

Disenfranchised grief: An art-based research inquiry

Susannah Morrison

Abstract

This paper explores the process of an arts-based research inquiry undertaken as part of my studies in the Masters in Therapeutic Arts Practice at the MIECAT Institute, located in Melbourne, Australia. It encapsulates the MIECAT approach to experiential inquiry with the procedures of finding an access point, amplifying this within the inquiry, and reducing this to a sense of knowing with a creative synthesis. A highlight of this paper is that it challenges the notion of the way grief is experienced, particularly illustrating disenfranchised grief, and how the use of multimodal art-making, while attending to content-in-process, amplifies a voice in an area too often silenced and misunderstood by society.

Keywords

Disenfranchised grief, loss, art-based research inquiry, content-in-process, experiential art-making, phenomenological approach.

Introduction

In this paper I will focus on the art-based research inquiry undertaken as part of the unit Emerging Inquiry 1 in the Masters in Therapeutic Arts Practice at MIECAT. The MIECAT procedures that inform the process of inquiry will be embedded. These include the use of amplification to expand data collection, reduction to reduce, and those that occur within process, including forming access points that open channels of inquiry, and adopting a phenomenological approach. Furthermore, the values from MIECAT are also implicit throughout this paper, including relationality within the intersubjective space, and allowing for emergence through multimodal art-marking. It is written using content-in-process that concurrently shifts between both what is happening, and how it happened.

I have chosen to share the most relevant parts of the inquiry, being guided by Leavy's (2019) arts-based research criteria, in particular criteria on transparency when communicating to the reader the process of methodology, as well as the criteria of aesthetics and artfulness, which evoke and captivate the reader, and aim to provide an authentic representation of the arts-based inquiry. I do anticipate the art expressions in this inquiry will evoke a response in the reader, which is an indicator in arts-based research that it is meeting the objective of art as evidence (McNiff, 2014).

I welcome you to my explorations, and in order to help you navigate this I have organised the paper into the inquiry question as an access point, the process of inquiry, musings, and will close with a creative synthesis/resting point.

Inquiry question as an access point

My inquiry question as an access point is represented as an expression. I formed this through the process of collating data, expressions, intersubjective responses and journal reflections, from previous MIECAT units. I then reduced this data through clustering, a MIECAT reduction procedure that I relate to as finding the common threads. I did this initially by bracketing out knowings to attempt to see the data with a fresh perspective, while remaining experiential and present in the moment. I then proceeded with bracketing in all knowings about the data to gain a broader understanding of how the data was shaping. I reduced it down to two clusters, made an expression for each, and titled one cluster as consonant, and one as dissonant. I found myself being more curious about the dissonant expression I had created. This was particularly evident with my body moving to be within proximity to it. I knew from there that this was the access point for the inquiry.

In reflecting on the process of forming my access point, I became aware of the friction that I was experiencing as my body and the pastel connected with the paper. The force from my body was so strong that I shattered the pastel. I felt a sense of shame for being rough and I apologised to the pastel. I then softened the expression by smoothing the lines with my finger. I am curious as to why I felt the need to soften the lines. The phrase 'softening the blow' comes to mind. I remember pausing and checking in with the expression, and myself, as this was emerging. There was this vulnerability that entered the space of being unfinished. I picked up the black pastel and scribbled across the expression. The stark contrast of the black lines stared back at me. I noticed myself distancing from the expression and looking at it with disapproval.

In essence, this access point was bringing into being both a disturbed sensation in my body and the judgement emerging from this expression of being not socially acceptable in its raw and vulnerable form (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Susannah Morrison, *Inquiry question as access point*, 2023, soft pastel on paper, 210 × 297mm.

