

An Exploration of Healing
Through Art: A Senior Project

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Introduction:

The first day of preschool I cried so much, my teacher had to ask my mom to pick me up early. I took my mom's hand, looked her in the eye, and told her, "Get my lunch box, we're never coming back here." This was the first day I can remember feeling debilitating anxiety like everything was folding in on me. I was three years old. This feeling continued throughout primary school. It wasn't until fourth grade that it manifested itself to its full extent; I created the belief that my mom was going to die in a car accident. I was convinced that it was going to happen. I woke up every morning thinking this would be the day. I could think about it all day, and I did. It began interfering with my focus in school, my friends, and my ability to feel free. While this was the year that the most painful obsessive thought process surfaced, it was also the year that I was somewhat liberated. I auditioned for my first musical. All the fourth-grade girls tried out for the part of Gretl in the Sound of Music. I can remember our small bodies lined up in a row singing, "The sun has gone to bed and so must I." Long story short, I got the part. This was the start of my process of using art as an avenue to cope and heal. When I was on the stage, I forgot to worry, and racing thoughts were quiet for the first time. Fast forward to my freshman year of college. I was studying Interior Design in Philadelphia. I was always so terrified to go to college. When my parents left me in my dorm room, it felt almost exactly like that day my mom dropped me off at preschool. Every day was harder than the next. I fell into a deep depression and struggled to fully process what I was going through. I called my mom at 8:00 p.m., January 12th, 2017. I told her that I couldn't do it anymore. My mom got in the car at 8:30 p.m. and arrived in Philadelphia at 11:30 p.m. We packed up my room and as we were walking out the

door she took my hand, looked me in the eyes, and said: “ We’re gonna figure this out together.”

I returned to my hometown of Cold Spring at 3:30 a.m. My dad was sleeping on the sofa; he awoke and said, “We're so happy to have you home.”

When I transferred to Purchase my understanding of how many kids my age were struggling with mental illness exploded. I began to meet people who felt like I did, who thought in spirals and who struggled every day. But, despite these major challenges they were creating beautiful things, and, in return, were healing and growing through their artistic process. The power of healing through art spans wider than just creation. Filling your life with art and creativity has the power to initiate curiosity and belonging. The community at Purchase gives each individual the chance to be immersed in art; there is almost no opportunity to escape it. It's seen in the way students dress, the sculptures, murals, shows, and galleries that create a unique and caring environment. Engaging with people who function like me and thrive in this environment pushed me to start making visual art for myself. I began to discover my own process, which doubled as a therapeutic process. This feeling unlocked an eagerness within me to further the scope of my knowledge of art as a healing tool. I'm passionate about learning about organizations and individuals who grow and recover through art. In fact, I am fascinated to discover the various methods and processes that individuals work with to find clarity in what seems to be a sometimes hectic world. This world is so much more gentle and kind when it is filled with art; I aim to uncover stories and accounts of how it acts as an agent of change and therapeutic healing.

The Birth of Art Therapy:

For thousands of years, art has been used as a form of communication, with the earliest known cave painting El Castillo Cave in Cantabria, Spain which “dates back 40,000 years to the Aurignacian period” (“The History of Art Therapy.”). Even 40,000 years ago art was used as an alternative way to connect and communicate emotions and meanings. But it wasn't until around eighty years ago that art was fully recognized as a therapeutic form. In 1940 Art Therapy began to be developed and further studied. Adrian Hill is known as the creator, coining the term Art Therapy officially in 1942. His work and discovery came out of his fight with tuberculosis. During this time he began to draw, stating in his book , *Art Versus Illness*, that “I became... a diligent and leisurely composer of precise pencil productions, each of which, in the terms of my restricted medium, sought to express my personal reactions to the unreality of my existence” (“The History of Art Therapy.”). After he left the treatment center, he found his first client. This inspired him to eventually go back to the treatment center and hold small group sessions with patients. This is where he started to see the potential of this work. His work in World War II was a critical point for his advancements. He worked with recovering soldiers who at first were “Initially apprehensive about art therapy, but Hill was able to promote in each of the patients an appreciation of art and cure them of their prejudices — as well as their bodily illnesses” (Bush). He put together the building blocks of the methods used to apply art as a form of healing and creation as the ability to express individuals’ struggles with dealing with the mental stresses of a physical illness. Two other very important figures in the early developmental stages of Art Therapy were Margaret Naumburg and Edith Kramer. According to the *Art therapy Journal*,

“By the middle of the 20th century, many hospitals and mental health facilities began including art therapy programs after observing how this form of therapy could promote emotional, developmental, and cognitive growth in children. The discipline continued to grow from there becoming an important tool for assessment, communication, and treatment of children and adults alike.” (“The History of Art Therapy.”). Today, Art Therapy has gained scientific and research-based validity that gives it a concrete base for advocacy.

