

This work is rooted in ideas about artists throughout time and why mental illness occurs so frequently in creative geniuses. Because mental illness is frequently associated with creative people, this idea is widely accepted and perpetuated—creativity and suffering must go hand in hand. There are two overriding ideas about art and mental health: 1. Artists must suffer internally for their work; and 2. Making art is good for one's mental health. As an artist myself, both statements have some truth to them. If I did not create art, I would be far less happy and, frankly, bored out of my mind.

This installation reflects my experiences with art therapy. I chose to paint and create a film that documents the process of painting. I used my hands to paint, because that is one of my favorite ways to release my emotions. The tree symbolizes goals. One goal was to get to The Oxbow School. Now I am here, and it feels quite literally that everything has been building to this moment and this project. The hands in the painting represent those of an artist's. On a personal level, the hands represent mine having reached this goal and holding it; but for others, the hands may represent their own, and cupping this tree symbolize their art, and within their art, themselves.

Mental illness doesn't define me, but my art *is* me. Making art is a first step to achieving a healthy mind. Creating keeps me sane and grounded. Creating keeps me connected to myself and enables me to connect with others. Making art is what makes me human.

Brenna

## Writer's Note

I think there comes a time in everyone's life when they could use a shrink.

During my sophomore year of high school, I was extremely depressed. So depressed that I was numb to the fact there might be something wrong with me. School was boring, and I didn't know what or for whom I was doing it for. I certainly didn't enjoy it most of the time, so it sure wasn't for myself. Then I would remember that I *was* doing it for a reason, that being to graduate so I could get a "respectable job" and go to college. *School had always been boring, so what was different now?* I would think to myself.

Worse, I was not inspired creatively anymore, which has been documented to occur in artists often when they are in a depressed state. This is what tipped me off more than anything; something was wrong.

So I consulted my mother, and she agreed: I was depressed. We hired a therapist, and I went to see her every other Wednesday. I started taking a form of Sertraline. It helped a little with my motivation in work, but I can't say I was very happy for a while. My therapist was considerate, and I appreciated her, but there were still bad days. There were always bad days. Things were normal with my shrink, but one day, she thought to recommend me to one of her colleagues, an art therapist. I had never heard of such a thing, but it sounded like a great idea.

Soon after, I had my first consultation with my new art therapist. She had a super punk pixie hair cut, and a nose stud. She complimented me on my blue hair. I knew I was going to like her.

The way a session went, she would welcome me into her office/studio area. We would sit down, and she would ask me how I was doing, in school, at home, and otherwise. If I had a problem that I wanted to deal with, we would address that. She would take a minute to think, then say "I want to invite you to..." explore the issue using some material she provided. Often she would ask me what I'd prefer to work with. Finger painting was my favorite. Paint in my hands became therapeutic on its own.

At first, these sessions were difficult. It was hard to just leap onto the paper with my raw emotions and make a mark. Also, my art therapist would watch me while I worked which felt a little awkward at first, but I got used to it. After I finished a piece, I would let her know when I was finished. We would talk about it, and interpret the piece.

With each session, I became better at expressing my feelings and talking about them with her. And with each session, I felt I understood myself a little more.

I am not a psychologist. I don't know what it is about art therapy that makes it so helpful to me. I want to know if it could help others as much as it did me, even others who may not identify as a creative type. There is something special about using art to interpret and help to heal an individual's turmoil within.

## Introduction

The human mind is the most wonderful, complex machine ever to exist. It is capable of creation, destruction, and everything in between. It can ask questions, and

conceive answers. Our minds are our most precious part of our being. Our minds are what make us, us.

We can question our own existence, our very being, and morals. We can look to the stars and ponder what put us here. Those who use their minds to question things, to seek out answers and present truths to the world, are considered “geniuses.”

A genius can come in many forms: a sculptor, a scientist, a writer, a painter, a musician, a poet, and a mathematician...All people who dedicate their time to create. But creation is extremely laborious. Mistakes will be made, and rough patches will be hit. The genius may question their abilities.

