

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**The Breath and the Line:
an art therapist's subjective account of drawing through illness**

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On the 22nd March 2020, on the eve of the National Lockdown, I sat down to a meal with my family; mid-way through the meal I started to feel strange. I was soon overtaken by shivering. Overnight the shivering continued, my head started to ache severely behind my eyes and my muscles hurt. I started to realise that this might be the corona virus. I lay awake trying to stay calm. Over the course of the next few weeks I experienced crushing chest pain, whole body aches as well as regular flooding of adrenaline through the body. Sleep was fugitive and full of weird dreams. I couldn't read or watch TV because of the terrible headache.

The nights were particularly hard as I was assailed by night sweats and the adrenaline coursing through my body. The summer before I had been camping in the Scottish Highlands and I kept thinking of the cool rivers I had swum in and the mountains standing solid under shifting skies. I remembered the summer rain and visualised myself being washed by gentle showers.

Luckily, I started to recover and as I grew a bit stronger, I felt the need to use art materials. I made some drawings sitting up, trying to portray the Scottish landscapes that I had been remembering as a comfort when I was so sick. As I drew, I realised that I was using repetitive lines to build up forms, this seemed to be helping me to focus and continue drawing despite my fatigue. It also seemed to help release some of the agitation and anxiety I was feeling.



Fig 1, *small drawing of fir trees*, pencils on paper March 2020.



Fig 2, *small drawing of clouds*, pencils and oil pastel on paper, March 2020

Another day I felt stronger and more motivated. I got up and made the drawing below – standing up at my drawing table. It took a lot of energy. I called it *Remembering Hills*. I don't know where I got the energy from, but I remember working very urgently to finish the drawing. It did take more than one day to do and there were disappointing days in between when I couldn't get back to it and wondered if I ever would.



Fig. 3. *Remembering Hills*, ink, pencils and chalk pastel on paper, 38 x 57cm, April 2020

I actually put this drawing up in my bedroom to remind me that I would get to see and walk in the hills again and that I would regain my strength. I've since framed it as it feels very significant to me.

The recovery period was prolonged, I had a series of secondary respiratory infections which meant I was off work for a long period of time. The fatigue and chest pain continued for a very long time and this was scary. But as other sufferers of "Long Covid" attest there are good days and bad days. On good days I was determined to carry on drawing, and I think of the drawings I made at that time as my recovery drawings. Sometimes I could work for long periods, despite finding it exhausting. But I thought about the patients who make the effort come to my art therapy sessions and make art even when they are stupefied by the effects of medication, poor sleep and mental disturbance, and I decided I would not let fatigue overwhelm me completely.



Fig 4. *Remembering Lochs*, mixed media on paper, 50 x 70 cm, May 2020

I found this statement that I wrote at the time about the act of making these drawings:

"Breathing in, the hand moves across the paper, the eyes gaze without blinking, the breath continues with the movement, eyes fix on pencil and paper until tears prickle out, the effort of focus demanding a pause...."



Fig 5, *Remembering Rain*, pencil and ink on paper, 21 x 30 cm, May 2020

Breathlessness had been a feature of the virus and it took a long time to go away. With the breathlessness came agitation. When I was drawing the repeated lines, I became aware that it was like a breathing exercise, which had both a calming and a stimulating effect. I was excited to see the drawing take shape, but I was also aware that I was completely absorbed. I wasn't thinking about my illness or my worries, at least on a conscious level.

In an earlier paper that I wrote on the possible function of repetition in art making, I wondered what might drive the labour-intensive use of repetitive mark making to build up a whole. From my research I was quite convinced by the idea that repetitious mark making serves many functions - as an anchoring force, as a form of meditation, as an expression of the pulse of life and as an inscription of the self in the world. Now, writing this I am interested in my own subjective experience of art making at a time when I was unwell and afraid. Certainly, making my drawings seemed to encompass all of the positive elements mentioned above and were a way of defying the debilitating effects of the virus, feeling a sense of agency and convincing myself that I would get better and return to the land of the living. When I look back at the drawings I made while recovering, I notice a stillness, despite all the physical effort involved. Later, when I was much better, I started to be obsessed with stormy skies and more looming landscapes - perhaps this was a delayed

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response to the danger of that time, when I was unknowingly walking into something very dangerous. I did get caught in the storm but thankfully I got through to the other side.

Reference

Cavaliero, A., 2016. *Considering the Function of Repetition in Art and Art Psychotherapy*.

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