

Seeing her stories: Finding a place in the landscape of art therapy literature

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Abstract

Viewing artworks is a way of seeing other people's stories. This article discusses the concepts of 'seeing', 'story' and 'her stories', and the ways they have been navigated by art therapists. I map art therapy's landscape of ideas about 'seeing her stories', locate my place within this landscape, and consider how understanding this territory has implications for our field.

Keywords

Art therapy, seeing, women's stories, narrative, postmodernism

Introduction

Art therapy's roots run deeply in the practice of visual arts. To engage visually with artworks requires the act of seeing. Looking at how art therapists have been researching, writing and theorising about seeing artworks, as an essential ingredient in our practice, provides us with insights into changing lenses, views and perspectives that have been part of our professional landscape across the past decades (McNiff, 2011).

As part of my doctoral research into *What can happen when a woman's stories are seen?* (van Laar, 2019), I mapped art therapy's landscape of ideas about 'seeing her stories'. In this article I locate my place in this allegorical landscape. I begin by describing my area of interest: Seeing her stories. I then look at 'seeing' and 'her stories' independently, and the way they have been conceptualised and described in art therapy literature. I share my perspective about my/our place as art therapists in this landscape and the implications of an art her-storical lens for our field.

Viewing artworks is a way of seeing other people's stories. This is not to reduce artworks to a story about their meaning. Rather, it is to remember the evocative and connecting possibilities of stories. We bring aspects of our own life stories as well as our participation in collective stories to our encounters with artworks.

From this perspective, stories are dynamic, open to engagement, and iterative. Each see-er participates in generating meanings each time the

artwork is seen, and stories their own experience of the artwork. Art therapists can use this kind of potentially powerful connection between people and the arts to create exchanges that are meaningful and life enhancing. Importantly, art therapists working with visual arts create opportunities for subjugated and unseen stories to become visible.

In this article, I focus on 'her stories' as examples of such subjugated stories. As art therapists, our "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972) are central to our practice when working with the visual. My approach to seeing artworks as 'her stories' challenges some taken-for-granted "ways of seeing" (Berger, 1972), and offers an alternative, multifaceted lens through which to view artworks. This lens enables a way of seeing that is at once a sense activity, a relational process and a discursive practice. It is the discursive aspect of seeing artworks that I focus on in this article. This is a viewpoint that rejects notions of 'true' meaning in artworks, and is more interested in how we can facilitate ways of seeing artworks that re-story and disrupt gender, and other, biases.

For example, as a woman painter I use my own embodiment as a sensing, seeing and creating woman to author stories by applying paint to canvas. I avert traditions of women as objects of the male gaze in art history that still permeate popular culture (Berger, 1972; Butryn, 2014). My artworks can be seen as stories of a female

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