

Placing Art at the centre of Art-based Practice and Research

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the author's creative experience of developing an art-based approach in practice and research as a registered Art Therapist in the UK, and the influence that Shaun McNiff has had in shaping the author's work. The first section describes a visual narrative documenting the author's experience of a creative arts studio group facilitated by McNiff during his London visit in 2018. The second section extends these art-based experiences into a research design format developed by the author in relation to clinical response art. Both areas converge through the intersection of internal embodied affect and externalised expression through art.

Key words: *creative arts studio; art therapy; response art; practitioner-research; creativity; imagination.*

Introduction

Shaun McNiff's written work has provided two seams of knowledge that has deepened my understanding of creativity in the context of health, learning, and therapy. This article focuses on these two areas; firstly, on art-based practice, in which the practitioners experience of the creative arts is considered as a centre point to the work of therapy, teaching, and learning in the arts therapies. Secondly, an approach to research that enables practitioner-researchers to use art to document, collate, and validate the layers of creative interaction within the relational work of therapy.

An art-based approach to therapeutic practice and learning places an emphasis on the practitioners 'lived experience' of creativity, imagination, and expression through art. This paradigm has been described by McNiff over many decades of painting, creating with others, and documenting his work. The publication of *Art as Medicine* (McNiff 1992) demonstrated how McNiff uses his own art practice to access the healing encountered within his art-making experiences. He describes the expressive and communicative properties of painting and uses his imagery to demonstrate the therapeutic language of imaginal dialogue, active imagination, and art-based interpretation. Whilst reading *Art as Medicine* I found that McNiff's focus on his personal art-based experiences gave voice to a visual arts narrative that had been marginalised during my own art therapy training in the UK. An emphasis had been placed on psychological concepts, and theoretical constructs drawn from a purely

psychoanalytic framework, thus reducing the opportunity to articulate the lived experience of art that underpins an art therapist's pursuit of knowledge and training. In my training experience, the importance of the creative arts in the curriculum was taught largely through experiential groupwork learning and a tacit knowledge that healing occurs in the visual arts when we 'trust the process'. In 1998 McNiff wrote *Trust the Process* in which he demonstrates, from personal experience, the twists, and turns of human creativity and imagination. This exploration of creative process deepened my knowledge of the body, movement, and breath, as holding creative potential and the capacity to support unique artistic expression.

In 2017 I began a conversation with McNiff in which I asked him to reflect on some of his many publications and core ideas about creativity, expressive arts, and imagination (Nash 2019a). We attempted to dig a little deeper into the healing qualities of creativity which only truly came to life for me when he visited London and held a weekend of studio sessions and a symposium. Since that visit in 2018 our collaborative working relationship has continued with Shaun providing guidance and stimulating reflections on my work with colleagues here in the UK, both in my practice, and in my teaching and research in clinical art making, response art, and art-based research design.

The medicine of Art and Interpretation through movement

In *Trust the Process* (1998) McNiff encourages the use of simple, physical movements, as the foundation of a unique creative gesture that can provide a starting point for visual arts expression. A baseline premiss is that when we move, we have the potential to connect movement to media and thereby extend the expression of the body through the medium of art. He describes how making a mark gives form to an internal energy, tension, feeling or conflict, and in so doing we also discover something of ourselves reflected back through the image.



Figure 1: Shaun McNiff at the London Sessions, 2018, London. Photograph by Mirella Issias.

Activating the medicine of art

The images and creative process described in the following section were made and documented during the London sessions facilitated by McNiff in 2018. The creative narrative described through images and words give voice to the creative body and shape to the narrating mind. The studio space is safe, contained, intimate, with ten art therapists working alongside as McNiff facilitates. The sound of percussion beating to the rhythm of our collective creativity is interspersed with the sound of the *marimba* (thumb piano) as we each worked on one image, hour after hour for most of the day. The media used is water-based ready-made paint (acrylic) on cartridge paper. No brushes or tools were used apart from hands and water. Time to witness in pairs developed during the final hour, and a further period was set aside for journaling and documenting the internal dialogue through sketches, imagery, and the written word. At the end of the day the artworks were digitally recorded and documented as evidence of the activation of the medicine of art and are used here for the first time as visual art-based reflection.