Process of inquiry

Together with my companion, I begin the process of inquiry through the procedure of mapping the access point as an inquirer. Mapping involves the companion asking a series of questions to the inquirer that assist with gaining clarity, or leading to further knowings (MIECAT, 2022). At an embodied level, I resonate with my response to the question ‘With whom does it happen?’ I feel curious when playing with materials that provide a bumpy texture, or sound, when I interact with them. I am uncertain why, yet it is this repetitive friction between the materials, my body and the relational space that I notice (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Susannah Morrison, *Friction*, 2023, digital art.

At this point of the inquiry, I am beginning to sense a theme of friction with materials and my body. I lean into this sense of friction and create a gentleness box for my materials. I want to offer comfort and support to the materials involved in this inquiry, so I also add cotton balls. I find, while I am creating the gentleness box, the colours emerge more clearly – black, blue and red – and the message to acknowledge that, during this inquiry, these colours and expressions hold significance and are to be honoured in a gentle way. They want to be seen but also protected (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Susannah Morrison, *Gentleness box*, 2022, photograph of hands holding collection of pastels, pen and cotton balls in a container.

As the inquiry continues, I revisit my access point to amplify again to see what is emerging now. I choose woodgrain cardboard as I know the texture provides friction. I feel a strong resonance to continue with the pastels, tracing the bumpy cardboard with black, blue and red. I feel into the texture and notice the friction when it connects with my body. A shape begins to form; I choose black to outline the shape. Perhaps, in a way, I am closing in on where the friction is most vulnerable. Immediately I experience a sensation of tightness in my chest, and a visceral discomfort with the forming expression.

I decide to continue by leaning into these feelings and open myself to dialogue with the expression. I am given permission to welcome a new colour. I choose a lighter shade of blue to colour in the area outlined with black. I use a gentler motion this time, maybe to bring more light into the expression. Yet I can still hear, and feel, this relentless friction of the pastel, me, and the cardboard. I pause for a moment then listen to the expression to attune to any keywords emerging. I notice, in this moment, the protective walls I have built are crumbling, cracks appear – the materials are finding ways to seep through these cracks in the wall and, much like Contos (2022) highlights, expressing implicit knowings in a more visible way.

I have a felt sense to view the expression through different angles. As I change angles, I notice this speaks of friction in the womb, baby, and mother. Tears swell as I come to know my inquiry in more depth (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Susannah Morrison, *Womb-baby-mother*, 2022, mixed media.

After completing expression four, I choose to amplify again to seek further understanding of my inquiry. I notice I am sense-making but feel I want to bracket this out to be present in the moment of experiencing.

I begin with exploring cord, feeling the shape, texture and weight. I am becoming frustrated with trying to unravel the cord, so I grab the scissors and cut it. I immediately feel heaviness in my body and acknowledge this is something significant. However, I want to remain in the experiential process, so I continue. I play around with the shapes of cord on the paper and lean into what feels right. Time for colour to enter the intersubjective space. I trace around the shapes of cord with pastels and notice my sense of touch is heightened. I slow down and repeatedly say, “feel the pain” as the red pastel travels over the bumps and friction on the cord (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Susannah Morrison, *Feel the pain*, 2022, photograph of hands using pastel on cord.

I can see there is a sense of emptiness on the page. I respond by dialoguing with the expression; it needs paint and water. I choose watercolour to fill the expression. I am drawn to the larger shape enclosed within the cord. I use a criss-cross motion of black and blue strokes, feeling into this sense that I am crossing it out. I notice I dislike what I'm doing, and begin to distance myself from the expression as I feel tension in my chest. Yet I breathe through this and pick up the black pastel then use my hand to roll the pastel back and forth. The pastel in my hand makes a ‘clunk, clunk, clunk’ sound as it makes contact with the page. This leaves an impression much like the other expressions of black lines; however, they feel softer, and not as disturbing to look at and witness (see Figure 6).