The Mental Health Crisis:

While mental health is still heavily stigmatized to this day, conversations are being brought to the forefront. One in five U.S. citizens experiences a mental health condition (“Mental Health By the Numbers.”). This has been broken down into specific conditions by the National Alliance on Mental Illness. The highest percentage is 19% of U.S adults struggling with anxiety, followed by 7% with depression, 4% with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, 4% Dual Diagnosis, 3% Bipolar Disorder, 1% Border Personality Disorder, 1% Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and 1% Schizophrenia (“Mental Health By the Numbers.”). This percentage translates to a shocking 47.6 million U.S citizens battling a mental illness. There is a good chance these numbers are even higher but lack of health insurance and the stigma that surrounds Mental Health might cause many to go undiagnosed. Suicide has been confirmed to be the second leading cause of death for citizens ages ten to thirty-four; suicide rates have overall increased by 31% since 2001. (“Mental Health By the Numbers.”). It is clear that we are experiencing an epidemic in this country. It is also known that the social, political, and economic state of our country has a large effect on one's mental health. Many popular media sources have begun

discussing topics of mental health in order to normalize the conversation. A recent article by *The New York Times* titled *Why is America so Depressed?* comments on the effects of our nation's current environment on people's well being, stating that:

“All of this mental carnage is occurring at a time when decades of social and political division have set against each other black and white, men and women, old and young. Beyond bitter social antagonisms, the country is racked by mass shootings, the mind-bending perils of the internet, revelations of widespread sexual predation, the worsening effects of climate change, virulent competition, the specter of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, grinding student debt and crises in housing, health care, and higher education. The frightening environment helps cause depression, depression causes catastrophic thinking, and catastrophic thinking makes the environment seem even more terrifying than it is.” (Siegel)

This quote sums up the many different aspects of our nation that can cause mental stress. On that list is “the mind-bending perils of the internet” which stuck out to me. This is connected to social media. In recent years studies have begun to explore the link between social media use and mental well- being.

Social Media's Affect on Mental Health:

The Centre for Mental Health released an article that discusses the different ways that social media can impact an adolescent's self- esteem, sleep quality, anxiety, and loneliness:

“The ‘urge’ to check one's social media may be linked to both instant gratification (the need to experience fast, short term pleasure) and dopamine production (the chemical in the brain associated with reward and pleasure). The desire for a ‘hit’ of dopamine, coupled with a failure

to gain instant gratification, may prompt users to perpetually refresh their social media. The absence of gratification may amplify feelings of anxiety and loneliness. A recent study conducted by the OECD, for instance, found that those who used social media more intensively on average had lower life satisfaction.”(Edmonds).

While social media can be a way to connect, in some cases it is the reason why so many people feel a large sense of disconnect and exclusion. In this disconnect, there are feelings of not having enough or being enough and missing out on social interactions. In fact, there is a term coined Fomo (fear of missing out). Dictionary.com defines Fomo as “Anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on a social media website.” When you feel Fomo, you are not mentally in the place you are; it creates moments of panic that you are not experiencing enough socially, in return lowering your self-esteem. On top of this, social media can create an unrealistic presentation of expectations in body image, and lifestyle, just to name a few.

In twelfth grade I began to realize how toxic my relationship with social media was; comparing myself to other girls, feeling left out of social gatherings, and not getting enough likes translating to negative feelings about myself. But, the biggest thing was the anxiety it induced, the constant need to check up, or check-in. At one point in college, I took a six-month break from social media, specifically Instagram. I automatically felt better and more in tune with my surroundings; this made me step back and analyze how much my mental wellbeing was being dragged down. When I rejoined Instagram, I decided to unfollow accounts that made me feel bad and mainly follow accounts of artists and museums. My feed began to be a little gallery of art; I

was feeling fueled with inspiration. That's when I started to see the beneficial aspects of social media on art and artists.

