

I Was Afraid
I Wouldn't be Able to
Make Work:
Sobriety and the Visual Artist

Supporting thesis for
Buildings I Feel Like
An exhibition of paintings

by
Laura Dawe

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I Was Afraid I Wouldn't be Able to Make Work:
Sobriety and the Visual Artist
Laura Dawe, 2018
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Abstract

Using a neonarrative methodology, this paper attempts to unpack the question “how does sobriety affect the art practice of the addicted visual artist?” This qualitative, auto-ethnographic paper asks whether substance use helps or hinders the creative process. By combining current science, Jungian psychology and personal accounts of visual artists about their experiences with drugs, alcohol and creation, this paper seeks to shed some light on the trope of the tortured artist.

Keywords: neonarrative methodology, Jung, persona, archetype, addiction, tortured artist, architectural palimpsest, architecture as metaphor, Csikszentmihalyi, recovery, painting, buildings, sobriety, recovery.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents, Christine Nantais and Tony Dawe, for loving me and believing in my work, both drunk and sober. To my sponsor, Nada C., and her wife Paula, for access to their secret Jungian library. To Harriet, Hanna, Michael, Kyle, Erin, and all the friends who were as curious about my changing self as I was. To my advisor, Rae Johnson, for guiding me so gently and wisely, and to my secondary advisor Jessica Wyman for the lavender, the snacks and the laughs. To Martha Ladly who really came through in the moments she was needed most. And to Joey, Kate, Jenna and Gareth at Division Gallery for all the ways they elevated the experience and the exhibition.

Mostly I dedicate this paper to the person I wrote it for: myself, two years ago. To the woman who couldn't figure out if it was worth it to change, who wasn't sure who to ask, "What will happen to me? Will I still be able to make work?" And of course, to all the other artists like her.

I hope you find this paper if you need it.

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“Drink to me, drink to my health. You know I can't drink anymore.”

-Picasso's dying words, as sung by Paul McCartney

Introduction

When I was 24 I gave a lecture which I called “The Creative Clit” to a Dalhousie University creative process class. A snapshot of a dimebag glowed on the PowerPoint presentation behind me as I described to the students, in great detail, the exact combination of weed, wine and coffee that I used to get in the ideal mindset for painting. I explained that when I reached this state, I was like a lightning rod. The paintings did not seem to come from me so much as through me. Not only did I believe every single word I said, I believed I was doing them a huge favor by telling them what they surely suspected: real artists were fucked up. This is how I knew I was legitimate.

Among the many characterizations of the artist, few have had greater staying power than that of the tortured artist. The founding of modernity and the idea of the modern painter is predicated on wild men and “outsiders” high on absinthe, opium, whatever. Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Gauguin and others glorified substance abuse as the key to creation in a way that seeped into the unconscious mind of the West. In the first few questions of an interview with her hero, David Bowie, artist Tracey Emin reminded him of a time he had forgotten because he was on so many drugs. And then she asked what this thesis sets out to answer: “Do you think being "out of it" adds to the creative process, or is this a myth? I mean, Van Gogh and absinthe, Victorian writers and opium, rock stars and cocaine.” Bowie's response is vague and unsatisfying, and he carefully maintains his creative-druggie reputation throughout the interview. Proliferation of this darkly romanticized image tacitly promotes the idea that substance use is a positive

variable in the production of great (visual) art. Van Gogh drank absinthe and cut his ear off, and now we find his face on absinthe bottles as a sales tactic. I think this is incredibly dangerous.

I am a recently sober visual artist whose studio practice explores issues of self-perception. When I was considering sobriety, I was terrified my work would suffer. I was surprised how little information I could find about artists' experiences with creation in sobriety. While there was no shortage of glamorizing movies like *Basquiat* and *Pollock* about artists abusing substances until they died, I couldn't find the answer to the question that was haunting me: "How does sobriety affect the practice of the addicted visual artist?"

While I am aware that this question is ultimately unanswerable, and that experts like Umberto Eco strongly advise against tackling such abstract problems in a Masters thesis, I hope to use this opportunity to begin to close the knowledge gap when it comes to a realistic assessment of how visual artists practice is affected by substance use.

