

**Finding Safe-Wildness: Exploring the Physicality and Materiality of Artmaking and its
Role in Expression and Mental Wellbeing**

Rosa Lee G. Fry

Catholic University of America

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Committee Chair: Dr. Delane Ingalls Vanada, Ph.D.

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Abstract

The research and analysis within this paper explores and seeks to address how the physical act of art-making helps to alleviate, or process, both negative and positive emotions or experiences. It also presents research and analysis on the ways artists communicate aspects of their mental health with others through the physicality and materiality of their artmaking practice. The research and subsequent artwork are informed by phenomenology, constructivism and self-study along with the analytical use of photo-writing.

Keywords: physicality, materiality, artmaking, phenomenology, constructivism, self-study, photo writing, mental health, ADHD, PTSD

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Introduction

In late 2020, I suffered a panic attack so severe I went to the hospital believing that I was having a heart attack. After seeing doctors, a therapist and a psychiatrist, I was diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). My therapist explained that the masking I had done continuously for so long led to the catalytic panic attack. This episode changed my view of myself on a fundamental level, as I realized that aspects of identity that I believed were personality flaws were actually symptoms of invisible illness.

In the process of exploring and studying artists, I found myself drawn to the idea of incredibly physical art-making (art that requires labor-intensive processes) and why, or how, it is helpful in the release of pent-up emotions, impulses and feelings of restlessness. This feeling of release is something that I have come to refer to as finding “safe-wildness” (R. Fry, personal communication, November 5, 2023), or finding ways to appease impulses that are not dangerous for mental or physical health. Creating allows me to move in new ways in addition to fulfilling sensory needs whether it is by moving a brush, ink, or carving tools or by contorting my body to find new angles with my camera. This experimentation provides me the adrenaline rush that comes with not knowing how something is going to turn out, but trying it anyway.

Looking back, “safe-wildness” has always been my coping mechanism. On one occasion when I was struggling in college, I came home and my dad gave me a hammer. He pointed me in the direction of a pile of furniture that was heading to the landfill and told me to destroy it, that it would help. It did. Today, in my artistic practice, I am working with several different materials, which keeps me from becoming disengaged or disinterested, all of which are very physical. I am

painting on a large scale, braiding yarn, carving basswood for wood-block printmaking and working with Polaroid® photographs.

While in the midst of my exploration of the physicality and materiality of artmaking, I went to see two concerts. I noticed that being at these shows and feeling the sensations of the bass thumping in my chest, along with jumping and singing, had the same sense of catharsis that physical artmaking has for me. This connection, along with recollections of moments of “safe-wildness” throughout my life like the demolition day provided by my dad, make it clear to me that physicality is my most useful coping mechanism for addressing my ADHD and PTSD. It is also a fundamental principle of my artwork, and the founding thesis upon which I base this work.

This arts-based research I present within this work is a combination of the theoretical framework of phenomenology along with the methodology of self-study, both of which fall within the constructivist paradigm. I am interested in how I, and others, experience feelings and emotions and process various mental health issues through the physical acts of creating. In addition to studying my own practice, and the strategies that I use to negotiate meanings and process feelings, I also examine how contemporary artists use their practice to alleviate, explain, or process the symptoms of various mental illnesses or traumas.

Positionality Statement

The following aspects, I understand, will potentially influence this research: I am a 32 year old, white, female. My political beliefs are liberal and my socio-economic status is lower to middle class. I have attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, both of which affect the ways in which I see and move through the world.

Problem Statement

I believe that it is important to have a means to express what you are feeling or thinking in a visceral way so that you can communicate what you may not be able to communicate verbally. This is why I am drawn to literature, artwork and audio-visual artworks that are centered around the idea of expression, of adventure, and of the need to move or create in order to fill some type of void. The purpose of this work is to use my artistic practice, along with research and self-study, to investigate how the physical actions of creating communicate the emotional and/or physical needs or meanings behind them. I would like to understand how, and why, this physicality contributes to our mental well-being and helps to alleviate negative emotions or energies.

Research Questions

I often find myself with overwhelming feelings that I am not comfortable verbalizing to myself or others; I struggle with sitting with these feelings, or thoughts or memories. Getting up and physically making something that puts these feelings somewhere outside of my body, helps me process them and to feel more at peace. The questions which led me to this research are:

- In what ways does the physical act of art-making help to alleviate, or process, negative and positive emotions or experiences?
- In what ways do artists use the physicality and materiality of their artmaking practice to communicate various aspects of their mental health with others?

Design of the Study

Methodology

I approached my work through the theoretical lens of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a methodology as well as a theoretical school of thought. As a methodology, it seeks to explore

and explain a phenomenon through the lens of someone who has, or is, experiencing it; ideally this should be done as freely as possible. This means that the product is not the goal, but rather the process; mistakes along the way are to be embraced rather than avoided, allowing the artist to let the work guide them.

“In Understanding of the Self Through Phenomenology in Art and Architecture,” Linde (2017) explains, “In the most primary understanding, the term ‘phenomenon,’ from the Greek phainomenon, is contemporarily defined as ‘an object known through the senses rather than by thought or intuition’” (p.1). This focus on the senses aligns with the idea of expressing thoughts, feelings and emotions through physical acts of artmaking. As Linde (2017) describes, “A phenomenological process can be used to heal in order to focus and truly experience in a place” (p. 8). In regards to the exploration of how physical experiences and experimentation with materiality informs and encourages healing for artists, phenomenology is an ideal methodology as it lends itself to being present within the time and place where creation is taking place.