The positive effects of Social Media on Artists:

A post by the Artwork Archive lays out a few positive influences that social media has on artists' opportunities. The first big benefit is the artist's ability to directly communicate with their audience; "Never before has an artist had the power to get into a conversation directly with their audience." ("How Social Media Is Changing Our Art Experience."). An artist has the ability to communicate with their followers through responding to comments or questions on posts with a click of a button at any time of the day. Some social media platforms have a feature called stories which is a post that lasts for twenty-four hours. Stories give artists the ability to create polls, Q and A's, and live videos. The next positive is the artist's ability to reduce sole reliability on promo by a gallery; instead, social media enables artists to take initiative and put their work out to gain a following. Thirdly, being on social media cuts out the cliché that artists are "elite;," you have the ability to show your audience who you are outside of just the gallery and buying situations, and create an even more curated image of yourself. Finally, social media is a great place for artists to finance their projects; "Artists no longer have to fret when it comes to financing their dream art projects—all thanks to social media. With eager Facebook and Twitter audiences at the ready, an artist is able to share a link to his or her Kickstarter page and instantly receive donations from enthusiastic fans and strangers alike." ("How Social Media Is Changing Our Art Experience."). In addition to this, these platforms can be used to build a marketing strategy and gain the following in order to produce more financial support. Overall, social media gives everyone access to art; this is one undeniable positive effect social media has on the art

community. Much like social media's ability to empower the art world and artists, clinical trials and studies give validity to art's ability to act as a positive change within society.

Study #1:

There are many different studies and accounts of individuals' experience with art healing and therapy but three studies I read were especially captivating. The first study is titled *Reduction of Cortisol Levels and Participants' Responses Following Art Making*. This study aimed to "Investigate the impact of visual art-making on the cortisol levels of 39 healthy adults. Participants provided saliva samples to assess cortisol levels before and after 45 minutes of art-making. Participants also provided written responses about the experience at the end of the session." (Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz). Cortisol is defined as a "Glucocorticoid hormone and one of the most widely studied markers of stress.". The hypothesis was "Art-making would result in reduced cortisol levels; greater changes in cortisol reduction for those with prior art-making experience; and greater changes in cortisol reduction for participants who used art media such as clay compared with participants using more structured media such as collage or markers."(Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz). The control group consisted of 39 students, staff, and faculty from a local urban university; the age range was eighteen to fifty- nine. There were thirty-three women and six men. "The racial/ethnic makeup of the participants was African American ($n = 2$), Asian American ($n = 13$), White ($n = 13$), and multiracial ($n = 3$)." (Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz). Eighteen participants had "limited prior experience with art-making", thirteen had " some experience" and the remaining eight had "extensive experience" (Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz). At the beginning of the study, a saliva sample was collected. They were presented with

three different materials; collage materials, modeling clay, and/or markers. They were then told they had the freedom to “of creating any kind of imagery using the three media choices individually or in combination.” And that “there was no expectation of creating a final artwork but that they were welcome to work with the materials as they chose.”(Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz). There was another person in the room called the “first author” and the participant could choose to converse about their feelings and process or stay silent. After 45 minutes, the participant was asked to express their thoughts about their work verbally, then a second saliva sample was collected. The result of this study is as follows:

“Changes in participants' pretest/posttest stress levels were measured via salivary cortisol (measured in nanograms/milliliter). A paired-sample *t-test* indicated significant reductions in cortisol following the intervention. Mean scores for cortisol levels pretest (*Mean* = 17.85, *Standard Deviation* = 5.11) and posttest (*Mean* = 14.77, *Standard Deviation* = 5.06), $t(38) = 4.54, p < .01$, differed significantly. Cortisol levels ranged from 32.40 ng/ml to 5.05 ng/ml at pretest and from 25.00 ng/ml to 5.01 ng/ml at post-test.” (Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz).

Seventy-five percent of the participants experienced a reduction in cortisol levels, while twenty-five percent experienced no change or a slight increase in levels. It was found that prior art-making experience, race, age, gender, and media choice showed no significant difference across the study. Participants verbally expressed that they were “feeling relaxed ($n = 19$); feeling pleasure/enjoyment ($n = 19$); learning something new about one's self ($n = 15$); feeling free from constraints ($n = 13$); experiencing an evolving process of change in art-making from initial struggle to later resolution ($n = 12$); feeling a sense of flow/losing themselves in the work ($n = 11$), and having a desire to make art in the future ($n = 3$).”(Kaimal, Ray, and Muniz) . The study

reflects on things that could have been changed and acknowledges the limitations of the study. But, overall it is an excellent example of an account of art being used as a coping mechanism to release, heal, and de-stress. While stress is normal sometimes stress can lead to anxiety and depression. This study can be seen as a testimony of the preventative ways art can be used to defuse stress that elevates itself to anxiety.