The image is made through movement, gesture, and mark-making, one mark leading to the next with rhythm and flow. These movements accumulate and contribute to building the visual structure of the image: layer upon layer, giving shape, colour, tone, and texture to the visual form. The sensory experience is of one movement giving way to the next, one gesture leading to the next: one mark triggering a chain of visual and tactile responses. There is a rising and falling of energy as the tempo alters, a furious energy takes hold, and a rapturous connection intensifies and then subsides.

Figure 2: Movement painting (detail), 2018. Acrylic on paper, 24 inches x 36 inches. Gary Nash.



Another wave of colour erupts and then recedes into a calm aesthetic movement as I witness colours bleed and the under-painting shines through. This momentary flow is challenged by a sense of futility, leading towards creative dead-ends, pulling me into a place of doubt and uncertainty. I experience an internal block arise and connect to thoughts of boredom, disinterest, and defeat, as the image fails to ignite, refusing to give back the energy I have released into it.

I hit another block and the painting stalls, things become unclear, pigment begins to lose its crispness and colours merge and become muddy. I face the fear that it could all turn to nothing, that this creative endeavour might lead nowhere, unresolved and abandoned. This is the hardest place to dwell within a creative act, and it is here also that something new and unexpected might emerge, if I stay here long enough and work through the blocks and disappointments.

I return to the breath, the rhythm in my body, the beat of the drum and McNiff's words: 'Breath is the essential source of all the body's gestures. Through breath, we stabilise ourselves emotionally and physically, inform our movements from inside our bodies as well as from outside, and further the strength and resilience of expression' (McNiff 2018; the London Sessions).

Movement and rhythm

The experience of making art in the group, to a beat and rhythm feels good, there is a somatic sense of relaxing, and attuning to an internal flow of energy. Returning to the image I feel able to work with the stuck-ness, and then something slows me down, a dense energy. I experience hitting up against another cognitive block. This time there are critical thoughts, judgements, boredom, loss, disinterest, lethargy, and a draining away of creative energy:

Like an effective leader, rhythm holds the tension and maintains the dynamic interplay among participants. It does not decisively pit one aspect against another as verbal argument does. Flowing within a rhythmic meter, differences are welcome; they create together and augment one another.

(McNiff 2004: 233)

With the continued movement of the body, I work through each doubt and critical thought. I move back into the flow of the paint and the kinesthetic sensation in my body, feeling the beat of my heart resonate with the sound of the marimba. A feeling of excitement rises in me, an experience of newness and frivolity seems to take hold, it is an energy that gets me going. The creative block was where the energy dried up, it took me to an internal, non-verbal place within, and this, in my experience, seems to be a necessary part of the creative process, building a negative tension that I rebound from.



Figure 3: Movement painting (detail), 2018. Acrylic on paper, 24 inches x 36 inches. Gary Nash.

I pause and then return to the image; I am moved by its ability to carry me forward and out of this barren wasteland. Taking me into something new and unexpected, something that reveals itself through the movement of colour and form. Things are in flux now and I go with it, relaxing into the work as the image paints itself through me. There is a sense of unity and balance in the relationship between self and image, feeling connected to the creative movement which I see before me and which I now feel flowing through me.

After a period of playfully moving the paint with my hands I sense a tension between my body and the image. Something in me wants to capture and fix the image that I see but the painting wants to continue to paint. This time the tension is between the flow of the medium and a desire to capture or to resolve the image and bring this journey to a conclusion. There is uncertainty and doubt, even fear, that I will lose this moment. There is a challenge and a call for discipline, it is time to hold this creative power and to claim it in some way, to fix it to the page and define it as mine, and in this moment – as me! When I reach this stage, it seems that the dynamic tension between mind and image has something very clear to say and it sounds like “enough!”

