

The Past 5 Years: Using Art to Evoke Empathy

Kristin Sorensen
Bachelor of Fine Arts
University of North Carolina Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Tamie Beldue, Robert Tynes, Eric Tomberlin, and Megan Wolfe

Abstract

The Past 5 Years addresses the ability of drawings to evoke an emotional response and the importance of regularly practicing empathy. This collection of drawings focus on what a person does when they experience loss; what they do with their hands, how they move their body, the words they say or don't say, and how that pain is changing them biologically. Synthesis of representational figurative drawings and anatomical studies work together to fully define and illustrate how pain affects the body. Extensive research on the subject of empathy and its effects generated several different methods to practice empathy, and evoke this feeling. Some of which included, listening to another's experience, developing a general curiosity in another's experience, and sharing personal stories of common experiences such as loss. This body of work questions how art can be used to help someone become more empathetic as well as the social and personal benefits of empathy.

1. Introduction

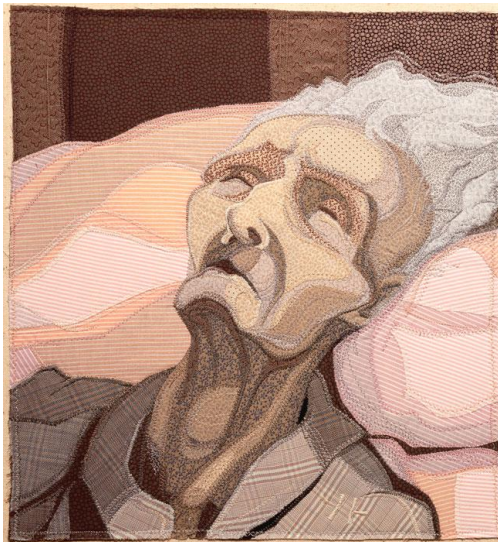
The need to feel understood and relate to another human being is one of the foundations of human existence. Empathy is defined as the ability to understand, be sensitive to, and indirectly experience the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another person.¹ Practicing empathy gives individuals the opportunity to look at a situation outside of their own experience and better understand another's plight. People are "soft-wired to experience another person's plight as if we are experiencing it ourselves."² Recent research done by Jeremy Rifkin, an American social theorist and founder of the Foundation of Economic Trends, indicates that there is a neurological basis for human companionship, sociability, affection, and the desire to belong.³ A particular structure known as mirror neurons give humans and some primates the ability to feel what another person is feeling simply through observation. The discovery of mirror neurons came about by accident when a group of scientists were studying the brain cells of a monkey. They were looking at the neurons that fired in the brain when the monkey would grab a peanut. During one of the sessions, another scientist accidentally walked into the room with the monkey and grabbed a peanut while the primate sat and watched. They observed that the same neurons in his brain fired whether the monkey grabbed a peanut or the monkey watched someone else grab a peanut.⁴ This meant that engaging in an action and watching someone else engage in the same action elicited the same emotion and were processed the same way by the brain.

To better understand why becoming more empathetic is necessary, it is important to look at the harm that a lack of empathy can cause. In a book titled *The Science of Evil*, author Simon Baron-Cohen looks at the impact of empathy, focusing primarily on the negative effects of a lack of empathy. Those who have little to no empathy are described as having no awareness of how they come across to others, why or how relationships work or do not work out, and have a deep-seated self-centeredness. These people have no consideration of other people and do not fully recognize that there might be other thoughts or feelings besides their own. People who have little or no empathetic capacity are much more likely to perpetrate acts of cruelty, such as becoming verbally or physically abusive, or even committing rape or murder.⁵ These examples demonstrate how important it is to develop a capacity to empathize.

An important setting to cultivate empathy is in social work. One study about the significance of integrating empathy into social work emphasizes the importance and methods of healthy, effective empathy. The authors, Karen Gerdes,

Ph.D. Social Work, and Elizabeth Segal, a professor of Social Empathy at Arizona State, discuss elements essential to practicing empathy in a healthy way.⁶ Since the brain is naturally wired to mirror the emotions and feelings of another person, the first element in healthy empathy practice requires a general interest and ability to listen to another's story. In order for empathetic capacity to grow, one must develop a curiosity in others paired with attentive listening. While listening is the largest part of practicing empathy, both parties must be vulnerable. When one party does not want to open up, they are not allowing themselves to be affected or changed by the conversation. When mutual vulnerability is shared, both parties benefit because they are allowing themselves to be moved by another's story. When someone talks regularly and becomes invested in another's life, the ability to empathize grows and deepens. Though being empathetic is positive, in some instances one party can become too attached to the other and not be able to disengage self from other. When being empathetic towards another's experience, it is easy to become too entrenched in the joys and challenges of another's life. This involvement can become a burden if one of those parties starts to experience the other's feelings as their own. For example, if someone is experiencing a deep grief the other could take on that grief and become depressed. Reciprocated personal vulnerability paired with the understanding that separation is needed between self and other is necessary for a mutually beneficial empathetic relationship.