Study Number #2:

The next trial aims to study the effect of art-making and art therapy on “reducing internalized and externalized problems of female adolescents;” in their words, they described their method as:

“A semi-experimental study carried out in the form of a pre-test/post-test design with the control group. The population of this study includes female students of Gole Laleh School of Art in District 3 of Tehran, Iran, out of which 30 students with internalizing problems and 30 individuals with externalizing problems were selected through targeted sampling. Students were randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. Experimental groups participated in 6 painting sessions designed based on Art therapy theories and previous studies. The material used for diagnosis of the problems in post-test and pre-test was an Achenbach self-assessment form.”(Bazargan and Pakdaman 37).

Dictionary.com defines an Achenbach self-assessment form as a “ Collection of questionnaires used to assess adaptive and maladaptive behavior and overall functioning in individuals.” This study uses the medium of painting, which has been noticed as having therapeutic and healing benefits since the early twentieth century and used by Edith Kramer, a

primary player in establishing art therapy as mentioned before. Painting gained validity in the field after his work with “emotionally disordered children”. Kramer’s study was a big inspiration for this study. The results were as follows: “ It can be concluded that Art therapy can effectively reduce internalizing problems of female adolescent students" but “there is not enough evidence for the effectiveness of Art therapy in the reduction of externalizing problems of female adolescent students.”(Bazargan and Pakdaman 40) .The study further expressed that more sessions and time set aside for females with externalized problems could yield a different result, explaining that:

“This study is more suitable for adolescents with internalizing problems since its emphasis is mainly on the expression of emotions and impulses, which is the exact problem of these adolescents. But, the problem of adolescents with externalizing behavior is mostly about managing these emotions rather than their expression. Thus, future studies are recommended to improve this intervention package based on regulation and control of the emotions and evaluation of its effectiveness on externalizing problems.”(Bazargan and Pakdaman 41).

What I find important about this study is that it illustrates the importance of understanding how different mental illnesses, traumas, and people need different attention. These studies have the ability to further the stretch of knowledge about how various mediums, techniques, and approaches to art as healing affect different people. It inspired me because it is an honest account of what works and what doesn't, and theories of how we can further examine ways to keep the process inclusive to the many varying issues people have.

Study #3:

The last study I read was found through the National Endowment for The Arts. The study is called *Observational study of associations between visual imagery and measures of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress among active-duty military service members with traumatic brain injury at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center*. This study has a sample size of three hundred and seventy active duty military service members experiencing “traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and related psychological health conditions.”(Kaimal, Walker, Herres, French, and DeGraba) .The age range was twenty to fifty. The subjects were referred to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (NICoE intensive outpatient treatment program). The study consisted of a four-week treatment session. The report states “Service members undergo a standardized evaluation using core assessment tools, which includes contact with 17 medical and integrative health disciplines. As part of the initial behavioral health assessment and treatment, all SMs engage in a group art therapy mask-making session in week 1.”(Kaimal, Walker, Herres, French, and DeGraba). These masks were used to create both a visual and written narrative to look at themes presented within the creation of each individual mask. Some themes shown through the masks were: sadness, anger, inability to verbalize, social isolation, sense of belonging to a military unit, the depiction of fragmented symbols associated with the military such as flags, camouflage fabric and dog tags, the depiction of inner psychological states through a visual image, specific individual colors as metaphorical representations of experiences and emotions, and, inclusions of images from nature in masks. The themes were categorized, counted, and reported. Then, “The coded database was

then integrated with the standardized data from the PTSD Checklist-Military (PCL-M),⁴⁵ the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)⁴⁶ and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder 7-item (GAD-7)⁴⁷ scale for further analysis. These questionnaires were administered to the SMs during the same week as the mask-making art therapy sessions.”(Kaimal, Walker, Herres, French, and DeGraba4). The service members “reported that art therapy helped mainly with enjoyment (n=136), with focus and concentration (n=72), and with relaxation/calming (n=52). In addition, SMs (n=74) said the mask-making helped with socialization and with opening up about their injuries, treatment processes, and struggles.”(Kaimal, Walker, Herres, French, and DeGraba). Other results showed that through mask-making there were “differences in mean symptoms for the mask themes of ‘psychological injury’ and ‘metaphors’.” For instance:

“Participants whose masks reflected evidence of psychological injury (n=102) in the mask-making reported higher PTSD symptoms, whereas those whose masks coded positive for metaphors (n=125) had lower anxiety symptoms. Those who used symbols that included fragmented representations of military symbols (n=44) reported *more* anxiety, whereas those who used representations of their military unit identity (n=41) reported *less* PTSD and depression.”(Kaimal, Walker, Herres, French, and DeGraba).

