

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Creativity as a Lifeline:
connection through witnessing**

Serena Martinez-Coleman, Jen Mank, and Toni Morley

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The weekly Accountability Art Project was the product of a chance meeting at an art exhibit to honor Doris Arrington, the founder of the art therapy department at Notre Dame de Namur University. The conversation revealed a common theme that each of us were noticing – a lack of personal art making. The project began as accountability art: a pledge, between three art therapists, to complete one piece of art per week. We decided to hold one another accountable with weekly check-ins through mobile texts and emails. The Accountability Art Project began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, we also experienced distress related to extreme exposure to systemic racism and a divisive political election at the same time of the pandemic. The act of art making integrated inquiry and discovery. It allowed for reciprocal acts of witnessing life and loss that we were all facing, throughout a troubled and turbulent time in our nation and the world.

The field of art therapy continues to grow and so does the challenge between creativity and practice in what it means to be an art therapist (Junge, 2016). The current pandemic forces additional areas to consider, including emotional and physical well being. Art therapists are equipped to adapt and assist during pandemics using creativity (Potash, Kalmanowitz, Fung, Anand, & Miller, 2020). Engaging in the art making process can provide further development for the art therapist to recognize personal biases, themes of social injustice, or current personal issues (Braus & Morton, 2020; Hinz, 2017; Moon, 2008, 2015; Potash, 2018).

Our accountability group is composed of three women ranging in ages from their thirties to their eighties. Our different life stages bring unique challenges, opportunities, and perspectives. Although we share differences, including our cultural backgrounds, we find commonality in our views towards social justice, creativity, and community. According to Phillips (2016), the continual conversation in the field of art therapy has been understanding the identity of the art therapist and one's relationship to one's own artist self. The Accountability Art Project created a space for connection and reflection in a time of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain times. The realization of the neglect of art making within our own lives became the catalyst to connect to each other. Art making provides a means to utilize the mystery within ourselves to engage upon a sacred journey of expressions of self and ultimately soul (Moon, 2008).

Art making is a mechanism to identify, contain and reconcile emotional content from daily life (Fish, 2012). The resolution to create art on a weekly basis offered an opportunity to enhance self-understanding, promoting new and greater awareness of an ever changing identity of self through creativity (Beaumont, 2018; Fish, 2012). As we were sheltering in place, we experienced overwhelming emotions from the deaths caused by COVID-19 and the racial injustice perpetrated against innocent black men and women in the United States. Each of us had our own personal responses. Art making provided a way to respond authentically to what was being experienced (Potash, 2018). “Images are not always beautiful; often they are raw and mysterious. They are not always comforting but can be exhilarating, challenging, provocative, even frightening at times” (Allen, 1995, p. x). Art making furnishes a platform for creativity to make the implicit visible allowing for connection and healing (Braus & Morton, 2020; Burt, 2002; Metzler & Morrell, 2008; Moon, 2008).

