

Work-in-progress: A trainee psychotherapist's experience with aesthetic inquiry

Sian Haydon

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Faculty of Health and Environmental Science

Department of Psychotherapy & Counselling

Supervisor: Professor Keith Tudor

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Abstract

Aesthetics refers not only to material products or art, but also the atmosphere of our environments. Human beings interact with aesthetics every day, with varying degrees of recognition and appreciation. An extensive theoretical history suggests that these interactions are a form of knowledge and personal growth. However, practical applications of these theories are often in contrast with predominant social structures. This heuristic self-search inquiry explores how aesthetic inquiry as a sensory knowledge and sensibility can impact a trainee psychotherapist studying within a university setting. Many aspects of this researcher's world were discovered to be in-between, liminal spaces that were effectively explored through aesthetic engagement.

The growing field of neuroaesthetics research finds engagement with arts and environment to be an often undervalued, yet important ingredient in health, education and culture. Non-arts based psychotherapy does acknowledge aesthetics in theory, but further cross-disciplinary collaboration with neuroaesthetics may inform practice and training approaches. Psychotherapy training often seeks to impart a therapeutic "attitude" and increased self-knowledge so that the fledgling therapist can safely and effectively relate to their clients. This trainee found that aesthetic inquiry supported such growth but that this required an intentional change in state and pace to foster play, creativity and resonance.

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Thank you to my parents, for keeping the ground beneath me steady.

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Thank you to Keith, for giving permission to roam and to create from the heart.

And to colleagues, lecturers and supervisors for travelling along the divergent path with me.

To the artists and creators, who dream for us all.

Chapter One: Introduction

So much beauty and meaning is obscured by our preoccupations.

– Magsamen & Ross (2023, p. 128)

I have been engaging with aesthetics my whole life, as human beings we all have been, with varying degrees of recognition and appreciation. As a child when I had a vision for a new creation I would excitedly pull all the parts together to create and share it. Short stories written and illustrated on paper bound with staples. Bedroom furniture heaved around the room for a new “feel” to the space. Dance routines crafted to the song of the moment, incorporating playground structures and whoever I could find to submit to my directorial demands. I was a sort of fledgling creative producer. This process of visualising, curating, crafting and expressing led me to a career in design. Although I didn’t have the words for it then, my pursuit was of the full-bodied excitement and saliency of the arts; finding colours, textures and movements that “spoke to me.” I have come to know this as an aesthetic experience. The ensuing chapters follow my self-search inquiry as I forge a new relationship with aesthetic engagement as a psychotherapy student. My research process has been informed by a heuristic and arts-based approach to discovery.

The expansive, all-encompassing nature of aesthetics can be hard to define. My own views of aesthetics are irrevocably connected to my various stints as a student. First, a crafty primary school student and arts-focussed high schooler, then an idealistic graphic design undergraduate, and now over a decade later as a psychotherapy student. Although design is a subjective and often abstract vocation, the decision to begin psychotherapy training marked a distinct step into a world less tangible. At times throughout my training I wondered, “where is the space for my aesthetic perspective?” There were glimpses of it in Freud’s (1920/2009a) dream interpretation, Jung’s (1972/2003) symbols and archetypes, and theories of creative facilitation from Bion (1970), Winnicott (1971) and humanistic literature. However, I had been sensitive to what I observed as scepticism regarding the importance of arts, creative expression or room design. Were these ideas not the stuff of serious psychotherapists, of “talk therapists”?

The lingering presence of this question became louder when deciding on a dissertation topic. This was the kind of nagging feeling that can lead a researcher to embark upon autobiographical modes of research—it led Moustakas (1990) to establish the heuristic approach. It was only when the term *aesthetic shivers* arrived in my ears one day via a podcast episode (Grant, 2023) that I felt certain about officially committing to researching aesthetics. I was fizzing with a surge of knowing and excitement. This was my first fully conscious experience of aesthetic shivers, although I knew I had already experienced this many times before in the presence of art, design, architecture and music. A livening of the body and mind through salient aesthetic experiences can often connect us to a deep

knowing within ourselves. Research in the field of neuroaesthetics finds that the intuitive, embodied way human beings interact with all forms of art can be healing and deserves consideration in areas of health, education and community (Magsamen & Ross, 2023). Due to aesthetic shivers I came to know that a reintroduction and reconnection to aesthetics felt necessary and somehow linked to my new identity as a soon-to-be psychotherapist.

A Question and a Guide

To formulate a research question that was relevant to psychotherapy, my initial literature search pointed me in the direction of the *artist-therapist* (Rogers, n.d). I was wary of prematurely limiting the scope of what art I might create or what artist might mean, so I resonated with my supervisor's suggestion of *aesthetic inquiry* and thus formulated the following question, *how might re-engaging with aesthetic inquiry impact upon a trainee psychotherapist?*

Moustakas' (1990) heuristic research method considers *initial engagement* the first phase. Using the term "re-engagement" in my question became even more pertinent as it became clear that my *initial* initial engagement was as that young creative producer I previously described. Now, I wanted to understand how a re-engagement might impact me as a psychotherapist in training. A definition of aesthetic inquiry is outlined in the literature view below.

Literature View

My search of the literature was conducted in the spirit of heuristic research; subjectivity is meaningful and intuition is followed. This section is named *Literature View* to signify this process (Tudor, 2022, 2023). A formal traditional or systematic review would have been misaligned with the freedom to roam that Douglass and Moustakas (1985) promote and the wide gaze required for my topic of aesthetic inquiry. Through an initial search of contemporary literature on aesthetic inquiry and psychotherapy, I was guided by intuition as the key instrument in identifying references cited in these papers and books to read further. In heuristic fashion (Tudor, 2023), I also engaged with poems, songs, art and artist autobiographies—these are woven throughout the chapters of this dissertation.

Aesthetics and aesthetic inquiry

Aesthetic inquiry, for the purpose of my research, is an adoption of Greene's (1977) art education concept of finding meaning through a *wide-awakeness*. Accordingly, my exploration focusses not only on creating art, but engaging deeply with the context it derives from. This involves a broad encounter with the aesthetic world; being attentive to both the beauty and cruelty of life. Aesthetic inquiry is a reflexive, expressive approach to learning with existential philosophical roots (Gaines, 2016; Ryan, 2014). Gaines (2016) evaluates this approach against standardised testing and finds Greene's philosophy is holistic, more engaged and produces higher levels of rigor. I find this critique relevant to

healthcare in the sense that an aesthetic, embodied approach can lead to engaged clinicians and patients. Magsamen and Ross (2023)—through neuroaesthetics research findings—argue this also.

The etymology of the word “aesthetics” is from the German *ästhetisch* “pertaining to taste or discernment,” borrowed from the Greek *aisthētikós* “of sense perception, sensitive, perceptive” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Aesthetics can be undervalued in the Western world—seen as a merely “decorative aspect of life”—its importance as a process of knowledge acquisition can be overlooked (Sarasso et al., 2022a, p. 723). German philosopher Baumgarten’s eighteenth century conceptualisation of aesthetics was as a modern science or inquiry—a *sensible knowledge*. Some propose a return to this original “thought of the senses,” the essence of which is felt to have been lost to hard science (Griffero, 2017, p. viii). Berleant (2015) proposes the term *aesthetic sensibility*. This represents the original root of aesthetics and acknowledges an intrinsic human sensibility starting with early handcrafted tools, glyphs in caves, decorative pieces, and now arguably has expanded to include everyday experiences and our urban and industrial settings.

