

**What's The Story?**  
**The Sixth Exeter Arts and Therapies Conference (EATc)**  
**18th May 2007**

---



**Pauline McGee**  
**Time, Place, Form and Space**

This is an exciting and universal title for a conference as we all have our stories to tell. Individuals seek therapy when they have a story to tell of sadness, loss, anger or lack of direction. Sometimes life stories are just too difficult to tell and secrets and shame become heavy burdens to carry. Art therapy can offer a different way to shed light on individual stories and endless possibility for exploration of meaning.

Art therapists of course have their own stories to tell of development of the profession, the internal and external politics, their stories of growth as artists, as therapists, and personal life histories that led them down this route in the first place.

The story of our own lives is often revealed through images we make in accordance with particular events. An ability to reveal our inner process leaves us open and responsive to the process, the dialect and the struggles of others. My personal story has never separated the artist from the therapist; I could not be one without the other. I hope to illustrate some of this parallel process through images made at specific times in my life and development as a therapist.

My artistic journey began at an early age through growing realisation that amidst the noise and chaos of a large family art was something that was mine. I could shut everything and everyone else out and paint, draw and create for hours. Making art has never lost this powerful impact upon me and expressions of joy, release, fear, anger and exploration have continued.



**Spring 1985**  
Gouache 45cm x 37cm



**Summer 1985**  
Gouache 45cm x 37cm



**Dance 1985**  
Charcoal  
60cm x 45cm

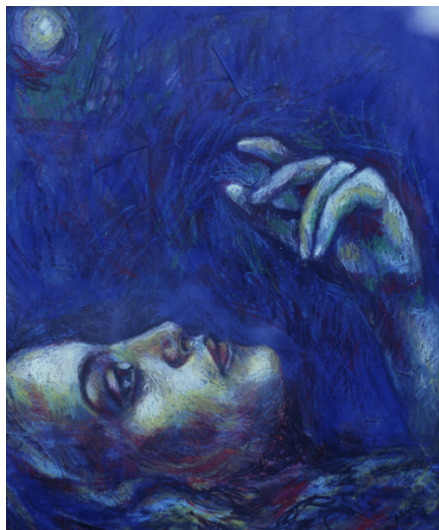


**Angel 1985**  
Charcoal  
60cm x 45cm

With the death of people I loved my life story changed. At these stages time had an uncanny knack of standing still and I often lost all sense of meaning and purpose. Sleep and wakefulness would blend together as my mind tried to make the reality of death just a dream and hold the bizarre world of dreams as my reality.



**Dreaming I Was Drowning**  
1987 Oil pastel and gouache  
30cm x 25cm



**Wish**  
Oil pastel 25cm x 40cm



**Inside Out**  
Oil on canvas 180cm x 120cm

Working with images has offered a way to honour these feelings but also opportunity to process internal chaos and find a way through the grief and loss. Time, space and silence to be with my thoughts have been important to my personal story. Silence however, does not hold the same meaning for others.

For years I have worked in the area of childhood sexual abuse where silence means secrecy and secrets are kept at a cost. Children do not possess the words to describe a sexually abusive experience. Childhood sexual abuse thrives in secrecy and silence with disclosure being a process over time, making it a confusing and complex area to work in.

Shame, guilt, anxiety, fear and current media reporting can all create barriers for those seeking help and for those wishing to help them. Media reporting plays a major part in shaping societal perceptions about childhood sexual abuse. Herman (1994) highlights that even within the confines of therapy any disclosure of abuse may result in public disclosure and this is what perpetrators work so hard to prevent. Perpetrators know what they can do to a child without detection. Tactics are coercive, manipulative and devised to confuse. We must also remember that long-term abuse is not necessarily accompanied by violence and danger (Finkelhor, 1986) and children are often abused by those who supposedly love them.

However some journalists have worked hard in trying to address a dangerous stance of reporting. In his article, 'If Journalists were Therapists' Mark Brayne (2002) pleads for therapists and journalists to communicate deeply and honestly with one another in order to be less

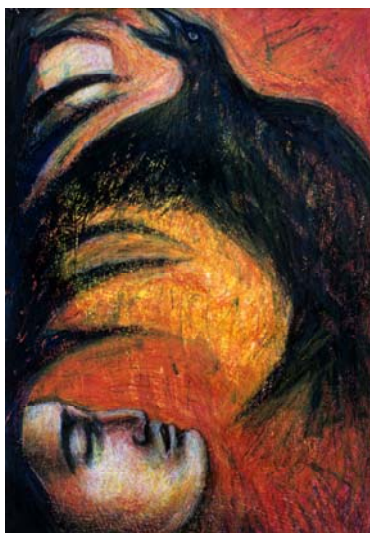
defensive of traditions and suggests that therapists can re-educate journalists understanding of trauma.

He describes societies perception of childhood sexual abuse as a 'mythical creature', an interesting notion when our imagination can barely tolerate what happens to the child trapped within this situation. The 'mythical creature' is elusive, faceless and formless but in many ways easier to conceive than the perpetrator who is a father, brother, uncle or the man next door.



