

Trauma, Self-Preservation and Manifestations in Art

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Abstract

The work of Crystal Moore is a complex combination of dark and light as well as circular and organic patterns. The after effects of sexual trauma sustained in childhood carried over into adult life overshadowing her every action. Human nature is to protect self whether automatically or purposefully, consciously or unconsciously. Moore spent a great part of her life hiding who and what she was from others and even herself. This is exhibited in the work by dark, lowly lit areas featuring crocheted items using plastic bags created to protect and hide. The light inside is reflective of who she is and what there is to offer others but has been carefully hidden and disguised. Circular patterns using plastic bags which are wall pieces, and her old clothing in others which are floor pieces, are indicative of protection and security. The organic patterns, crochet flowers, tissue paper flowers and plastic bottle flowers, represent hope which Moore has always held on to. The body of work transitions from the dark areas into lighter, and ultimately very light areas. This is representative of her attempt through her work to tear down the emotional walls she had built around herself, not only allowing the light in her to shine on others, but allowing the light of others to shine on her as well. Through the process of making art and studying both the meaning and therapeutic nature of art, Moore is able to discover things about herself that will lead to emotional healing.

1. Introduction

Born into a familial situation and growing up in an environment having no control significantly affects a person psychologically. This is referred to as nurture. Some qualities of a person are inherent through DNA, or nature, while others are learned over time by lesson and example. Due perhaps to dissociation, artists set out to create a body of work that feels comfortable and right in their own eyes. When studying their art and contemplating their own lives, artists can determine the meaning behind their work and may be surprised at the discovery. Does trauma and the need for self-preservation (the protection of oneself from harm or death, especially regarded as a basic instinct in human beings and animals) manifest itself through the work of artists and can it be therapeutic in the process? Through the act of self-protection, for me, false security was experienced followed by recurrent traumatic feelings when aging into irrelevance. Need for reinvention began to emerge.

DNA plays a significant role in the physical traits of humans such as sex, eye color, hair color, or propensity to diseases.¹ The environment a person grows up in perhaps plays a more significant role in shaping the ultimate outcome of career, marriage choices and behaviors. DNA strands can definitively determine certain abnormalities such as Downs Syndrome; these abnormalities can be detected through testing. People with the fat mass and obesity-associated protein also known as alpha-ketoglutarate-dependent dioxygenase or FTO variant for example have a tendency towards obesity. Science has the ability to see and identify these DNA traits. More elusive and harder to prove are the personality traits. Dr. Michael W. Krause, PhD stated; "The current prevailing genetic evidence seems to suggest that we actually don't have genes for personality."² He does feel however, in the future a gene determining personality will be discovered. The question between nature and nurture still arises when looking at personality traits and the career path a person takes.

As an artist, I create work containing deep emotional meaning. In this case, environment played a significant role in influencing the aesthetic of the work. Because children have little control over occurrences in their lives, they are especially vulnerable to predatory behaviors and susceptible to psychological damage. When trauma occurs they are not psychologically developed enough to appropriately respond. Having little attention or affection as a child feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem and fear developed. Growing up in a society believing that “children should be seen and not heard.” When molestation by a family friend occurred, it was kept secret. The insecure feelings grew along with feelings of worthlessness and despair which carried over into adult life.

Introduction to needlework spawned a love of crochet, knitting, cross stitch, painting, and drawing. Anything artistic was the avenue most used to avoid thinking about the pain. Memories of childhood have seriously faded but the most outstanding are those surrounding art. Having a great love of school and learning was enhanced by the art projects. Memories of the projects created in first grade are quite vivid, while other memories during that time are just a blur or totally forgotten.

Difficulty arises when a person shies away from others, fearing being the center of attention. However, art is a field where the creations need to be viewed and noticed by others. Having parents who believed that women should marry, have children and stay home, made an art education impossible. To please parents, grandparents as well as other significant role models, marriage and children were the chosen path. Due to the sexual trauma, marriage became impossible and intolerable. That level of intimacy felt like another violation and marriage could not survive. Having two beautiful children however, was a reason to survive and perhaps the only reason to survive. The only option was self-protection and so an environment was created for that purpose. Closing the world out and creating a loving and nurturing environment brought a lot of happiness as well as false security. Security was fragile and any assumed threat appeared worse than reality.

