

FOUND OBJECTS IN ART THERAPY

Materials and Process

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CHAPTER 10

Tension

Balancing Self-Care with Professional Practice During and After a Workplace Tragedy

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Introduction: Constructing the context

Tempted and tantalized by the pure, raw, and sensorial gratification of using a range of materials for making things, for making artwork, I'm confident that my art therapy career began in early childhood. I manipulated fresh snow and ice to make snowmen and frozen fortresses, I built multilevel tree forts with discarded wood, tree branches, and twisted nails, and constructed curious little worlds for my superhero figures in the small rocky enclaves along the shores of Lake Superior in Northern Ontario. Serving to enhance my understanding and perception of the world, making things also helped to form my sensitivity to possibility through imagination, it stimulated my senses through active engagement, and it allowed me to connect with others either by showing them what I created and/or by enlisting them to create with me.

It wasn't until I pursued postgraduate training in art therapy that I came to realize the significance of artmaking and how critical this was for my own development, for finding my way through this complex world, and for connecting with others through creative self-expressive and therapeutic means. This proved especially essential and enlightening after a horrific tragedy at the large-scale forensic mental health inpatient facility where I had worked full-time as an art therapist for an extended period of time. All adult patients who I provided services

to had committed crimes, varying in severity per classification of the law, and each patient was serving different lengths of stay depending on their sentence, their legal hold, and whether they were considered an ongoing threat to themselves or to others. All patients also had a clinical diagnosis of mental illness and each had a legal commitment given that they were either charged with or convicted of criminal activity. Understandably, this setting was at times dangerous, highly volatile, and unpredictable.

Within this facility that was meant to keep the community safe through the mandated rehabilitation and treatment of adults, internal safety was adversely compromised and ruptured when a male client murdered a female staff member on the hospital grounds. This intensified the already high-level risks and hazards of this line of work as well as the stress, trauma, and anxiety experienced by the staff, patients, and the larger community (Hyatt 2019; Malinowski 2014; Sodeke-Gregson, Holttum and Billings 2013). Details and descriptions of the tragedy have been deliberately safeguarded in this chapter to avoid any misrepresentation and to ensure the utmost dignity and respect necessitated here within.

This chapter acknowledges that mental health professionals can be and are impacted by their work, their settings, and by what transpires within the confines of their work site. The chapter also highlights that engaging in one's own artmaking can be a significant expressive outlet for processing challenging, complex, shocking material and experiences (Fish 2019; Hyatt 2019; Nash 2020). As a way to excise complicated ruminations in response to this workplace tragedy, the absolute need for safety within such a setting, as well as the very real consequences and ripple effects that violations committed within this setting have, I instinctively turned to my art.

Written from a practitioner-based perspective, the aim of this chapter is to illustrate how a self-reflective process of contemplating one's own artwork surfaced unconscious trauma leading to insight and healing from a workplace tragedy. Through the public exhibition of this artwork at the facility's annual employee art exhibition months later, others seemed to resonate with the underlying symbolic meaning and, collectively, additional layers of support were extended to staff, clients, and visitors. Uncannily, the artwork was awarded: 'First Place, Professional.'

Containment and creativity: Pragmatics of forensic art therapy

Working within such an environment demands much energy, stamina, and resilience. All professional staff underwent a series of annual mandatory training with the overarching aim to enhance communication, to expedite response time to aggressive and maladaptive behavior, and to develop strategies to ensure the safety and protection of all those who entered the premises. Regardless of this reality, mental health professionals can and do derive satisfaction from this line of work (Sodeke-Gregson *et al.* 2013; Walker *et al.* 2018). Certainly, this was my experience overall. In fact, I had traveled the world presenting on the profound work that was being achieved and accomplished.

I was compelled to share how the arts, and art therapy in particular, had positively impacted the lives of older adults residing within a forensic mental health facility, and how this was having a transformative impact that extended beyond the therapeutic encounter. Intentionally showcasing the artist identity and activity of the patients also contributed to the commitment of building an artist community aligned to the strengths-based recovery model that this setting recently implemented and was guided by. This also helped to de-mystify and proactively address the stigma associated with this particular population (Peterson and Etter 2017).