Methods

My methods in my art practice consist of physical artmaking and experimentation with materiality. In addition to my sketchbook work, I carved basswood to create a woodblock print, manipulated Polaroid[®] photos, spray painted, created tracing paper transfers, and used Posca[®] pens to paint on a large scale. I also practiced self-observation, reflection, and note-taking. When the time comes to reflect on and analyze my work I rely on a combination of poetry, journaling and photography in photo-writing as analysis. To create photo-writing I took Polaroid[®] photos, throughout my process and created poetry as a reflection of and analysis of that process.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the research of this work are phenomenology, which in this art-based research acts as both a methodology and theoretical framework, with constructivism as a paradigm. In both aspects, as a theory and methodology, it is rooted in constructivism, because it uses and emphasizes experience to construct meaning.

Constructivism is a paradigm that informs theories such as phenomenology as it emphasizes the significance of experience. This belief system also proposes that we are “actively engaged in constructing meanings” (Leavy, 2017, p. 13) through these individual interactions. Constructivism suggests that we, through our experiences, are continuously shaping and reshaping our world and therefore there is value to be found in the subjective interpretations we make in the process.

Literature Review

Phenomenology

Phenomenological theorist and philosopher Martin Heidegger (2008) was concerned with art’s ability to uncover truth, and the idea that this meta-physical (or physical) act of uncovering and the phenomenon of experiencing it is a vital part of art. “Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is the instigation of the strife in which the unconcealment of beings as a whole, or truth, is won” (Heidegger, 2008, p.180). Heidegger (2008) emphasized the differences between work as a noun and work as a verb. He argued that the value of the work (verb) or experience of creating art, of unearthing truth, is more important than the aesthetics of the art work (noun).

Trisha Famisaran (2020), when discussing Heidegger (2008), presents the view that truth is the process through which understanding is made or found by creating something new which

manifests or communicates something which did not exist, or has not been made comprehensible. She goes on to explain, “In contrast to truth being contained in demonstrations, arrived at through the most careful means of cognition... the disclosure of truth is revealed in such a way that the effect of the happening, the experience, affects the person; disclosive affectivity causes a fundamental rift in the person’s world, how she sees, understands, and experiences the world henceforth” (Famisaran, 2020, p. 23). This concept of using art to unearth and understand our experiences is integral to the theory of phenomenology.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a theory which proposes knowledge is gained through the processes of reflection and a resulting building and rebuilding (construction) of understanding. John Dewey (1934) was a constructivist who argued for the experience of art and the importance of action and aesthetics in regards to meaning-making. In his reading of Dewey, Tan (2020) writes:

Occasionally, however, experience reaches fulfillment and consummates, as when one arrives at a solution to a problem or has “that meal at a Paris restaurant” (Dewey, 1934, as cited in Tan, 2020, p.72). When this happens, experience is no longer fragmented, but unified, integrated, self-sufficient, individualized, perceived as a whole, and reaches a rounded closure. Dewey calls this a “consummatory experience.” (p.72)

The communication and exploration of these experiences by both the author and the viewer allow for the construction and deconstruction of preconceived notions and therefore create new meaning.

Dewey (1934), saw the artist’s experience of creating art as an integral part of the art itself because art is a result of construction of meaning for the artist. “When an art product once

attains classic status, it somehow becomes isolated from the human condition under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (Dewey, 1934, p. 1, as cited in Clements, 2013, para. 10). In separating art from life, from the experience which created it, it loses its resonance, becomes simply an object, and is no longer an experience from which the viewer, and artist, may construct new knowledge.

Coyolxauhqui Imperative

Utilizing phenomenology, Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) was a feminist philosopher, writer and artist who inspired the direction in which my research followed. Autohistoria-teoría and the Coyolxauhqui imperative are concepts proposed by Anzaldúa (1990) which support the idea of the body as an important aspect of our experiences, making sense of them, and the importance of the of the body in both creating and conceptualizing work for healing. Coyolxauhqui is depicted in a large Aztec monolith (see Figure 1). In Aztec mythology, Coyolxauhqui (the moon goddess) is dismembered by her unborn brother (Huitzilopochtli). He then scatters the pieces of her body and throws her head into the sky, where it becomes the moon.

Figure 1

Coyolxauhqui Stone



Note. Unknown Artist. (1500). *Coyolxauhqui stone* [Aztec carved monolith]. Templo Mayor Museum, Mexico.

<https://www.arthistoryproject.com/timeline/middle-ages/the-aztecs/coyolxauhqui-stone/>

The image of the goddess' dismembered body is a focus of the philosopher's work (both written and visual), especially in the Coyolxauhqui imperative. The goal of the Coyolxauhqui imperative, "is to 're-member' oneself through the act of self writing" (Anzaldúa, 1990, as cited in Donaldson, C. & Lewis, T. E., 2023, p. 75). This concept is a part of autohistoria-teoría, which is a process of self-knowledge involving the critical cross-examination of our identities and motivating meaning-making and healing.

Materiality and Physicality of Artmaking

Christina Murdoch Mills (2009) discusses materiality and physicality, stating of the latter, "The artwork's physicality, those aspects that can be sensed and verified by viewers, is a first consideration; physicality impacts content and, subsequently, meaning" (Mills, 2009, p. 1). Materiality and physicality work in tandem for artists who strive to release energy, express ideas or emotions in an attempt to heal from or manage symptoms of mental illness. "Just as a body is the vehicle for life, itself an energetic form, art objects embody ideas and experiences. Individuals sense the world and interpret what is sensed" (Mills, 2009, p. 3). Through the process of the artist exploring the material and physical facets of their work, the viewer is able to see and interpret the movement within the work in regard to their own lived experiences; this connects the artist and viewer and allows for meaning and connection making.