Recently, art has been used as tool for people to learn how to practice empathy in a safe and healthy manner. A recent study completed in 2014 at East Carolina University examined several college students' ability to empathize through multiple learning experiences taking place in an art museum.⁷ The study followed the students as they were taught how to analyze art and question its meaning. The artworks analyzed were the fabric works of Deidre Scherer in the exhibition *The Last Year*. In this body of work, Scherer's relationship to an elderly woman in her last year of life inspired the nine pieces that share the theme of grief, dying, and death. One of her pieces, *Release*, depicts the elderly woman's beautiful and moving final moments. The findings of the study concluded through learning how to evaluate artwork critically, students made personal connections to experiences in their own lives.⁸ As the subject matter reminded the students of their own encounters with death. Analyzing and investigating the meaning behind the artwork helped them move towards closure about the personal loss they had experienced, and in this process students learned how to practice empathy. They asked questions, thought critically, and analyzed the meaning behind the work. This then brought them to a deeper understanding of why the piece was made and what it was communicating. As they made these connections, students found that the art helped them work through their own struggles, and students' understanding of grief and death expanded as they looked at the subject from the perspective given by the artist. Scherer's pieces facilitated the learning of empathy for these students and introduced the personal benefits of practicing it through analysis of art.



Deidre Scherer *Release* thread on fabric, 14 x 13"
<http://dscherer.com/portfolios/traveling-exhibitions/>

2. Background

The Past 5 Years is a series of drawings inspired by emotionally distressing events in my life and those close to me. The focus is specifically on the five-year period of time that my brother was missing. Some of the worst months during that time were when my family and I knew nothing, a period of 5 years. It was not until he contacted my parents in 2015, that I knew, without any doubt, that he was alive. Throughout the five years of his absence I went through cycles of being angry, bitter, frustrated, hurt, depressed, and indifferent. As a coping mechanism, I would cast personal feelings aside and distract myself with work, friends, TV and books. This response became so ingrained that I started to become numb and indifferent towards my others siblings' struggles. It was difficult to empathize with my siblings as they spoke about their feelings towards our brother, as I could not relate to how they coped. When my brother returned, I became acutely aware of how little I had dealt with the heartache that was a result of his absence. Since his return, my family members have had very different and often dramatic reactions, which has forced me to confront all that I had repressed while he was away.

As these events were taking place, I would make art and talk to friends to process these feelings. When I would open up about my brother, I noticed that others would feel more comfortable talking with me about their own experience with loss and the pain it brings. There was mutual understanding as we helped each other make sense of these events. Though I wasn't aware of it at first, my investigation expanded from my family to those around me trying to comprehend, and I use my drawings to process what I learned both from my own experiences and from others' experiences. Throughout the research and drawing process, I was able to reflect on specific emotional moments and their physical manifestations. This process has given me a deeper understanding of my personal feelings and of those around me.