Fraught with a range of risks, whether metaphorical, perceived, or actual, working within forensic mental health can also be exciting, exhilarating, and rewarding. Working with an integrated, experienced, and compassionate team, as well as having the ability to access and utilize my creativity as an art therapist with a very challenging clinical population, led to a strong sense of satisfaction overall (Elkayam, Snir and Regev 2020; Malinowski 2014; Sodeke-Gregson *et al.* 2013). As my art therapy career progressed within the setting described above, I became increasingly more confident and proficient working with older adults to stretch and challenge their own creative self-expression and artmaking through participation in individual art therapy, group art therapy, and/or in open art studio sessions. Themed displays within tamper-proof bulletin boards, murals, and gardening projects were initiated and designed to enhance their living environment, which included their secured outdoor courtyard.

Some patients, while out on the setting's grounds, found sticks, pine cones, peacock and egret feathers, seeds, and even small animal bones and used these in their artwork. Such found objects were understandably considered contraband and, if used, needed to be worked on and stored in highly supervised workshops outside of art therapy. Patients were not allowed to keep such artwork in their living quarters; as such, they either remained in storage or were mailed out of the facility to loved ones as gifts.

Inspired by the ingenuity of those particular patients and by their compelling need to create artwork, I made good creative use of pumpkins that were donated annually to the facility. I had patients paint and decorate pumpkins during Halloween, a North American tradition, which was a novel compromise to actually carving the pumpkins with knives or other sharp implements. Painting the portrait of one particular patient on a pumpkin was a novel and successful way of connecting with him. He had a long-standing reputation as being resistive and even hostile toward treatment; fortunately, he received his pumpkin portrait with humor. In fact, this further led to him requesting that I draw or paint his portrait on different occasions throughout the years. These portraits were meaningful to him and he had somehow kept them installed in his living area years after I had left that facility.

Within forensic settings, art materials must be carefully considered, monitored, tracked, and secured to ensure overall safety given that some art materials can be manipulated into implements of harm. Art materials are a significant component within the therapeutic encounter and must be skillfully selected and rationalized to optimize the therapeutic impact overall (Robbins and Goffia-Girasek 1987). I often created artwork alongside the patients to either model ways of working with materials, to enhance the therapeutic alliance(s), and/or to simply create in a community while enjoying the pleasure of making art. Tempted to expose and introduce patients to a wide range of possible art media including found objects, I needed to restrict these to markers, pencils, paints, beads, and collage materials. Safety within forensic settings is paramount, and close observation is necessary, even within art therapy and open art studio sessions.

Surviving the setting: Peer support, clinical supervision, and self-care

The art therapists met monthly on site for professional development, and this was supported by the setting. These meetings also served the critical need for peer supervision, skills set sharing experientials and workshops, and the discussion of clinical case material. This was a key venue wherein new art therapists developed their networks, learned the local mental health culture, where their individual clinical supervisor was identified, and where we collectively engaged in artmaking.

We purposefully created space and community to ensure that we, as art therapists, continued to advocate for the centrality of art and artmaking, and that we ourselves were actively engaged in making art (McNiff 2019; Peterson and Etter 2017). To augment this critical level of support and to have a return to the artwork, especially our own, the art therapists initiated a series of artmaking and art reflection gatherings that rotated between venues outside of the setting, sometimes even the homes of some of the art therapists.

On occasion we scheduled setting-approved field trips to visit art exhibitions, settings of other art therapists, and/or to engage in experiential workshops. I am confident that all of these actions served to address work-related stress and each served to enhance our wellbeing (Elkayam *et al.* 2020; Huet and Holttum 2016). Peer support is beneficial in addressing one's self-care, one's sustained effectiveness with challenging experiences that sometimes involves difficult patients, and can inspire and/or re-ignite our passions (Elkayam *et al.* 2020; Hinz 2019; Hyatt 2019; Malinowski 2014). This was effective in developing insights, learning different ways of working with complex situations and clinical material, and in developing supportive networks.

Clinical supervision, by an experienced and theoretically sophisticated on-site art therapist, as well as having been assigned to a very seasoned and strong interdisciplinary team, helped me to remain balanced, effective, and productive. Self-care was additionally achieved through planned leave throughout the year, through peer group supervision held monthly on site as described above, and through my own artmaking and activity. Throughout my career at this facility, I did observe compassion fatigue, staff boundary breakdown, and violation, and how these negatively impacted the emotional, psychological, and physical safety of both the staff and clients. Negotiating and asserting

an effective work/life balance is essential while working at such settings and with such populations.