To watch a genius at work, a painter during the creative process may step back from their canvas frustrated. They may storm off, vowing never to look at the work again. They might mope about for a few days, grumbling to themselves as they walk past the work, which sits, stuck in a sort of “creative purgatory.” Days later, perhaps in the early hours of the morning before the sun has come up, the artist may leap from their bed, energized with a sudden inspiration. With their manic energy, the canvas transforms, and the artist is content. How would one stay sane? And yet, if the artist never finished the piece, or never made art at all, how would they stay sane then?

Throughout history, the creative genius and their suffering has become something people consider inevitable. Affliction and brilliance are simply accepted to go hand in hand. But why has this become so “accepted?” Are we, as a society, content to sit back and watch as more great minds wither away, ruin themselves, or take their own lives?

I want to find a way to stop the perpetuation of the idea that artists must suffer for our creation. Society needs to change the way that mental affliction and mood disorder is viewed, and how we treat those within its grasp. And to do this, we must entertain a new idea. This idea is far less popular than that of creation going hand in hand with suffering, but is still just as valid, if not more so. This idea is the opposing view that creating and making art is actually good for your mental health.

We have been using art as a way to interpret our feelings and express ourselves for so very long, and still the idea persists; if you are an artist, you must be troubled. And this may be true, but all artists will say, if they were not making art, they’d be far worse off and a lot less happy.

In my mind, the next thing to do is to take action; get people educated to become aware that mental illness and mood disorder can occur in all walks of life; art can be used as a form of therapy.

## **Genius**

In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of “genius” reads: “1. Exceptional intellectual or creative power or other natural ability; 2. A person who is exceptionally intelligent or creative, either generally or in some particular respect” (“Genius,” def). Today, when one has a certain ability to produce scientific, artistic or other intellectual work, it is called genius. However, one’s genius is also determined by the way the society in which they live receives their work. Genius is not an attribute, but a “dynamic relationship between its possessor and society” (Hershman and Lieb 8). This “relationship,” as phrased in *Manic Depression and Creativity*, is formed in the response

from the public to the art. It could inspire people, it could make them cry, or even frighten them. Or, the work could be ahead of its time, and not receive any attention at all. For example, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, the French painter of the Post-Impressionism movement, received no recognition until after his death in 1901. This is the relationship of the creator, their work, and the society they live in.

Also part of this relationship, an artist may consider who they are making their artwork for, who is going to see it, and how it is going to affect people. Artists, scientists and intellectuals who wish to be published or recognized are aware of groups in society that will not agree with them, such as political, religious, or otherwise. They could be exiled, threatened, or censored. In Vincent Van Gogh's lifetime, he was considered a "madman." Many in his town were put off by his erratic behavior, and signed a petition to have him placed in a mental hospital. Today, he is one of the most influential painters of all time. What is considered "genius," all depends on the genius's contemporaries.

### **"Having a Genius"**

The etymology of the word genius can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. A "genius" was a guardian spirit with an extraordinary talent or gift. A skilled painter or sculptor would be said to "have a genius," genius being an otherworldly deity that lived with them, like a house elf of sorts, that guided them in their creative thought. This changed in the mid 1600s, when rather than someone being considered to "have a genius," they were considered "a genius" themselves. Elizabeth Gilbert's TED Talk, *Your Elusive Creative Genius*, touches on this change in the history of the genius. "I think that allowing somebody, one mere person to believe that he or she is the vessel... the source of all divine creative unknowable mystery is just like a smidge too much responsibility to put on one fragile human psyche... I think the pressure of that has been killing off our artists for the last five hundred years." Gilbert has many interesting and valid points here. She asks us to entertain once again, the idea of the genius from mythology, the mystical deity that every creator, inventor and writer had. Gilbert says if artists treat their "genius" as if it is a "being," separate from their selves, it will lift the pressure from the backs of artists. This idea relates back to art therapy concepts. Using one's imagination to create this "being" and separate it from oneself will help to analyze one's ideas and feelings about it, and will help one better understand themselves altogether.

