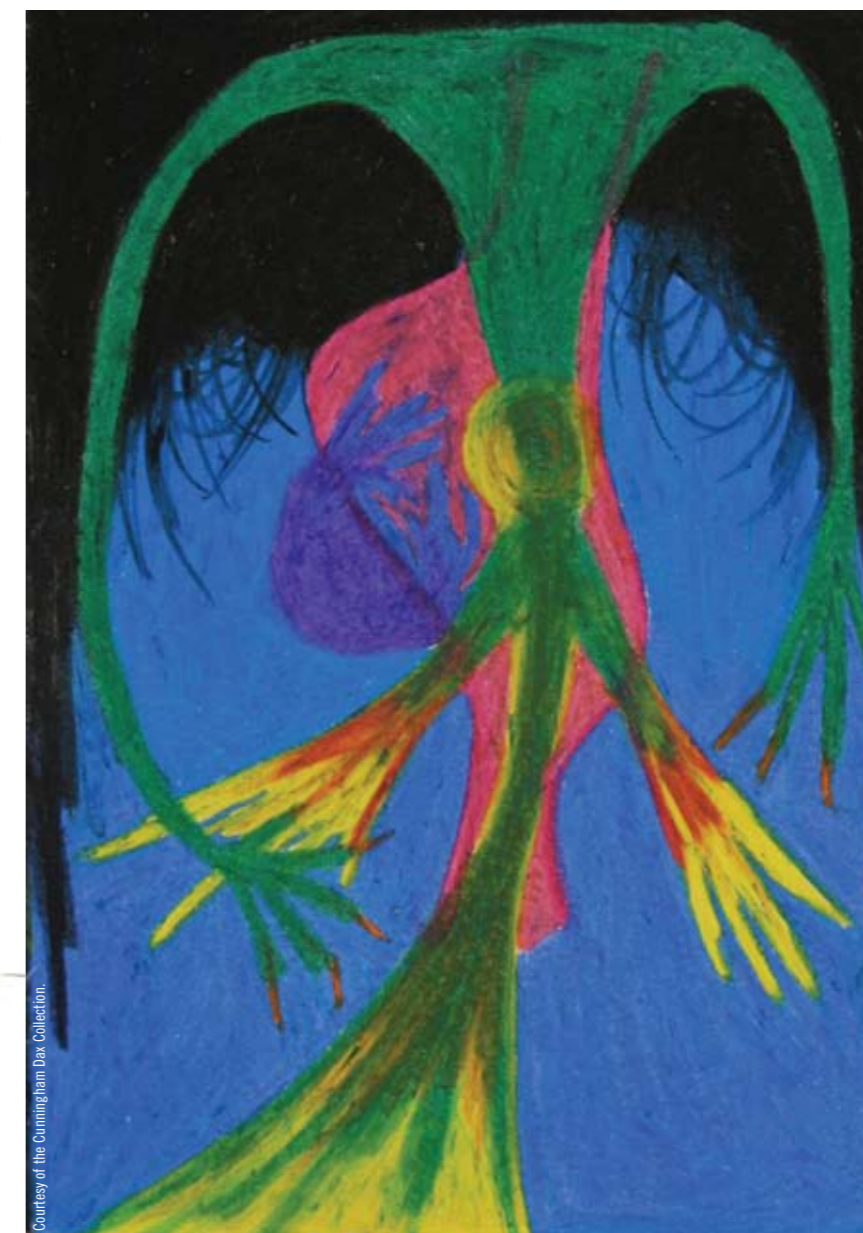