Promoting an arts community: The annual employee art exhibition

The facility's 'Arts in Mental Health' program initiated an annual employee art exhibition and competition. The exhibition was curated internally and juried by outside invited judges. It was held within the secured treatment area and patients were able to view the exhibition through staff-escorted groups. The aims of this annual exhibition were to build community, encourage and showcase the creative self-expression of staff from all sectors and departments, and to foster an arts community within the facility. The exhibition allowed patients to interact with staff on a more informal level in that both were able to discuss the artwork on an artist-to-artist level; a good majority of the patients engaged in arts activities in the exhibition space as part of their regular treatment. This further added to a sense of an arts community within this very difficult and challenging setting, shifting communication into realms of community and mutual interests (Peterson and Etter 2017).

For several years I participated in the employee art exhibition and my artwork often garnered a lot of attention given the unusual materials used. Given themes of memory and the passing of time, I often incorporated such found objects as discarded furniture and furniture parts, raw canvas, horse hair, twine, and antique photographs to name a few, which typically challenged patients to expand their own appreciation and understanding for materials and media within their own artmaking. Conversations between the patients and I made lasting impressions with some as they would often approach me years afterward remarking on how they had been intrigued with my artwork. Such experiences certainly did enhance my own mental health over sustained periods of time, it enhanced my own sense of satisfaction of having created something that others found interesting, and further stimulated the generation of more ideas that could be effectively implemented. I do believe I was able to stave off my own compassion fatigue through a revived sense of purpose and commitment to those I provided services to (Elkayam *et al.* 2020; Sodeke-Gregson *et al.* 2013; Walker *et al.* 2018).

As an artist and art therapist, I regularly engage in my own artmaking and self-reflective process (Fish 2019; Nash 2020). Having the long-term experience of creating artwork, usually through assemblage, I derive satisfaction, pleasure, and a sense of accomplishment through such deliberate activity. I tend to gravitate to materials that have been discarded, are in tatters or in near ruin, and have had a visible and dialectical history; many of these materials have been discovered, found, and appropriated at second-hand stores and flea markets. Each of these encases their own memories, narratives, associations, and former intended uses. These materials are assigned a fresh constitution through repurposing into new objects and artwork.

Historically, my assemblages remain stoic and static. This is understandable given my long-term use of the same antique photograph that I intentionally manipulate in varying shapes and dimensions to suggest a reference point, a color, or even to stimulate a range of associations and even projections of the viewer. With the introduction of mechanical parts, such as the wind-up mechanism used in each of the three individual objects comprising *Tension* (Figure 10.1), an interactive element was initiated. Creating the first object (Figure 10.2) using plastic transparencies and then interlaying shards of the cut-off pieces of the transparencies from the second and third objects (Figures 10.3 and 10.4), I was intrigued and enticed by both the movement and resulting unsettling sound on releasing the wound-up object.

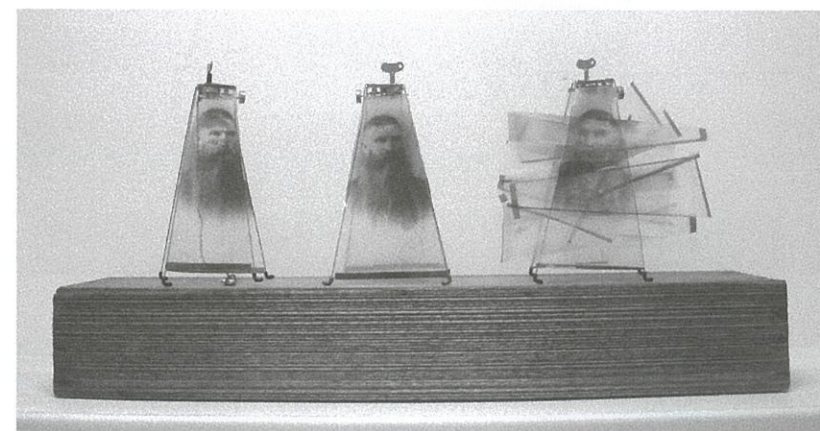


Figure 10.1. *Tension* [mixed media including mechanical parts, dimensions variable, Ronald P. M. H. Lay]

As it haphazardly expunged its energy across my table, I incessantly rewind and released the object until I actually burnt out the mechanism. Naturally, this action gave rise to the artwork's title, *Burnout* (Figure 10.2). The constituent parts of the artwork seemed dangerous to me and were a direct departure from the typical art materials and subject matter that I incorporated into my artwork. The level of potential dangerousness was further exaggerated through the movement of the piece once I unwound the mechanism. Although disturbed by what was emerging, I was also excited about the poignancy of this artwork and how it seemed to signal a depth to my artmaking through the assemblage of objects, some structured and some delicate. As I contemplated this artwork alone in my home, it triggered and surfaced links to the array of unprocessed and suppressed emotions, responses, and reactions to what had happened at my work setting wherein a colleague had been murdered and the setting forever changed for the entire community of professional staff, patients, and visitors.