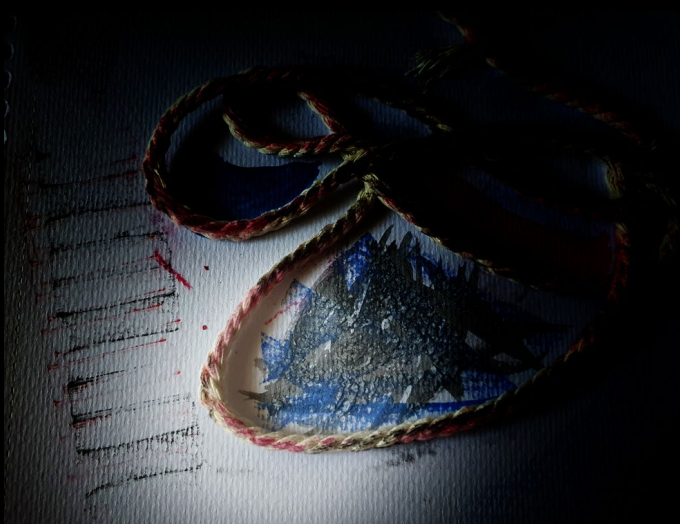


Figure 6. Susannah Morrison, *Soft black lines*, 2022, cord, watercolour and pastel on paper, 148.5 × 210mm.

I am drawn to the one side of this forming expression where the two ends of the cord have been cut and are now feathering. I paint this with pink watercolour and pat the area to soothe. I wonder if this needs love. I use my fingers to circle around the feathered cut cord. Embodied energy takes over my whole being. I feel a big whoosh that rushes in, then out (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Susannah Morrison, *Whooshh*, 2022, digitally edited photograph of ink on paper, 60mm × 210mm.

I pause, breathe, and then consult the expression. It wants me to flick the paint, so I flick the paint, yet it comes out as big blobs. The desire emerges to wipe them off, because I feel they destroy the harmony of the expression. I bracket this out, as the expression is ready to speak. It speaks with vulnerability of a memory of my body (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Susannah Morrison, *Memory*, 2022, cord, watercolour and pastel on paper, 148.5 × 210mm.

My inquiry is leading to a body memory where my mind was unconscious. I continue to cycle through different multimodal expressions and arrive at a point where the data has reached fruition. This is referred to as data saturation, where further explorations continue to produce the same insights (Leavy, 2019). I try to make sense of what this is (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. Susannah Morrison, *Two parts of a whole*, 2022, mixed media, 160 × 270mm.

I contemplate what two parts of a whole means, from expression nine, by bracketing in what I have come to know through my journals, expressions, and my access point as inquiry question. I lean into this ideology from Kalmanowitz (2013), of wholeness being perceptual.

I AM creating,
MY WHOLE with
MY PARTS,
MY PERSPECTIVE, and
MY EXPERIENCE.

I feel an urge to create a comic story of my lived memory as 'its whole' emerges (see Figure 10).