Once complete time was given to write and reflect, using words and poetry to interact with the sensations felt in the body and the colours resonating on the page. The image and the poem complete the studio session:



Figure 4: Movement painting, 2018.
Acrylic on paper, 24 inches x 36 inches.
Gary Nash.

The image interprets itself
The dynamic energy in a picture
its composition, rhythm, and form.
Harmony and order, creative
tension pulling,
releasing, and resolving,

The poetics of colour and the
emergence of imaginary narratives
experienced through the senses as
I move and respond
to what I see, feel, and touch.

The image is created through body
movement,
and I interpret the image through a
movement response.
I feel attuned to this creative
presence,

embodying the image through movement and gesture,
imitation, and amplification,
honouring and allowing the image to move through me.
(Poetic response, Nash, 2018)

Knowing through the experience

The studio sessions brought my experience of the sensory body and the shaping mind into an expressive dialogue through the medium of paint. The documented narrative provides evidence of my subjective experience of creativity, art, and healing through the imaginative and sensory interactions within the body. This is the basis of art-based research: knowing that the subjective, internal, creative experience resides deep within as a creative pulse which, when combined with internal dis-ease or pain, can find expression through the arts.

In my experience the intersection of internal somatic forces with art media provides a space and a platform for expression, and the creative therapies provide safety, guidance, and a witness to this process. The combination of a safe space, a facilitating relationship, and a receptive and responsive

witness to what has been triggered or activated, enables art to channel, externalise, and transform internal tensions into externalised visual form. This is arts capacity to heal as movement, attunement, and mark-making activate the ‘medicines of art’.

Following the session, I asked Shaun McNiff the following question: ‘In my experience of using movement to interpret my own imagery I found that the image somehow completes itself through an interpretative response in movement. It seems to return the energy that went into making the piece and I feel it resonating, activating, and completing something in me. Is this what you describe as the medicine of art?’ His response was:

“Yes, it is cyclic. We are responding to the image with the movement used to make it. As strange as this might seem to people, because it is outside the norm, it is actually more congruent with the process of artistic expression, much more so than translation into the very different sphere of words. People constantly say, as you do, that it gives something back to them. It ‘moves’ them. You again affirm the reciprocal exchange of creative energy and yes, it is the medicine of art. The most common response that people give is that this way of relating to images is more intimate, possibly because it is unusual, even strange at first, and for most, it involves taking a risk within the unknown. Perhaps the potential vulnerability furthers tenderness” (Nash 2019b:17).

The studio sessions gave me an embodied experience of art-based learning that reflects the growth of creative knowledge in my professional work, and also validated how central art is to my own identity as a therapist and practitioner-researcher. The flow of creative knowledge that derives from trusting an embodied-creative-process has developed in my research and practice since the London sessions. I have paid more attention to the internal feelings, images and metaphors that arise when working creatively with others, allowing the imagery that I make in response to my work, to form the central focus of my art-based research. As with the experience of one mark leading to the next in the painting, a similar process has occurred in my research into response art.

Art-Based Research

The term ‘art-based research’ has been defined by the pioneering work of McNiff (1998, 2008, 2013, 2018). The research paradigm defined in *Art-Based Research* (McNiff 1998) provides a framework for research design that supports practitioners and educators to consider how creative acts generate art-based evidence that may contribute to developments in therapeutic method, approach, technique, and teaching.

According to McNiff artistic expression provides a vitally important way of acquiring and communicating information about human experiences. He asks us to value art, imagination, and creativity, and to use them systematically to study human experience and phenomena: 'The personal presentation through art and the therapist's reflexive narrative belongs to the traditions of artistic inquiry and expression' (McNiff 1998: 36). The principles of art-based research described in McNiff's work (1998, 2008, 2013, 2018; Prior 2018; Nash 2021) places the artworks and art making processes of research participants central to the research design. In so doing, McNiff introduces a significant paradigm shift by moving the focus of research methodology from the artworks of clients in therapy to the inclusion of the artworks of other research participants, including the therapist-researcher. The London studio sessions reinforced my understanding of the authority of subjective creative process, described by McNiff (1993), and the value that my own artmaking might have in relation to the imaginative and affective somatic experiences that I channel into post-session art. The subsequent research project enabled me to consider my own imagery as providing important information about the relational work of art therapy and its contribution towards reflective practice and art-based supervision.