An alternative school of thought has grown from the Kantian notion of *disinterested pleasure*. The disinterested stance allows the viewer to simply admire art without the desire for anything more, making way for appreciation, or openness and creativity (Sarasso et al., 2022b). Upon reading, I questioned the Kantian stance. Although openness and creativity could certainly be achieved, this stance seemed detached compared to my own experiences. This may have reflected a divide between the concepts I was reading about in recent literature about *creativity* versus an *aesthetic sensibility*.

Sultan (2019) reminds us that human beings are more than simply eyes, ears and noses. Physiologically our nervous system is using these bodily organs to link sensory information with our internal representations (Gallese, 2019; Magsamen & Ross; 2023). Drawing a line between this and Greene’s (2001) philosophy, we may understand how meaningful personal discovery by “knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world” (p. 5) can occur through dialogue between an artist and their creation (Berleant, 2015; Dewey, 1934; Gain, 2022; Griffero, 2017; Ryan, 2014). These are Western theories, but an even greater level of interconnectedness between aspects of the living and non-living world is important in *Te Ao Māori*. Recent neuroaesthetics research (Magsamen & Ross, 2023) appears to bridge the gap between Western science and indigenous philosophies previously hampered by hard science, as Griffero (2017) argued.

I have offered a brief summary of my “view” of aesthetics and aesthetic inquiry as a grounding to my own inquiry. There is a wealth of literature, and as I explored, I felt as if I was surrounded by this topic in a different way from my time as a design student. I consider the word aesthetic to have had a contemporary renaissance. Younger generations have adopted it as part of their everyday vocabulary. It appears as though almost anything and everything is “aesthetic” (Schwartz, 2024; Silcoff, 2024). An

outfit, a profile picture, a lone pink shirt is simply “aesthetic”; no other descriptors are involved. Perhaps this is a signal of social change. Online, an imagery-based shorthand is now a common vehicle for personal communication (i.e. emojis, memes, short videos). Although I was not sure if this observation related to my search, I wondered if the pace of this communication impacted opportunities for myself and others to have deeper aesthetic encounters.

The aesthetically informed therapist

First-hand perspectives of aesthetic inquiry as a psychotherapist, particularly a trainee, were not forthcoming. I grappled with insecurity about my topic, concerned the appellation artist-therapist was a fraudulent claim to make of myself. Self-doubt eased slightly when I discovered students before me had researched their own artistic pursuits (Christophers, 2019; McCall, 2021). A collection of articles by psychotherapists who consider themselves artist-therapists illuminate the ways in which the arts and therapeutic practice intertwine (Jackson, 2018; Pivnick, 2018; Schwartz, 2018; Wexler, 2018). Geller (2018) introduces this collection by stating that there is new knowledge to be gained from aesthetic perspectives on how psychotherapists work. It is proposed that a deep interaction with various forms of art and aesthetics is an intersubjective process that nourishes a therapist’s skills in creative articulation (Schwartz, 2018). A process similar to this occurs in psychotherapy via the co-creation of a common language between therapist and client, resulting in a reorganising of the mind in a way that is “aesthetically pleasing” (Wexler, 2018, p. 208).

Studies of clients’ and therapists’ experiences in psychotherapy spaces (i.e. the interior design), found that therapists might benefit from a mereological system to consider aesthetic experiences in practice environments (Morrey et al., 2020), and that cultural differences required further research (Sinclair, 2021).

Stjernswärd and Glasdam’s (2023) autoethnographic research considers the student’s use of an art diary as an effective support for developing professional competencies in therapeutic work. Although potentially applicable to generic therapeutic practice, this research was conducted within an expressive arts program.

Aside from the above, initial searches gave me the impression that my topic was largely embedded in the distinct disciplines of art therapy or Gestalt therapy. As these are not my mode of training I considered this literature to be outside the scope of my research. However, this first impression caused my thoughts to return to Natalie Rogers’ (n.d.) view that some artists witnessed healing in the creative process and thus became artist-therapists. Expanding upon Carl Rogers concepts, Natalie had established *Expressive Arts Therapy*, a separate modality. I questioned if I was straying too far from my training by embarking on this research. Progress came to a halt as I sat on the fence. So I listened

inward, as the heuristic inquirer does, and intuition told me that I needed to explore the roots of my doubt before I could move forward. I went back in time in the literature.

Artistry in psychotherapy has a complex history and I recognise I can only touch the surface in this short chapter. In early psychoanalytic literature Freud (1920/2009b) pathologized artistic pursuits as unresolved needs and conflicts; unsatisfied “men” turned away from reality and toward wishful phantasy. Jung (1966) argued that “the golden gleam of artistic creation is extinguished” (pp. 68–69) by Freud’s thinking. Later, in contrast to the psychoanalytic debate and other objective psychologies, a humanistic approach to artistry included new theories that suggested creativity was a path to growth and wholeness (Arons & Richards, 2014; Greening, 2014; Rogers, 1967; Maslow, 1971). There is a breadth of contemporary literature supporting this approach to psychological health and the importance of the creative process for learning. This does not appear to reduce the systemic challenges practitioners face in helping and teaching professions (Gaines, 2016). From here, I knew I would need to jump down from the fence into the middle of this debate to see what I could understand for myself.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Method

The prerequisites for growth: the openness to experience events and the willingness to be changed by them.

– Mau (1998)

When I came to terms with my final research question, I recognised two things: how personal and connected to my identity my topic was, and how essential it felt to explore the topic through both *being* with it (an internal exploration) and by *doing* things with it (an external creation). This required a methodology based on Moustakas (1990) heuristic research (and Sela-Smith's (2002) contributing concept of *self-search*), alongside a creative approach which I describe below. Beginning this process came with a sense of excitement and possibility that didn't take long for me to feel I should tame. I took Sela-Smith's (2002) advice to surrender to this taming instinct and find meaning in it in order to move through it.

Heuristic Methodology and Philosophy

Articulating the research philosophy proved to be a project of self-exploration in itself. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) felt heuristic research was not a prescribed methodology, rather that it offered a conceptual framework or attitude with which to approach research. As Tudor (2023) states, this requires the researcher to engage fully from the start in order to provide their own methodology. Sultan (2019) describes heuristic research as qualitative, social constructivist and phenomenologically-aligned. Also as experiential, emancipatory, imaginative and creative. It is an exploratory process. I was seeking to know something of my experience over time (Sela-Smith, 2002). Heuristic research is particularly suited to exploring change over time and in-depth personal experience. Other qualitative research methods can also allow for change or nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2013), however without the option of interviewing research participants in this study I found a heuristic self-search was the most appropriate approach.

My methodology is underpinned by both heuristic and aesthetic inquiry as humanistic, sensory and embodied. Humanistic theorists such as Rogers (1967), Maslow (1971) and Gendlin (1978) placed high value on experiencing as a path to self-awareness; Moustakas (1990) did the same. Sultan (2019) describes Gendlin's philosophy of "experience happens when a person and the world encounter one another" (p. 42) as central to heuristic research. Aesthetic inquiry follows a similar belief, and I considered co-constructed knowledge between myself and the world to be fundamental to my methodology.