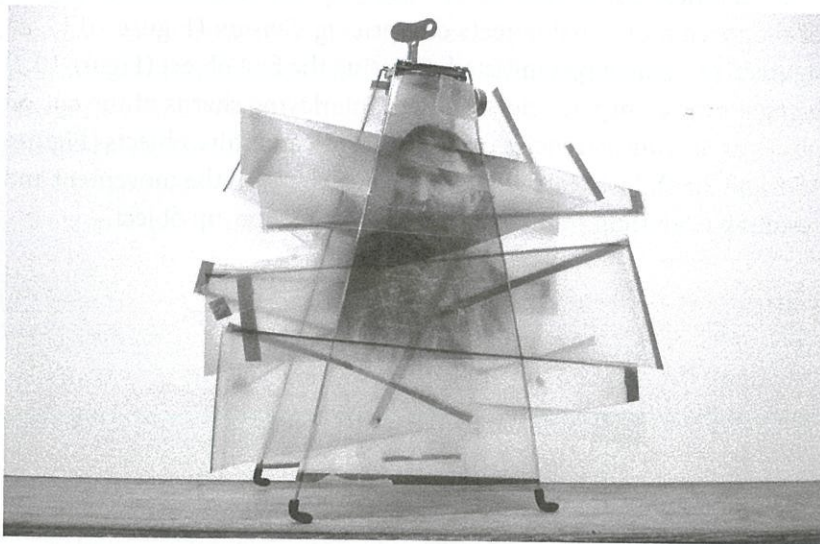


Figure 10.2. *Burnout* [mixed media including mechanical parts, dimensions variable, Ronald P. M. H. Lay]

Conscious of McNiff's (2019) cautions about creativity, to allow the artwork its life and to refrain judgment, I continued. As I became increasingly aware of the layers of associations and not wanting to censor the compelling need to create, I expanded on the emerging themes of

and associations to tension, stress, letting go, unwinding, release, and witnessing through action. Intrigue turned to insight and insight led to the creation of *In Knots* (Figure 10.3). The internal section of this artwork is intentionally comprised of raw canvas, a heat transfer of the image used in all of the plastic transparencies, and threads that have been knotted and that bind all parts together. Unlike *Burnout*, which started out as experimentation with new materials for me, *In Knots* was deliberately created to visually represent my understanding of my own embodied experience of feeling stress, nervous, scared, and anxious. The centralized inner canvas with thread knots is a personal metaphor depicting my own vulnerability albeit with strength and composure through art; this keeps me balanced, grounded, and focused.

