

Essay

Art as therapy

It is possible to survive things that are worse than dying. Torture for example, more commonly called child sexual abuse. It is also possible to become content and for the memories to fade, to survive suicide attempts.

I used art as therapy. I didn't do art therapy but I was taught how to draw and paint and attended art college. You see my parents had refused to let me study art at school. I think that when I was at primary school I was expressing myself through my art and my parents didn't like that—obviously it reflected badly on them, me painting monsters and getting upset. I'm a very creative person and being stopped from painting or sculpting was so hard.

Why were my parents so keen to stop me from creating art? It was a complete ban. To my father, artists were all lefty bastards. Strictly no art in any form was allowed. The television would be switched off. On holiday, I was dragged across the road from galleries. No painting sets, clay, or play dough; even pencil and paper were banned. I got in trouble for doodling on the telephone pad, sculpting in the butter, and making portraits in potatoes.

In 1990, in a poor council house, me on benefits as a carer to my son, I had my table. I had washed out an old tin and it sat on the table with pens and pencils on it. I can't quite pinpoint the time or the real impetus, but I started drawing. I had no money for paper but something about the packaging from breakfast cereals and apple pies, something in the substance of card through my hands instructed me to draw on it. I sat at that table, given to me by a charity shop, and I drew. I drew out all the pain, the misery, and the hurt. The plain unfairness of life came out of me and it came out of my fingertips; they seemed to know what to do. Somewhere inside, it was all stored up. Intense, angry, crisscrossed images, fantasy sequences, dreams, memories so removed from the actual events it took some time to establish what they were.

Paintings emerged from my very psyche that knew I repressed these memories. It was a release, but almost coded: the memories were too painful and unpleasant to face but were contained in blobs of colour—really old childhood memories. The colour appeared, then a few lines; more lines built up and eventually an image, a release.

Unfortunately, due to the demands of caring for my son I was unable to study art at this time. My son was born with congenital deformities and needed many reconstructive surgeries.

I had been living in Aberdeen (Scotland) but moved back to Edinburgh to try to get support from my family, which never materialised. The reality of being back in the city where I grew up and having contact with my parents again had a negative effect on my mental health. I slid and slid

into psychosis. I had struggled to cope throughout my teenage years and early twenties—I had taken to drinking alcohol and smoking hash to cope, self-medicating. I had stopped eating for several years too, denying myself nourishment or pleasure.

During my psychosis, I thought that the Nazis had taken over and that everybody who was a single parent, old, disabled, or Black was being taken to concentration camps that I could see hidden in the trees. The buses with the odd numbers took you there. I thought that they were going to take my son away from me and abuse him, while raping me to get me pregnant. This thought was partly true as my family would have abused my son if I'd let them. The saying, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you, rings true for me. Even through this, I started a college course to do Art Portfolio preparation.

I eventually went to see my health visitor and was admitted to The Royal Edinburgh Hospital in Edinburgh. The admission was difficult as I was thinking it was a concentration camp and they were going to rape me. They had taken my son off me and I was thinking that he was being abused. The psychiatrist with the kind brown eyes managed to get through to me that this was a hospital: it was a difficult process. I was in there for 6 weeks. They gave me amitriptyline, which was sunshine in a pill, it brought me up from a deep dark hole.

There was very little discussion of my background in the hospital despite me being in there for 6 weeks.

The hospital staff just did not address the real issue for my ill health. They had no time or inclination to listen: what I wanted more than anything was to talk about what had happened, instead there was smoking, no exercise, a television, punctuated with three meals a day, and a huge feeling that the staff were right and I had done something very very wrong. On the ward, I learned of the currency of cigarettes and the importance of the tea trolley and that there were gradients of madness—there had to come a point, if you wanted to get better, when you had to realise that you were ill. It was a slow climb, like a bus going up a hill in the snow. I settled in when I realised the staff were there to help. For some reason, one of the female psychiatrists forced me to tell them of my parents' address and phone number. I hadn't wanted to see them again. So then I had to cope with my family coming up to visit me; they were brought into my life again. My mum wore her blazer, showing off her middle class credentials, and she asked me what the prognosis was. I had had enough of being polite: I just shouted at her, you know why I'm in here, over and over and she got up and left.