Creativity and research

Humanistic psychology, and creativity as a discipline, emerged almost concurrently. In post-war America their paths often crossed and influenced each other (Arons & Richards, 2014). According to Arons and Richards (2014) the qualities of a creative object, idea or behaviour are that it is: original, new, or departs from convention; that it communicates, and it is meaningful to others. Rogers (1967) wrote, “creativity is the desire to communicate” (p. 356). I find that heuristic research seeks to achieve the same. Creativity is inherent in both aesthetic and heuristic inquiry.

Considerations and limitations

As this is a self-search inquiry, I am the researcher and sole participant providing data (Sela-Smith, 2002). I am a Pākehā woman training as a psychotherapist and this data is subjective and from my own experience only. With ethical responsibility in mind there are no personal details or information shared about other people who have contributed to my journey with this topic. This subjectivity could be criticised as anecdotal or unable to provide definitive answers (Lyons, 2007). Focus on the individual experience may be considered “Eurocentric” (Sultan, 2019). Tudor (2023) discusses how overvaluation of autonomy over homonomy can be true of both heuristic research and psychotherapy. However, as Rogers (1967) writes, “what is most personal is most general” (p. 26). Heuristic researchers are able to explore questions that are not readily researched, this can have social significance. This research was conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand, a country with diverse perspectives on wellbeing and aesthetic importance that are unique to the bicultural context (Gain, 2022; Tudor et al., 2013). I hoped my research may contribute to this context.

This is a 45-point dissertation to be completed in eight months. Moustakas (1990) believed heuristic research was a process not to be constrained by clock time. Experiential time would allow the researcher to move with intuition, following lines of enquiry through a sense of what holds meaning for them (as described in the literature view). An adjusted method was suggested by my supervisor which myself and other group members adopted to fit within the short eight-month research period. I wondered if it would be possible to follow the tenants of heuristic research within such constraints. I embarked with a plan to create spaciousness within each phase to hopefully allow discovery to unfold.

The Method

Moustakas’ (1990) method involves the following phases: *initial engagement*, *immersion*, *incubation*, *illumination*, *explication* and *creative synthesis*. Recent contributions from Sultan (2019) and Tudor (2023) critique the notion that each phase neatly occurs one after another. Instead, the phases overlap while the researcher moves backwards and forwards as if in a dance (Sultan, 2019). The overall purpose of Moustakas (1990) method remains true, that is, searching for “qualities, conditions, and relationships that underlie a fundamental question” (p. 11) by “moving from whole to part to whole

again” (p. 16). Tools such as focusing, self-dialogue, journaling, art, poetry and audio recordings are considered the means to complete this.

Initial engagement

As I described in my introduction, my prior engagements with my topic were as a child and a university student about fifteen years ago. *This* initial engagement is as a postgraduate psychotherapy student. This phase involved a “setting of the scene” to reacquaint myself and evolve my everyday relationship with aesthetics. I began an intuitive, nondescript process of reading, seeing and creating, then re-seeing and recreating what I had made. I had a dream at this early stage about being the passenger in a van that reversed its way through a pile of hard-shell suitcases. The suitcases—which I feared would be in the path of the vehicle but felt powerless to stop—were attractive pastel colours but were crushed by the wheels of the reversing van. Their contents were somehow soggy and wet. My unconscious sleep state was anticipating breaking open, and perhaps ruining, what I believed my relationship to aesthetics was.

Immersion

Moustakas (1990) believed that any method that gets the researcher closer to the phenomena, is relevant to the topic, and ethically appropriate, is acceptable to adopt for the heuristic researcher. Methods such as: immersion into the topic or question, or discovering meaning in literature and everyday experiences (e.g. being alert to the whispers and signs of the topic in conversation or happenstance and entering into the presented opportunity). I practised Greene’s (2001) wide-awakeness and my topic seemed to be everywhere. I gazed at my interior surroundings and breathed in the suburban landscape. I wrote poetry, one about a vase that looked *as if its bright yellow dots could dress up its sadness* and realised that I’d been buying a lot of yellow myself lately. Poetry seemed to come naturally before visual art making, perhaps not surprising as psychotherapy studies focus on expression via language. I visited art galleries, heard messages in the lyrics of songs, and meditated on imagery in the Relaxation Room at our university clinic. Importantly, I regularly used an art diary. This time was beautifully littered with synchronicities. I began selecting items from my wardrobe that had symbolic meaning to me and others often noticed when I wore them. As Berleant (2015) would say, I was building my own aesthetic sensibility. One small act at a time. It was during this early immersion that I felt I was part of the continuum of self and environment, creator and perceiver—the experience of the infinity symbol that Sultan (2019) refers to.

Incubation

I am reminded of the advice a design lecturer once shared about not “jumping on the spot.” Meaning, continuing to obsessively make small adjustments in pursuit of perfection can stop you from moving forward. Stepping away to gain perspective can offer a leap in a new, maybe much needed, direction. An unplanned incubation occurred after the discovery of my old school reports. I had to reckon with

my longing for a different experience at school—a more engaged, artistic one. After initial engagement and immersion, my new knowledge of aesthetic inquiry no doubt increased this longing. While unplanned, I believe this intuitive shift to incubation was instrumental as a way to process shame and grief and open up potential for greater discovery.

Illumination

As Tudor (2023) states, illumination or “eureka” moments cannot be planned as a phase, they occur as a series of moments throughout the process. I believe these are a culmination of everything that has come before it. Early in the research process I wrote down two sections from designer Bruce Mau’s *An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth* (1998) which I had admired as a design student. The first one is an epigraph to this chapter, and here is the second, “[c]offee breaks, cab rides, green rooms. Real growth often happens outside of where we intend it to, in the interstitial spaces—what Dr Seuss calls ‘the waiting place’” (Mau, 1998). The interstitial spaces offer mini-incubations, *and* these are often the moments where illumination happens. I agree with Moustakas’ view that a preparation phase (in my experience, initial engagement and immersion) is readily envisioned, and in contrast, incubation and illumination is like a highly impromptu part of the researcher’s dance Sultan refers to. Illuminations were peppered throughout the research process and at times they felt like the buzzing embodied energy of aesthetic shivers. One evening I watched a music documentary which showed people walking into a church. Above the threshold was a banner, it said *Signs Wonders Miracles*. My attention was piqued. I felt that engaging in aesthetic inquiry was like a religious or spiritual experience. The signs that were calling out from the apparently non-human and non-living felt like seeing wonders and miracles. Felt like magic. Felt not alone.

Explication

Moustakas (1990) saw the purpose of the explication phase as fully examining “what has awakened in consciousness” (p. 31) through illuminations during immersion and incubation. I found this was a more cognitively creative phase than the misty musings of illuminations. Language is being fully formed around previously unconscious notions and the loose strings connecting concepts are reigned in more tightly and pertinently. Through use of a digital (and aesthetically pleasing) notebook app, I organised diary entries, artwork and poetry into a hashtag system to begin to identify themes. I also made drawings of my process over time (Figure 1), including plotting key terms against main themes in a cluster to demonstrate core qualities and connected components (Moustakas, 1990). Two tools which I will discuss shortly, *focusing* and *indwelling*, allow themes, qualities and components brought forth during earlier stages of the research to be fully elucidated. This allows for those key components to be utilised in the next phase, creative synthesis.

Creative synthesis

The key components are woven together into a creative synthesis that represents the researcher's experience as a whole. This can be via creative means like drawing, painting, poetry, story or music (Sela-Smith, 2002; Sultan, 2019). Any means that best conveys the essence of what the researcher has come to know about their topic. My creative synthesis is described in the final chapter.