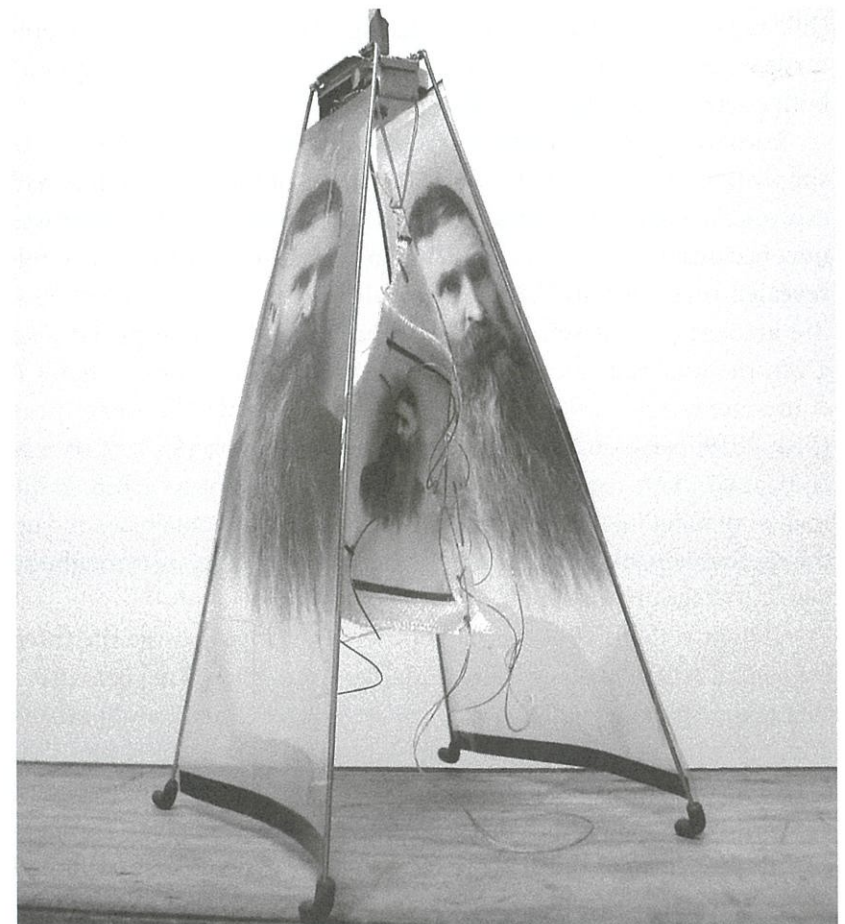


Figure 10.3. *In Knots* [mixed media including mechanical parts, dimensions variable, Ronald P. M. H. Lay]

The third artwork, *Heavy Heart* (Figure 10.4), was constructed to reiterate and depict the potentially devastating toll that working with others through the context of mental health can have on the art therapist. I garnered substantial satisfaction from my work within forensic mental health; however, I also valued the need for purposeful and sustained self-care. Having had a highly experienced mentor during the formative development of my career, it was sophisticatedly instilled that although I can be passionate about what I do professionally, I must also remain cognizant and vigilant to the parameters of my own limitations (Malinowski 2014). *Heavy Heart* is a reminder to acknowledge the impact that our work has on us, and to take the essential steps to ensure that we take care of ourselves emotionally and psychologically, especially for those of us who are in this line of work for the long haul (Elkayam *et al.* 2020; Hinz 2019). Placing all three artworks into a pre-made wooden box allowed the objects to be interacted with in ways that both contained and safeguarded them.

Assembling the various materials into the artworks, my intent was simply to create. Admittedly, I was conscious of the aesthetic that had evolved during the artmaking process, but also realized that there was unconscious material that could not go unchecked. Further reflection revealed that not only the artist but also those who interacted with the artwork would somehow be impacted; this was especially so given the materials used in these objects, including the mechanical components, the inherent themes, and the interplay between these (Fish 2019; Nash 2020; Robbins and Goffia-Girasek 1987). This was confirmed when *Tension* was exhibited and when viewers accepted the invitation to interact with the artwork, whether they actually wound up the mechanism, observed the action of the unwinding, or through the viewing of the artwork itself.

Certainly, the title of the artwork was evocative as were the three individual artworks comprising the larger installation. I am convinced that this visual, my artwork, acknowledged the difficult and perhaps complex range of responses to the stresses of the setting, and that even though these may not have been explicitly articulated verbally, the viewer was able to appreciate new perspectives given the not-so-subtle themes of the artwork, and that the artwork was exhibited in the same setting wherein the workplace tragedy had taken place. Although respectively aware of my professional boundaries as well

as the parameters of self-disclosure, whether verbally or in this case visually, the benefits of building an arts community within the forensic mental health setting was essential in having our setting's community come together through the arts (Huet and Holtum 2016; Peterson and Etter 2017).