### **The Manic Depressive**

Aristotle once said, "All extraordinary men distinguished in philosophy, politics, poetry and the arts are evidently melancholic." The concept that creativity and suffering go hand in hand has become a very widely accepted idea. Unfortunately, it is not an entirely false statement. Time and time again, throughout history, great minds have been said to consider their knowledge a burden. Time and time again, artists, poets, and novelists have died young, and often at their own hands: Sylvia Plath, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Richard Gerstl, Mark Rothko and Ernest Hemingway. All met their ends at their own hands, their own addictions, or at the fault of their crafts.

Often when the genius's personality and behavior is examined, they are deemed, *manic-depressive*. Rapid speech and thought process, restlessness, insomnia, quickly changing moods, are all characteristics of a maniac. The manic speaks quickly and extravagantly, and will be very articulate, and often even charming. These characteristics are often to be expected of a "genius," or found they are interwoven with genius. For example, Beethoven was known to have extreme mood changes, sometimes described to have a "cloud of melancholy over his spirit," or when engaged in conversation to be highly animated and witty.

Mania and depression in all their forms have been found in a myriad of humanity's great thinkers and creators. Though the two contrast each other in many characteristics, they can be found within the same individual. "Artists may undergo changes of moods depending on where they are in their projects. George Eliot and Charles Dickens began their novels in states of depression that lifted as the books progressed" (33-34), and following into the end of Dickens's novels he would become manic.

Outside of these conditions, artists and other intellectuals have experienced different, sometimes more intense delusions. Edvard Munch suffered anxiety attacks and hallucinations in his later years. Charles "Buddy" Bolden, Father of Jazz, suffered an acute alcoholic psychosis, and was admitted to a mental institution for the remaining years of his life.

Artists throughout history have lived with manic-depressive traits; it has largely become part of why many so strongly associate creativity with suffering and madness.

## **The Artist's Brain**

What is it about the artist's brain that makes it the way it is? Recent studies have shown artists have more neural matter in areas of the brain correlating to fine motor movements. But in the grand scheme of things, this does not tell us really how the creative "genius" harnesses their genius.

A general article entitled, "Artistic Production Following Brain Damage: A Study of Three Artists," written by a group of cognitive neuroscientists and medical students, explores how brain damage affects artistic output. Using a unique method of art assessment, called the "Assessment of Art Attributes" (AAA), participants in an experiment rated pieces of art created by three artists based on 12 descriptive attributes. The attributes were 6 formal properties—color saturation, color temperature, depth, complexity, and brushstroke—and 6 on content and representational properties (abstractness, animacy, emotion, realism, objective accuracy, and symbolism). The subjects studied were artists who had suffered left-hemisphere or right hemisphere strokes: Katherine Sherwood, Lovis Cornith, and Zlatko Boiyadjiev. Participants in the experiment evaluated the art produced by the subjects before, and after their stroke, using the AAA. Work after a stroke (called post-morbid work) is consistently described by participants in the AAA as "raw, intuitive and flowing (Chatterjee) or as more abstract, gestural and expressionist" (Waldmen).

Some may prefer the post-morbid work to the work prior to brain damage. It is more expressive and the brushstrokes are gestural. They are more interesting to look at. I

also fear, however, that by using the AAA, they are putting too much effort into analyzing a piece of art, which arguably is a piece of the creator. Every time an artist creates, they are sewing parts of themselves into the work. Art-making is very personal, and some feel it is difficult to use scientific methods to analyze something as such.

However, in the kind of art therapy I am going to discuss, the creator must have a capacity to look at their work and symbolize; for example, using shapes and colors to represent things and be open to discussing it.

## **Art Therapy**

“It seems to me that both views of the relationship between art and emotion are true. For some of us, doing art pulls out feelings, desires, and fantasies that otherwise are hidden from us. For others the conscious mind more easily fills with stuff that is usually kept unconscious” (Friedman 47).

In Friedman’s paper, “Creativity and Psychological Well Being,” he discusses the importance of art and how it can be beneficial for one’s mental health. There is something about being immersed in an activity or something you enjoy, that provides such a sense of engagement and accomplishment.

