

CAPTURING MENTAL HEALTH: CAN ARTISTS CAPTURE MENTAL HEALTH
IN ARTWORK

by

Heather Marie McCreery

HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
May 2021

Thesis Supervisor:

Rachel Romero

Second Reader:

John Lewis

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DEDICATION

To all my fellow college students – you are not alone.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my professor, Dr. Rachel Romero, for supporting and helping me through the process of conducting my honors thesis. If it were not for your class, this thesis idea would have never happened.

I also want to thank John Lewis for taking the time to become my second reader for my thesis. I appreciate you taking time out of your day to look over everything.

A huge thank you to my friends and family who also helped support me in my journey with my honors thesis and throughout college. I specifically want to thank my grandmother who has been the biggest support throughout my college career. If it were not for you, college would not even be an option for me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABR	Arts-Based Research
APA	American Psychological Association
BAD	Bipolar Disorder
ADHA	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
OCD	Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
GAD	General Anxiety Disorder

Abstract

In this study, as both a researcher and an artist, I endeavor to capture the nature of mental health disorders in the form of artwork. With the use of in-depth interviews and arts-based methods, I explore mental health based on the experiences of four participants. Along with the experiences of these participants, I include my own reflections. This study is an exploratory and collaborative project between the participants and myself, to make sense of mental health disorders through art. The included artwork will depict my own interpretation of the participants' experiences with mental health, and will also include the participants' suggested revisions of the art which I created. The goal of this study is to see how well artists can express and capture mental health disorders of others in their chosen medium.

Capturing Mental Health: Can Artists Capture Mental Health in Artwork

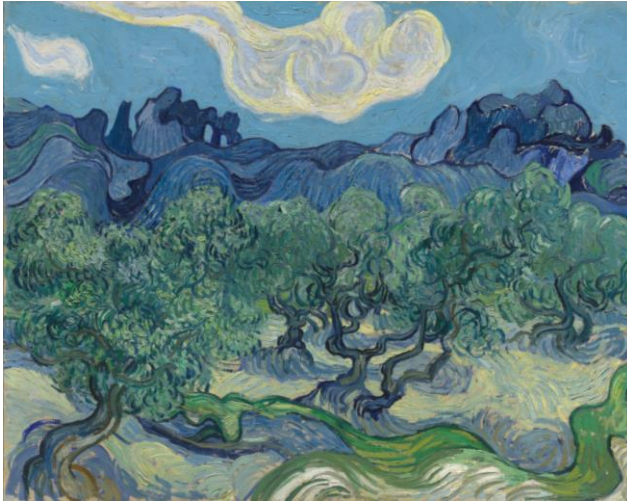
I. Introduction

Art is a form of creativity that people use to express themselves in different ways. We see self-expression through various art forms such as music, poetry, dance, fine art, and many more. In fine art, people can express themselves in the form of 2-D or 3-D art. These methods of expression can allow the artist to show how they feel, shed light on serious issues in their community, or to simply have fun. As an artist, I use art to pass the time and show people what interests me. Yet, when I first began to create art, I was only interested in expressing or examining things about myself. As my journey with art progressed, my view on my own art shifted towards the perspective of others. As one views the range and breadth of topics addressed by artists, one can see how they wanted to capture the beauty of nature in landscapes, the beauty of people in portraits, and even the beauty of everyday objects in still life artwork. With artists setting out to capture these things, it got me thinking of the role art can play in psychology.

Supporting Research

Artists have previously captured their own mental health in their artwork. Most notably, Vincent Van Gogh, has had his body of work examined by historians to attempt to interpret his mental state (Rustin, 2008). Another well-known artist, Edvard Munch, has also depicted his own mental health in his artwork (Rustin, 2008). These examples further my interest in the role art can play in psychology. Since I as an artist was interested in others, I wanted to know – can artists capture mental health disorders in other people? While sitting in one of my honors classes, this question came to me. In this

class, we discussed different ways to apply expression and research through various forms of art – Arts-Based Research (ABR).



Vincent Van Gogh
“The Olive Trees”



Edvard Munch
“Blossom of Pain”

Rustin (2008) has also done a similar study that shares a focus with this study. In his research, Rustin created artwork based on his clients’ experiences with their mental health disorders. Rustin’s goal was to better understand his clients and their mental health disorders. The difference between my examination of this topic and Rustin’s study is that Rustin had more time to get to know his participants, whereas I only had 30 minutes with mine. Having less time for my study required me as an artist to endeavor to capture mental health disorders to my best ability in a shorter period of time, with limited revision or emendation. While both the creation and the interpretation of art will always be a subjective process, my goal is to see if some articulable quantity or quality of either

the nature of or the effect of mental disorder can be divined in an artist's work, specifically when they have endeavored to include that perspective in their expression.