Clinical art – response art

Art made by art therapists in relation to their clinical work is known generically as 'response art', clinical art or counter-transference art (Moon 1999; Fish 2006, 2012, 2013, 2017). Barbara Fish provides this definition: 'Response art is artwork created by art therapists in response to material that arises in their therapy work. Art therapists use response art to contain difficult material, express and examine their experiences, and share their experiences with others' (Fish 2012: 138). The author describes several features that are unique to response art made by art therapists: the work can be created alongside the client, in the context of artmaking in a group, privately after sessions have finished and the client has left the room, in clinical supervision and also as part of a training or learning experience. The purpose and benefits of response art making are also defined as contributing to 'self-care, to support with the empathic engagement with clients, and to illuminate countertransference' (Fish 2012: 138). The resulting art works can support the practitioner in areas of self-reflection, self-care, clinical formulation, and research.

In 2017 I decided to formally research this area of my practice. The research places the focus of inquiry in relation to post session 'reflect piece' imagery (Nash 2020) and gathers further evidence of the value and benefits for the practitioner when making art at the end of a session. The term 'reflect piece' imagery is used in this article to distinguish post-session response art from other forms of clinical artwork. This term draws attention to the context in which the image is made, the symbolic material it contains and how it is viewed once made:

These images, made at the end of the session, immediately after the client has left the room, become a visual expression of the therapist's internal responses activated by the complexity of visual, verbal, non-verbal and sensory communication experienced during the session. These images are made in private, unlike working alongside where one is responding directly to the client and are therefore free of many inhibiting factors and relational dynamics (Nash 2020: 40).

This area of art-based practice developed from my work as a clinical supervisor in 2015 when a supervisee recounted making an image in response to a client who failed to turn up for a session as planned. The image was prompted by the experience of absence and involved wondering about the client, playing with thoughts and associations in relation to the whereabouts of the client, and allowing other ideas to permeate. These thoughts were developed into a drawing that seemed to hold a combination of memory, fantasy, and self-reflection. In the supervisory dialogue the visual language of the drawing facilitated a level of personal reflection that stimulated my interest in the counter-transference potential contained in this one simple image. From that point on I began making artworks during absences, in between sessions, and most potently, following sessions in which powerful or intense feelings had been aroused (Figure 5). When using this approach, I noticed several internal dynamic processes that seemed to find expression impulsively and spontaneously through art media. My curiosity led to developing a research project designed to evaluate the response art process I had been working with, and to ask whether a similar approach was being used by other art therapists in my professional network (Nash 2020). The research sought to evaluate the beneficial effects experienced in relation to making a reflect piece image at the end of a session.



Figure 5: post-session image, 2018.
Charcoal on paper, 12 inches x 18 inches.
Gary Nash



Figure 6: Systematic art making, 2018. Charcoal on paper and small-world figure on paper, 12 inches x 18 inches. Gary Nash.

The findings show that several processes are activated when creating a response piece and then reflecting on the image in supervision. Firstly, the creation of spontaneous art produces a release of powerful bodily affect which is experienced as a discharge or catharsis of somatic energy. The expression of intense feeling through art media has an effect of clearing the body and psyche of unprocessed affective material, energy, or unspoken feelings picked up in the attuned relationship: ‘The evidence gathered to date indicate that when making a reflect piece image there is an immediate release of bodily tension which can channel built up levels of affect in the body of the therapist’ (Nash 2020: 47). The research questionnaire (n-20) also found that art made immediately following a session, can be used as a visual container for the therapist’s imagined imagery in response to the client’s narrated distress or descriptions of traumatic events. This area of research has positive implications for the therapist’s self-care in relation to vicarious trauma and formed an important part of the research outcomes.