Dewey's work, in addition to speaking to the paradigm of constructivism, can also be applied to the idea of physical artmaking and a focus on materiality and movement. As Susan Pashman (2017) explains:

Dewey insisted that artistic expression lies on a continuum with other life processes. As the production of art is a conscious...process employing natural

human intelligence, it must be understandable by, and coherent with, empirical theories of human perception and other biological functions. (p. 27)

In this way, artmaking becomes interconnected with experience and therefore an integral part in the communication of those experiences.

In addition to Dewey, neurologist Antonio R. Damasio (1994) also proposes that the mind and body are not two separate entities, and that our reasoning is informed by both our body and our emotions. "It is as if we are possessed by a passion for reason, a drive that originates in the brain core, permeates other levels of the nervous system, and emerges as either feelings or nonconscious biases to guide decision making" (Damasio, 1994, p. 246). Pashman (2017) explains Damasio's neurological model and his support of the concept of emotion as a "physiological occurrence and establishes a neural connection between bodily movement and emotion" (p. 33). This concept, Pashman (2017) explains, "reinforces the conclusions...regarding the two-way nexus between feeling and bodily movement: it turns out, in fact, that they are two sides of the same coin, a double—or complementary—phenomenon, kinesthesia" (p. 33). This connection between the movement of the body and emotions helps to explain why movement and physicality in art help artists to heal through expression.

Artists focusing on Materiality and Physicality of Artmaking

Monika Grabuschnigg. Monika Grabuschnigg works with clay, and enjoys building and making intuitively, focusing on the materiality of the work. This instinctive, physical approach to art making allows her to examine her world and experiences, and for her, "...examining the world intuitively through three-dimensional form is a fundamental human pursuit" (Thackara, 2018, para. 14).

The artists' focus, along with the phenomenon of building these forms (see Figure 2), is to return to the vulnerability and experimentation often left in childhood. “As little kids, we build things out of mud, sand, or toy blocks, and with that, [we] start to understand our surroundings,” she said. “Then we enroll in school and everything becomes flat...” (Grabuschnigg as cited in Thackara, 2018, para. 14). Artists who approach their work through the lens of materiality and in the search for phenomenon, or the expression of previously experienced phenomenon, are able to return to the openness of play. This aids in the attempt to express hidden emotions or symptoms of illness, such as sadness, hyperactivity or restlessness, or the exploration of more difficult experiences and feelings such as anxiety or trauma.

Figure 2

What Shall I Swear By



Note. Grabuschnigg, M. (2017). *What Shall I Swear By*. [Ceramic sculptures]. Artsy.

<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-20-female-artists-pushing-sculpture-forward>

José Villalobos. José Villalobos works mostly in sculpture and performance art, using physicality to express emotional trauma as well as personal experiences. “Villalobos’s performance art pieces are essential to understanding the concepts of visibility, invisibility, and

the body within his oeuvre” (Coates, 2023, p. 7). It is this idea of utilizing physicality to express invisible concepts, and ultimately meeting Villalobos and seeing his work in action, that inspired the research questions of this work.

While visiting Centro de Artes in San Antonio this year, I was able to see the exhibition, *Soy de Tejas: A Statewide Survey of Latinx Art*, featuring his work (see Figure 3). While I missed witnessing his performance, I was able to meet him as he iced his wounds at a local gallery afterwards. The way he put his body into his work, literally, sparked an urge to create more work that required physicality and to understand why it is beneficial. “He spoke of abuse, neglect, and struggle. As he walked away...I took note of the bright red rope burns on his shoulders and squirmed at the thought of enduring that pain, essentially reliving trauma publicly and vulnerably” (Fuentes, 2023, para. 12). By creating art that makes invisible illness, pain or experiences visible and understandable to others, and embracing that vulnerability, Villalobos conveys art’s ability to heal, or at least process, trauma through action.

Figure 3

José Villalobos “Lo Que Faltó”



Note. Photograph of Villalobos performing. From, Esparza, J. (2023). *José Villalobos “lo que faltó”* [Photograph]. Glasstire. <https://glasstire.com/2023/04/30/a-wave-of-emotions-performances-at-soy-de-tejas-in-san-antonio/>

Alleviating, Addressing and Coping Through Artmaking

When discussing ADHD, expression, and the materialism of movement, Kasper Levin (2017) discusses the negative connotations typically connected to the symptoms of ADHD, specifically movement and expression, and how a change in perspective is needed. Rather than seeing the symptoms experienced by those with mental health issues as a negative, or as an obstacle to making, it is important for artists to harness their mental health issues and make use of them. Levin (2017) explains, “...looking for the aesthetic or expressive dimension of ADHD behavior would, in this context, mean assessing expressive aspects of movements in a positive or productive sense rather than what they represent in terms of a lack or deficit” (p. 789).

Similarly to Anzaldúa (1990) and the Coyolxauhqui imperative, Levin (2017) discusses Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and their work, “The Body without Organs” that suggests a body

that is dismantled in a search for new creation. “The Body without Organs is at once the dismantling of the body-subject through experimentation and that which forces a production of new possibilities of subjective sensibility” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994 as cited in Levin, 2017, p. 788). Levin (2017) adds that the Body without Organs concept is able to be, “termed the body of sensation in the sense that it frees sensation from the actual or already established organization” (p. 788) meaning a body without organs as a body that has freed itself of sensation. This connection to the body and freedom of sensation is the reasoning for my research as to the ability of creating physical work to both alleviate the restlessness and impulsivity caused by ADHD and allow the artist to better understand and express feelings caused by other mental health issues.

