

ART AND WELLBEING: A PERSONAL PRACTICE IN CLAY

Susan Joy Rippberger, 2026

As an artist and art psychotherapist, I see firsthand the importance of art therapy in wellbeing. Yet I wonder how art reflects one's inner life, and how a psychodynamic approach can honour the client's part in their journey towards recovery? Examples from my own art practice may provide illustrations and hopefully raise questions.

My artwork currently involves experimenting with clay and found objects. Together, these create unexpected textures and colours when fired. I chose three ceramic projects to illustrate my work in art and therapy: a clay mandala imbedded with shells and nails, a ceramic cube wrapped with copper wire, and a clay frame filled with broken glass. Each piece has inspired wonder in how art making can illustrate inner psychological processes.

The mandala, traditionally a symbol of home and wholeness, was my first project. I traced concentric and radiating circles into moist clay, then pressed seashells and small nails into the clay. When fired, the piece took on an entirely new appearance; the seashells evaporated, leaving their impression and a soft brown glow from the sand and calcium carbonate that make up the shell, and the nails exploded into a rough lava-like texture. (See images 1 & 2).



Image 1: Mandala, greenware



Image 2: Mandala, fired

The second object was a small clay cube wrapped with copper wire. The piece started out somewhat square, but in the kiln's heat, it shrank, tilted, and the wire melted to a soft mossy brown. (See images 3 & 4).



Image 3: Clay cubes



Image 4: Fired cube

Third, I made a clay tray and filled it with pieces of broken bottles found on the seashore. In the kiln, the glass melted unevenly, fusing with the clay, strengthening the piece and creating an uneven finish. (See images 5 & 6)



Image 5: Clay container & glass



Image 6: Clay & glass, fired

Working with clay (the ground we are supposedly made from) and the intense heat of the kiln can serve as a metaphor for human transformation in therapy. Initially, my focus in ceramics was on the outcome, in creating a perfect object. Similar was my initial focus in art therapy, in creating perfect wellbeing. However, my focus gradually shifted from the outcome to the process itself. The process of handling and shaping clay can be described as performative, where gestures and materials, not just the final product, provide psychological and emotional information and transformation. All three pieces - mandala, cube, and vessel - embody a building of my relationship with wholeness and describe my hope for participants as I support them in their own journeys towards wellbeing. The ceramic process can represent a desire for change, the old self renewed or morphed into something beautifully new, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, something that happens quite literally in ceramics.

Each ceramic vessel acts as a container, holding me as I hold it, just as the therapist provides space for participants to follow their own inner vision, experimenting, making mistakes, and taking delight in the process, allowing their own art to hold them. As in ceramics, each step is unique, one step flowing from the next, not by accretion, but through unfoldment, or flow of ideas. In ceramics, each time a piece is fired, it shrinks and is hardened and may take on a slightly new shape or colour, leading to the next phase of work. Similarly, in life, we are formed in the heat of first-hand experience, creating space and a direction for each progressive step. Like my cube, outcomes with people are not always perfect but are nuanced and have character. Ogden describes the psychological concept of holding or containment as an ongoing process, "The container is not a thing, but a process. It is the capacity for the unconscious psychological work of dreaming, operating in concert with the capacity of preconscious dreamlike thinking (reverie), and the capacity for more fully conscious secondary-process thinking." (2004, p. 1356).¹ My ceramic containers walk a middle ground as experiments that hold thoughts, experiences, and possibilities for multiple outcomes.

How is it that what we create can mirror a transformation taking place within? What is it about the objects we chose? A mandala, perhaps signifying home, a small block as the building

¹ Ogden, T.H. (2004) 'On holding and containing, being and dreaming', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 85(6), pp. 1349–1364.

material of life, and a vessel filled with glass shards, representing life's processes of transfiguration and transmutation. Could it be that using found objects is a way to put together or rearrange the missing parts of one's life? In found objects, are we recognizing the beauty of the object itself, apart from its original function? For example, a rusty nail is no longer used to piece wood together, but becomes a fall-coloured spiral topped with a cross. And what does it mean to collect sharp objects like glass shards or rusty nails, and the danger of taming these pieces? Do these pieces become mystical, like the danger of trying to find oneself and discovering hidden parts of that may be half buried or dangerous? Does the work take on a new life of their own, where the original purpose isn't even relevant anymore?

Finding, cherishing and repurposing found objects may also offer a chance to think about - and be present with - the lost or discarded parts of oneself. This can be about re-discovering who we are and where we fit in. For example, a washed-up piece of a teacup or bottle from the sea might presents a miniature ethnography of one who has come before us, showing how their lives and ours converge in a single shard. Taken together, the clay pieces might represent finding a sense of home within, or a person reborn with each breath. They may serve to describe a need for home, a comfort and familial embrace, a warm cup of tea, or perhaps a connection to the ocean.

Reflecting on the conscious and unconscious processes at work during art making, artwork becomes a visual metaphor for growth. Everything I do is about the process (detached from any outcome); an experimental learning experience, where I can't know the result: clay shrinks, glaze runs in unexpected paths, metals may melt or burst, and new bonds are created, but never the same way twice. In similar ways, participants arrive with different backgrounds and challenges, and we begin art making with a sense of containment, grounding each work in a healthy environment, without specific outcomes in mind, except for the process itself, hopefully leading to self knowledge and peace. Through these processes, I have become more patient, dropping expectations and looking forward to what participants and I can learn in the process, and how we can grow individually. Personal transformation may start with a basic goal, but the process and outcome can be messy and intuitive, and the materials, like people can be volatile or unpredictable.

My own transformation as an artist and therapist, like the clay, has happened at different rates, depending on the pressure, the handling and the processes, whereby beliefs that are no longer useful are burned out, adding beauty and leaving only traces of the original substance. I realize that changes within a client's inner self can be slow or fast, obvious or hidden. With inner work I can't control outcomes, just as with my ceramic work, nor do I want to, but I can grow in the process and appreciate the character transformation.

Work in ceramics hints at deep and long-lasting changes happening within. Art therapists Siano and Hickman, describe art therapy as a language to "bridge over the silence of trauma."² They discuss how recycling found objects in art can embody the process of putting yourself back together. My experience in creative re-use of objects and clay, coupled with the creative use of art activities, has been transformative. Through the heat and friction of personal experience, my participants and I are transformed in imperfect but nuanced ways, yielding a unique beauty. In therapy, as in art, I am best when I am present, holding people (or clay) in 'unconditional positive regard' (Rogers, 2013).³ My desire for perfection has given way to honouring the process and transformation that the client and I go through, strengthening us, binding us in therapy, and allowing our true character to come forward, transformed.

² Siano & Hickman Ch. 6 "The magic of Holy Junk" in Wong and Lay, eds. 2021 Found Objects in Art Therapy: materials and process. London, England: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

³ Rogers, C.R., 2013. The basic conditions of the facilitative therapeutic relationship. The handbook of person-centred psychotherapy and counselling, pp.24-28.