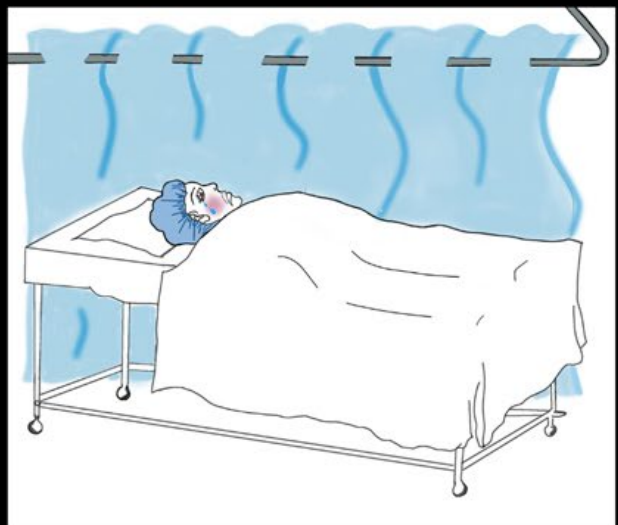
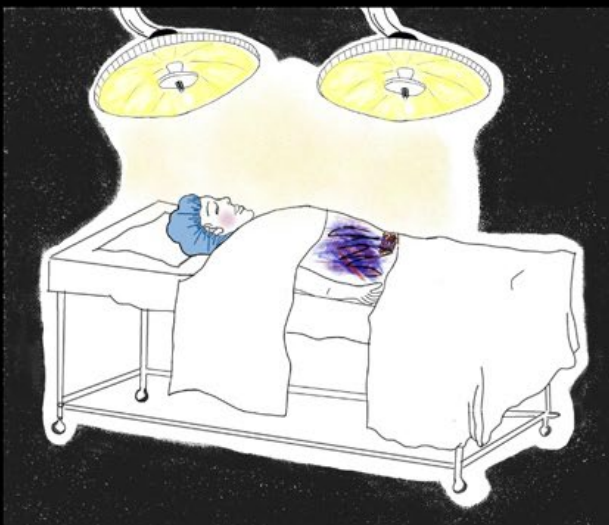
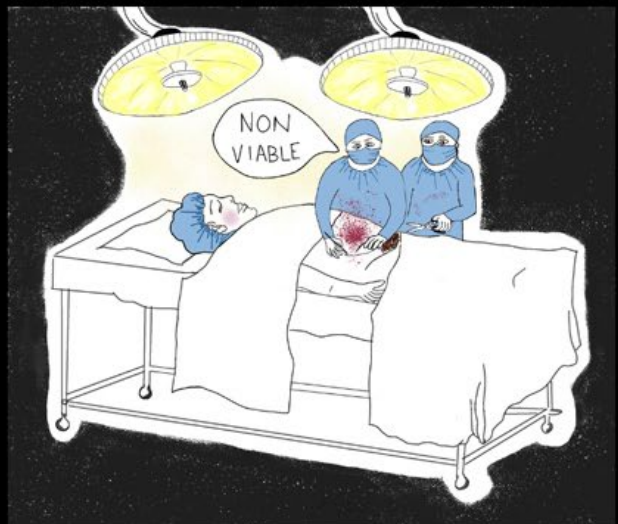
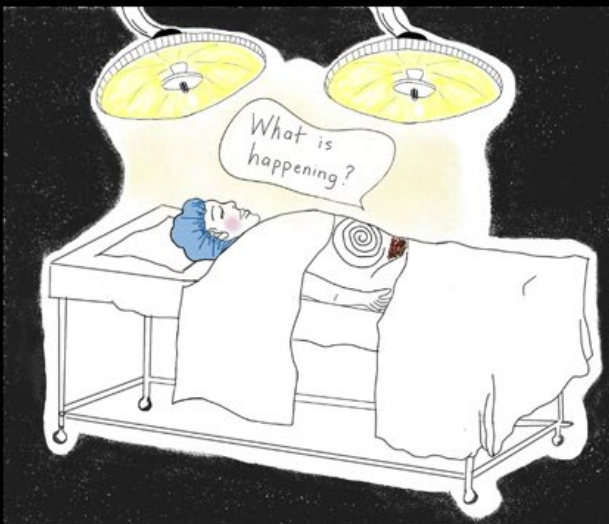
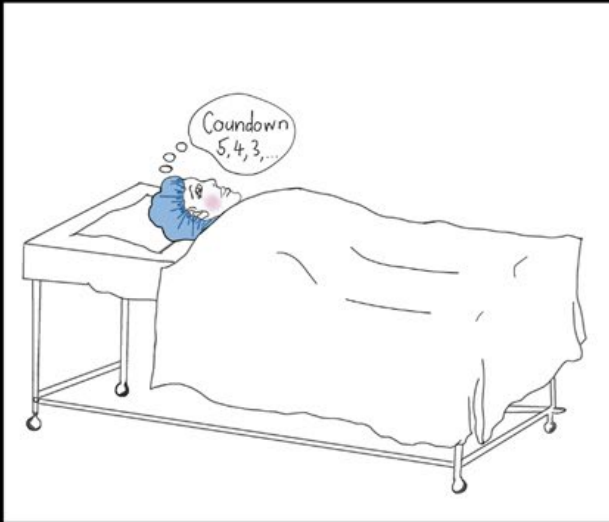


Figure 10. Susannah Morrison, *The WHOLE story*, 2022, digital comic.