Artists Focusing on Alleviating, Addressing and Coping through Artmaking

Sandra Beccarelli. Beccarelli (2023) works on a large scale, focusing on materiality and the expressing of feelings (both positive and negative). Her work is full of moving lines, often overlapping each other, creating images that appear to be vibrating with unspent energy (see Figure 4). Beccarelli (2023) explains that her works are, “created through my body movements and gestures...the continuous flux between thought, feeling and emotion are explored in these ways” (para. 1). This exploration of the need to move, art’s ability to facilitate movement, and art’s benefits to the mental well-being of the artist channeling it show the importance of physicality when creating. In this series:

Sandra’s own restlessness is conveyed through physical and gestural mark making, creating systems and breaking them, and by the unending exploration of the potential of materials. She is searching at the edges for the divergent or unintentional to be receptive of the numerous possibilities that may arise, and

where each choice could be the starting point of a whole new body of work.

(Restless States: Sandra Beccarelli, 2019, para. 4)

The choices Beccarelli (2023) uses as starting points for new ideas, new places and new explorations are enveloped in the ideas of phenomenology as well as constructivism as she continues to make meaning from the experience of creating.

Figure 4

Frequency Shift



Note. 59" x 71", From Beccarelli, S. (2017). *Frequency shift* [Charcoal & gesso on canvas]. Sandra Beccarelli.

<https://sandrabeccarelli.co.uk/restless-states>

Colin Frangicetto. Colin Frangicetto (2023) is an artist who focuses on expressing symptoms and experiences of ADHD (he even goes by the pseudonym “ADHD”) and the aftermath of his music career (homesickness, and a constant ringing in the ear - which I also frequently experience) in both abstract and literal ways, especially in his new exhibition: “A Noisy Mind.” A painting from this exhibition is shown in Figure 5. He explains,

There are many instances in my life where I lack the language for my thoughts, feelings and or experiences. Due to this I often feel quite lost in life's maze but art making has always been my most powerful ally in processing and expressing what felt otherwise ineffable. (Frangicetto, 2023, para. 7)

The ability to express what words cannot is important when addressing or alleviating the need to communicate thoughts, feelings and emotions.

Figure 5

Blue Light



Note. 48" x 36", From Frangicetto, C. (2023). *Blue Light*. [Mixed media on canvas]. Artworks catalog.

https://ffa2d767-dccd-49ab-84d9-475cdf28bc0f.filesusr.com/ugd/06c8e6_f93610b783ae48a2ae64366be6059fe1.pdf

Frangicetto (2023) utilizes his art not only to tend to his ADHD symptoms, but also to express and share his world with others. “Through a vast array of mediums and aesthetics, this exhibition of all new works delves into the theme of overwhelm, designed to immerse the viewer into a world defined by the fractured synapses of neurodivergence” (Colonna Contemporary,

2023, para. 1). The inclusion of many aspects of ADHD not often spoken about (hyperfocus, ear-ringing, executive dysfunction and body dysmorphia) connects the work to the audience by either educating or connecting with those who experience similar effects.

Anna Wagner. Anna Wagner (2023) is a ceramicist who creates artwork based on her experiences with ADHD as well as the ADHD medication, Adderall. Like Fragicetto, she uses her art to communicate her symptoms, experiences and world-view as it is influenced by her mental illness.

Wagner's edgy but playful sculptures combine pulsating colors with gestures and words, and images of faces and pills. Her recent body of work promotes 'a safe space for individuals to share their stories, experiences, and support around topics of invisible 'mental' illnesses.' She bases each piece on "embarrassing or uncomfortable moments in hopes of finding the humor of it all.

(Bengtson-Lykoudis, 2021, para. 3)

The concept of normalizing and humorizing the symptoms and experiences of mental illness explored by Wagner in these pieces (see Figure 6) is one way in which art is able to communicate and express the inner workings of the artist. While these acts of expression are not therapy, they are therapeutic for both those who create them and those who view, relate to and feel seen by them.

Figure 6*Pause*

Note. H: 3” x 10 ½” x 11 ½”, From Wagner, A. (2019). *Pause*. [Stoneware, colored underglaze slip, glaze]. Not Real Art. <https://notrealart.com/anna-wagner/>

Interpretation

The repeated images and concepts of the dis- and re-membered body within the previously referenced literature, along with the explorations of expression, materiality and physicality in the artworks presented previously led to the dismantling of my body, conceptually, through physical and material artmaking. I focused my work on using the physical and material in an artistic search for “safe-wildness” with the goal of alleviating feelings of restlessness and other symptoms of mental illness. The resulting artistic practices allowed me to acknowledge and express feelings of anxiety, hyperactivity, restlessness and overwhelm through the act of using my body in various forms of artmaking.

Process

I began by brainstorming methods of artmaking which involved physical interaction between myself and the materials and tools (see Figure 7). I decided on wood-block carving and printmaking, Polaroid® photography and manipulation and working on a large scale (requiring me to stand, carry, spray and trace). I combined these methods to not only create artwork focused on the physical and material aspects of art, but also to participate in various forms of this type of art.

