

# ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**'Skin' and Pigment: a glance back at the nature and use of the oil pastel**

**Barrie Damarell**

**ISSN: 2044-7221**

**Date of Publication: 28/4/2020**

**Citation:** Damarell, B. 'Skin' and Pigment: a glance back at the nature and use of the oil pastel. *ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine 11 (1)*.

Available at: <http://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.atol.v11i1.1390>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License

<http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Intriguingly, I find myself recalling the birth of ATOL, of which I was a part, happening in a church or church rooms, although I think this unlikely. But, this miss remembering, if it is, carries an interestingly symbolic resonance in so far as the depth of belief that was felt at the time. A belief that art therapy and its representation(s) needed to be as broad and as creative as possible.

Over the ensuing decade this was a guiding light and I feel proud to have been part of the nurturing process that enabled authors to develop their work and to publish freely to anyone who had access to the internet.

I retired from practice over six years ago and stepped back from ATOL in the last two. When I received an invitation to contribute to this tenth anniversary edition I was both flattered and, to be completely honest, a little daunted feeling that my distance from practice starved me of relevant material. After a period of mild paralysis I recalled a piece I had written for an exhibition on art therapy curated by Dave Edwards and held in Sheffield in 2018. It describes my recollections of people's use of the oil pastel in a learning disability context. The piece was structured in an attempt to make my thoughts and memories as accessible as possible.

Keywords: Learning disability, Loss, Damage, Creative Process

### **The exhibition piece**

In one form or other, the pastel has been in human use for at least 10,000 years and most probably significantly longer.

The oil pastel however, is a mere infant by comparison having been developed in the early twentieth century for use by children on one hand and artists such as Pablo Picasso on the other.

Its composition is a mixture of wax, oil and pigment and once formed into a cylinder is wrapped in a paper sheath, or skin, presumably to add strength and to protect the users' fingers.

In use, the medium is characteristically dynamic in colour and possesses the innate ability to blend either by smudging or through the use of solvents.

The oil pastel, often in a cardboard box containing others just like it in various hues and tones, is frequently found in the art therapy room as part of the art therapists' basic toolbox.

What interested me when I practiced as an art therapist was the regard shown by individuals' to the medium in three particular situations; the new box; the 'old' box and the behaviour of the oil pastel under creative use.

The new box is a beautiful thing. Its contents arranged in tonal gradation ranging from cadmium yellow through to burnt sienna. In some ways it appears to echo the satisfying primary object of analytic theory. Of course difficulties, for some, seem to arise when the pastel is first used. Use inevitably impacts on the idealness of the whole object—crayon changing its form and appearance, much like our first projections upon our primary objects during infancy. If the pastel should break, a not unusual occurrence during the creative process, regret and grief—like reactions may follow.

These observations are drawn from my work with people with learning disabilities and I wonder if notions of 'the ideal' and 'the broken' are perhaps intensified by experiences of difference and prejudice.

It is as-if, for some, the pastel both embodies and enacts painful experiences associated with damage and disability.

The 'old box' with its broken fragments of once whole oil pastels was often rejected (not unlike the life-experience of the learning disabled) in favour of more integrated media such as the fibre-tip pen. Of course, some of this might be related to the 'dirtiness' of the 'skinless' pigment. The loss of the barrier between the container and the contained seemed to bring about an anxiety for some that the pigment, and its unconscious associations, would indelibly, and perhaps toxically, stain their fingers and by extension, their essential personal and public sense of self.

It's hard to say what lay beneath this phenomena, but I'm left wondering about the discomfort that might be associated with things tainted and the tension between order and disorder that play upon the inner resonances that ripple in the unconscious of the individual.

And there this piece hangs. Much as it did during the exhibition in Sheffield. Alone amongst others. Floating words seeking location in a new narrative landscape. A containing virtual home.

By way of illustration, I have created a short video of my working process with oil pastels (iPhone 11 pro, x2 speed). This, I suspect, will be familiar to both observing therapists and individual art-makers.