Using a neonarrative methodology, I synthesize psychology, artist biographies and self-conducted interviews with recently sober visual artists. Secondary questions include: do substances actually enhance creativity? What is the myth of the addicted genius and how does it manifest? Is the tortured artist a Jungian archetype? Are artists more likely to be addicts? What is the reality of the drunk "genius"? What is the reality of the sobered artist?

My paintings were deeply affected by the research I conducted for this paper and act as a metaphor for my discoveries. My hope is that they help provide emotional insight into a topic which is much less academic than it is personal. As my primary theorist, Carl

Jung, says, “Art by its very nature is not science, and science by its very nature is not art; both these spheres of the mind have something in reserve that is peculiar to them and can be explained only in its own terms.” In this way, my studio practice and my written thesis exist alongside one another, only sometimes intersecting. The format of this paper attempts to reflect that.

Truly, my objective is to create the document I so desperately sought when I was considering sobriety, a paper that speaks openly about substance use as a career visual artist. When I got sober, I thought I was sacrificing my muse. It was difficult to find candid, relatable discussions. I’m looking to define and hopefully debunk the archetype of the suffering artist, and to adjust it to represent a more holistic, nuanced vision of creativity. I am looking for qualitative, anecdotal answers. I do not intend to write a comprehensive or conclusive thesis, but one that is frank in discussing an issue which is often romanticized or ignored. It is important for me to provide a platform for sober visual artists to examine self-image and professional image, and to confirm or dispel some prominent myths surrounding substance use and the creative process.

I think this paper could be very helpful for artists to understand their capacity for growth and the potentially dangerous influence of a societal/social pressure they may not even be aware of. This paper does not promote or encourage sobriety, disparage substance use, or come to a finite conclusion. It is simply an attempt to join a new academic conversation. “The relationship between art and addiction,” observes Julia Skelly in her thoughtful paper on Indigenous artists and addictions, “remains largely unstudied.” She proposes a field of research which she calls *critical addiction studies*, “...a field comprised of scholarship that interrogates, rather than accepting as fact,

discourses and beliefs related to addiction.” In questioning the myth of the addicted genius, I hope to contribute to this interrogation.

Though there are a lot of resources about drunk writers and musicians, some of which I include in my bibliography, this paper attempts, where possible, to limit itself to the field of visual art. There are few case studies of life before and after sobriety in this field. We know De Kooning got sober and his work changed dramatically, but this was also the same time his dementia was advancing. Nan Goldin got sober and her work then used natural light for the first time. Pollock is said to have made all of his best work in his two sober years, yet the image I always maintained of him was as drunk and burning bright.

Likewise, while it is tempting to look for and analyse changes in the *content* of the visual artist’s work, this thesis intends to focus on artists’ self image, their ideas of themselves and their practice before and after sobriety. This paper is not concerned with representations of archetypes *within* artists’ work, but rather with the artists’ process, self-image and public performance of that image. Jung himself believed that a work of art cannot be psychoanalyzed, but that the artistic process can.

While there are many forms that the “tortured artist” takes – mentally ill, romantically challenged, poor, abused, addicted or any combination thereof – this paper will focus on the idea that genius is related to suffering and how that idea affects the choice of addicted artists to get sober.

Methodology

My hypothesis is that there is a perceived benefit for artists to cultivate or succumb to addiction in the name of their work and that this perception acts as a justification for addicted artists to continue to use substances to unhealthy and possibly fatal degrees. The practical (as opposed to conceptual) implications of my hypothesis have led me to pursue research employing the qualitative methods of autoethnography, literature review and case-study interviews.

In order to establish and explore the myth that substances increase creative prowess, I have undertaken an interdisciplinary approach which has allowed me to combine historical narratives with my own experience and the experience of other artists who face the same cultural paradigm as myself. To do this I have utilized a neonarrative methodology.