Figure 7

Process Sketches



Note. Pen and manipulated Polaroid® photos on paper, 8" x 12", Rosa Lee Fry, 2023

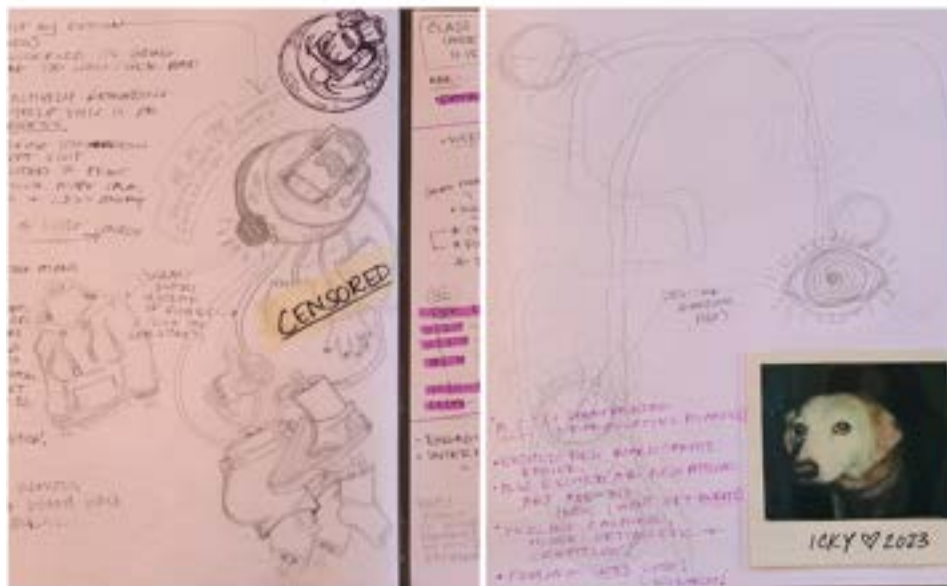
The process of developing sketches helped alleviate symptoms, allowing me to change-up what type of physical art I made each day and allowing me to move and release any hyperactivity or feelings of restlessness.

As part of my process, I designed and redesigned what I would carve several times. I did not want to become too closed off or focused on the end result by creating too-detailed drawings or plans so I kept it fairly loose. Once I decided on my general plan, I began to collect my materials and start to physically create. When wood-carving proved to be more of a physical struggle than I had anticipated, I was forced to order softer (and smaller) wood-type materials.

What I originally saw as a set-back, gave me time to continue with the readings. In this time, I found and became inspired by the idea of Coyolxauhqui and the writing of Anzaldúa (1990) previously mentioned (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Process Sketches



Note. Pen, pencil and Polaroid® photos on paper, 8” x 12”, Rosa Lee Fry, 2023

It was at this point that I was able to begin the act of carving (see Figure 9) and added Before Carving (BC) and After Carving (AC) entries in my sketchbook. Eventually, the “carving” in these entries came to mean any physical method of making, including: spray painting, tracing, transferring and manipulating photographs. I jotted down my feelings or performed a free-writing session before I attempted to create, then performed a session after. This process revealed patterns in my mental state, and typically went the same way: before carving I was often stressed, anxious or fidgety and after carving I usually felt at least somewhat more calm - satisfied with releasing some amount of the suppressed energy that I tend to carry.

Figure 8*Carved Wood Block*

Note. Carved basswood, 8" x 12" x 2", Rosa Lee Fry, 2023

Self-Study

A self-study is the intentional study of one's own practice where you see yourself as the researcher as well as the subject of the research. "Autobiographical inquiry requires us to attend to our processes of becoming through texts including writing and the creation of art" (Kalin as cited in Buffington, Wilson & McKay, 2013, p. 235). Throughout the process of creating my artworks, I continuously used my sketchbook for both written and visual reflections. Using these writings and images, I am able to look back and see how I was feeling before and after my artmaking. My record of my mental state before and after artmaking supports the use of art as a healing outlet, especially through the exploration of physicality and materiality. Before making,

there are various entries where I note feelings of anxiety or fidgeting. For example, in one entry I describe my thought process (before) as:

“Think.

Bite nails

Think.

Bite nails

Think -

Epiphany!” (R. Fry, personal communication, November 16, 2023).

This entry later became a poem when I entered the photo-writing stage of my process. I then go on to explain how I had planned to create a large-scale painting to accompany my wood-block carving. In the after-making session from that same day, after spray-painting and photograph-manipulation, I described myself as being, “Excited! About new physical art add ons (now I won’t get BORED!) Feeling calmer, more optimistic and creative!” (R. Fry, personal communication, November 16, 2023). From here, I added drawings which I colored using paint pens (see Figure 10); because the boards are so large I had to stand and lean on the boards, as well as spin them around, to paint them. Once again, these physical techniques allowed me to release my energy in a positive way, while connecting with what I was feeling in the moment.

Figure 10

Attempting the Coyolxauhqui Imperative - in Progress



Note. Birch plywood pieces, spray paint, Posca® paint pens, 4' x 2' x 1/4" (middle), 6" x 6" x 1/8" (smaller pieces),

Rosa Lee Fry, 2023

Analysis

My finished pieces, the large-scale painting, “Attempting the Coyolxauhqui Imperative” as well as the “Eye on the Moon” series of prints framing photographs (Figure 11 and Figures 12-15 respectively), are informed by the research I performed as well as my experiences with both ADHD and PTSD. The theme of the moon in my work, seen as my head in the painting and the hanging moon in the prints, is inspired by Anzaldúa’s (1990) idea of healing. Her concept of the Coyolxauhqui imperative supports the idea of using the body and what it feels, or what it has experienced, as a focus in creating.