The results shed light on an account of how complex service members’ mental health and injury is. It also presents different ways emotions can be compartmentalized and translated into themes created through visual works. Sometimes, I feel our Military personnel are left to deal with a horrible amount of mental carnage after their time served and in many cases not offered the help they need. This study offers a great example of an art-based project that gives the service member the ability to reflect on themselves, their trauma, and their experience in a

way other than just spoken words. This was an empowering and crucial study for this sample population.

Nonprofit Art Therapy Organizations:

After reading the last study from the NEA, I understood the extent to which these clinical trials are excellent evidence to further the advancement of art healing and therapy. The NEA's main function is not only to give the arts a voice but an opportunity for all to experience, learn, and, be an advocate for the arts. Looking through the NEA's website caused me to become intrigued about different non-profits whose missions specifically serve the development of art healing and therapy. I came across The Art Therapy Project which is located in New York, New York. Their mission is stated as follows: "Healing through Art: The Art Therapy Project is a nonprofit mental health organization providing free group art therapy to adults and youth affected by trauma. Using the art-making process and with support from our art therapists, clients learn how to explore feelings, increase self-awareness, and cope with life's challenges." ("The Art Therapy Project."). They opened their doors in 2011 and since then they have served more than 6,100 individuals and 1,200 plus individuals yearly. The Art Therapy Project serves all age groups, backgrounds, and communities offering more than 34 weekly group art therapy sessions. They serve youth who have been affected by domestic abuse, homelessness, foster care, medical issues, legal issues, and are in need of an alternative education system. Their adult programs cater to those who have been affected by 9/11, domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual assault, substance abuse recovery, survivors of torture, veterans, caregivers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Each program is specifically tailored to the mental disorders and stress

that is associated with each group. These groups are in collaboration with over twenty other well-established non-for profits such as The Children's Village, Crimes Victims Treatment Center, CUNY vets, Educational Alliance, and many more; all of which are listed on their website. They also offer continuing education and workshops to better their practice and offer tools for professionals to learn new and inventive ways to practice art therapy. Finally, every spring they hold exhibits of the client's work, explaining that this:

“Empowers our clients and provides insight to the public on how art therapy can positively impact past trauma. Clients tell us that they often experience a great sense of validation and pride when their inner world is honored and held by others. One of the goals of The Art Therapy Project is to try to reduce the shame and stigma around mental health, and we try to address this issue through exhibiting client artwork.” (“Check Out Our Client Artwork.”).

The Art Therapy project is such an important place for the community of New York to feel safe and heard. After learning about their mission and programs, I will be following their work closely. It is a great resource. Other important non-for profits who progress Art Therapy and healing with their missions are as follows:

- The American Arts Therapy Association whose mission is “To advocate for an expansion of access to professional art therapists and lead the nation in the advancement of art therapy as a regulated mental health and human services profession.” (“About the American Art Therapy Association.”)
- The Art for Healing Foundation “Brings the healing power of art to hospitals and wellness facilities, transforming public and patient areas into inspiring

environments that encourage a sense of serenity and hope for patients, their families, and healthcare providers.” (“Home.” *The Healing Power of ART*).

- The Laundromat Project focuses on community healing by giving artists and community members the opportunity to act “As change agents in their own communities”. The organization states “We envision a world in which artists and neighbors in communities of color work together to unleash the power of creativity to transform lives. We make sustained investments in growing a community of multiracial, multigenerational, and multidisciplinary artists and neighbors committed to societal change by supporting their artmaking, community building, and leadership development.” (“About.” *The Laundromat Project*).

From the Universal to the Personal:

Alexis Elton:

On February 24th, I got the chance to visit an artist community in Stony Point, New York. In house number five lives artist Alexis Elton. Her work is in the area of sculpture and installation. In 2003 she earned her degree from The School of The Art Institution of Chicago. She has shown her work internationally and nationally. She describes herself as “a material junkie who is obsessed with different materials in an incredibly labor-intensive way, a process-oriented way and all about the journey the material took her on before the final product.” I have been interested in talking to Alexis about how she got to where she is today; specifically