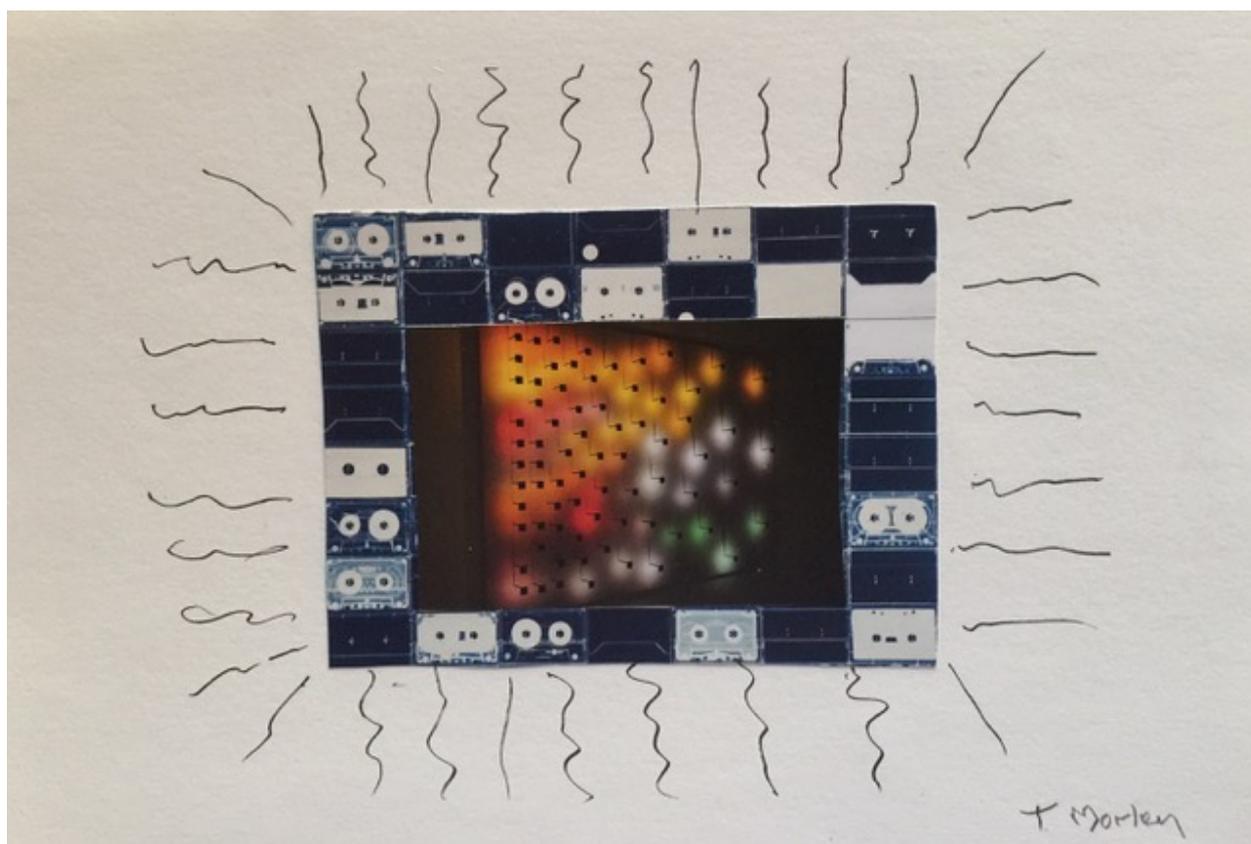


Figure 1. On Edge
By: Toni Morley

On the 18th of March last year, one art therapist was exposed to the virus at work and the office was shutdown as Californians went into lockdown. This piece was done as a reflection of the fear and unease she was feeling (Figure 1).

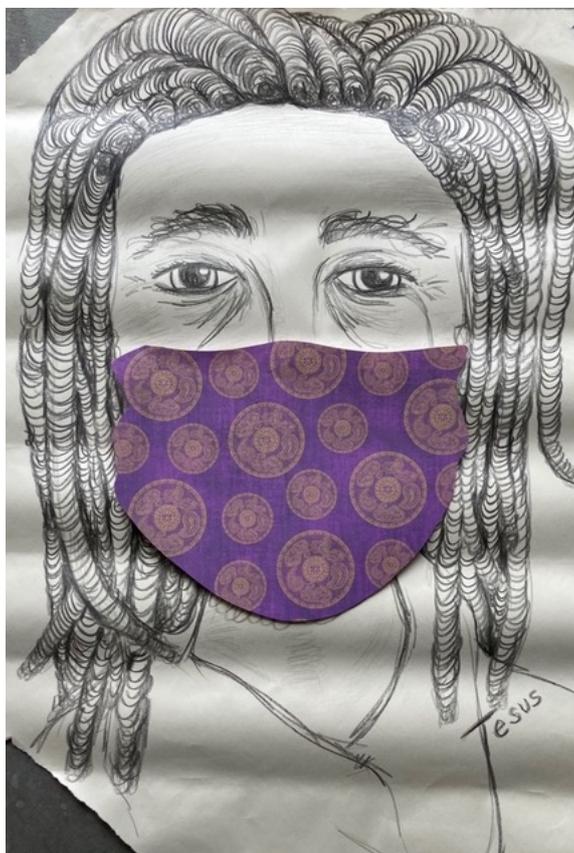


Figure 2. My Jesus with Dreads Would Wear a Mask to Save Lives

By: Serena Martinez-Coleman

The second image (Figure 2) was reconstructed from an original piece created during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2017. Jesus, a religious figure known for love and justice, was used as a reminder of WWJD (what would Jesus do) during the pandemic – wear a mask to show you care.



Figure 3. Dead Fish and Dreams

By: Jen Mank

The final image was created as a response to the behavior on display during the first Presidential Debate in 2020 (Figure 3). Emotions flowed outward onto the image and coalesced into an internalized sense of lightness of being and transcendence.

So often we are witnesses of the art made by our clients and there is little witnessing of our own journey. Witnessing one another's art was a way to be seen and experienced in an authentic manner that led to a sense of greater connection to self and one another (Burt, 2002). Similar to Allen's (2008) open studio method, our goal was not to have a therapeutic relationship, but instead a community to promote the artist within and the opportunity to self-express the soul. In the process of witnessing, we became aware of the variety of art materials used. We were inspired to expand our repertoire of art media resulting in new forms of creativity. The creative product is the vehicle for creative inspiration in others thereby becoming a legacy of creativity for the greater community (Chiu & Kwan, 2010; Leddy, 2009; Okada & Ishibashi, 2017; Plancke, 2014).

As art therapists, we recognize the importance of providing a gentle, safe holding space for our emotions to take artistic form. During a time when it seemed our nation was collapsing, we chose creativity to be a lifeline for connection. A world of creativity, expression of emotions, and a greater sense of connection during times of isolation awaited our engagement through art making (Braus & Morton, 2020). We continue to feel supported by the art and the empathy of our fellow art therapists by which creativity, through the process of art making, is our shared language.

About the Authors

Serena Martinez-Coleman M.A., LMFT, ATR-BC, PhD Candidate

Serena is a parent, student, therapist, activist, and artist. She considers herself a life learner and aspires to live each day like it is a gift.

Jen Mank Ph.D., LMFT, ATR-BC

Jen is a drummer, drum circle facilitator, art therapist, artist, author, and compassionate advocate.

Toni Morley M.A., LMFT, ATR-BC

Toni is a printmaker and art therapist who is currently working with chronic pain patients.

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