Tools for creation and discovery

Moustakas (1990) offers tools one can draw upon to gain knowledge about their area of inquiry, two of which were mentioned in the explication section—focusing and indwelling. The others are *tacit knowing*, *intuition* and an *internal frame of reference*. Sela-Smith (2002) contributes *self-experience*, *inward reach* (for tacit awareness and knowledge), *surrender*, *self-dialogue*, *self-search* and *transformation*. Many naturally occur within a heuristic self-search. I decided to highlight two such tools to guide my work within the shortened time frame; focusing and tacit knowing.

Focusing is based on Gendlin's (1978) slow and intentional process of inward attention in order to understand or gain awareness of a "felt sense" or the essence of a problem, concern or situation. As my research included artistic creation, focusing was an important counterbalance to the active creation process.

Tacit knowing is described as the sense of something's wholeness from its individual parts (Moustakas, 1990). This sense is often unknown or preconscious. The researcher can focus inward to investigate feelings and intuitions to allow knowledge to emerge (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). I mentioned in my introduction the idea of aesthetic shivers (Magsamen & Ross, 2023). In my personal experience this is a holistic encounter, where our body "knows" something that we are not yet consciously aware of, or not of its parts in any case. This tool was selected due to its relevance in aesthetic inquiry.

Chapter Three: Discoveries

I did not know that I could only get the most out of life by giving myself up to it

– Milner (1934/2024, pp. 64–65)

This chapter is titled *Discoveries* rather than *Findings* to more accurately denote the emergent manner in which ideas, themes and illuminations present themselves in heuristic research. Here, the parallel threads of my re-engagement with aesthetic inquiry, and engagement with literature *about* aesthetic inquiry, as a trainee psychotherapist became intertwined. Art, self-dialogues and immersive aesthetic experiences illustrate this process, centred around prominent themes that arose while reviewing my self-produced data. Many of the themes were prompted by pieces of art I created. They were not planned pieces or intended for exhibit outside of this research, mostly they were emergent and made with whichever tools or materials were in front of me. In other words, they weren't intended to be "good." These pieces, some with an accompanying written reflection, are placed ahead of themes or clusters of themes that relate to the piece. They are: *relationships: object turns to subject; possibilities: containing endlessness; counter-cultural: feeling different; a shift: taking it slow; consumption: being a seeker; conduit: being in-between and environment: being with space*. Throughout, I also re-view relevant literature in light of my evolved relationship with the topic. Further references to the literature appear in the following chapter, which will bring these discoveries into a synthesis and consider implications to the field of psychotherapy.

The Discoveries

Relationships: Object turns to subject

There is a tendency to think of aesthetic aspects of our world as simply decorative, as objects. My awareness of perceptions of my topic as "materialistic" was clear in a diary entry in which I asked, *why go outside myself to create a relationship with aesthetics?* As if all the answers were inside. Often they are thought to be when studying psychotherapy, but the key word in my self-posed question is *relationship*. From the start of my research, visions of moulded jelly appeared in my mind. I made a humble drawing with marker pens and notepad (Figure 2) and had a long dialogue between the art and myself ("myself" was both the artist and the beholder). This became my standard practice. Almost inevitably during these conversations it became unclear who's role was what, both the art and the artist-beholder shifted between asking questions and answering them. A dual process emerged, clearly defined roles disappeared. A similar process transpired when I engaged with other people's creations. "Perhaps what is most human about artfulness is the fact that it is not an *object* but a *relationship*" (Pivnick, 2018, p. 222). Turning object to subject allowed for infinite relational potential, just as a human-to-human interaction allows for infinite potential.

Figure 2*Jelly on a Plate*

Icons and symbols representing aspects of Self are suspended in moulded gelatine. I see wobbly jelly as a flexible yet sensitive container that holds itself together. Are the aspects of Self stuck, I wonder? Almost naively separated from their surroundings and 'kept in check'/contained by the translucent curves and edges of gelatine. Jelly on a plate tells me there is some inhibition. I see in this piece separation of internal and external worlds but desire for transparency. The jelly sits atop a tablecloth of clouds and blue sky, offering freedom and possibilities—Jelly speaks of 'blue sky thinking' and a potential for newness. (Diary entry, 3rd May, 2024)

Possibilities: Containing endlessness

A wish for potential and possibility was constantly on my mind: a sense of what I was calling a “new-to-me-ness.” At first, I uncovered fear of not finding this newness. I wrote about a fear of getting *stuck in an intrapersonal quicksand* by over-indwelling and being restricted from reaching it.

Later, a paradoxical fear emerged when looking at the tablecloth in Figure 2 and seeing that it mirrored what would be the blue sky above. This felt endless and overwhelming, *no end in sight. I am the wobbly jelly, gathering, absorbing and containing my own stuff and other people's stuff but not*

finding ground to land on. Some of this “stuff” I can only describe as Bion’s (1970) beta elements—unprocessed feelings and thoughts waiting to be transformed into something palatable. I imagined these to be the clouds peppered throughout the sky.

I looked at this piece from two perspectives: I saw myself as the jelly, a trainee who contains various thoughts and feelings of others without much ground to sit on; and I felt the essence of my engagement in aesthetic inquiry—endless possibilities. Is not finding ground the trade-off for one’s pursuit of potential and “new-to-me-ness”? Greene (2007) insists that receptivity to art and aesthetics means sitting with the feeling of inexhaustible and unpredictable possibilities. Whatever form the aesthetic experience took, if I took the time to really see them, the symbols, metaphors, colours and textures contained a multitude of meanings to me. Endless possibilities felt easier to contain once I could bring form to them, even in the most abstract way.

Figure 3

My Relationship to Art



Counter-cultural: Feeling different

Diary entries about being released from conventions were prominent throughout my midway immersion phase. I had attended a group art therapy class and crafted a collage of ripped organic paper and monochromatic lines with concealed glittery elements (Figure 3), that “represented my

relationship to art.” We simply used whatever was provided on the day. To me this piece felt incohesive and ugly. Most likely because the mix of materials and colour conveyed tension, disharmony. To me this tension was between organic desire, structure, and magic; the artist confronted by convention. My embodied response was one of resistance, a feeling of being halted. I turned this into a question to focus upon: *what resistance did I have to aesthetic inquiry?*

Some answers to this question were found in the diary entry below and, a few days later, a box of my old school reports. I had written of generational scars that created a lack of reverence for artistic experience or spiritual experience:

...scars that mean “feelings” or “inklings” are not to be trusted... Surrendering to anything other than certainty—science and fact—is dangerous or naive.
(Diary entry, 8th June, 2024)

I cannot claim any of this to be accurate, only my perception, but a very deeply held grief formed within me for ancestors who were robbed of the ability to express themselves.

Was not being taken seriously as an artistic person a reflection of a prominent attitude in Aotearoa New Zealand? My internalisation of this attitude had created inner conflict. My own school reports added to a sense of grief and reinforced the tension illustrated in my art therapy collage:

I looked through some old mementos from my primary school years. I found joy in a little story from my Year One writing book about a bird who was floating calmly in the sea when her tail was suddenly turned into many colours by a magical shell, and "she was happy." But, what I also found was a report system that denoted Effort vs Outcome... this feels... stifling. I need to temper down my enthusiasm and curiosity and just hand in my work, but I just want to keep going.
(Diary entry, 11th June, 2024)

As I wrote the above, my perspective shifted to my experience as a child who felt constricted. I recalled as a child how natural it felt to learn through a process akin to aesthetic inquiry, but this collided with structured learning time and marking criteria in the schooling system. The same collisions occur while studying to complete and pass assignments now, or writing a dissertation. I have called this theme *counter-cultural* because of the systemic clashes it contains, this theme also involves the concept of judgement.