The Neonarrative Approach

The neonarrative model is a pluralistic approach which allows new narratives to be formed. The researcher combines information from a variety of methods and disciplines, and synthesises these into a culturally relevant story. In her paper “Constructing Neonarratives”, Robyn Stewart describes how the approach functions by

...considering the subjective and intersubjectively gained knowledge of the life experiences of individual participants including the researcher, whose partially shared experiences in the lifeworld of the subjects cannot be discounted. The research process centres on the gathering of data reflecting perspectives of players in the field and is characterised by processes of reflection, in which interdisciplinary notions of interpretation, description and comparison are engaged.

This methodology allows me to combine my personal experience with the information gained from historical accounts of addicted artists, my own interviews with

sober artists, working in my studio, and my attempts to find a psychological explanation for the perception that suffering makes better art through the theories of psychologists Carl Jung and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

The neonarrative approach dovetails nicely with my theoretical framework, which is rooted in psychology and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis relies on self-perception and the construction of narratives. Artists' own words about themselves, their substance use, and its effects on their practice will be considered alongside Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow and his studies of artists' fundamental characteristics, and Jung's theories of the archetype, persona, projection, rebirth and self-individuation.

The following methods used in this thesis operate together within the neonarrative methodology:

Text Analysis

Close reading of artist interviews and (auto)biographies has helped discern artists' feelings toward the relationship between substance use and creation. By compiling the testimony of a variety of visual artists, I illustrate that there is a general belief that substances and great artists are complementary.

Case Studies

I interviewed seven recently-sober visual artists about how self image, particularly around substance use, plays into their creative process. I received approval from the OCAD University (OCADU) Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A), which allowed me to publish the names of my respondents, who signed informed consent forms (Appendix C). It is important to me that anonymity not be a factor, as I believe it implies

that there is or should be shame surrounding these common, socially-promoted, personal experiences. These participants were recruited from my extended network via social media and friends.

While my initial intention was to interview each participant in person and transcribe these interviews, it soon became clear that the limitations of this process were overwhelming. By emailing the interview questions and consent form, I was able to let respondents answer according to their own schedule. This also minimized ethical concerns; respondents had time to thoughtfully answer, and did not have to worry that they had shared something they were not comfortable with. I left all spelling and formatting exactly as I received it. There is beauty and honesty in the individual styles of response.

In the auto-theory style of author Maggie Nelson, who adeptly merges academia and auto-biography, these interviews are intercut with the findings of my literature review, aiming to discover how, if at all, artists' practices and reputations changed in sobriety, and to discern whether the image of the tortured artist had any effect on addicted artists' self image. There is a strong auto-ethnographic tone to this research. The questionnaire provided to interviewees (see Appendix B) is based on elements of my own experience, which are referred to throughout this paper.

Psychology

The inclusion of this discipline is necessary in addressing why we cling to the myth of the tortured artist. What is it about artists' self-perception or the societal perception of artists that necessitates they be outsiders? Jung himself posits that suffering is inherent to artists, tacitly advancing the myth of the tortured artist without examination into its truth.

While more contemporary psychologists like Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as well as multiple clinical studies have proved that there is no foundation for the belief that substances improve creative output, the myth is still alive. Why is that? Jung suggests in his theories of archetypes and projection that we need certain universal images and characters. Jung's ideas of rebirth and psychic individuation outline some possibilities for how the self and self-perception might change during the process of recovery from substance abuse.

Practice-based Research

I've been a painter and a drinker since I was thirteen. I got completely sober of all drugs, cigarettes and alcohol two days after my 33rd birthday, on July 21, 2016, using the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I started the Masters program for which I write this thesis less than two months later, still in a bit of shock.

The Masters of Fine Art (MFA) program at OCAD U is explicitly interdisciplinary, and we were heavily encouraged to push our boundaries. All of my work was about getting sober. My entire life, and so of course my practice, was obsessed with what it meant to not-drink, to express the before-and-afterness of it. I had always painted, and I wasn't sure if I could or should be a painter still. My earliest MFA projects were performances as a sad clown. I became interested in incorporating the objects of my life into my work: a bottle of Carl Jung de-alcoholized wine, my AA chips, the house-dresses I wore more often as my life became more domestic, the shrine I built in my bedroom to help me meditate and find the "vital spiritual experience" that Jung, in the Alcoholics Anonymous basic text, said would help me to recover. At this point, I was

still late-night Googling “sober painters” and finding no authoritative answers to the questions that were keeping me up.