3. Method

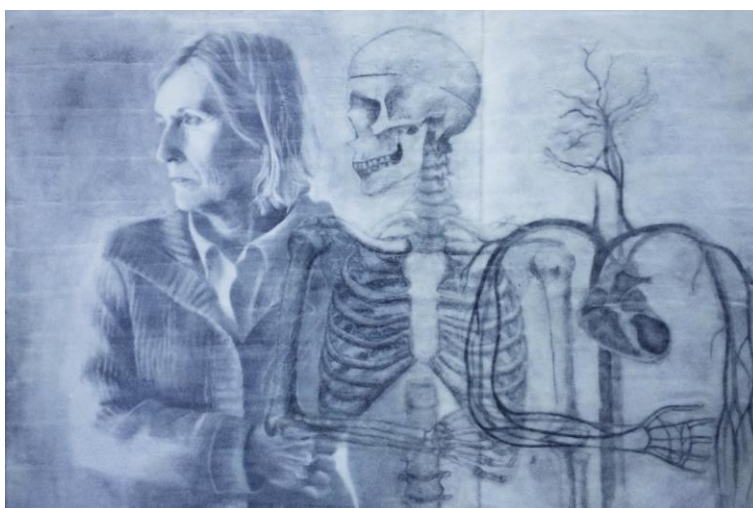
Each drawing throughout this series was inspired by personal observation and research, and started as a conversation with someone experiencing loss. In an effort to understand more fully what others were experiencing, I would ask specific questions while also being sensitive to their feelings. Some of these questions included: What are the most frustrating or insensitive things someone has said or done about your loss; what do you want people to understand about your experience; if you could use a metaphor to communicate your experience what would it be and why. I would have questions prepared, but depending on the nature of the conversation I would change the wording, ask questions more specific to their lives, or simply sit and listen. I learned the most when I was sitting quietly, attentively listening. I found that integrating empathetic practices in my interviews brought the greatest depth and vulnerability.

Alongside personal observation and inquiry, I researched the biological response to emotional reactions. For example, when a person loses their spouse they experience intense emotional stress that triggers left ventricular apical ballooning, which is also referred to as broken heart syndrome. After a person of significance dies in someone's life they are twenty-one more times likely to have a heart attack the day after. The risk of having a stroke or heart attack can stay elevated for an entire month. This finding uncovered how someone's emotional pain can manifest in their anatomy. My work is showing the relationship between the emotional effects of grief and the physical reaction. In exploring this connection the viewer can experience a better empathetic connection with the subject.



Kristin Sorensen *The Mirror Neuron* (Diptych) Graphite and Pen on Mylar 2016 24 x 29 inches

Some of the pieces in this body of work include or are exclusively anatomical studies of the human body. As I began to learn about how empathy functions on a biological level in the brain, I became interested in how grief affects the anatomy. In some cases, when someone is depressed they cry as an emotional reaction. I became curious about what was happening in their body that is not visible. In order to give a well-rounded understanding of how grief affects someone, I needed to understand and depict the emotional reaction along with the anatomical reaction. For example, when someone has depression, the chemistry in his or her brain is different than a healthy person's. There is no way to know and understand that information unless it is visualized. This is my motivation for drawing anatomical studies of subjects' outward emotional response. Presenting the facts of grief next to the emotive manifestation helps the viewer understand that for someone experiencing emotional pain also experiences physical pain. In understanding that grief is more than just emotional pain, the viewer can better empathize with those they know who are experiencing loss.



Kristin Sorensen *Left Ventricular Apical Ballooning: Broken Heart Syndrome*, graphite and encaustic, 36 x 24

My drawings are completed in a range of mediums including charcoal, graphite, and encaustic. All of these mediums allow detail to be added or taken away easily. Encaustic medium is a mixture of purified white beeswax and damar resin heated together at a temperature no higher than 250 degrees Fahrenheit. The temperature is incredibly important; if the encaustic is heated higher than 250 degrees it can become toxic to breathe or catch fire. When working with encaustic one must always have good ventilation and a working fire extinguisher. After the encaustic is made, I then brush it on top of a graphite drawing that has been mounted to a wood panel. Layers and layers of the wax are added and fused together with a heat gun, being careful not to scorch the paper. Encaustic is semi opaque in nature, but by scraping away some of the wax, I can make areas of the drawing come into greater focus while other details are lost. Losing focus and detail within my drawings speaks to the nature of grief. When some people experience this amount of pain they can lose themselves within their grief or become defined by it. The loss of detail and defined edges in my drawings references their loss of self. To further this idea visually, most of my drawings are completed in grayscale and if color is added, saturation is low to allude to loss of liveliness.



Kristin Sorensen *Brenna* Charcoal

4. Influences

Several artists have inspired my own artistic practice, and one such artist is Javier Rollande who creates intricately representational and portraits using graphite. While her drawings may take months to years to complete, she does not do any preliminary sketches or use an eraser in her pieces. Her work combines the use of photographs with drawing from life. The artist takes multiple photographs and combines the areas that she likes the best. Rollande relies on her intuition and the personality of the sitter to inspire and drive her pieces to a finished state. In her piece, *The Memory*, the artist talks about her drawing technique as an advantage when communicating traits about her mother. In this drawing, the artist depicts her mother with many parts of rendering incomplete as a metaphor for their relationship. Rollande says, “My mother is fading into the background, which is like my experience of my mother—she was present and not present in my life.”⁹