The design painted over the spray-painted boards is a self-portrait featuring parts of my body which have been segmented and scattered. Anzaldúa (1990) explains this process as, “Healing thus involves this destructive/creative process of dismembering → re-collecting our scattered pieces → re-membering in order to remake ourselves and our reality” (p. 76). The idea of using a history of violence done to the body, literal and/or figurative, to dis- and re-member scattered pieces in an effort to recreate, or reclaim, our identities is what inspired the design. This same image of scattered pieces can refer to the dissociation and disorganization often felt when attempting to focus with ADHD.

My artwork is informed by my research as well as my experiences and promotes healing or expressing the often-physical symptoms of an invisible disorder through creating work that allows the artist to find release through materiality and movement. The physically-intense creative action allows me to process not only emotional feelings (anger, sadness, joy) but physical feelings (restlessness, hyperactivity, claustrophobia) as well.

Figure 11

Attempting the Coyolxauhqui Imperative



Note. Birch plywood pieces, spray paint, Posca[®] pens, 4' x 2' x ¼", 6" x 6" x 7/8", edited in Photoshop[®] to show how it would be hung, Rosa Lee Fry, 2023

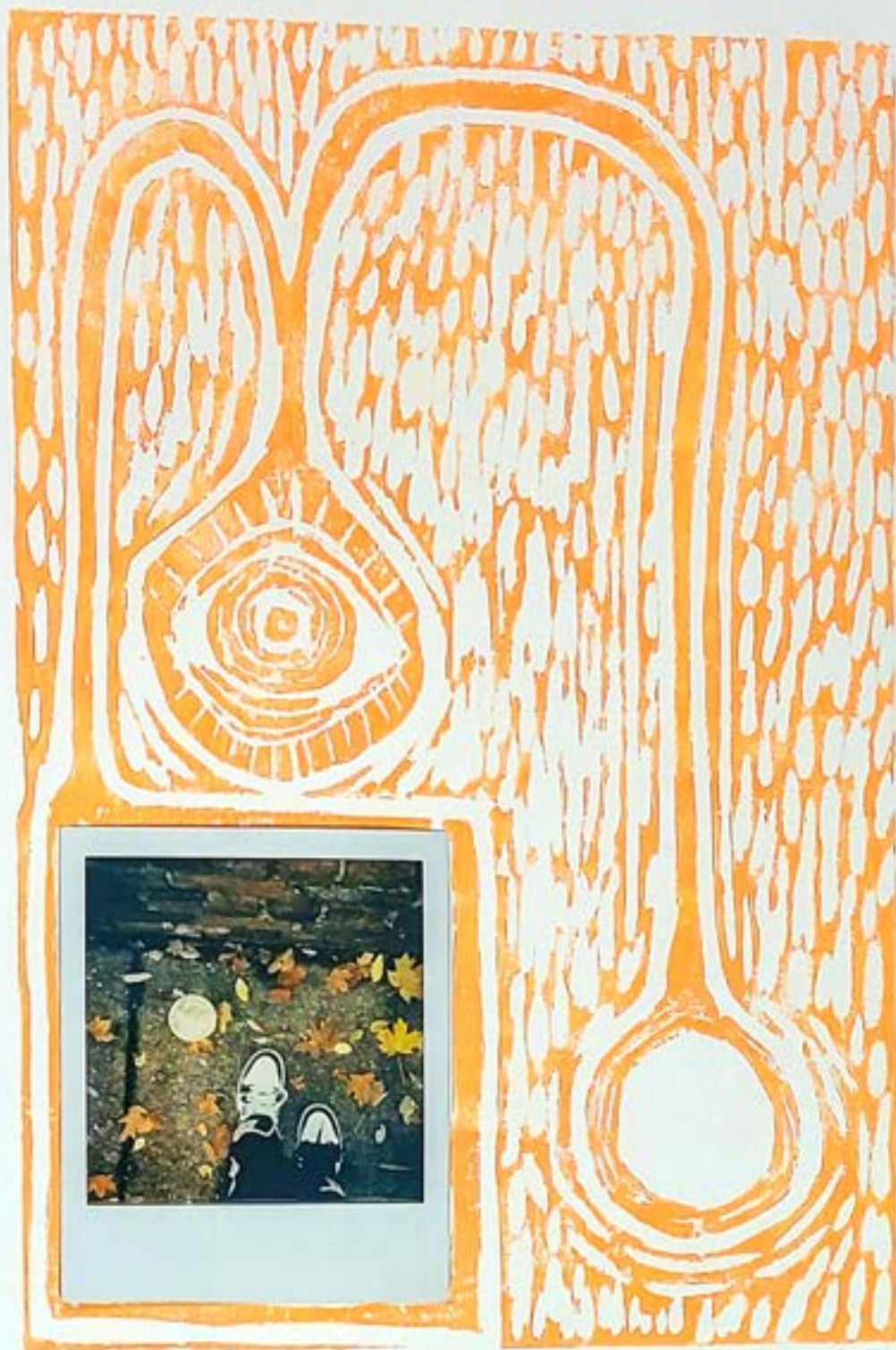
The woodprints feature an eye, wide-open, and the moon connected by a line which also wraps around the photograph (see Figures 12-15). The background of the print was carved in random, but repetitive, patterns which create a texture with round, droplet shapes. The idea of the moon connects back to the painting, representing myself. The eye symbolizes the new insights gained by the process shown in the photographs it hovers above.