Figure 4*Compassion**A shift: Taking it slow*

To me aesthetic inquiry felt like a slow, reflexive state of being that was in high contrast to the fast-paced, active and achievement-driven life outside of it. The art therapy classes allowed for this slower state of being. I wrote in my diary a feeling of *unfamiliar spaciousness and calmness due to the invitation of both time and lack of outcome requirements*. To create Figure 4 I used soft materials and curved undulating lines within a circular frame to denote slowness and compassion. In its simplest form, creative expression might be thought of as a consumerist endeavour; the designed products people purchase and display in their homes or pick out for their outfits each day. Here, the process is forgotten. The process of “making, doing, teaching, critiquing and becoming whole” (Magsamen & Ross, 2023, p. 214). Being present with this requires time and patience.

This process opened up synchronicities that emerged through a stage of open dialogue with the aesthetic world that I could facilitate by reading, hearing, writing, reading, touching and painting as a cycle of meaning making and allowing what emerged to resonate and connect. I reflected upon this in a diary entry:

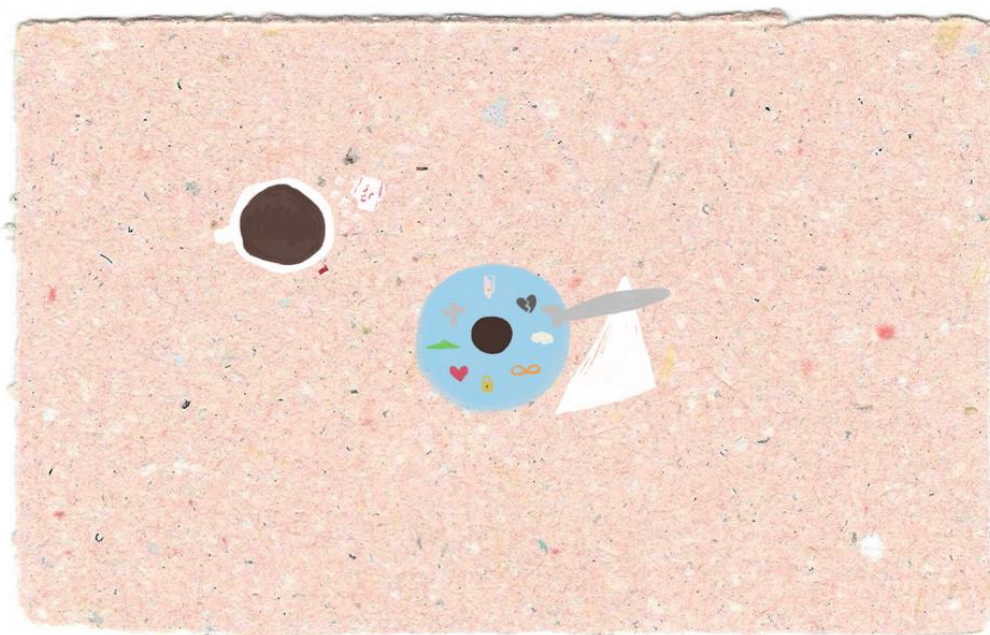
...in my study, on my laptop I heard in Jon Batiste's MOVEMENT '19: "I think that our egos should serve us / Instead of us serving it." I picked up an old box of beautiful recycled paper on the bottom of my bookcase and felt the supple bumps of it. Then I walked to the kitchen and on the radio David Bowie sang: "Waiting for the gift of sound and vision / Drifting into my solitude / Over my head" And I thought, I have received the gifts of sound and vision today instead of hungrily searching for more.

(Diary entry, 29th July, 2024)

On this day I created Figure 5. There was something very alive about this. I realised that during my psychotherapy training these moments of connection to music or books had been few and far between. But as a teenager and young adult this was almost an everyday experience. This process is also connected to the *conduit: being in-between* theme I discuss later in this chapter.

Figure 5

Sight



A painted eye is sitting in the middle of recycled paper, paper full of remnants of the natural world—a visual representation of 'atmosphere,' the 'material' Rubin speaks of. From this atmosphere the eye finds meaning, shown through icons and symbols. Dichotomies of existence that co-exist but appear on opposite sides of a mediating, central pupil (intact love and broken love, ground and sky, infinity and death, open and shut), dichotomies that exist 'out there' and 'in here.'

(Diary entry, 29th July, 2024)

Consumption: Being a seeker

After the immersion, incubation and illumination stages of my research I wrote:

I began my search by following my eyes, ears and nose. And I found inspiration and excitement, grief and sadness. Depth of feeling. But as I started actively seeking, I found pressure and judgement. More, more, and I could keep running away with more. A word emerged in my mind today, it was simply “less.”

(Diary entry, 17th June, 2024)

Artist-therapist Milner had described a similar feeling while engaging in her “meta-diaries” which contained personal lessons from being with art and literature. Milner (1934/2024) felt drawn “to sink down beneath the level of chattering thoughts and simply feel what it meant to be alive” (p. 176).

The word that came to my mind when I felt this active seeking for more was *hungry*. Writer Elizabeth Gilbert (2015) speaks of the Buddhist idea of the hungry ghost—our ego eternally howling with need—driving an almost maniacal creative quest. On the other hand, Suzanne Scanlon (2024) (who spent much of her twenties in a psychiatric ward) found her passionate consumption of literature allowed her to create herself into something “real”—an artist—which felt more real than any psychiatric diagnosis she had received. Through reading, Scanlon was able to write her own words, therefore she felt her consumption did fulfil her need. Both of these descriptions resonated with my own experience although they are opposites. My indulgent “more, more” felt quite vital and familiar—like the enthusiasm I had as a child, although this needed to be tamed in order to hand in my schoolwork.

Conduit: Being in-between

I began my immersion imagining that I could distinguish myself as an artist at times or a beholder at other times. I would draw the infinity symbol and place “artist” on the left, “beholder” on the right, and “aesthetic inquirer/perceiver” in the middle crossover of the loop. This made some sense, but when I tried to list what each of these roles did that was different to the other the listed items would converge.

Like an infinity symbol, this dynamic was always in flux. Berleant (2015) describes an embodied beholder responding to art through sense perception and thought, “conditioned by physical, historical, and cultural influences” (p. 5). Instead of considering myself as “the artist” or “the beholder” who become “subject to” one another, I could see myself instead as a human being who is a “subject of” my aesthetic environment (Griffero, 2017). I made art about how this related to my psychotherapy practice too (discussed further in the final theme)—two positions of opposite power that the therapist and client might oscillate between in a session. After multiple variations of the infinity diagram, even writing this section now, I still don’t feel resolved in trying to define it. Figure 5 illustrates aspects of how the aesthetic inquirer holds contrasting ideas. Music producer Rick Rubin’s concept of artist as conduit describes the essence of moving between artist and beholder, and therapist and client, to simply feel as a “subject of” the aesthetic, sensory space we occupy.