Secondly, the memory of the initial feeling that produced the expressive image or visual metaphor can be represented and explored through the visual language of the image and brought directly into supervision. Thirdly, as the body memory is brought into the present and mediated through the artwork, so the image can hold and reflect the original affective experience visually, enabling the process to resonate in parallel with the verbal supervisory narrative.

The research also found that therapists were making response art between sessions and in supervision, this work has been described as ‘systematic’ art making (Figure 6), by Wadeson (2003). Systematic response art involves planned and focused art making between sessions and may begin with the initial reflect piece image which is then re-worked in response to the exploratory process of supervision. This is done through elaborating the central motif or metaphor and re-shaping the initial affects as they are visually amplified through the artwork. A questionnaire and interview of art therapists (n-20) found that some therapists continue to work between sessions as they think about and deepen their empathy towards the clinical work and a particular client (Nash 2020). The research findings in this area show that there may be an increase in connection, attunement, and ‘visual empathy’ towards an aspect of the person and the work being described through the artwork (Franklin 2010).

The research described demonstrates McNiff’s (2013, 2018) influence on research design and how art transcends demarcated roles and disciplines (McNiff 2015), to form integrative connections between the different experiences of the practitioner, supervisor, and researcher, as mediated through an art response. This work is continuing to generate new ideas in the innovative area of art-based practice, supervision, and research, most notably, it shows how a new area of reflective practice

emerged through the simple act of noticing the creative presence of another, a supervisee's art response towards the absence of a client.

A parallel connection that resonates with McNiff's work and the London sessions is in 'trusting the process' of creativity, valuing visual and gestural responses towards the work of therapy (McNiff 1998), and trusting that they can be used as the basis of an art-based research design (McNiff 2018). Trusting the process involves trusting that the movement, impulse, and connection between the body and art media, will lead to a form that holds feeling. The synergy between artmaking, reflective supervision, and research demonstrates McNiff's description of allowing art to shape the research design: 'Art based research grows from a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with the images that emerge from it. These two focal points are the basis for a new tradition of inquiry' (1999: 83).

Research, whether in therapy or learning contexts, seek to understand how we learn, develop, and communicate through art. The epistemological focus always has a relationship towards how we feel and experience art, and how art has something unique to contribute to our research questions and knowledge base. I have found that placing art at the centre of a research design enables one to resolve subjectivity and rigour through the language of art (Nash 2022).

Conclusion

The London sessions gave me an embodied sense of my own creative experience and deepened my knowledge of what art does to me. The imaginative and conflictual processes that were going on within my experience were channelled, externalised, and resolved through the painting, giving access to an aesthetic knowledge that is defined by breath, movement, media, surface contact, and trust in the creative process. The experience encouraged me to develop research focusing on the value of the art that I make in response to my work as an art therapist.

The experiences described in this article show how all practice activities, innovative approaches, and experimental methods, derive from an exploration of art therapy within an aesthetic epistemology. The exploration of creative encounters with others reveal how creativity expresses an art-based knowledge of intuitive experience and attuned response towards the creative presence of those we work with (Nash 2022). The processes involved are non-verbal and emerge through body contact with creative media, and when we research these phenomena, we seek to articulate what happens in the creative moment, and what happens when we 'trust the creative process'. The overarching approach described by McNiff is to embrace art-based ways of looking-at and responding-to creative and relational practice and considers how therapist generated artworks are embedded in a collaborative therapist/client research paradigm.

The principles that I have distilled from McNiff's work (Nash 2021) have taught me that a defining feature of art-based research is that we start with art. When we start with art we build a research hypothesis, questions, and focus of inquiry, in relation to the art media and relational interactions with and through artistic expressive acts. The combined use of art as a starting point, a counterpoint, and an endpoint of enquiry reveals what we know about creative and relational experiences through visual empathy, aesthetic attunement, and imagination. This approach reflects the influence that Shaun McNiff has had in establishing a paradigm that uses the language of art as a means, method, and outcome of all research activities (McNiff 2018).

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