Janvier Rollande *The Memory* graphite, 10 x 8, 1984

<http://www.artistdaily.com/blogs/drawing/drawing-basics-janvier-rollandes-portraits-of-self-expression>

In *Adieu Maman*, a drawing depicting her mother's death, Rollande explains that the process of drawing her mother in that state was as a way for her to cope with the loss. "That's the reason for the drawing. I think drawing in general it is a way for me to really know something, to understand something or someone. This drawing was a way of understanding that particular experience and my feelings about it, and coming to a place of peace with her death and with our relationship," said Rollande.¹⁰ The artist is aware of how the process of drawing these figures gives her the freedom and space to think about her own understanding and work through personal difficulties and struggles. She uses her art as a tool to better understand her subject as well as herself in relation to her subject.

Rollande is a master of figurative drawing with her expert attention to detail. In *Adieu Maman*, every wrinkle and strand of hair is exquisitely rendered although the subject is not traditionally beautiful. She draws inspiration from her personal relationships and uses the detail in her pieces as another avenue to communicate the level of intimacy of the relationship. Rollande's attention to every detail and soft quality of rendering throughout her work has inspired and been used for reference when creating my own work. The level of detail within her drawings of her mother directly relate to the type of relationship they had, and her process of using intricate rendering to communicate the emotive qualities of her subjects has helped me learn to do the same in my drawings.



Janvier Rollande *Adieu Maman* graphite 10½ x 14½, 2007

<https://tearticism.wordpress.com/2011/04/13/art-break-janvier-rollande/>

Another artist who has inspired my work is Sophie Jodoin, an artist based out of Montreal. All of her drawings are done in black and white and are often very disquieting. In a series very unlike the rest of her works, Jodoin draws eleven opened envelopes. This series, titled *Open Letters*, was created to make private letters open to the public. To visualize interrupted, long-term communication with a loved one. In looking at these drawings, the viewer is caused to wonder if the letters are from a former flame, a long lost family member, or if the letters signal a reconnection or the end of a relationship. Jodoin takes an intimate moment between herself and another by drawing emptied envelopes, which implies that there was a letter inside that she read and saved. These envelopes allude to a deep relationship with someone, while leaving the ambiguity as to what that connection looked like. Jodoin leaves the interpretation open to the viewer. In an interview about the choice of color, the artist said that black and white gave her a distance with the subject and allowed her to conceptualize her work further than she believes she could have done in color.

Sophie Jodoin's *Open Letters* series communicates emotion and alludes to deep connection without directly drawing out two people in a relationship. These letters were objects that resulted from a deep relationship, not a direct depiction of it. Her work draws the viewer's attention to the overlooked details, such as an opened envelope, that result from everyday human interaction. The used envelopes allude to a connection, but they also portray the human impact on the object. The crinkles, smudges, and ripped edges show that someone opened and handled the letter. Two relationships are illustrated: one between the writer and receiver of the letter and one between the envelope and the receiver.



Sophie Jodoin *Letter 8* 14 x 11" conté on mylar 2013
<http://sophiejodoin.com/site/open-letters/>



Sophie Jodoin *Letter 10* 14 x 11" conté on mylar, 2013
<http://sophiejodoin.com/site/open-letters/>

Kathe Kollwitz was a German artist whose work was inspired by the heartache in her life, and she also inspired my work. She was born in 1867 and died in 1945 during the First World War. Her charcoal drawings and woodcut prints were created in response to the sorrows she directly witnessed during this time. With the death of her son in 1914, Kollwitz made many pieces inspired by the very intense emotions that come with losing a son. In her print *The Parents*, Kollwitz shows a couple kneeling on the floor, embracing. The composition is simple yet powerful as it depicts the intimate moment of grieving for the loss of a child between two parents. This piece is emotive because it depicts two people in an easily recognized position of grief while not depicting traits that would be specific to the individuals. The viewer is able to connect and insert themselves in this print because of the generalized representation of two figures grieving. Kollwitz uses her own sorrow to inspire her woodcuts and cope with the grief of losing a son, while making her personal heartbreak publicly accessible to help others who have experienced a similar loss.