how each small step and change has given her a rhythm to her life. I thought it was important to start from the beginning, so naturally, I was curious to learn about her first memory of art and the impact it had on her. She immediately smiled and said, “Oh that's a really good question.” She began to recall her early life as a kid in New York City. Every Saturday her parents would take her to the Met. Each time she couldn't wait to get to the Chinese Wing. Outside on the terrace was a goldfish pond; she explained just how special this moment was. She loved how it was a fluid transition from the outside to the inside world. She used the word “striking” to describe the feeling of being in a busy city to then standing in front of a fish pond. After thirty-nine years, she attributes this experience as having a profound effect on how she goes about her work today. It brought her to think about the big question of “How do we interact with the natural world?”. Her approach to this began when she switched from making big objects that forever take up space to working with natural materials. She started making these natural materials into objects that she would display in landscapes. These objects had a life of their own and a journey into decomposition. She stated that she was fascinated “ That you could create the life of an object and then watch it fall apart and document the deterioration.” This began her obsession with understanding life processes and the effects of nature and time. It all boils down to “The idea of how these elements are beyond our control.” Alexis made a big move to the Southwest to a small town in northern New Mexico. She was enchanted by that landscape, it was very foreign to her as she spent most of her life in upstate New York. She knew there was something she wanted to learn from that environment. She needed to leave the east and be in a place that was unfamiliar so she could hear her head in a new way and investigate her curiosity about a place she knew nothing about. This act of displacing herself translated to creating another footing for herself.

Her first project out there was an installation in the desert landscape called the Badlands; an environment that has no water and no survival rate for life. Her piece consisted of a string of sculpted pearls that stretched across the area. The idea was to take an object (the pearl) that comes from water and place it in this area that thousands of years ago was underwater. The pearls would decompose into the land. This started her study of cyclical cycles, life to death, stating that “It is constant and one has to happen for the other and it's so interesting how time fits into the equation.” The conversation then shifted to a discussion of the current environment of our culture, “A culture based in the consciousness, consumption of the image and how it affects the mass thinking to preserve beauty or preserve youth.” She began to connect the meaning of her work with the hope of shattering this social construct. It was the start of a way to heal and cope. After this project, she became involved in a farming community. Eventually, this led to her starting a cooperative farm of her own. While this seemingly was divergent it also directly related to her artwork and the theme of the life cycle. She became a big part of the rural village and spent time with the elders in the community in hopes of helping with land preservation. Her work started to shift form to community engagement and social practice and creating ways to connect with people in these rural places over food and art. She talks about her role in these rural places; especially being a white woman in a place of indigenous people; she was the minority and outsider. “There were a lot of cultural sensitivities to navigate, and I learned a lot about how to be patient and how these people lived for hundreds and hundreds of years in this land-based way; a lot has changed but a lot has actually not changed.” Alexis eventually came back to the east and started to work with soil. She stated that:

“It was displacing after being away for a long time and being embedded in a way of life that was so different than the mode of the east coast, I started to think more deeply about soil telling stories about the place and about culture and I started to think about my sense of place and how to readapt to the place I was from, I started to work with the idea of, what does soil smell like and how does it smell in different places.”

She began to experiment with this and thus began her process of the distillation of hydrosols which is what she is currently working on. “How do we form connections to the natural world in the way where we are working with scent as the medium, how do we journey with our sense of smell and, where does it take you?” She talks about how scent is connected with memory which gives us the ability to work with trauma, in addition, there is deeper healing that starts to happen as we slow down enough. “When we smell something and we have a memory of it, or it reminds us of something or we don't even know what it reminds us of or why it is familiar, we slow down.” The aromatic waters Alexis makes have medicinal properties but beyond that, on a molecular level they are the blueprint of that plant; they represent the molecules of the place and environment it grew and survived in; this idea gets transferred into this aromatic water. The distillation process in itself is transformative.

“The bigger idea of this project of working with scent as a medium of a way to journey into the natural world, as a way for us to reconnect with yourself, heal from our past traumas, heal from things we may not even realize are there but when you interact with these aromatics your starting to explore the possibilities of a new relationship. Getting to know a plant is no different than getting to know a person.”

These are all avenues that she has begun to take with her work. She has done traditional gallery work with these aromatics, performance pieces, and workshops. She started working with children as a way for children to have these experiences. She specifically mentioned her work in a charter school in New Mexico. She distilled a cedar branch and through their experience with their smell, they began to draw and paint the imagery that they thought of. Her next workshop was in a detention center in Wyoming where she worked with young girls from the area. They experienced a series of her aromatic waters that were specific to their location in Wyoming and they created a collaborative poem based on their experiences. She described the situation as “very powerful”. The room she held the workshop in had no windows and she said it was so transformative to bring “the outside, inside.”

“ The memories and the feelings that they expressed were very personal but at the same time very transformative; it was an exploration of how the scent is a sensory way to slow down share and connect. It's no different than the idea of having a meal and creating an intentional moment to connect in different ways and if you continue to show up in different ways the process keeps evolving.”