I am interested in seeing if I can capture the mental health disorders of college students. The techniques I use will also play a role in achieving my goal. The study by Péntzes et al. (2018) highlights the importance, also the potential ambiguity, of the use of the elements of art. The elements of art are the basic guidelines one uses when they create art: line, shape, form, space, texture, value, and color. Keeping these elements of art in mind when I made my artwork, helped guide me to interpret the information that my participants provided to me. Similarly, most people have probably heard of the 'blue' period that some artists, such as Van Gogh, have gone through. In past art classes, I learned to associate color with emotions, such as blue with sadness and red with anger. However, can these color examples indeed be the best way to capture emotions felt by others? Along with focusing on color, I will focus on texture. I believe texture can help capture how participants have expressed how they physically feel and how they have described their relationship with their mental health disorder.

With this exploratory study, I wanted to focus on the college student demographic. As a college student myself, there were times when available resources were not readily available when I needed them. Also, as a college student who has been diagnosed with two mental health disorders, I wanted to focus on people who might have similar struggles as I do when it comes to their mental health. Pedrelli et al. (2015) point out that mental health disorders are common among college students. This may be due to the drastic change of being a high school student who has direct help and comfort from parents and friends to a new environment where parents and friends can be distant. I

personally was affected by the change of no longer living with my parents and living on my own in a new environment. Pedrelli et al. (2015) also highlight the prevalence of mental health disorders among college students. Pedrelli et al. (2015) state that 11.9% of college students have some form of an anxiety disorder, 7 to 9% with depression, 3.2% for bipolar disorder (BAD), 9.5 % with an eating disorder, 2 to 8% have attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD), and 1.9% could meet the criteria for autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Art Therapy

The approach of this exploratory study differs from the approach of art therapy. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), art therapy is a healing technique used in psychotherapy or rehabilitation. In contrast, this study explores the idea of someone being able to capture someone else's mental health and not just their own. I previously cited the example of well-known artists capturing and expressing their mental health through their art. Stuckey and Nobel (2010) bring to light the curious duality of art and health together. While, their study does not just focus on mental health but health in general, they pointed out a critical factor that plays a significant role in this study. Stuckey and Nobel (2010) state that art can help people express how they feel when words are hard to find. Thus, while my exploratory study could create dialog with psychologists and patients and possibly lead to art therapy, yet this study itself is not art therapy.

Objective

With the goal in mind of determining whether a research-artist can capture mental health disorders in artwork of college students, I considered what information participants

provided for me and let my own interpretation flow when I made their artwork. The artwork that I created made use of multiple mediums, ultimately creating mixed media pieces of artwork. The artwork which I subsequently produced was specifically intended to capture the mental health disorders of the participants of this study. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the process for achieving this goal.

II. Method

Participants

College students were recruited with a recruitment script from Texas State University. The study's goal was to have eight (8) participants, but only four (4) took part. Participants were not compensated for partaking in the study. Participation requirements were for those to be involved to be 18 years or older, a Texas State University student, diagnosed with a mental health disorder, English speaking, and having no visual or hearing impairment.

Materials

Due to COVID-19, all interactions with participants were held online through Zoom to put no one's health at risk. Interviews with participants were held online over Zoom. The Zoom meetings were recorded for the purpose of notetaking and recalling information participants provided. All documentation was done via Word Document on a laptop, which was saved on a USB drive.

The subsequent artwork was on a 16x20 canvas. The art medium that was used varied from each artwork to express each participant's mental health disorder. These mediums include acrylic paint, paint markers, pencils, glue, loose paper, and embroidery thread. Other tools that were used were paint brushes, a ruler, eraser, and scissors.

Procedure

Participants partook in two, one-on-one, interviews over Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, with the shortest being about 16 minutes and the longest being an hour. During the first interview, participants were asked ten questions regarding their mental health disorder. During the second interview, participants provided feedback regarding the completed artwork. Both interviews were video-recorded, and the use of their use of their own webcam was optional depending upon the participants comfort level in doing so.