Sandra L Bloom, MD states that people alter their reality using dissociation. She goes on further stating: Human beings alter their reality with such consistency and frequency that we are forced to conclude that this capacity is innate and must therefore have significant survival value. We alter our reality through our capacity to enter different states of consciousness that allow us to maintain separate - and often contradictory - bodies of knowledge. We call this capacity “dissociation”. In its acute state, after some tragic occurrence, it is not uncommon to recognize that the people are “in shock” – that is, they are acutely dissociated. As a result they may not remember the terrible events that just occurred, or they may remember them but have no feeling about the events. Sometimes the shock is so sudden and profound that the person separates from consciousness and faints. Until recently, however, we have thought little about what it means to be “in shock” most of one’s lives, to suffer from chronic dissociation because of terrible things that have happened repeatedly. Nor has there been a clear recognition that dissociative experiences cover a wide spectrum from the extreme states that require psychiatric treatment to experiences that we all have every day.³

Through dissociation a false environment had been created but it was a lonely place, even though it felt safe in the moment. The children grew up and wished to break free and have an independent life. The nest was empty and a mother was no longer needed to nurture and protect. The need to recycle and reinvent became necessary for survival.

2. Artwork

Sculpture is the primary method used and enjoyed most because of its open-ended nature. Traditional ideas of sculpture are statues carved from stone or wood. Contemporary sculpture has opened up a world that includes not only stone and wood, but fiber, metal, ceramics and everyday objects, even garbage. This body of work primarily focuses on fiber with limited wood, metal and ceramics woven into the mix. Many of the pieces feature plastic bags, aluminum cans and plastic bottles.

More important than the methods and materials however, is the intent and meaning of the work. Through the educational process and needing to confront and understand the work, a greater understanding and ability to create purposeful work begins to emerge. It is important to understand why some aesthetics are appealing while others are repelling. No two people experience art in the same manner. This aids in determining the type of art created by each artist. The misconception was that an artist goes to school, learns about art history, other artists and develops skills to make art but nothing psychological and beyond the superficial. Art comes from a private place within each artist and learning that lesson would help to make art intentionally. Thinking about what the art means and make pieces from that point of view aids in the creation of stronger art.

Light is a very important feature in this body of work representing the need to allow the “inner light” or true self be revealed. Going to church as a child we sang “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,” but understanding did not come into play. Being a person who felt there was nothing there to offer others only complicated an already difficult situation. Setting out on this journey the path seemed clear. The classes needed were carefully mapped out as well as the time frame. I was in college to obtain the skills and connections to make successful art, get into a master’s program and work as an artist. Most surprising has been the revelation of self and the beginning of emotional healing from past traumas. The ability to make successful art pales in comparison.

Before confronting past trauma and self-protecting, crochet was one activity keeping focus off the past. Crochet is repetitive in nature and a person who has the need to have hands moving on a continual basis will be fulfilled. If a person is tense and stressed when working with crochet, the piece will not be uniform and take on unintended shape. After learning that basic lesson, it became routine for me to relax while crocheting in order for the work to be uniform. It was unconsciously done but made the process more enjoyable.

3. Meaning of the Work

Many forms are covered, wrapped or incorporated into the fiber in some unusual way to create a more unique form. The incessant wrapping of surfaces represents the need to cover and protect. A mother swaddles her baby tight in a blanket to create the womb experience and make the baby feel safe. After years of self-protecting, then protecting children it is not surprising to observe these repetitive patterns. According to Melinda Smith, M.A. and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D. impulsive behaviors serve a purpose: “They’re coping mechanisms for dealing with distress. They make you feel better, even if just for a brief moment.”⁴ To wrap a form is a calming activity and the beautiful result is a bonus.