Throughout the process, I took photographs of what was around me; I did this quickly and focused on what I felt was important at that moment. I chose five of the photos to have framed by my prints - the subjects of the photos chosen (my feet on a walk between writing, my lava lamp, my drafting table and my turntable) are all other coping mechanisms for me. I found it interesting how these items ended up being what I photographed impulsively, many of them (and other photos taken throughout the process) were used to create my photo-writing and analysis.

Creating art with a focus on materiality and physicality of the work, and viewing work created by others doing the same, enabled me to be more present in the moment. When I was suffering or struggling, the acts of carving, painting, slicing, sanding, and printing allowed me to express or expel those feelings in the “safe-wildness” that I needed to quell many of my symptoms.

Figures 12-15*Eye on the Moon, series*

Note (Fig. 12-15). Wood-block prints on paper, Polaroid® photographs, 8" x 12", Rosa Lee Fry, 2023



2/4

9/23

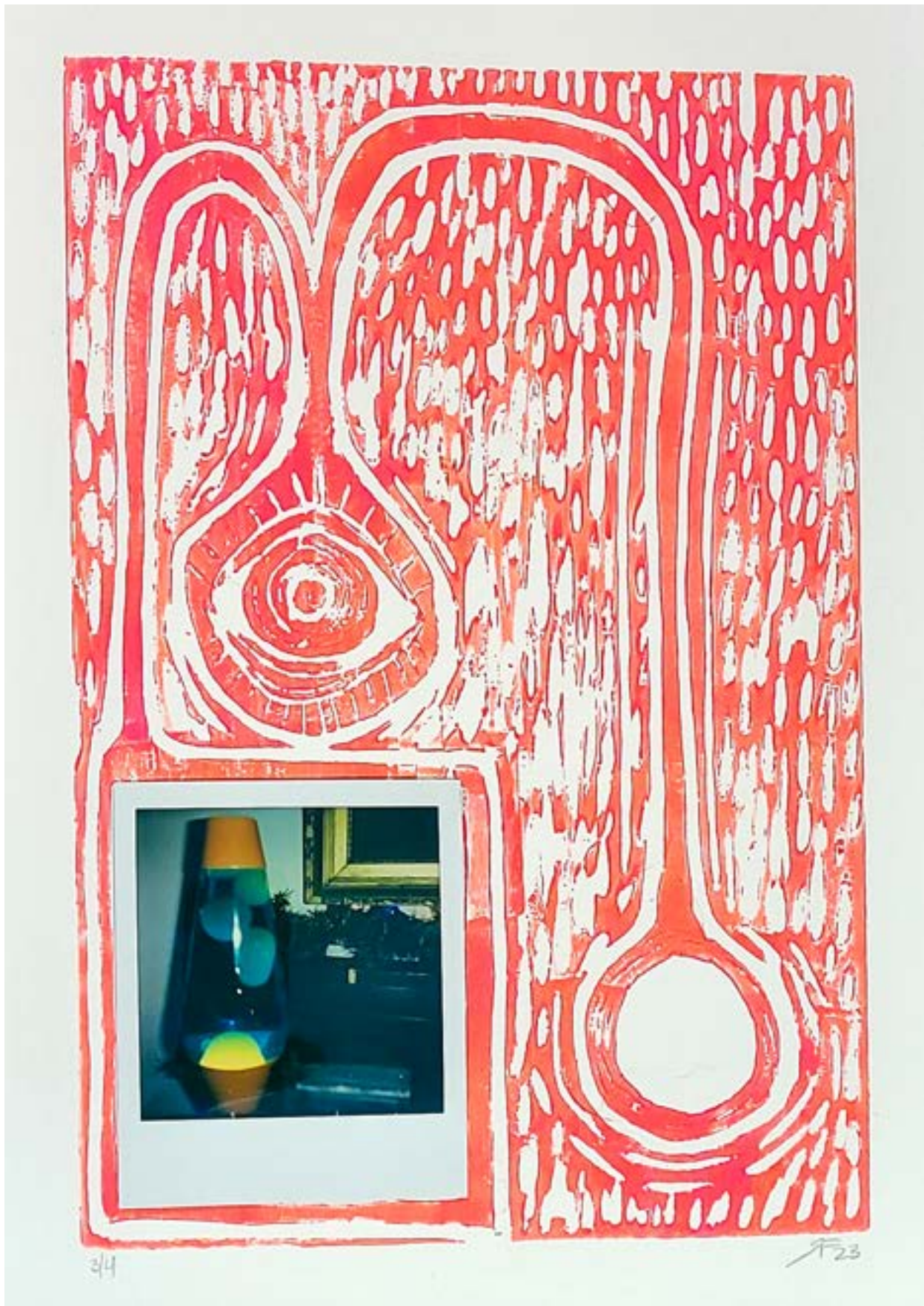




Photo-writing

In her chapter within *Practice Theory: Seeing the Power of Art Teacher Researchers*, Anniina Souminen Guyas (2013) writes about three methods of visual and verbal media as self-study, describing them and giving examples of their use. One of the three methods she describes is photo-writing. According to Guyas (2013), photo-writing “...entails creative writing practices as a reaction or in relationship to photographs taken by the investigator” (p. 122). I was drawn to this method because of my interest in both photography and writing. I felt that the combination of the two would be an accessible way to both analyze my work and deepen my understanding of the ways in which my work allows me to express and understand my identity.