Musings

My body has been left in this state of disturbance, displacement and loss. My arts-based inquiry has unearthed a memory from when I was ten weeks pregnant. I was rushed to hospital after it was discovered that my baby was not in my womb; it was in my fallopian tube. It was considered life-threatening, so I had my baby and fallopian tube removed immediately.

My body has expressed through this inquiry the friction felt, the inferiority of my womb that is crossed out, the sounds during the medical procedure, the pain, the shock, the sadness, and the loss.

I have noticed feelings through this inquiry of being distanced and having reluctance to explore this. I felt isolated after this happened. I was told it was non-viable by the doctors, who wondered why I felt sad and wanted to see a social worker. My tears were silenced and only seen by me. I was told it wasn't meant to be, by family and friends, and that it would be a financial burden. I felt alone, as no one acknowledged that I had lost someone I loved – my baby. This led to part one of my creative synthesis, representing what I have come to know, as inquirer, with the gentle and compassionate support of the materials, myself, my body, my companions and my lecturer. This expression in Figure 11 reflects on what it feels like to come to a place where I'm opening to this notion that it was hard, it hurt, and there was loss.



Figure 11. Susannah Morrison, *Creative synthesis part one – Unzipping*, 2022, photograph.

Resting point

I have discovered through my inquiry that it has spoken of my experience of disenfranchised grief, which is defined as “the experience of loss, or a state of bereavement, not openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (Markin & Zilcha-Mano, 2018, p.21). I felt it was not socially acceptable to grieve, or to grieve what could be. This was evident from the disapproval I felt towards my access point, and the vulnerability from expressions during the inquiry process, the need to feel protected and held gently. In this inquiry, my body has taken the lead, and reminded me through art that this experience has not had the closure it needs. At this resting point in my inquiry,

I truly resonate with Sajnani's (2012) stance on the arts illuminating the experiences of living in a way that would be lost if we attempted to quantify our lived experience.

I may be a statistic of early-pregnancy loss that can be quantified by medical professionals as non-viable, but I am also a human who experiences the world through my own lens and deserves to grieve in whatever way I feel. What I feel to do now is to honour this baby and my body. In early-pregnancy loss, exploring the arts provides opportunities to grieve and create a "tangible and lasting part of their lost child" (Seftel, 2001, p.98). With that in mind, I leave you with my creative synthesis part two, seen in Figure 12.



Susannah Morrison, *Creative synthesis part two – Acknowledging*, 2022, video, 01:38.

[Click here to access the video](#)

I want to scream,
“Screw society!”
for devaluing my experience.
I don't. That's not who I am.
However, I will grieve.
I need to grieve.
It is valued grief.

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Susannah is a current student in the Masters of Therapeutic Arts at the MIECAT Institute in Melbourne, Australia. She is passionate about the field of therapeutic arts, and surrendering to the process that the creative arts offer in being an agent for knowledge, acceptance, change and healing. She is avid life-long learner, receiving the University Medal for her teaching studies from Charles Darwin University, and being placed on the Dean's Roll of Excellence for her studies at the University of Tasmania. As an alumna she now serves on the Creative Arts and Health Course Advisory Committee for the University of Tasmania. She also offers creative art experiences to various community agencies, as well as life-skills support, and social and emotional learning therapy to people with disabilities through her business Functional Skills Focus, located in Kaurna Country in Adelaide, South Australia.



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