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AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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The editorial team wishes to thank those members of the Peer Review Panel and others who generously contributed their time and expertise to the peer review of this edition of *ANZJAT*.

Published by Australian and New Zealand Arts Therapy Association
ABN 63 072 954 388
PO Box 303 Glebe, NSW 2037, Australia
www.anzata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Jill Segedin

Printing McCollams, Auckland, New Zealand and Documents On Call, Melbourne, Australia

Beneath the surface: The lived experience of the art therapist

Jody Thomson

Abstract

This article draws on a practice-led exploratory study of Australian visual art therapists' experiences of working with people living with, or dying from, cancer. My research was inspired by clinical work over many years as an independent art therapist, positioned at the intersection of psychotherapeutic practice and the Australian medical and allied health world of cancer and palliative care. The study was an art-based phenomenological enquiry using reflexive, spontaneous image creation as *data* within semi-structured interviews, in a way familiar to the art therapist-participants. As in clinical practice, image-making opened a space for intimacy and connectedness, offering therapist-participants a different way to respond and communicate not only professional knowledge, but their subjective, lived experience in an observable process, creating tangible data. I responded through image making to this data and in the process developed a method that I call *immersive visual analysis*. In this method, the image functions simultaneously as primary data, the method of enquiry and as a point of dialogic and analytic focus.

Keywords

Cancer and palliative care, visual methodologies, art therapy research, immersive visual analysis, therapist's experience.

My first lessons in painting were about *learning to see* – to focus and to frame, or find the *essence* of the image-to-be amongst all the distracting stimuli. Competence and confidence grew from practice, learning the techniques of colour, brushwork and style. In beginning a work, I was taught to first prepare the canvas with a 'ground' colour, usually in a light, neutral mid-tone, onto which I would paint the colours and light of what was before me. This base coat was intended to cover the stark whiteness of the surface that can interfere with the way we see the temperature of the paint we apply, and to prevent the paint from being absorbed into the material of the canvas.

As a painter, I am familiar with taking a pause before the work begins – a moment to stand back and breathe, a moment to focus my intention to the exclusion of all else as the grounded canvas sits on my easel. The moment

is filled with uncertainty, of 'not knowing' whether I can communicate the image in my mind and recreate it on the canvas before me. In my work as an art therapist, I experience a similar moment of pause and uncertainty before a client symbolically shares the colours and tones of their in-the-moment experience on the life-canvas between us. I rely on my training and experience to allow me to see images *differently*, to focus, and to provide a semi-opaque theoretical and professional *ground* to protect the underlying fabric of my life.

This was how I approached a recent exploratory study (Thomson, 2015) into the lived experiences of art therapists working in Australian cancer and palliative care. My training and experience grounded me, providing a focus and intention to remain open to the "spontaneous and unknown" (Leavy, 2015, p.20), of what might emerge.