



# Soul Art

**Vanessa Murray dips into the paint pot to explore the healing power of art therapy.**

*"Artistic creativity offers a source of inner wisdom that can provide guidance, soothe emotional pain, and revitalise your being. More important, it is a well-spring that enlivens, rejuvenates, restores and transforms and it exists within everyone for health and well-being."*

From *The Soul's Palette* by Cathy A. Malchiodi (a leading Art Therapist in the United States).

Outside, the rain is lashing against the windows, the dark sky crowding around me like an overly protective parent. I think about staying home. My inner self, the one that criticises and judges, is telling me I'm not cut out for this. The weather is just an excuse. I'm not an artist. At school I liked art, mainly because it gave me the freedom to not think so much. As an adult I doodle in a mindlessly methodical way, creating myriad repetitive circles, or playing noughts and crosses with myself. I stand at the window and watch the raging sky, thinking that right now, not thinking so much seems like a good idea, so I do it, I leave the house and make my way to my first group therapy session at the Art Therapy Institute in Kew.

The evening opens with art therapist Amanda Hansen explaining that we will spend the first hour of the session making art alone, and the second hour as a group, reflecting upon our own and each other's art. Amanda encourages the group to tune in to the present moment, to be spontaneous, and to create in a non-judgemental way. I come over all confessional, sharing with the group (all of whom have been before) that I don't think of myself as a visually creative person, and that I've never done any sort of group therapy. They smile empathically and nod encouragingly. We are given free reign with the space, the refreshments, and the materials in the studio, and it's not long before I feel at home. Large, sturdy tables fill the centre of the room. Against the walls there are shelves filled with a rainbow of paints, pastels and paper, jars and paintbrushes and found objects, scissors and glue and clay. I'm not sure where to start. Or finish. But Amanda has laid out an assortment of materials, so I begin with these, selecting a brush and dipping it into a particularly appealing blob of fuchsia pink paint, spreading it across my paper like jam on bread.



My own paintings seem energised and organic. With feedback from the group I realise in them my quest for inner balance and harmony...

Visual expression has been basic to humanity throughout history, but art therapy did not emerge as a distinct profession until the 1930s, when psychiatrists became interested in their

patient's artwork, studying it for links between the art and the illness of their patients. At the same time, educators were discovering that the free and spontaneous art expression in children's art represented both emotional and symbolic communications. Unlike commercial works of art, often planned and created with a particular theme, or genre, or audience in mind, art therapy encourages the creator to engage in a present-moment dialogue with the inner self, in order to gain meaning and insight into a current situation or concern. "Self expression through art allows for far greater depth of expression than is possible with verbal expression," says Amanda, "and can therefore be a very effective tool for communication, clarity and inspiration."

Amanda Hansen completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Sydney's College of the Arts in 1991, but realised she was more interested in the therapeutic than commercial aspects of art. A two year Diploma in Transpersonal Art and Therapy at Melbourne's Phoenix Institute provided the skills she needed. The Institute's healing related goal is to transform experiences into breakthroughs rather than breakdowns, by providing people in crises with an alternative to symptom suppression. In psychological terms, the ultimate goal is to reveal the true self, helping people to creatively adapt to a crisis, to use an experience to grow and wholly heal. Amanda has worked with fellow art therapist Jenni Harris since 2001 and their clients have included people recovering from accidents, illness and trauma. For Amanda, seeing clients come alive and find empowerment are the highlights of the job. "It is an honour to accompany them on their journey of recovery, and to witness the strength of the human spirit in being able to triumph and adapt through adversity. I enjoy my work tremendously and feel blessed to be able to do what I love."

Artist Jamie Daddo is testimony to the power of creative expression as a tool for rehabilitation and recovery. At the age of 18, Jamie was in a motor vehicle accident. After a four month long coma and serious brain injury, Jamie regained control over one of his four limbs, and spends most of his time in a wheelchair. The aftermath of the accident left him angry and frustrated, and it was art that helped him through. When he is painting at his easel Jamie stands, unaided, for hours at a time. Ironically, he now

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