I asked her if she could describe how her process helps her move through life, cope, heal, and let go and in return gain mental clarity. She enjoys working with her hands and describes how the physicality of this has been an agent in her healing process. When she's using her hands she's tuning in to parts of herself in a unique way. She is directly connecting to her materials and she describes that even though she's in this physical tangible moment of physicality, she describes her need to let go. This kind of focus becomes a meditation for Alexis and a moment where the subconsciousness takes over and intuition kicks in. She states that:

“Working in this intuitive way is really important to my own well-being because I start to tune in to a different kind of quietness and when I'm able to do that and to be really quiet in this meditative way and using my hands to create that moment, I'm able to gain more mental clarity and through gaining more mental clarity I become more grounded and becoming more grounded makes me more balanced as a human being.”

She then spoke to a moment that is “deeply personal,” when she's in this space where things are totally in sync, it creates euphoria; she's not getting there with any substance but just being true to her nature and in that moment of being truthful she is able to feel free. She feels very lucky to be able to go there and have this experience in life. She doesn't expect that her work will touch everyone in the same way that it touches her but if she can create something that somebody else is going to be curious about and have a slow experience to take in the visual and sensory part then she feels like she has reached someone. “As your work is evolving and your curiosities are changing, how you are reaching the people is also gonna shift, if I can get to that point where someone slows down to tune in, then I feel like I have been truthful.”

Machi Tantillo:

My next interview was over the phone with Machi Tantillo, a master of all trades including doodling, drawing, animation, communication, environmental science, and currently the healing art of Reiki. Similar to Alexis, I asked her what her first memory and moment with art was. She spoke about growing up around piles of art books in her childhood home. No one ever told her to look at them or study them. But she said that it was “A given that when we were lying around in the living room we would pick up one of the books of the enlightenment or the

surrealist or the impressionist and we would pass time looking through the art.” But her first real and true experience with art was when she was in the first grade and a substitute teacher read *Mousekin's Golden House* by Edna Miller which is a children's book about a mouse who seeks shelter in a pumpkin. The teacher had the idea that the students could have a drawing contest where each student drew their vision of the story. Machi drew the mouse's “sanctuary” in the pumpkin filled with acorns and feathers. She ended up winning the contest and taking the book home. She was so excited by this experience but it didn't occur to her that she was quite yet an artist. She then began to recount her mother's love for art, describing that “She was always sketching and doodling with her big pens, sketching when she was on the phone or just drawings going everywhere.” Drawing was just part of the way her mother and siblings lived. She calls doodling a therapy for her after learning it from her mom. She has post-it notes and notebooks everywhere and she loves the “simple line, shapes, and circles.” That is the art she makes the most, “unconscious doodles.” She also says that she was really lucky to have older siblings who took her to museums, galleries and to Soho in the seventies when it was bustling with artists and art, stating that, “I got carried along with the flow and there was really no ground to break-in terms of discovering art.” But she was faced with the moment to break ground when she was presented with the notion of what art or subject she wanted to study in college. She went on to go to SUNY Albany where she designed her major in environmental communications; she was very interested in doing something within environmental education, alternative energy, and how to teach children to take care of the earth. This didn't stop her from taking a multitude of art classes; she took film, photo, printmaking, and many more, mixing this with communication, propaganda, rhetoric, geology, biology, and debate classes. She was passionate about learning

how to communicate both visually and verbally. This all led her to the field of animation; this enabled her to communicate through an artistic medium. Her first job was as an assistant to an artist whose film was sponsored by the NEA. She also independently worked on her own films, animations, and projects. After working with many independent film artists she landed a job at MTV, she worked there for ten years. She worked within the animation team; one of the shows she worked on was “Beavis and Butthead.” After many years she began to feel very unsettled in what was happening in our environment. This shifted her to work for a solar energy company. She worked there for a couple of years until she lacked inspiration and missed the lightheartedness of creating. This is the transitional period where she found her passion for what she does now which is Reiki. This passion was found through her own experience with a Reiki session from a friend. For years, Machi had struggled with serious hypersensitivity to fragrance and smell; she would become ill if there were overwhelming chemical smells or even perfume in a room. After this Reiki session, she began to notice she could be in rooms easier without this feeling of both anxiety and physical sickness. Reiki is defined as “A healing technique based on the principle that the therapist can channel energy into the patient by means of touch, to activate the natural healing processes of the patient's body and restore physical and emotional well-being.” In Machi’s words, Reiki is a healing art because “Art is the physical and spiritual result of creativity and creativity is energy and so, therefore, Reiki is art.” She recalls her natural tendency to grab people's hands and the ability to feel people's energy from a young age. With Reiki, she could immediately see and feel how others were helped through this transfer of energy. She translates these feelings and experiences and expresses that the person receiving Reiki has the ability to bring it into their everyday life cycle whether you are “In an elevator or

working as a receptionist or working with a team of people, or making coffee you can embody this spirit of love and support and energy.” Reiki is meant to balance the body and what balance means to her is “A grounding system that therefore is more open to love and positive energy.” It is a meditation and an invitation to work with energy, be the energy, and surround yourself with energy. Machi believes Reiki can introduce a creative space for new and unique approaches to someone's relationship to healing and the universe. This April marks the fifth year of her pursuit of reiki; with training and certification.