The point of art therapy is precisely what Friedman is communicating. To utilize art as a healing of one’s mental affliction, is to dive deep into one’s unconscious (as Friedman mentions in the quote above) and one can pull from their unconscious things they may have never learned about themselves.

A chapter from *Creativity and Madness: Psychological Studies of Art and Artists* explores Jackson Pollock’s alcohol problem, and the author of this chapter, Evelyn Virshup Ph.D, A.T.R, writes an introduction about her time with clients recovering from substance abuse through art therapy: “My interest in Pollock derives from my work with alcoholics and drug abusers. Among the art techniques I used was to have them drag ink-saturated string around on paper and then using oil and soft pastels... bring out the images they saw in their drips and splatters” (Virship 17). This is a common technique used in art therapy, but what happens following the art-making is just as important: “By writing and talking about their images many of these people were able to understand their conflicts and make peace with their inner monsters” (17). It is not just the making of art, but really looking at it and analyzing it. This may turn some creative types off, however; from personal experience and occasional opinion, sometimes it feels the very nature of art and creation is too different from something as “analyzing” that sounds so scientifically based. A lot of artists I have known, and many times I have felt this, artists don’t want their work to be laid out on the table and dissected bit by bit. However, in art therapy, the dissection is essential to understanding yourself, those pieces of your unconscious that slip from your mind to paper in this raw process.

I interviewed Lisa Mitchell, Art Therapist and Counselor, to better understand how the mind heals with art therapy. I first asked if it she could discuss what happens in the brain during art therapy. She responded: “When we’re influenced by experiences that were negative or even traumatic, we try to integrate them so we can function fully and not have them be things we continually respond to and have to accommodate for in our every day life. These experiences are encoded in the brain, in the limbic system... Which

contains the amygdala and hypothalamus, which is the primitive part of the brain that is in charge of keeping us safe. The amazing thing about that part of the brain is that it is all sensorial input; it's all sight, sound, smell, and feeling, not at all words. When we are doing art and simultaneously working on this state of anxiety or trauma or hurt...we're automatically interacting with this part of the brain that had the experience without words."

She goes on to explain how art therapy can be superior to other forms of counseling for certain people. "If we talk about it (the traumatic experience) and we just say 'well this happened and that happened,' its almost like making a 'back-up copy.' If you tell the story, and you have the memory encoded you have two different versions of the occurrence in your brain, one with words and one with senses. We want to work in the 'original copy,' not the back-up copy... If we use art, we're automatically lighting up that part of the brain, but not lighting it up too much to the extent the brain says 'Oh it's happening again, alert, alert, alert!' But we are lighting it up with the expressive quality, and even the pleasure and the excitement of making art. So this memory can become more fully integrated and not have to live in the brain in the kind of way that we have to protect ourselves from it."

I asked Lisa if everyone could benefit from art therapy, or if it is only certain people that do the most. "The kind of art therapy that I am talking about...it isn't for everyone actually. People have to be able to have some amount of ability to symbolize. So a young child is not going to represent their negative experience with color and line the way a teenager would. Because the kid is just involved with making marks on the page, it doesn't represent anything. The same goes for people who are autistic or have neurological disorders; they don't tend to have that symbology and so their images don't apply to their internal life in the same way. This doesn't mean they couldn't benefit from art making, as a helpful activity, but in the way I was talking about art therapy they wouldn't benefit from it, it would be a struggle for them."

Lisa also touches on how the practice of creative problem-solving can help with problem-solving in life. "Art making teaches us decision making, most of this can be very unconscious, but if you get backed into a corner with your art there's always another turn. So when people practice art making they are practicing creative problem-solving with helps strengthen their problem-solving skills for life."

So we see that art therapy and the practice of creating and creative problem-solving is good for you on a multitude of levels.

## **Conclusion**

The artist's mind is an enigma, but it is not always a tortured one. Artists are a little misunderstood. Creating is an extremely beneficial outlet for resolving traumatic experiences. Making art is beneficial to everyone's mental health, and often happiness too.

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