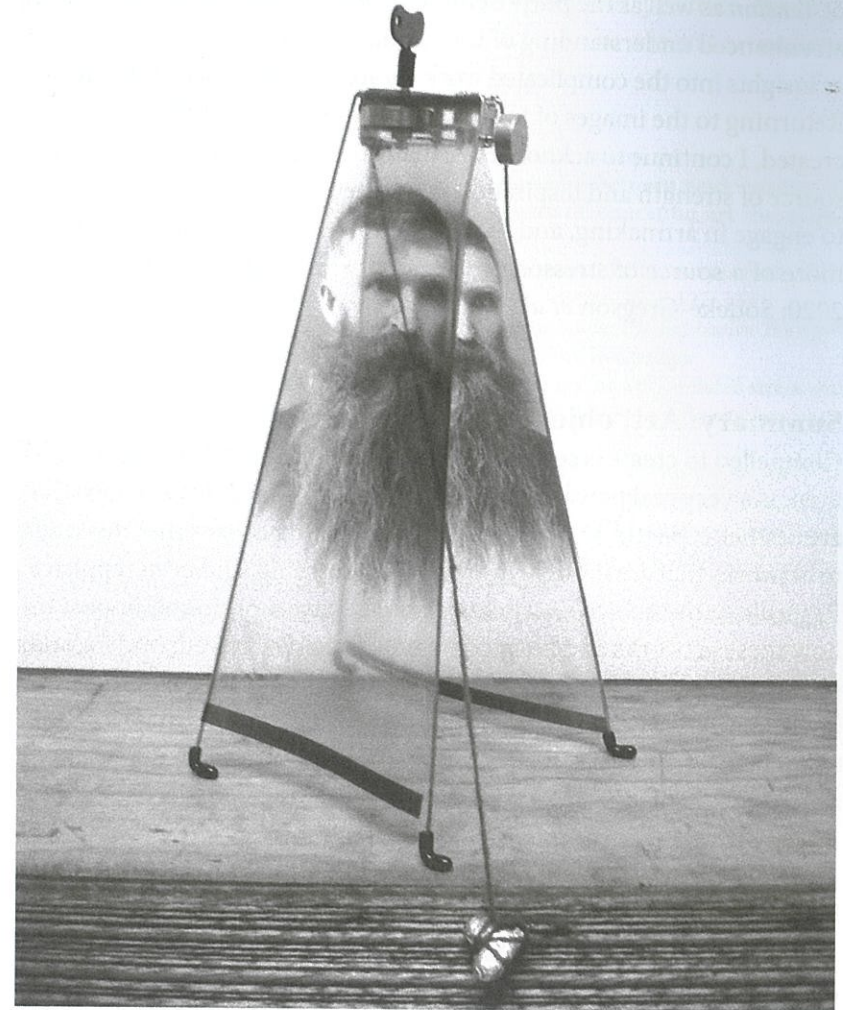


Figure 10.4. *Heavy Heart* [mixed media including mechanical parts, dimensions variable, Ronald P. M. H. Lay]

Admittedly, I remained functional and effective throughout my tenure at this facility, and this was achieved through my own

artmaking, through dedicated self-care, through individual and peer clinical supervision, through the opportunity to work as part of an integrated multidisciplinary treatment team, and through the facility's commitment to providing ongoing specialized professional development opportunities (Elkayam *et al.* 2020; Sodeke-Gregson *et al.* 2013; Walker *et al.* 2018). The process of creating the three aspects of *Tension* as well as the purposeful self-reflection afterward gave rise to an enhanced understanding of the various constructs of trauma as well as insights into the complicated work we are engaged in as art therapists. Returning to the images of my artwork almost a decade after they were created, I continue to acknowledge that working with my patients was a source of strength and inspiration given their creativity and willingness to engage in artmaking, and that it was the realities of systems that was more of a source of stressors, frustration, and disappointments (Nash 2020; Sodeke-Gregson *et al.* 2013).

Summary: Art, objects, and relations

Compelled to create is something that many are innately drawn to, and there is a very real power to this. Sometimes this leads to creations that are aesthetic, poetic, and even intriguing, while at other times this leads to artworks that are thought-provoking, disturbing, and even repulsive. Regardless, the choice of art materials can have a profound impact on how these artworks and creations are received, perceived, understood, given life, and perhaps even embraced by those who view, witness, and experience the artwork (Fish 2019; McNiff 2019; Nash 2020). This chapter aimed to highlight the use of found objects as materials in artmaking that led to a sense of release, reflection, and recovery after a tragedy within the workplace.

The process of creating *Tension*, the intentional reflection of this artwork, and then the public exhibition of this purposeful interactive artwork attests to the significance of materials in practice. Reviewing each of the three individual artworks that comprise *Tension – Burnout, In Knots, Heavy Heart* – illustrates the intimate complexity of a professional and experienced art therapist's own grappling with and working through the trauma of the murder of a colleague by a client

on site. Integrating found objects within one's artmaking certainly permits a sense of play, exploration, and discovery. It may not have resolved tensions experienced at work, but it did provide opportunities to visually express and explore complicated internal struggles and a coming to terms of a tragedy at work...sharing with others, witnessing. This is only further reinforced and exemplified when the artist/therapist is driven to uphold the sanctity of professional practice through calculated self-care and life enrichment through the arts and artmaking.

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