Circular shapes are viewed and “perceived as feminine and evoke such feelings as tenderness, warmth, love, friendship, care, support, protection, affection, comfort, compassion.”⁵ Circular shapes in the work became apparent as representing the protective nature of a mother encircling her child in her arms. Having two children to protect led to necessary courage. Changing after having children led to an evolution in personality, a need and desire to stand up for them even when it was uncomfortable. This need to protect also became almost over protective, which is exhibited by the crocheted blanket on a ceramic plate or the umbrellas totally covered with thread.

There are a lot of floral and organic forms in the work as well. Having a traumatic event and the love and creation of flowers and beauty could seem counter intuitive. It could be viewed as dissociation, an attempt to forget or ignore the past. Elaine de Botton works in art therapy and explains this phenomenon as “hope.” He uses Claude Monet’s *Bridge Over a Pond of Water Lilies* (1899) as his example.

Monet’s painting is one of the most popular works in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This is worrying to many people of taste and sophistication, who take a taste for “prettiness” as a symptom of sentimentality, even stupidity.

The worry might be that the fondness for this kind of art is a delusion: those who love pretty gardens are in danger of forgetting the actual conditions of life, which include war, disease and political error and immorality. Audiences need art constantly to remind them of this kind of material, sophisticated types will propose, or they might end up deluded as to what life is actually like.

But this is to locate the problem in completely the wrong place. For most of us, the greatest risk we face is not complacency; few of us are likely to forget the evils of existence. The real risk is that we are going to fall into fury, depression and despair; the danger is that we will lose all hope in the human project.

It is this kind of despair that art is well suited to correct and that explains the well-founded popular enthusiasm for prettiness. Flowers in spring, blue skies, children running on the beach ... these are the visual symbols of hope. Cheerfulness is an achievement and hope is something to celebrate. (Botton 2014)

Research into the effects of flowers on emotional health shows a direct correlation between flowers and emotional wellbeing. To be drawn to flowers when seeking emotional healing is not surprising. To create work full of flowers creates a sense of happiness, calm and satisfaction. The below chart was formulated after research at Rutgers showed the impact flowers had on emotional health.

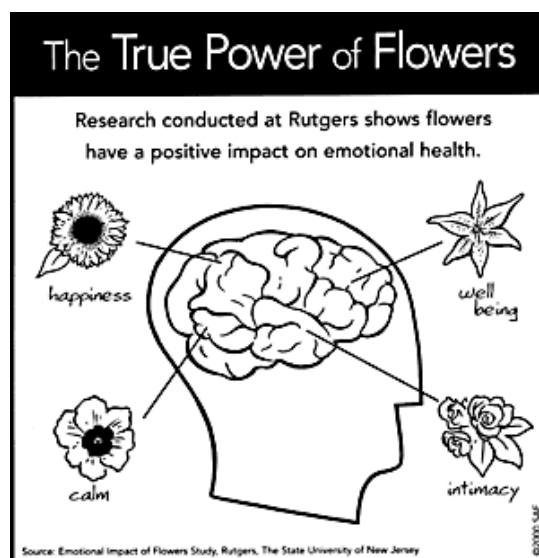


Figure 1. Jeanette Haviland-Jones from Rutgers University in New Jersey wrote about her findings.
Her abstract states:

For more than 5000 years, people have cultivated flowers although there is no known reward for this costly behavior. In three different studies we show that flowers are a powerful positive emotion “inducer”. In Study 1, flowers, upon presentation to women, always elicited the Duchenne or true smile. Women who received flowers reported more positive moods 3 days later. In Study 2, a flower given to men or women in an elevator elicited more positive social behavior than other stimuli. In Study 3, flowers presented to elderly participants (55+ age) elicited positive mood reports and improved episodic memory. Flowers have immediate and long-term effects on emotional reactions, mood, social behaviors and even memory for both males and females. There is little existing theory in any discipline that explains these findings. We suggest that cultivated flowers are rewarding because they have evolved to rapidly induce positive emotion in humans, just as other plants have evolved to induce varying behavioral responses in a wide variety of species leading to the dispersal or propagation of the plants. ⁶

Renee Phillips saw that:

For most of us our environment is generally nurturing and positive, like the beautiful idyllic painting by Linda Calvert Jacobson. But for some, it can be traumatic, such as experiencing horrific events in war zones or being raised in an abusive home. Art is often the healing balm that soothes these harsh realities, as well as provides long term benefits.