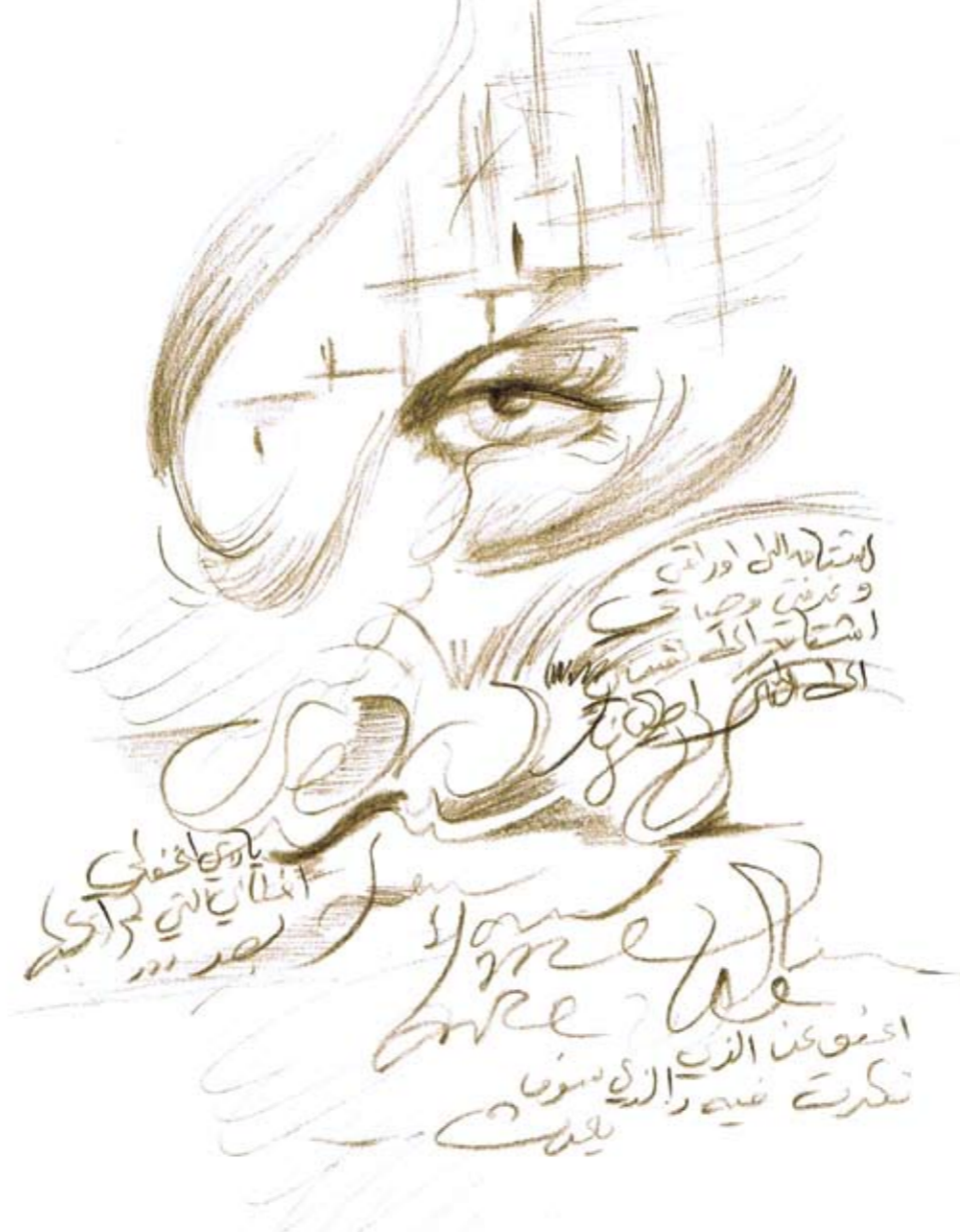


FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Three images drawn by clients of art therapist Sue Sweeney; (Far right) Leah, *The Monster*, 2008, oil pastel on paper, 42.0 x 29.5 cm, from the Cunningham Dax Collection. All images reproduced with permission.



Courtesy of the Cunningham Dax Collection.

Kate Woods reports on how art therapy can help people through their toughest times.

art and healing

CAN God see this? Does God know about this?

These poignant questions are ones that haunt art psychotherapist Sue Sweeney.

"I was with the UN in 2003 when its headquarters in Baghdad was bombed and found myself working with some of the survivors.

"One young woman in her late 20s, who had facial and other injuries, made a series of images... one of which appeared to be a shard of glass or a crystal with disembodied faces in it. The glass was dripping with what appeared to be blood.

"It was a very powerful image."

Her other piece, continues Ms Sweeney, was of an eye surrounded by Arabic words.

"It is shocking to hear someone describe how they had to feel their arms and legs after the bomb went off to make sure they were still in one piece. Or to hear them describe the blackness, the choking dust, and how the force of the bomb blast blew off their clothes.

"But at the same time I also saw it as a privilege. They wanted to share their story."

The use of art therapy – a form of psychological support that uses images to help people access thoughts, feelings and memories that are not easily retrieved through words – has always struggled for acceptance within the Australian medical fraternity.

A lack of robust evidence has prevented many Australian healthcare professionals from jumping on board.

'Many abuse victims find it therapeutic to then destroy their artwork' Sue Sweeney

Most trials to date have been small, and researchers have found it difficult to distinguish whether the benefits of the therapy are due to the art or the supportive element of the therapy.

BARRIER TO ACCEPTANCE

Megan Shiell, from the Australian and New Zealand Art Therapy Association (ANZATA), agrees that research has been a barrier to acceptance.

"We have done a lot of clinical trials, but most use narrative material," she says.

However, she adds that there is a growing body of evidence and that art psychotherapy can be used effectively for a number of conditions.

In a recent paper, US researchers describe a small number of studies that have yielded positive results in combat veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including one study that found veterans who completed a drawing task after being

woken by nightmares had fewer and less intense nightmares than those who completed a writing task.¹

Likewise, several studies looking at abuse and trauma have shown that short-term group and individual art therapy can decrease anxiety, depression and PTSD symptoms, and improve self-esteem.²

Ms Sweeney says that in her experience, the benefits of art therapy are not exclusive to PTSD developed after extreme circumstances. She has used it

successfully in a person traumatised from a car accident.

"When someone is traumatised, they find it very difficult to consciously make sense of what has happened to them, no matter what the experience behind it," she says.

"Creating an image often helps that process to start."

ABUSE

People who have been abused also find it difficult to find the words to express their experience, Ms Sweeney says.

As one US researcher looking at art therapy and sexual abuse describes it: "At times of intense stress and terror, the cognitive memory system may be bypassed... Art therapy offers visual and sensorimotor media that may more easily allow repressed traumatic memories to surface."³

These surfaced memories, says Ms Sweeney, are frequently a real revelation for clients, as often "they had no idea they were going to bring those thoughts or feelings to the paper or even that they were going to express them in that way".

Once the thoughts and feelings are expressed, she says many

abuse victims find it therapeutic to then destroy the artwork, which helps them regain "a sense of control".

GRIEF AND LOSS

West Australian art psychotherapist Dena Lawrence specialises in a number of different areas, but describes her work with people experiencing grief and loss as special.

"Often people who are dealing with grief and loss get stuck in an empty void. Through art, we try and tap into the part of the person that is still alive and retrieve who they are."

As well as catering for grief, she also works with people experiencing loss of identity, self-esteem or even a loss of their role in life.

A research paper published earlier this year looking at women grieving over infertility problems suggested art therapy could help reduce stress, anxiety and helplessness.⁴

EATING DISORDERS

Another one of Ms Lawrence's special interests is eating disorders.

She says while there isn't a

huge amount of research looking at the use of art therapy in eating disorders, the data available shows it is successful when used as part of a holistic approach.

She believes anorexics have difficulty in expressing their experience in words and that eating disorders are often a refuge where people can hide from their problems and gain control of their lives.

Unfortunately, as they lose weight and, in turn, inter-personal relationships, they find they are caught in a prison rather than a refuge. Art therapy can help them see themselves more clearly.

"Often they will draw their eating disorder in black or red, and always as mean and menacing creatures.

"However, their healthy self is always fragile – birds or fish – which have no chance against the lethal creatures.

"They then see how demonic the destructive part of themselves really is – it's a reality check."

PALLIATIVE CARE

Victorian art psychotherapist Susan Gilchrist believes that as

a society, we don't "do death" well.

"People find dying difficult, and I think in part it is because they have no choice about it.

"Art therapy offers a way of detouring the anxiety and exploring the intense emotions that dying brings."

However, she says, though art therapy may be cathartic, it doesn't always lead to resolution.

She adds that many people also turn to music therapy to help address their psychosocial, emotion and spiritual needs.

"If someone is finding it very hard to verbally express themselves, the use of images, metaphors and music can alleviate that stress. And that, I think, is very important."

A recent study looking at the use of music therapy in 80 people with terminal cancer found quality of life was higher among those receiving therapy.

Furthermore, quality of life increased over time as they received more music therapy sessions.⁵

References are available at medicalobserver.com.au



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