Our work embodies a higher purpose. Whether we know it or not, we're a conduit for the universe. Material is allowed through us... If we zoom out of our small view of reality, we function more as an instrumentalist in a much larger symphony the universe is orchestrating. (Rubin, 2023, p. 95)

When I felt myself to be a conduit, I was no longer concerned with judgement, familial beliefs or opposing theories. As a conduit, the feeling was of taking up a place in between two things, like the transformative “place of the middle” (Jung, 1972/2003) or “the third” (Ogden, 2004). My sister sent me an article about liminality and I felt this place of the middle was a liminal space. The conduit experience felt new to me in this re-engagement with aesthetics. Something close to meditation or mindfulness (which I had only truly picked up in the last seven years); spiritual. Being an intermediary was true for others engaging in aesthetic inquiry and psychotherapy—Schwartz (2018) writes that this process in art also helped her to “construct a relational environment” as a therapist (p. 244).

Figure 6

Space In Use I



Figure 7

Space In Use II



Space In Use I (24th June) and Space In Use II (13th July) are telling me that the space of the therapy room is fraught with unexpressed experience within non-linear time and space—energy, joy, cracks and separation, uncertainty. Who occupies the two armchairs is unclear. One takes up more space than the other, both are only in outline, susceptible to the comings and goings of the atmosphere of the ‘space in use’ (a play on the red sign that is placed outside the door of rooms at the university clinic saying ROOM IN USE). The room is a space manipulated by both occupants (therapist and client) each taking different roles as the session proceeds through varying phases of expression and insight. Each brings their context, their environment, their history to the space. What happens in between these two occupants? The space in between.
(Diary entry, 13th July, 2024)

Environment: Being with space

When I sat down with my iPad before and after my sessions with clients, drew my visual and visceral perceptions of the therapy room in terms of space and atmosphere. Both pieces portrayed my sense of non-explicit, “poetic dimensions of sight, sound and space”—Pivnick (2018, p. 218) aptly refers to the aesthetic experience of a psychotherapist in session as such. *Space In Use I* and *II* also contain literal representations of the physical aesthetics of the space. The overstuffed purple chairs are almost a living feature of those therapy rooms to me. Their giant arms wrap me up and the deep base cushion almost swallows me whole. One day I wore a purple jumpsuit, and my client commented that I was

almost rendered invisible aside from my floating head. A meaningful expression at the time, and perhaps the reason there is no one in the chairs in the above pieces.

Noticeably, I neglected to include the empty bookshelf that has blankly stared at me in each session. The empty shelf has been perhaps too heavy a reminder that I am using “borrowed space” like I had read about in Jackson’s (2018) article about aesthetics and the psychotherapist’s office from her own training experience. I related to the struggle to find a consistent clinical identity due to ever-changing clinical placements, locations and room design. My time as a student was also accompanied by other uncertainty, multiple house moves and job changes, as I tried to make my non-student life fit with my student life. I wrote a poem while looking at another artist’s work that featured a lounge setting, I offer just a segment of it here:

*it’s a wobbly seat
set against a background of undecided colour*

*it’s a floating seat
set against a background of undecided ground*

*there are two seats
but
maybe i will sit on the
ground
instead
(Diary entry, 19th April, 2024)*

Despite the lack of personal identity in university clinical rooms, Jackson (2018) imagined that the look of the space might convey something to her clients about how unestablished she was as a student. That was how I felt to be mostly invisible in my big purple chair. Like I was an amalgamation of therapists, supervisors and lecturers who also take their position in the therapy chair. The therapy room is full of invisible presence. This non-explicit atmosphere can be perceived and sensorially “known.” “The way in which “appearances” resound in our lived body” as Griffero (2017, p. viii) describes. A world *feeling* rather than a world *view* (Bazzano, 2023).

In my diary I found a description of the comfort in creating something tangible, something that could be truly “made” amidst the uncertainty. Schwartz (2018) uses the term *relational home* (as conceived of by Stolorow (2015)) for this process, saying art “did not heal the traumatic aspects of my loss; but the process of making them did establish a ‘relational home’” (pp. 241–242). Near the end of writing this chapter I came across the following quote: “Without a home at the centre of the real, one was not only shelter-less, but also lost in nonbeing, in unreality. Without a home everything was fragmentation” (Berger, 1984, p. 55). A lack of aesthetic consistency or a life that didn’t involve the

arts could feel like the lack of a home, for a trainee psychotherapist it could feel like having no place to hang your hat.

Chapter Four: Discussion

As it came time to reach the last phase, creative synthesis, I stumbled into my own resistance. The limited timeframe of my research study felt short; I had a desire to prolong it and not signal its end with the final phase and a final piece of art. After a short incubation away from images, diary entries and streams of words on my laptop screen, it struck me that this exploration has been about time.

Wanting more of it. To achieve more with it. Trying to stop it. In a way, I wanted to be in-between time.

Almost every chapter of this dissertation has been re-written immediately after “finishing” a draft for the monthly deadline. I was a slave to this process. My first writing would be weighed down with the heaviness of a conventional structure: what I thought others might expect “proper” research to be. Then, with the deadline no longer looming—concerns of time and expectation released—I would settle in to *actually* write the chapter in my own voice.

I am aware that while writing this, my language has been poetic, fragments of sentences, meditations. This style helped me reach a certain essence, to capture a moment in time, and to move through layers of thought and felt sense throughout my self-search. For this reason, I consider it to be part of the method of this research. As such, I consider the discussion of themes below to be a mediation on time and space in relation to aesthetic inquiry and psychotherapy. It is an extension, review and reflection upon the discoveries from the previous chapter.

Meditations On Time and Space

Work-in-progress

In a therapy session we are often attempting not to do too much in the 50 minutes we have. The hope is this will create space to feel more, and to know more about the two beings in the room. Engaging in aesthetic inquiry asks us to do the same: stopping, seeing and sensing our way through something we are creating. Being with art and allowing ourselves to be touched by it. A cycle. Or that was my experience of it. As a student, as an artist, and inside the therapy room, I was in the place of the middle. In flux. How to put a time limit on this kind of learning? Therapy, as one example, is a perpetual work-in-progress that “cannot be pinned down to a stable physical manifestation”; an artwork without a work (Scheurer, 2019, p. 56). By making poetry, painting or drawings I felt comfort in the physical manifestation of these formless moments, although aware that I could never completely capture them.

Ogden (2021) says, “I find that I have to be creating something of my own as I am immersed in trying to help someone else create something of his or her own” (p. 221). Artistic pursuits might be a way for

students to create greater capacity for helping others and to “concretize” (Schwartz, 2018) their own development process. Much like Jung (1971) felt dream elements were symbols of the self that were “the best possible representation of a relatively unknown fact” (p. 474), I found symbols in my art that taught me about my self and how small parts contributed the whole essence of my experience.