For Moore the latter was the case. Having experiencing trauma early in life created the need for healing and comfort. To be around beautiful images or just being outside in nature was a great comfort. To live in a cabin in a forest like the scene above was a fantasy. It was a place that would be safe, beautiful and happy. The smells, sounds and sights would be pleasant and healing. To create work that mimics this fictional environment is also therapeutic.

Along with self-preservation resulting from trauma, symbols of hope, renewal and rebirth are evident in the work. The use of recycled items is important and supports the idea of the renewing of self. Taking items that have been discarded, the goal is to bring renewed purpose and beauty to things deemed useless and no longer needed. The children grew into adults and no longer needed personal parental care, feelings of uselessness led to the idea of being just something to be discarded. The need for reinvention and renewed purposed grew out of those negative feelings. Art was being made from items others were discarding and sending to a landfill. From a distance a flower or vine may be recognized, but a closer look to identify the material’s original use becomes necessary. It may now take on the shape and appearance of a flower but once was, for example, used to package soda. An object or a person can be useful and beautiful no matter where they are in life. With that understanding, more and more recycled materials are being incorporated into the work.

Contrasting and comparing the work is most helpful in understanding what other artists are doing and what they are motivated by. It also aids in understanding your own body of work as well. Tara Donovan is an artist who likes to take everyday items such as Styrofoam cups – (1969 San Diego, CA), Index Cards, (2014 Pace Gallery) and buttons stacked in piles (Ace Gallery) and create forms that take on new meaning to the viewer. The button is still a button but a cavern like form is observed. The repetitive nature of the works are similar and the air of obsession is also apparent. Sharing her story Donovan tells the story of a girl growing up in a boring town and having the need for hands to be moving. Her work has been referred to as “generative art.”

Generative art refers to art that in whole or in part has been created with the use of an autonomous system. An autonomous system in this context is generally one that is non-human and can independently determine features of an artwork that would otherwise require decisions made directly by the artist. In some cases the human creator may claim that the generative system represents their own artistic idea, and in others that the system takes on the role of the creator.⁷



Figure 2a. Bluffs, 2005, buttons & glue, Ace Gallery Los Angeles



Figure 2b. Colony, 2002, pencils & glue, Ace Gallery Los Angeles ¹
<http://designobserver.com/feature/the-work-of-tara-donovan/7417/>

In comparison, Moore has the need for hands to be moving, not out of boredom but a need to focus on positive aspects of life. When moving and creating, the trauma of the past is far removed from the mind and the creation of beauty takes center stage. Feelings that Donovan expressed when she was asked to explain how she felt when she created the sculptures above are also resonate. Donovan said she felt frustrated and when asked why she commented;

I don't know. I think when I make stuff I go through this whole range of emotions, starting with I'm a fraud, I'm never going to be able to make anything ever again, 'til I get to that moment where the material does something that is just beyond me. It lands in a place somewhere between the limits of my knowledge and what one is capable of knowing. Isn't that what the experience of the sublime really is?⁸

Feelings were much the same as Donovan when creating the two sculptures below. Made with grocery bags and other discarded items felt fraudulent and invaluable.



Figure3a. Outside In (dark), left, Outside In (light), right,



Figure 3b. 2015, grocery bags, yarn, plastic bottles, aluminum cans.

Judith Scott was an artist who was born with Downs Syndrome and separated from her fraternal twin, Joyce, for many years. When Joyce was an adult she gained custody of her sister who had never been able to communicate with a single human being. At thirty years of age it was realized that she was also deaf, therefore; she was never able to learn to speak or understand language.