Carla

I had been on a date the night before I ended up in hospital: he never came to visit me so I guessed it was over. My hash dealer came to visit me twice, I'm not sure why, but he got a cold reception from the staff at the hospital—they take a dim view of drugs. I thought these dealers were my friends and during my time in hospital I realised that that wasn't so; they were users for their own profit and didn't care about my mental health, which was exacerbated by the smoking of hash. I was rubbish at smoking hash—I did get paranoid a lot and realised it was ridiculous to keep doing something that increased my negative thoughts.

Before coming into hospital, I had asked people for help. The door was firmly shut in my face. My family had got aggressive with my mother holding her hands around my neck and telling me to keep my mouth shut, scaring my son.

I decided to go and visit my friend's mum and dad up in Aberdeen, I thought they would help me. Instead they got a suitcase out and pretended to be going on holiday to try and get rid of me. It didn't work—I was psychotic. They had tissue boxes, which had the same colours as the German flag; I thought they were in league with the Nazis.

My friend's mum and dad convinced me to leave (you can't stay here), driving me to the bus station very fast to make the bus on time. Putting me back on the bus home he said, while shaking my hand, everything will be alright.

I had even gone to my general practitioner and told her that I was feeling suicidal—nothing was done, except a prescription for some not very strong medication that I then used to try to commit suicide.

Hospital was scary: I was terrified, people were out of control. We were given medication at 10 pm. We had to queue up at the office for our pills from the drugs trolley. You had to take it without protest or explanation. We were shackled by the medication to the hospital and the psychiatrists. It pulled you down with side-effects. The amitriptyline gave me sunshine in a pill, it pulled me out of a deep dark hole; I learnt to smile again. We were then sent to bed and had to stay there. The night staff didn't like being bothered. Strangely, I always felt safer when a big rugby boy was on duty in case it kicked off.

After hospital, I decided to pursue a career in art. The amazing thing was, for once in my life I was in the right

place at the right time—a company called Forth Sector was setting up training for artists. The two tutors Lisa and Lorna were sympathetic to our health; we just did afternoons to balance out our feelings of fatigue due to depression. We had classes in clay, painting, drawing, and printmaking. They were patient and took time to explain how to do something and didn't mind if you were a bit slow on the uptake. It was all part of the healing process.

My drawing slowly improved. My drawings were black and white rather like my attitude to life, here's the black with my pencil and there's the white of the paper. Lisa showed me how to use a rubber to make gradients of grey to make the object appear three dimensional. The other thing I wasn't good at was grounding the object, it always appeared like it was floating in air; this was solved by putting in a shadow and a definite solid line to lynchpin it to the table. I can see that by resolving my drawing I was also resolving my attitude to life. The lack of solid grounding was indicative of my family life, black and white thinking often found in Aspergers.

After this I studied for a diploma at Edinburgh College. This was a complete contrast to Forth Sector as the tutors really didn't care. My relationship with them broke down and they failed me. However, I complained and got my certificate in the end. It was a great chance to try lots of art—illustration, textiles, sculpture, and painting. I chose to study sculpture; it was unfortunately soulless. I wanted to do figures but that wasn't in fashion. It meant a lot to me but I didn't realise you just have to produce what the tutor wants to pass, massage their ego.

It was a shame, I love art. I had studied for 4 years and I had chosen my own subjects and my own courses to follow, each class adding to my wealth of expertise and experience. Maybe it wasn't to be my career but it had healed me. I had hated my hands and the things they had been made to do, art made me love my hands, love my life.

Carla

This article is taken from a longer unpublished memoir.

Copyright © 2022 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an Open Access article under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.