The opposite of concretization also occurred for me when possibilities felt inexhaustible. When up against time (deadlines) it seemed imperative yet entirely unattainable to know all these possibilities. My antidote to this discomfort was to create capacity for spaciousness within the deadlines. Rosa (2019) proposed, “If acceleration is the problem, then resonance may well be the solution” (p. 1). Art and aesthetics can offer resonance (Magsamen & Ross, 2023; Wexler, 2018). The conditions for finding resonance are not always built into the environments we operate our lives within. In chapter one I wondered whether digital forms of communication could impact a person’s ability to deeply aesthetically relate. As an infrequent social media user, I did not uncover findings related to this. Alternatively, my experience was that strict criteria and timelines, instability, and social perception were of greater personal significance as barriers to meaningful aesthetic engagement. Studying at a mature age has been an opportunity to bring more of myself into the learning process. At the same time, it has highlighted the ways in which this can feel difficult within an institution like a university. Aesthetic inquiry can lead to active engagement, collaboration, capacity for ongoing learning, involvement in social issues, and personal fulfilment for the student (Costes-Onishi et al., 2020; Dewey, 1934; Gaines, 2016; Greene, 2001). I found the faculty were encouraging of this, but also inevitably have assessment schedules, criteria and other requirements to adhere to. Since artistic, aesthetic or deep inquiry felt counter to the perceived norms in education systems (Costes-Onishi et al., 2020; Gaines, 2016), at the end of my research I appreciated that there was an element of “permission giving” required to approach learning in this more personal, creative way. Undertaking a self-search into aesthetic inquiry gave this permission. Although short by heuristic standards, my perception was that this method comparatively felt like more time to engage, learn and synthesise through the freedom to roam.

Time in liminal spaces

Liminal spaces are in-between spaces that denote a shift in time. When I sit in a therapy room, I have left the conventions and grind of outside life behind, or I try to. Much like contemplating brushstrokes on canvas or stepping into an art gallery gives me a sense of stillness, so too the therapy room promises a reprieve from outside noise. Often the shift into a liminal space is accompanied by a ritual that marks a change in place or state (Turner, 1969). I am thinking back now to the *Signs Wonders Miracles* banner at the threshold of the church. Rituals not only mark a change but give permission to shift into a slower and more reflective state. In the current climate—which is rather fast-paced—arguably, preserving the sacred nature of our therapeutic spaces is important yet challenging.

Innovative art psychotherapy programs conducted in art galleries and museums found those environments—which are inherently contemplative and educational—supported creativity, expanded therapeutic work and addressed power imbalances (Watson et al., 2021). Therapists said they had to work much harder to create this atmosphere in clinical environments where rooms were not fit for purpose, or the context was restrictive. Non-arts psychotherapies and programs may find these issues resonate with them also.

As a student, at times I felt as if I was ricocheting between theoretical paradoxes, supervisory advice, clinical contexts and literally the sprawling motorways of Auckland City. Lack of consistency during training years can be a vast and bewildering landscape for trainees to navigate (Civitarese & Ferro, 2020; Jackson, 2018). This is highlighted in psychotherapeutic literature and appeared in the key assigned text for this year's AUT practice course in the first chapter,

As if the ethereal quality of the psychoanalytic attitude were not intangible enough for the fledgling psychoanalytic practitioner, the picture is further complicated by virtue of the sheer diversity of psychoanalytic theories that are often at odds with each other, along with the technical recommendations that are advocated. (Lemma, 2015, p. 22)

Other psychotherapeutic scholars have alternative conceptions of the “attitude” Lemma refers to (e.g. a unique *voice* and *style* (Gabbard & Ogden, 2009), a *way of being* (Rogers, 1967)). The student, in a liminal space between stages of their professional life, may find it difficult to discover this and find their feet amongst the intangibility of it all.

A room and a home

When Virginia Woolf spoke of a woman needing money and a room of one's own to write fiction (1929/2004) it was in a different time and context. However, one could argue that this can apply to a trainee therapist (here, Masters' psychotherapy students do not qualify for a student allowance and there are high expenses involved). These practical challenges of training can make it difficult to ground oneself in space and time, to sink beneath the chattering thoughts, and cultivate a craft and practice. When I think of a room I also think of a home and the varying essences of “home” and “space” that arose in my discoveries. Bachelard and de Botton speak of a home as a place of shelter and refuge for our minds and imaginations to work their magic:

[T]he house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace. (Bachelard, 1958/2014, p. 28)

We need a home in the psychological sense as much as we need one in the physical: to compensate for a vulnerability. We need a refuge to shore up our states of mind, because so much of the world is opposed to our allegiances. (de Botton, 2008, p. 107)

We need our rooms to align us to desirable versions of ourselves and to keep alive the important, evanescent sides of us. (de Botton, 2008, p. 107)

There is often a fantasy of the perfect therapy room that arrives in the mind when deciding to make psychotherapy one's profession.

The therapist's office in its physical form is intimately tied to several processes of the therapy itself—the creation of a “holding environment”... the establishment of an effective workspace that allows the therapist to do his or her best work, the formations and representations of the therapist's own identity. (Jackson, 2018, p. 234)

It is not feasible for all trainees to receive a practice room that represents their identity or optimally supports their work. In the absence of such a room, I discovered that engaging in aesthetic inquiry and art-making created a space to hold and contain my daydreams when I didn't have the physical “home” as a refuge. Using art to form an ongoing loop between external and internal was a grounding act. In the previous chapter I shared how Schwartz (2018) felt their art practice created a safe or relational home for processing difficult emotions. Having this routine practice for myself helped me establish skills to create the same kind of space in clinical work with clients.

Rituals and transitional objects

It occurs to me that aesthetic inquiry in the form an art diary (or other artistic ritual) seemed like a sort of transitional object (Winnicott, 1953). It provided a semblance of consistency to me. A portable consistency. The ritual of art-making and aesthetic inquiry may support an aspiring therapist to move through the in-between space and *potential* space of therapy, ready for what will be brought forward by therapist and client (Scheurer, 2019; Winnicott, 1971).

I used my art diary on a regular basis but without much structure. Even more ritualised was Stjernswärd and Glasdam's (2023) use of an art diary before and after each session. They found this nurtured self-knowledge and the ability to transition between phases and physical spaces in therapeutic work. It was a useful tool for changing states. Some argue that written or visual diaries are their own forms of autotherapy (Halton-Hernandez, 2020; Scheurer, 2019). “The Milner method” is the practice of using images and words in autobiographical life writing to uncover the self in a way that is psychoanalytically informed like Marion Milner's books were. Halton-Hernandez (2020) writes about the criticism this method has received regarding the diarist's overreliance on a relationship with their own mind, in danger of being cut off from the rest of the world. This perceived radical autonomy and divergence from conventional society is what McLaren (1999) refers to as the “dark side of creativity.” I discovered that my artistic practices, when approached with an aesthetic sensibility, offered a chance

at greater connection and synchronicity with the world. Others have also found this (Geller, 2018; Jackson, 2018; Sarasso et al., 2022b; Scanlon, 2024; Schwartz, 2018; Wexler, 2018).

Contextual space and time

At the start of this research, I shied away from adorning myself with the title “artist” even though I had proposed this research might relate to the writings of other artist-therapists. I had more readily described myself as a creative producer. “Producer” sits comfortably within a society where productivity and consumption are highly valued; an artist might deliberately sit outside of these values. Here in Aotearoa, attitudes towards the arts and artists have been growing more positive but still create roadblocks for individuals and the sector (Creative NZ, 2022, 2024). My discoveries reflected a tendency to suppress my own interests or pass self-judgement due to a family history of disregard for vocations based in subjectivity and emotion, i.e., the arts and indeed psychotherapy. These perceptions may have a uniquely Aotearoa New Zealand flavour. I am reminded of O’Connor et al.’s (2022) article telling this country’s history with psychotherapy—Bevan-Brown arrived in the 1940s with new psychotherapy theories only to be regarded as an “impractical crackpot.” Although society and culture has greatly evolved since then, my impression is that “practicality” is often still preferred and I wonder how this may impact other therapists in training.