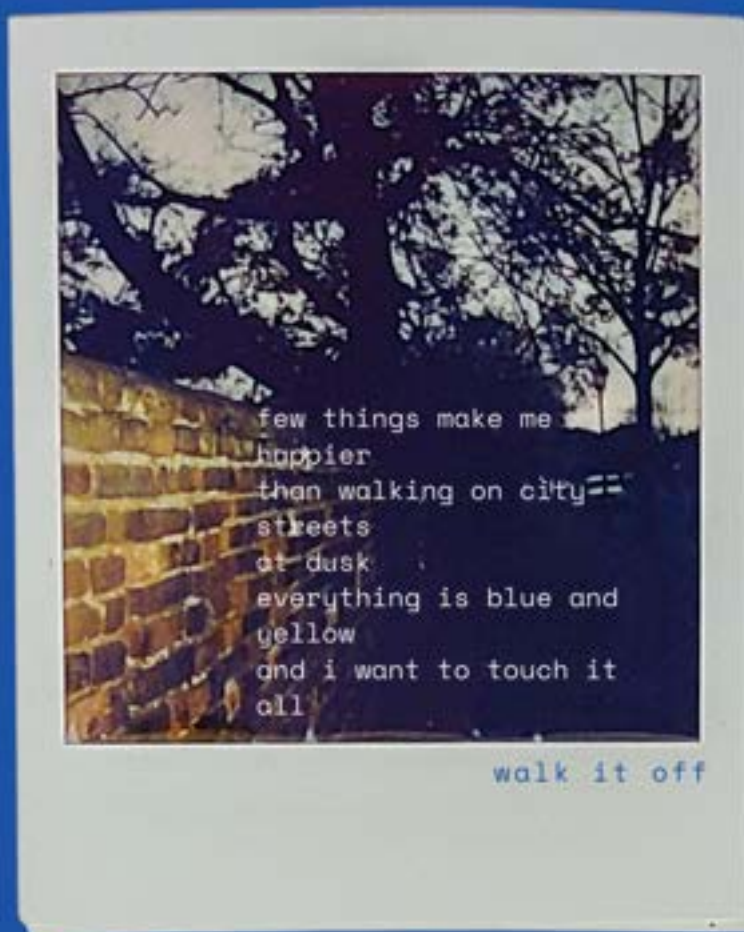
I chose to use poetry as my writing form within my photo-writing process, shown in Figures 16 - 25. The poems analyze the process and act of creating as a reflection of my actions, my thoughts and my realizations while completing my research and artwork. Feelings of restlessness manifested themselves in the carved marks in the wood, my sketchbook drawings and my painting. I observed that I was better able to analyze and explain them afterwards using poetry.

Figures 16-25

Analytical, Photo-writing (poetry as analysis)



Note (Fig. 16-25). Polaroid[®] photos (scanned) and poetry by Rosa Lee Fry, 2023



few things make me
happier
than walking on city
streets
at dusk
everything is blue and
yellow
and i want to touch it
all

walk it off

the process

music blaring

blades gliding
through wood
making their mark

ink rolling
brayer squeaking
paper clinging to grooves

spray paint can
makes its noise
my maraca of mayhem

scribbling, tracing
repeat
scribbling, tracing
repeat

the loud
cuh-cheeeeeaaakkkkkkk
sound of a Polaroid
spitting out a new memory

gloves
respirator
mad scientist
in my lab



post-it
notes on
the dash

think
bite my nails
think
bite my nails
think
bite my nai-
epiphany!
i know exactly what i want
i know exactly how to do it

and by the time i reach where i'm going i've forgotten



gig mass

nobody's looking at me
in a sea of people
eaten by smoke
screaming, singing, jumping
the bass is in my stomach, then my chest, then my throat
lips are wet with the communion
body buzzing
the old wooden floor boughs as we move
reciting the words that mean so much to us
leaving together, then going our separate ways
in the dark
renewed
from our cathedral





leftovers

sometimes i flinch
still
now
don't take it personally
i do it less than i used to
now
maybe i will reclaim it
and turn it into a dance move

Implications for Art Education

In response to my research questions, connecting with my body and learning about how it can be used to alleviate and communicate symptoms of mental illness through creative action also informs my teaching practice. Many students live with invisible illnesses that I and other artists are also coping with. Understanding how to communicate symptoms, feelings and needs in my own art process allows me to pass that knowledge to my students. Showing students techniques that emphasize physical and material aspects of artmaking, and being able to facilitate experimentation where they can find their own, can encourage students who need an alternative form of making to succeed. In addition, using the research to explain how myself and other artists use art in this way can help them to make deeper connections to their work.

This work, while beneficial to my practice as an artist, teacher, and researcher, has left me with more questions moving forward. As I discover how this physicality and materiality benefits my mental health, I question whether or not this is being addressed or emphasized within art therapy programs. In addition to art therapy settings, I wonder how this could be introduced within art classrooms. I am more interested in the connections between movement, material and mental health. While I learned that these methods help me to feel and process, I would like to learn more about why that is.

My process, while very personal and self-reflective, is a combination of my art-based research and my art practice, and connects these two aspects of my identity (artist and researcher) with my teaching practice. While most artmaking benefits an art educator in the development of technical skill and idea-making in regards to lesson planning, this research allowed me to learn more about ways in which artists, and art students, can express, alleviate and explore the symptoms of their individual invisible illnesses. Through this research, I found ways

in which I find “safe-wildness” and, additionally, how I can help my students find it as well. My job, as an art educator, researcher and artist, is to use my creative voice to express and speak-to my experiences and to help my students find their voices to do the same.

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