by Layer Five (Figure 5), I was able to reflect on how my grief response may reflect a resistance or a hidden message. At this time, I was aware of my need to commence termination with the client as our work was coming to an end, and was consciously being thoughtful about my approach. It was not until I came to finishing the canvas that I truly acknowledged the impact of the pending termination on the client relationship, curious as to whether this reflected my grief and investment in the client or a response to the client's transference of grief.

Layers and depth

It is evident that the sequential process of making and reviewing a series of images was integral to illuminating and understanding my responses at a deeper level, whereas after each individual session reflection was confined to process and conscious meaning-making. With the creation of and dialogue with each layer created and dialogued, I gained a deeper understanding of my feelings and thoughts in the moment and was able to use the art-making to process my responses. I noticed key reflections about my experience of the client work at each art-making session, which were utilised to inform the next client session with reduced interference from my most visible responses. It was not, however, until completing at least the fourth layer (Figure 3) that I began to see and make sense of the key themes at the unconscious level and in a manner that transcended the superficial. The finding of symbols, metaphors and archetypes afforded me the ability to reflect on my core sense of being. I would not have been in touch with this were I to have focused on one image at a time, and it illuminated understanding that would affect all areas of my life, not just the individual case work I was involved in.

Considerations and recommendations

The use of self-supervised art-making helped me contemplate and process tricky experiences immediately and illuminate unconscious elements impacting my engagement with the client

over time. The approach gave me more time to process the many facets of my experience, which consequently enhanced my professional decisions regarding my work with the client in a timely manner. I was able to process feelings and thoughts during my art-making process, reducing my external dependence on debriefing with a supervisor. Sharing the canvas images in the supervision relationship felt fluid, and had a scaffolding effect that guided what I brought to discuss in supervision. This was not impacted by my supervisor not being an arts-based practitioner, as the self-supervision model was the mechanism that activated the meaning-making through art.

I felt that the five sessions were sufficient to gather relevant personal responses, as I was able to highlight several key symbols and process themes – the themes were not visible until I had completed at least four layers on the canvas. However, I am intrigued about what could have been illuminated if I were to have worked with the client longer and continued the self-supervision process on the single canvas. I would not recommend using this model with any more than one client at a time, as I found my capacity was reached at this point with the client being seen weekly or biweekly.

Despite the limitation imposed by the time required to implement it, the model was found to be user friendly, creatively stimulating and revealing in ways that will enhance therapeutic skill, highlighting aspects of the human self and improving visibility of the dynamic in therapeutic relationships. Sustainability of this self-supervision model is important, requiring consideration of the needs of individual therapists and organisations as to how this can be incorporated into the workflow, or exploring key milestones in which the model may best be utilised; for example in times of stagnant therapy or ruptured alliance.

There is potential for this model to support those accessing arts-based supervision from a distance, supporting art therapists who might not have access to local arts-based supervision (Fish, 2019). It would be interesting to explore this model when working with clients engaged in art therapy, as opposed to therapy without the use of art, as the interaction with client images may have a different impact on the art-making process for the therapist post-session. The client in this process engaged in a small amount of art-making; however, this modality was not conducive to her needs and practical capacity, as she was often holding her baby.

As members of the teaching team in a university art therapy program, the authors have introduced process painting in group supervision and encouraged the structured use of response art such as the single-canvas self-supervision model to provide emerging therapists with the tools for deep self-reflection and pride in vulnerability, a skill the first author feels was enhanced during the research experience. The authors have seen students flourish in confidence when using this approach and be inspired to use process painting as part of their research projects.

Conclusion

The single-canvas self-supervision model as a visual and creative form of practice reflection, can serve to illuminate countertransference and self-awareness in the moment, providing timely professional insight into a therapist's therapeutic impact and bias (Robb & Miller, 2017). The engagement with image through dialogue can effectively capture curious inquiry about client work and the therapist's personal experiences, being a vehicle for immediate

decision-making and reflection of the impact on the dynamics in the client–therapist relationship.

The process provides a space for facing vulnerable experiences, providing an opportunity to gain deep personal self-awareness. Vital to its effectiveness is its ability to reflect on multiple images and accompanying dialogue over time, as the layering effect has the potential to add further expression, revealing patterns and recurrent themes. Further exploration of the impact of this process on clinical practice is a warranted endeavour.

With regard to my own experience, the final dialogue with the series of images presented me with the following message, which reflects my learnings from this illumination process.

The Sun: There are aspects of yourself that will feed you, fuel you, just like the moon and the sun feed and fuel the water and the land. They work together, not against each other. Without the other would they be the same? If the moon was not around, I would not be me. You would not cherish my quiet risings; you would not marvel at my sparkling rays on the ocean, you would not know the many colours the sky can become. I cannot imagine a world without these experiences.