Questions

During the first one-on-one interview with the four participants, ten open-ended questions were asked. Questions were asked about participants' physical descriptions of their mental health disorder, their relationship with their mental health disorder, and whether they have learned anything from their mental health disorder. These questions were worded to be as least minimally invasive as possible to participants' mental health. The questions were also designed to be open-ended to help limit the amount of participant-research bias. Listed below are the questions that were asked:

1. Since this thesis is about mental health disorders, which, if multiple, mental health disorder would you like to focus on?
2. Tell me about the start of your relationship with your mental health.
3. Describe how you experience your _____ (mental health disorder).
4. Where in your body do you feel _____ (mental health disorder)?
5. What colors and textures come to mind when you think about your _____ (mental health disorder)?

6. Could you share a story of an episode and how it affected you?
7. What is a coping mechanism you use to help with your _____ (mental health disorder)?
8. What is your relationship with your _____ (mental health disorder) now?
9. What 'silver lining' has your _____ (mental health disorder) taught you?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add that I did not ask you? Or any other details you would like to share?

III. Artwork

All artwork that was created was based on the information provided by participants. My own personal reflections and interpretations were also taken into consideration when I made the artwork. Some artwork took a literal approach based on the ten questions, while others took a more abstract approach. Descriptions of each artwork are based on provided information and my own interpretations.

Participant One

Participant one was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and wanted to focus on OCD for their artwork. Participant one stated that they feel their OCD as a "reddish-yellow" color and that it feels that it radiates from them. I tried to capture this radiating feeling with these colors in the background of the artwork and with the figure in the middle. The participant also mentioned that their OCD makes them feel like they are "puppeted." With this, I incorporated puppet strings on the figure. Lastly, I wanted to have the main focus point be doors in the artwork, since participant one mentions flat surfaces and doors being their main focus when it comes to their OCD.



Trapped
Acrylic on canvas
16 x 20

Participant Two

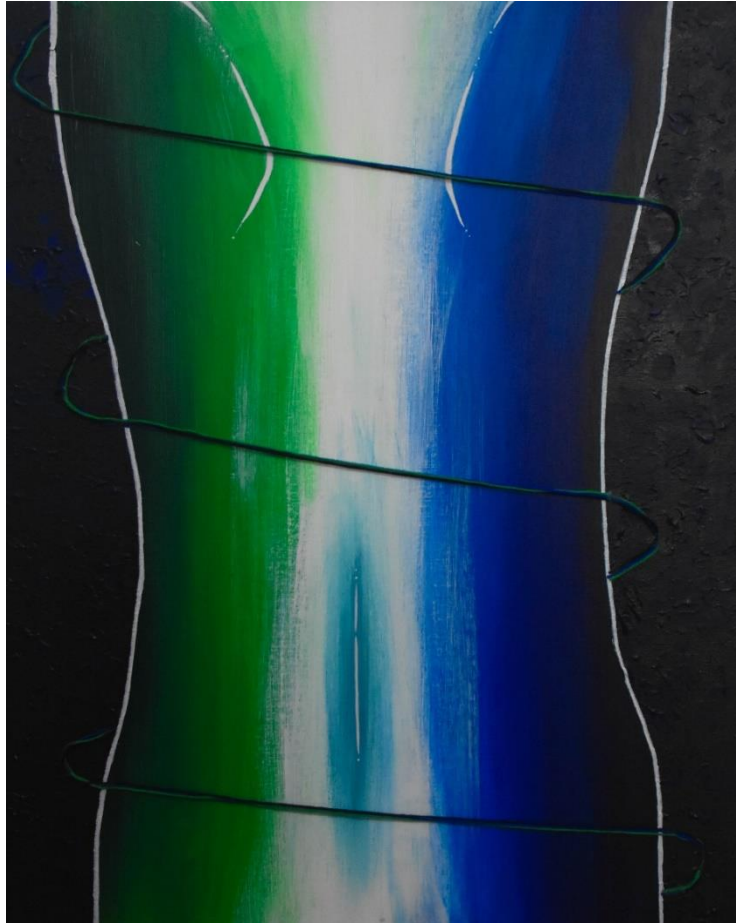
Participant two was diagnosed with OCD and wanted to focus on OCD for their artwork. Participant two mentioned the color green when they experience their OCD. I incorporated this green with their use of the word “sticky.” They also said that their OCD could lead to the “root and cause” of things; thus, I added roots into the artwork. The main focus point was books. Participant two said that their OCD leads them to ask questions, research, and being prepared for events (i.e., an apocalypse). Overall, I wanted to capture this feeling of books grounding the participant yet also the inability to get away from their OCD.