I started this research feeling uncertain about my topic within psychotherapy, by the time I reached the end I felt content with their kinship. I discovered recognition for the value of aesthetics in psychotherapy—Berlant (2015) counts Jung, Bion, Hillman, Metzler, and Williams among those scholars who prize it. The consistent use of artistic metaphors in psychoanalytic writing (Scheurer, 2019) comforted me of this interrelationship. Loewald (1975) felt the patient and the analyst become “both artist and medium for each other” (p. 297), which I find particularly apt. On the other hand, Ogden (2001), whose personal artistic pursuit is poetry, tentatively argues that it is oversimplistic to conflate the two practices: “psychoanalysis is a therapeutic activity, while reading and writing poetry is an aesthetic activity” (p. 113). I’m not sure that I agree. Perhaps this is considered true of psychoanalysis by some, but through a humanistic lens, if the goal is growth, then I believe therapeutic activities and aesthetic activities can be conflated.

Reflections on the Research Process

To start my self-search, I put out a call to my inner creativity to experience the topic as fully as possible (Moustakas, 1990; Rogers, 1967). Theories and research about aesthetics pointed to a path for human growth and healing that validated my personal belief that there was more to this topic than “purely decoration.” It was a wide-ranging and expansive inquiry, and I trusted that my intuition was travelling along vital paths, although naturally at times I doubted it. Immersion, illumination and incubation felt like hunger, restraint and surrender. Dancing back and forth between these phases was comparable to shifting into different gears. Amidst these transitions, I found that aesthetics as a way of

communicating to *know and understand* was perhaps one “gear.” Another “gear” was akin to a way of *being and becoming*; I consider an aesthetic sensibility and being a conduit to be part of this second gear. This process suited psychotherapeutic research as in practice these two mindsets also coexist and enrich one another. Ogden (2019) has named them *epistemological* (knowing) and *ontological* (being) psychotherapy.

Heuristic inquiry allows movement between these two gears (Sultan, 2019). The research phases and tools supported me to naturally make these shifts and to discover the overlapping essence of both aesthetic inquiry and being a trainee. My search was not an exhaustive view of the literature. This was a broad exploration of an expansive topic evoking a range of thoughts and questions for further research on specific aspects of aesthetics within psychotherapy, some of which were referred to throughout this chapter, others are mentioned below. Limitations of my findings were that they were personal to me, my lifestyle, family history and values. As a part-time student this was conducted during only a small phase of my time as a trainee. The hope of heuristic research is that what is personal can also be general. Despite the lack of co-researchers to contribute to richer and fuller data, I consider art and aesthetics were co-creating with me in this study (Sultan, 2019). For subjective methods of research such as this one, validation of results relates to the meaning and accurateness of the researcher’s depiction. Throughout the explication and creative synthesis process I continued to “check and judge” (Moustakas, 1990) the essence of what I had described—via self-reflexivity, supervision and therapy. I had set out to prioritise focusing and tacit knowledge as research tools, however I found that *self-dialogue* (Sela-Smith, 2002) was frequently a naturally occurring tool for uncovering relevant data and checking accuracy of depiction.

Creative Synthesis: A Work-in-Progress

Reflecting upon how I might have answered my research question and how I might present this as a creative synthesis, the images of the infinity symbol and the ouroboros arrived in my mind (Sultan, 2019). Not only had I realised the role of time, but also how the question I had asked could be read both ways. I had been seeking to answer it in its linear form: how might my re-engagement in aesthetic inquiry impact me as a trainee psychotherapist. But it was also true in the reverse: how might I, a trainee psychotherapist, impact my aesthetic inquiry by re-engaging in it. My discoveries uncovered judgement and shame based on historical cultural perspectives on artistic engagement. But I believe another layer underneath these concerns of social attitudes was the shame that I *needed* it. That I used artistic engagement as a crutch or relied on it to form an identity. By the end I felt as if I could more wholly embrace being both an artist and a therapist; an active participant in work-in-progress. And beyond the labels, I simply embraced an aesthetic sensibility as a way of being. So, instead of producing a piece of work I considered to be final and ready for consumption, I collated my pieces from throughout the research in the form of “a work in progress.” Alongside, I also present this

dissertation as a written component. I fantasise about making these kinds of art pieces as part of the clinical work I have in progress one day, with clients or with colleagues.

Figure 8

A Work-in-Progress



Implications

Based on my discoveries, aesthetic inquiry could nurture a trainee's capacities for self-knowledge, facilitating reflexive environments, transforming inchoate thought and uncovering meaning from sensory information. Cross-disciplinary collaboration between neuroaesthetics and psychotherapy professionals could contribute to knowledge of embodied therapeutic conditions and interventions. Greater emphasis on the aesthetics of both the training and therapy environment might be considered

for its potential or inability to offer a “refuge” that promotes self-discovery and confidence for its inhabitants to develop their abilities.

Thinking, and healing, beyond dichotomies

Geller (2018) proposed that we “think of therapy as a creative enterprise and move beyond the science versus art dichotomy that has burdened therapists beginning with Freud” (p. 200). Thinking beyond dichotomies is a worthy call to action. I discovered that aesthetic inquiry could open a dialogue, find interconnectedness and make use of sensory knowledge in a way that doesn’t fit neatly into prescribed categories. Perhaps this particularly resonates in this country where a principal belief system of Te Ao Māori is interconnectedness between all things—particularly with *whenua* (land) and *turangawaewae* (place and belonging) (Fleming, 2018). Land was not a feature of my research, but place (my interpretation of it) was prominent, unexpectedly so. Spaces, rooms and homes—literal or metaphorical—were places that significantly impacted my sense of stability and confidence.

Within psychotherapy in Aotearoa New Zealand, Tudor et al. (2013) have evaluated how Western and Māori approaches to therapy may bridge together. I mentioned in the introduction that Magsamen and Ross’ (2023) *Your Brain on Art*—through neuroaesthetics research—seems to sit in the gap between scientific and cultural philosophies. They consider non-Western worldviews to be aesthetically-minded and able to impart different ways of wisdom and healing. Art is sacred and integral in many indigenous cultures. Training that definitively includes aesthetic inquiry has the potential to help psychotherapy students who are more familiar with Western, individualistic principles to engage in a first-hand experience that is outside of those principles. Further research would be required to support the possibility that this could aid therapeutic relationships for practitioners working in Aotearoa’s multicultural communities.

Conclusion

Murdoch (1971) said, art is not a “side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities” (p. 87). I leave this study feeling more convinced of this. Ogden (2021) believed that he must be making something of his own to help others do the same. Koshkarian (2024) (influenced by Ogden) says, “The more readily and thoroughly we can access all of the elements of our wholeness, the more we may responsibly possess our autonomous subjectivity and ethically consider that of others” (p. 74). When a psychotherapy trainee engages with art and aesthetics, they might just find a voice, a style, a way of being, that is whole and authentic and helps others do the same.

I wish to conclude with a piece of imagery that has been salient for me. Someone, years ago, told me that I was flogging a dead horse. The words and the imagery of it cut right through to my core. I had forgotten about it until I began this inquiry. The pertinence of the sound of the phrase and the image it evoked became more prominent in my mind over these months of research, but I could not place its

relevance until I wrote this chapter. Once I understood the essence of my inquiry, I understood this vision was about time, and running out of it. Now, it is my time to stop willing this particular horse forward.

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