This message still gives me goose bumps at every reading, reminding me that light and shadow make life beautiful, make it real, and that as therapists our own light and shadow are inevitably part of our therapeutic work.

Endnotes

This paper was granted Ethics Approval by the Human Research Ethical Review Subcommittee of the University of Queensland, on 22 May 2014.

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Appendix

Transcript of dialogue with the series of images created during five sessions of post-session art-making.

Author: The circular nature of the layers really stands out to me, what is it like being in that motion?

The Sun: The motion, the circle shape is a natural occurrence, it's energetic yet calming to me. Look at me, at the waves, how they move and roll. How air when placed inside a balloon opening, pushes the rubber into a curved shape. How the wind swirls around itself, how a flower opens from the centre outwards, how angels' wings envelope you in an embrace, around you. How I am round and the planets are round. Despite this rounding, upright objects and being can exist.

Author: Is it about the scientific fact of gravity connecting the two or is it something more vital within us? That connection to the cyclic, the round, the never-ending, is vital, is life. I am seeing in your images how life, being, is about the circle, that representation of wholeness. Like humans and gravity, there is something that holds us to the planet even though we then wonder how we can still be upright, when standing on a sphere, when there is no upright.

Red Balloon: It is similar to how I could float away but a string attached and placed in the hand of a protective child or parent keeps me grounded. There is something that connects us.

Author: I am struggling to see this in the second layer. It's so sharp and stagnant. There is a feeling of forced containment. I get the sense this was a time where things were in crisis, not flowing naturally, a turning point between two things maybe?

Mary: I felt concern for you when I came to help you create Layer Three. I could see pain, I could sense confusion, a loss of self-confidence.

Author: Looking at the vase and the wings, I feel a sense of dread, goose bumps. I am actually glad that the layer was covered. Although I know it is still there underneath, it doesn't feel as potent. I was actually sad to layer over Layer Four. The image gave me such a sense of relief; I could not take my eyes off it. As I look back at the image, now layered over, I grieve for the loss; luckily, I am still in awe when I see it here now.

The Sun: Remember it is always there, it peeks through in the end.

Author: I know, but it still saddens me to have covered it over.

Red Balloon: I left a window for you to see in. It's important to not forget things that touch us the most - even when we lose them. You did gain a colourful bouquet of balloons to brighten your day.

Author: I did indeed. Balloons have always been a comforting image for me; they remind me of fun, of the importance of colour in my life, of the temporary as well. They can burst by accident; you can also burst them yourself. They can slowly deflate until they become a limp shrivelled piece of colour. But the image still stays with me about how they were at their prime.

Mary: There are always snippets of the bright that we remember. Even when things dull, the bright is still part of what has happened. It is also natural for bright and dull to happen together in their own time.

Author: Do you believe Layer Three, the woman's swirling face, is a self-portrait of myself?

Mary: A self portrait of all women. We have our roles in life, in society, but our face is still a blank slate, we can shape it how we like. We might be born with a face, freckles, complexion, the family nose, but we decide how to use it, how we shape our smile when we are embarrassed, how we shape our smile when we greet a friend. We can hide a lot of things in our face and we can also share our soul.

Author: When I look at what looks like an ever-deepening tunnel that is the woman's face, I feel invincible, like anything is possible. But, also, that there will always be changes in her face, different lines will form, different smiles will show.

Mary: Changes will happen, but you are always you. You will remember a younger you, a you from two days ago, a you ten years ago. You might not always see the you that comes next, but it is connected to the you right now. The you of the future is of your choice if you are brave enough to put that decision in your hands.

The Sun: There are aspects of yourself that will feed you, fuel you, just like the moon and the sun feed and fuel the water and the land. They work together, not against each other. Without the other would they be the same? If the moon was not around, I would not be me. You would not cherish my quiet risings; you would not marvel at my sparkling rays on the ocean, you would not know the many colours the sky can become. I cannot imagine a world without these experiences.

Author: You are always you, sun and moon, light and shade, you are all the colours. It's a scary thought at times, but comforting to know that the darker things are okay.

The Sun: Dark is okay. I would become exhausted and start to fade if I did not enjoy the rest the moon gives me, the rest it gives the earth.

Red Balloon: Just like a balloon stays bright and big but it can't last forever, soon it will burst.

Author: It sounds like you are saying that trying to be bright all the time is not achievable, that it is better to find balance, even when it's scary.

Mary: Fear is part of your moon self. But look at the moon tonight and every night. It is part of the cyclic nature of nature, of being. You can trust the moon if you trust the natural cycle of life.

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