Two Parents was part of a series called *Krief* (War), which was her response to World War I and the sorrows it produced. As her work continued to develop, Kollwitz moved away from drawings and woodcuts that discussed her personal experience with loss and focused on the “sorrows of those left behind — mothers, widows, children.” Her pieces depict scenes of war without referencing a specific place or time, leaving room for the audience to empathize through their own interpretations and understanding. Kollwitz used only black and white for her pieces, and she used both her own pain and the collective pain felt by the effects of the war as inspiration for art.



Kathe Kollwitz *Two Parents* 13 13/16 x 16 3/4" hand-printed on paper 1923
<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/69684?locale=en>

5. Conclusion

Throughout this experience I have learned a great deal about the importance of practicing healthy empathy, how to relate to someone else who is experiencing grief, the biological response behind emotional reactions, and the beauty in visualizing these ideas. Empathy is much like a muscle. It is something that all have the capacity to utilize but it has the innate capability to grow and strengthen. People can become more empathetic if they take necessary steps to develop that skill. Empathy helps individuals understand and relate to another's plight, better understand personal emotions, and have healthier and more successful relationships. This project helped me to understand the scientific reasoning behind emotional responses and use art to communicate the information poignantly. Working on this body of work has gotten me incredibly excited for what lies outside of the college campus. This body of work has not only helped me to better understand empathy, but it has also generated inspiration for future projects. Empathy is necessary for people to have healthy and successful relationships with one another, and making work inspired by and to evoke empathy has helped me grow as an individual and an artist.

6. Bibliography

1. Arnold, Alice, Susan Martin Meggs, and Annette G. Greer. "Empathy and Aesthetic Experience in the ArtMuseum." *International Journal of Education Through Art* 10, no. 3 (2014): 331-47.
2. Bahr, Bob. "Portraits As a Vehicle for Self-Expression." *American Artist: Drawing* 5, no. 17 (Spring2008 2008):110-119.
3. Baron-Cohen, Simon. "The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty." New York: Basic Books, 2011.
4. Cort, Julia. "Mirror Neurons." PBS. January 25, 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/mirror-neurons.html>.
5. Gauld, Quanta1. "Empathy beyond the human: Interactivity and kinetic art in the context of a global crisis." *Technoetic Arts: A Journal Of Speculative Research* 12, no. 2/3 (December 2014): 389-398.
6. Gerdes, Karen E. and Elizabeth Segal. "Importance of Empathy for Social Work Practice: Integrating New Science." *Social Work* 56, no. 2 (04, 2011): 141-8.
7. Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2015.
8. Mostofsky, E., M. Maclure, J. B. Sherwood, G. H. Tofler, J. E. Muller, and M. A. Mittleman. "Risk of Acute Myocardial Infarction After the Death of a Significant Person in One's Life: The Determinants of Myocardial Infarction Onset Study." *Circulation* 125, no. 3 (2012): 491-96.
9. Salmon, Sara. "Teaching Empathy: The PEACE Curriculum." *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 12, no. 3 (Fall, 2003): 167-173.
10. Scherer, Deidre. "Thread on Fabric." *Deidre Scherer*. N.p., n.d. Web. 12 Sept. 2015.
11. *The Empathic Civilization*. Dir. Jeremy Rifkin. TED, 2010. RSA Animate.
12. Webster, Debra, EdD,R.N., B.C. "Promoting Empathy through a Creative Reflective Teaching Strategy: A Mixed-Method Study." *Journal of Nursing Education* 49, no. 2 (02, 2010): 87-94.

7. Endnotes

-
- 1 Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 14 Sept. 2015.
 - 2 *The Empathic Civilization*. Dir. Jeremy Rifkin. TED, 2010. RSA Animate.
 - 3 *The Empathic Civilization*.
 - 4 Cort, Julia. "Mirror Neurons." PBS. January 25, 2005. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/body/mirror-neurons.html>.
 - 5 Baron-Cohen, Simon. "The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty." New York: Basic Books, 2011.
 - 6 Gerdes, Karen E. and Elizabeth Segal. "Importance of Empathy for Social Work Practice: Integrating New Science." *Social Work* 56, no. 2 (04, 2011): 141-8.
 - 7 Arnold, Alice, Susan Martin Meggs, and Annette G. Greer. "Empathy and Aesthetic Experience in the Art Museum." *International Journal of Education Through Art* 10, no. 3 (2014): 331-47.
 - 8 Arnold, Alice
 - 9 Bahr, Bob. "Portraits As a Vehicle for Self-Expression." *American Artist: Drawing* 5, no. 17 (Spring2008 2008): 110-119.
 - 10 Bahr, Bob.