Nina Elton:

My final interview was with Nina Elton. Nina served as a big inspiration for this project because she is a huge advocate for the healing properties of art. Similar to Alexis and Machi's interviews I was curious to learn of Nina's first experience with art. She was eight years old and living in Spain when her babysitter taught her how to paint with watercolor. “He taught me about two-point perspective and one-point perspective, and I could draw for you today the barn that he taught me.” After this experience she was “Determined to keep trying” and from that moment until today she never stopped making art. Moving back to the United States, Nina never had an art class in Elementary School but in High School, Nina's teacher became both a mentor and fan of Nina's work with watercolor. This series of work was based on her memories of growing up in Spain. She expressed that “My teacher gave me a lot of recognition by always hanging up my paintings around the school, so that was so encouraging.” After this Nina went off to study Art Education at Nazareth College. By the time she was a sophomore, Nina realized that her true passion was Art and Design. She spent that next summer putting together a portfolio to transfer

to Parsons's Graphic Design program. She was accepted into the program, but unfortunately, her mother refused to allow Nina to attend. Her parents did not want her to pursue a career in art but instead a "practical applied art" where she could "support herself". She ended up transferring to Adelphia College, where she took as many art classes as she could and continued her own practice of making art. She then got her masters in Art History at American University. After graduating, she moved to Paris where she worked with Architects drafting their drawings. She expressed that this was a time in her life when she was experiencing a lot of anxiety that caused agoraphobia resulting in panic attacks. The thing that got her through this was painting and drawing, and today this is still her way of finding peace and quiet. She moved back to New York City and worked in the Graphic Design industry; working for several magazines and companies. She met her spouse Bruce, and together they started their own firm. This was her long time dream. She then talked to me about her transitional period of moving to the Hudson Valley "You have transitional periods in your life where you change your focus, you change your grounding, and you change your purpose." She began working as a teacher at a local art center in Garrison, NY. One of her colleagues suggested she look into positions at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She landed a job there and this started her next chapter of an "odyssey of teaching". She loves teaching because "It transforms people and the arts transform and I like that. This is when I started to really see the healing qualities of the arts". Teaching and seeing how the arts healed her students led Nina to become a certified Arts Therapist. She has run programs in New York City Prisons, Shelters, Rehab facilities, and other intercity locations. She spoke to her experience at Rikers: " I had to park the car a mile away from the prison, we got on a bus where we were smelled by dogs twice to make sure we were not carrying any drugs, we went through a gate into

a building where we left all of our belongings in lockers. We talked to some of the younger prisoners and it was hard because they are very wounded, they are angry, resentful”. “Working with this group of young people with this profile is very difficult and I found it worked best if I did not respond to their negativity but just kept pushing forward with the artwork.” During this program, the prisoner’s created quilts and paintings. She worked in halfway houses in the Bronx and Yonkers. For a period of time, Nina went every single week to different homes and she said even though it was very challenging she little by little had people open up to her and create artwork. She also talked about her work in drug rehab. Nina went on to say that the secret to helping those who are struggling is “Reach them with kindness and structure, it is incredible the art they can make, and that is what keeps you going when they shift.” She also added that “It’s all about building trust, if they learn to trust you, then they can start to express the pain or joy that they need to get out so they can have more harmony in their lives.” Her most recent program was in the fall/winter of 2019 called Safe Homes through Bethel Woods. The program was held in Newburgh, NY for women who have been abused. This was an eight-session program. Art for Nina has been a continual way for her to heal personally: “Doing art is the major healer, and helped me with the hurt and pain from my childhood, and my process has helped me during serious times, times where I just fell apart. The way I have always healed was drawing. I always knew I could go to work and then come home and draw, this is what always brought me back and that is what still works now.”

Conclusion:

Art has the power to heal on a universal and personal level. When you fill your life with art you have the power to both improve your life and the people around you who are struggling. Now more than ever, society needs an avenue like art to alleviate the stresses and anxieties created by our social, political, and economical environment. The purpose of my senior project is to expose the clinical trials, Art Therapy non-profits, and individual testimonies that have led to success stories of arts healing benefits. I hope in the future, Art Therapy and art healing gain more support and in return, we can further its advancements.

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