Scott created cocoon like pieces of art by wrapping objects in yarn, rope, thread or whatever was available to her. Because she was never able to communicate to others the meaning of her work, it is not known if there really was meaning at all. She may never have realized what she was creating was even considered art. It is thought the action of wrapping for her was a protective act. This idea parallels with the work of Moore who felt the need to protect herself and her children. Just as Scott probably never knew why she created her work, Moore did not understand or even know that the work had meaning. Ruth Fremson of the New York Times touches on the subject of the intent of art. She also brings up the idea of “outsider” vs “insider” art. She writes in her article;

The issue of intention, or lack of it, was at one time a factor used to define and isolate the “outsider artist,” particularly if that artist had mental disabilities. The assumption was that insider artists rationally decide what they are going to do and do it, while outsiders, incapable of self-direction, produce like automatons, compulsively. This is a mistaken view of both sides of the divide, yet the divide itself, for better or worse, continues. (Carter 2014)



Figure 4. <http://www.textileartist.org/textile-artist-judith-scott-uncovering-innate-talent/>

The above is two of Scott's pieces that were displayed in San Francisco. She was the first artist with Downs Syndrome to be featured at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Below is an example of Moore's work demonstrating the urge to wrap objects.



Figure 5a. Children Grown Up, 2017, bicycle wheels, thread, yarn .



Figure 6b. Protect the Children, 2017, discarded rocking yarn.

With formal training and education, Moore will be able to better understand the work and can approach the process with intent at the forefront. This approach will aid in creating a stronger body of work. Realizing now, after the creation of some pieces, that there was no conscious intent in the beginning, the work still has deep meaning. While Scott was unable to convey anything to her audience, there must have been meaning and purpose to her work. The mystery makes the work even more intriguing. Moore wants to create mystery in as well by taking found objects and creating something unexpected.

4. Background of Crochet

Traditional crochet was used for clothing, coverings, and even fishing nets. Materials were threads, or yarns, that usually had to be spun by the maker out of animal hair. The modern form of crochet was developed in the 16th century.

⁹ Both Walter Edmund Roth (1916) and Lis Paludan conducted extensive research into the origins of crochet. The belief is that crochet developed from Chinese needlework and was referred to as tambouring in the 1700s. This technique closely resembles cross stitch or crewel as we know them now. In the 1800s, Mlle. Riego de la Branchardiere took old needle and bobbin lace designs and turned them into crochet patterns. Her style of crochet became what we know as Irish crochet. The technique was taught to the Irish people and was instrumental in keeping many alive through a famine that claimed the lives of many. The technique was passed down through generations from mothers to daughters and ultimately to Crystal Moore. This skill would become paramount to her artwork.

Today cotton yarn is used as well as nylon and acrylic manmade threads. In some yarns, other materials have been added such as gold or silver thread to create sparkle. In this body of work, yarns of various types are used but nontraditional materials are utilized as well. Those materials consist of grocery bags, old clothing, wire and other plastic materials. The idea of crochet began as necessity and was moved to craft and only recently made its way into the fine art world. The use of the other materials takes it out of the realm of craft and promotes it to the realm of art.

5. Conclusion

Personal experiences, especially sexual trauma, serves to guide the art created by Crystal Moore. Taking old traditional methods of crochet, using nontraditional materials and the pairing them with more commonly utilized materials, creates a unique aesthetic just as her personal journey has been unique. Her need and desire to finally become part of the world around her instead of remaining hidden, drives her to be courageous and creative. In order to survive after a traumatic childhood, she subconsciously protected herself and hid her life away from scrutinizing eyes. Never totally letting go of hope but using it as a guiding force, she created and continues to create art to heal herself and now desires to reach out to others. The act of creating as well as the determining the meaning behind her work, is therapeutic, enlightening and healing for her. The work is not only a manifestation of past trauma but also a beacon of hope for the future. As a result of her recycling and reinvention of self, paired with education and contemplation, a new and improved artist is able to emerge.

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7. Endnotes

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