Afflicted
Acrylic, mixed media on canvas
16 x 20

Participant Three

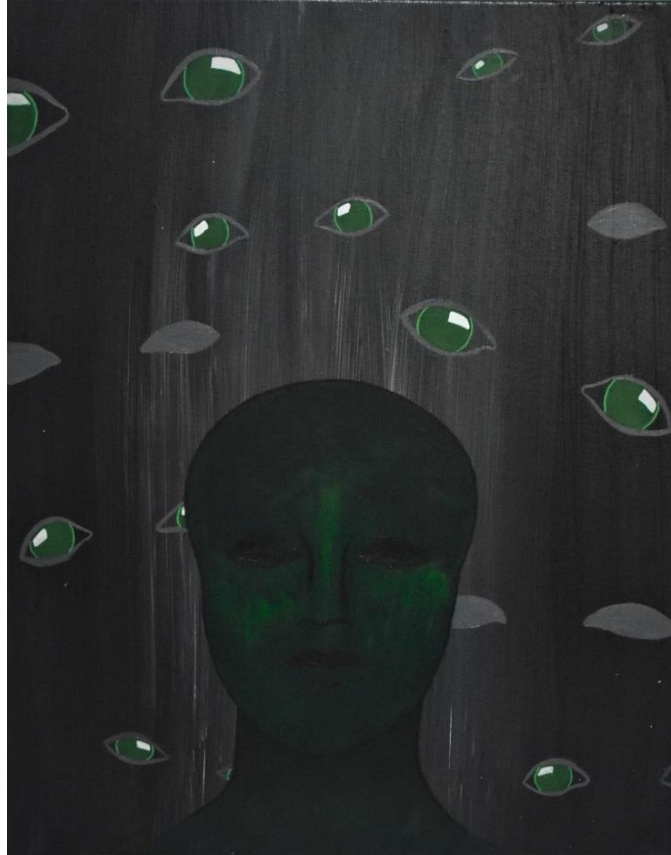
Participant three was diagnosed with bipolar II and wanted to focus on bipolar II disorder for their artwork. The participant mentioned the color blue when they feel their mental health disorder. I wanted to use blue to capture the depressive side of their bipolar II and green to capture their manic side. The participant mentioned that they feel their mental health disorder in their back; thus, I focused on a back in the painting. I also used embroidery thread to wrap around the back because they said this relationship with their mental health disorder as “it just is.”



It Just Is
Acrylic, mixed media on canvas
16x 20

Participant Four

Participant four was diagnosed with general anxiety disorder (GAD) and wanted to focus on GAD for their artwork. The participant cited the color dark green when they feel their mental health disorder, as dark green. My goal was to try to stay away from light green as much as possible because they said it was beautiful to them. The main focus point was the eyes. Thus, I put eyes throughout the background of the artwork. The participant said that they feel like either everyone or no one is looking at them.



Eyes upon you
Acrylic on canvas 16 x 20

IV. Findings

With this study being an exploratory practice study, the findings of this study are not generalizable. All four participants, in different words, say the artwork that was created based on the ten questions was a success. They acceded that I, as a research-artist, had accurately captured their mental health disorder.

Participant one said that the artwork I created “resonates with me” and that it “captures the experience.” Participant two said, “I think you did, you definitely did.” Participant three said, “yeah, I think you did” and “really good embodiment.” Participant four said, “I would say so” and “I do see aspects where anxiety reflects.”

During the second interview for feedback, two (2) out of four (4) participants suggested changes to be made to the artwork. Participants suggested these changes: to add a facial expression to participant one's artwork and add another color to participant three's artwork.

Along with creating the artwork, I also allowed the participants to title their artwork. Participant one gave me two options, participant two titled it themselves, participant three had me pick a quote that stood out to me, and participant four also titled it themselves. I allowed the participants to title the work because I wanted them to make a more profound and personal connection with the artwork.

V. Future Research

Collaborative

With this study being an exploratory practice study, I would like to revisit this thesis. With revisiting this thesis, I would reach out to the same participants to discuss possible changes. Since two out of four participants mentioned some changes I could make, I could do so at this point. I would hold another interview with the participants to obtain more information about the changes. I would then go back to the artwork and make those changes. Once the changes had been made, I would meet with the participants again to acquire their feedback on the changes. These changes would bring collaborative aspects with the participants and create a more in-depth connection with the artwork.

Thesis Expansion

Another future research development with this study would be to obtain feedback from a larger population. This study would also not result in generalized findings. For

this study, I would create artwork based on the DSM-V information and the most common mental health disorders found in a college student population. The artwork created from this information would be employed as an art exhibit to see how college students interpret the artwork. College students would put slips of paper with a mental health disorder in a box next to the artwork. This way, I would be able to see how these students interpret or relate to the artwork on display.

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