**Mythical Creature**  
Oil on canvas 180cm x 120cm

An easily identifiable target for moral outrage, shame and anger has become the professional working in this field (Itzin 2000; Richardson & Bacon 2001; Herman 1994) An environment has been created which, in many ways, mirrors the experience of the victimised, fearful and disempowered child. However fear ensures enforced silence, "*the most potent weapon of abusers*" (Nelson 2000. p394) and silence is not what children or adult survivors need in order to speak out and begin the process of recovery.

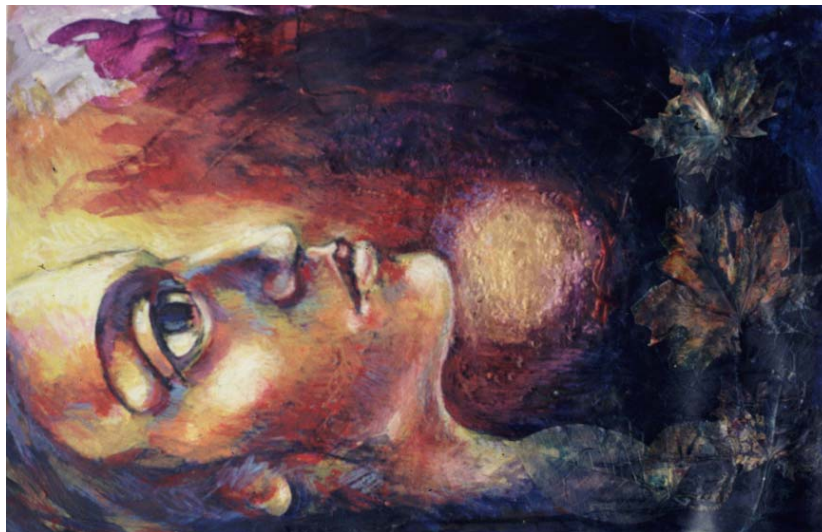


**Place**  
Oil pastel and Acrylic 70cm x 50cm

As the study of trauma has grown and developed so too has the level of controversy surrounding it. Understanding how the mind and body survive traumatic events has intrigued and informed generations of practitioners in diverse fields since the aftermath of our known wars (Herman 1994).

Important links in memory formation is made to what we now know as 'Flashbacks' with their disturbing ability to trigger memories so intense they feel as if they are happening at that very moment. For the survivor inability to locate memory, feeling, time and meaning can result in the therapist being feared until trust is established in a realistic way.

Until only recently dissociation was considered an instinctual and merciful response to a terrifying situation but growing awareness highlights the long term cost of survival and has often led to survivors being labelled or further stigmatised (Hogan 1997; Nelson 2001; Itzin 2000) An important aspect of dissociation is the numbing of feeling, freezing at the point of terror in belief that no escape is possible (Rothschild 2000). Survivors often believe that they should have reacted differently, making shame and guilt long-term issues. When a traumatic memory is triggered shame can resurface.



Solitude 2000  
Oil pastel & gouache  
75cm x 60cm

Working with survivors of abuse can challenge our professional identity and self esteem. We can feel inadequate, helpless and confused when confronted with dissociation, self-harming behaviour and terror. This can lead to therapeutic failure and exacerbate a survivor's shame and self-loathing when their perceived potential for growth, recovery, change and developing trusting relationship does not transpire.

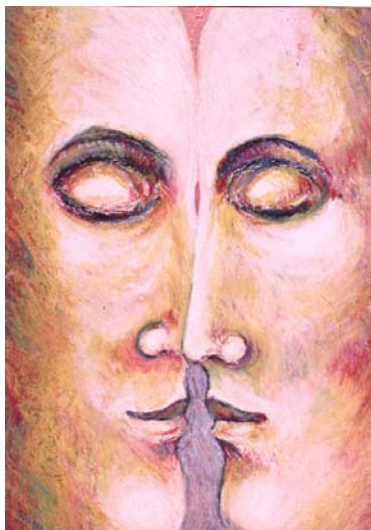


See no Evil 2003  
Oil pastel & acrylic 30cm x 20cm

‘See no Evil’ was made in response to my own overwhelming feeling of a third presence in the room when working with a particular client. On re-reading Herman’s ‘Trauma and Recovery’ (1994) I came across her description of the perpetrator who, “*appeals to the universal desire to see, hear and speak no evil*” (p7).

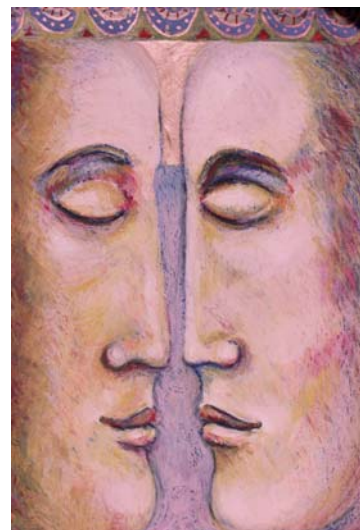
I knew that the feeling of a third presence was the perpetrator who instilled great fear in the child in order that the ‘secret’ would never be disclosed. By making sense of my own confusion and fear the client was given permission to identify her fear and accept that natural responses were not indicators of madness.

Consideration of mind – body unity is of particular importance to the art therapist working with childhood sexual abuse with its range of emotional responses associated with shame, fear, loss and stigmatisation and how these affect transference, counter transference issues (Rothschild 2000). Exploration of my own boundaries and coping mechanisms became increasingly important to understand and process. I often had to make sense of feelings and sensations that were my own and distinguish these from feelings and sensations I was ‘carrying’ for the client.



Borderline 2003  
Oil pastel &  
acrylic  
45cm x 30cm

Brokenline 2003  
Oil pastel &  
acrylic  
45cm x 30cm



The secrecy, fear and disempowerment upon which sexual abuse depends results in isolation and disconnection from peers, siblings and community therefore ability to connect and communicate with another in the context of relationship is crucial for recovery (Herman The power imbalance within a therapeutic relationship, however, will inevitably arouse childhood fears.

Art therapy can provide a way of processing images in a form that is less terrifying and overwhelming. Confronting traumatic imagery may be the first step in addressing shame where its powerful hold need no longer be maintained by secrecy. Auditory and visual flashbacks may be more readily expressed in images than words (Rothschild 2000; Shore 2003)



Heart2Heart 2003  
Oil pastel & acrylic 30cm x 20cm

For a survivor it takes great strength and determination to return to therapy week after week. They face confusion, rage and grieving over losses alongside ongoing physical, emotional and psychological impact of abuse. However within therapy there is also growth of trust, determination, self-belief and incredibly powerful moments of sharing, compassion and intimacy.

Shame dynamics will have implications for art therapists where sight, vision, images, witnessing and ability to be with another form crucial components of this therapeutic contact. Art therapist as ‘witness’ (Learmonth 1994) places us uniquely in the position of seeing detail of traumatic events unfolding through art. Within the area of childhood sexual abuse this also means bearing witness to detail of crimes committed against children with implications for confidentiality and boundaries of therapy. Art therapists, like others working in this area, face the continual balancing act between fear and consequence of witnessing with belief and hope in the work we do (Warner 2000)



Cocoon 1999  
Oil pastel & gouache 70cm x 50cm

Processing our own sensory experiences is crucial when working with trauma. Personal resources can be depleted when we don't feel ‘Good enough’ and it's easy to lose hope. Feelings of fear, anger, confusion and loss may be expressed through art materials with their potential for destruction, mess, chaos and release alongside aspects of rebuilding, reforming, growth and development.



Work in progress  
Oil on canvas 100cm x 60cm



Work in progress  
Collage 30cm x 25cm



Creativity allows us to experience despair and tolerate the unknown



**Corryvreckan-1 2007**  
Mixed medium  
40cm x 40cm



**Cinneas 2007**  
Acrylic and ink 60cm x 45cm



**Grunnaich 2007**  
Acrylic and ink 60cm x 45cm

Art allows us to be fearless, playful, courageous and insightful.



**My Summer Garden**  
Mixed medium 36cm x 50cm



**Mother Hen**  
Mixed medium 28cm x 20cm

Art therapists have access to a wonderful resource that serves in keeping us healthy and in touch with our own language.



Wishful Thinking 2007  
Collage 40cm x 60cm



Seas Between Us 2007  
Collage 40cm x 60cm

We all have our stories to tell and every picture tells a story. But we need to honour the time and space required to recount our stories in order to reveal conscious and unconscious meaning. Time is a precious commodity within the therapeutic context and within our personal lives. As my life story changes new images mark that place and greater understanding develops of the issues I work with.

Being an artist and an art therapist widens my vision helping me experience the depth and meaning of every situation and in an endless variety of ways. In therapy, as in stories, there is great emphasis on beginning, middle and ending. At this point we reach the end of my presentation but the story continues and the images will keep coming.

## References

- Brayne, M. (2002) If Journalists Were Therapists. *CPJ. Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal*. Vol 13 No. 8, pp 6-9
- Finkelhor, D. (1986) *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse*. London: Sage publications.
- Herman, J.L. (1994) *Trauma And Recovery*. London: Pandora.
- Hogan, S. (1997) *Feminist Approaches to Art Therapy*. London: Routledge.
- Itzin, C. (2000) *Home truths About Child Sexual Abuse*. London: Routledge.
- Learmonth, M. (1994) Witness and witnessing in art therapy. *Inscape* (1): 19-22.
- Nelson, S. (2000) Confronting Sexual Abuse. Challenges for the future. In Itzin, C. (ed) *Home Truths About Child Sexual Abuse*. pp 387 – 401 London: Routledge.
- Nelson, S. (2001) *Beyond Trauma*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Association For Mental Health.
- Richardson, S. & Bacon, H. (2001) *Creative Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rothschild, B. (2000) *The Body Remembers. The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. W.W. Norton & Company Inc. New York.
- Shore, A. (2003) *Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the Self*. New York: Norton.
- Warner, S. (2000) *Understanding child sexual abuse*. Gloucester, England: Handsell Publishing.