Literature Review

I have approached my literature review from multiple angles, pulling together a variety of sources: published interviews with artists about their experiences with substances, scientific experiments regarding inebriation and creativity, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s longitudinal research on artists and his “flow” theory, and Carl Jung’s theories of archetype, persona, rebirth and the psychology of art, intercut with my own experience, my case studies and my personal interviews with artists.

The Myth

First, the difficult task of illustrating the elusive but pervasive belief that substance-use aids the creative genius. This passage about Amedeo Modigliani encapsulates the issue; in excusing Modigliani’s excesses, author Corrado Pavolini says, “Alcohol and drugs, yes... but in his art there flourishes a purity which unfortunately is denied to abstainers and the rigorously moral.” This is to say: if you don’t get messed up like Modigliani, you can’t make “pure” art. There is a sort of logic whereby if artists like Pablo Picasso, Tracey Emin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Joan Mitchell are all addicts, then it must be the source of their genius.

While I found many, many instances of artists and non-artists referring to the idea that substances improve creativity, it is summarized perfectly in this heart-breaking quote from an interview with American photographer Nan Goldin:

People who've had a long history with drugs, after rehab they get very involved in staying sober, and many of them don't work again as artists. They believe the

mythology that drugs were their inspiration, and people will feed that, too. When you get clean, they'll tell you that you're boring and you can't work any more because they can't live off you any more, they can't suck your blood, they can't expect you to provide them with their vicarious life. I was very hurt that way.

The idea of the vicarious life provided by the artist is something that comes up again and again. This is an issue of what Jung calls projection, which he defines as “a general psychological mechanism that carries over subjective contents of any kind on to the object.” This has little to do with the person onto whom ideas are projected, and everything to do with the needs of those who do the projecting.

Like Goldin, the painter Brad Phillips says he was affected by the myth of the tortured artist after he got sober:

...and in part because fuckhead Lars Von Trier said nobody who ever got sober made good work again (then made melancholia) even though I don't care about Von Trier it triggered me and I did worry that maybe I couldn't make work anymore. I thought that it was possible sobriety would be too difficult to work or that heroin was a magical elixir that helped me make great art. Even though I probably also called bullshit on that idea in my head.

Of the type of projection-awareness Phillips describes here, Jung says, “(s)ometimes one is apparently quite aware of one's own projections, though one does not know their full extent. And that portion of which one is not aware remains unconscious and still appears as if belonging to the object.” This is exactly my experience with the myth of the addicted artist. I saw it everywhere, and it seemed obviously “true”, even as I got sober and researched this paper, and realised not everyone was seeing the same thing I had been seeing, and that my beliefs weren't always lining up with reality.

I think the drama of the myth is so repeatable that it can stick in the minds of people who maybe need that narrative to be true for one reason or another; the excitement of one artist throwing a door through a window is more psychically impactful than ten who just showed up, put the work in and succeeded quietly. Knowing the powerful yet

unconscious subjectivity of projection, I turned to laboratory studies to be sure substance use and abuse is not in fact making better artists.

The Science

There have been, quite surprisingly, few experimental studies aimed at the subject of alcohol and creativity. The most prominent of these studies were compiled and reviewed by clinical neuroscientist and creativity expert Torsten Norlander, who examines the creative process in five phases: preparation, incubation, illumination, verification and restitution. The studies reveal that a moderate intake of alcohol can help with incubation and illumination (ie, inspiration) but hinder illumination and verification (ie, making and knowing if what you've made is any good). This is to say that a very small amount of alcohol can marginally increase inspiration, but then rapidly hinders actual creation.

Francis Bacon, well known drunk and genius painter, observed this for himself: “It leaves you freer, but on the other hand it dulls your final judgement of what you hold. I don't actually believe that drink and drugs help me. They may help other people, but they don't really help me.”

Why, then, did I tell those students that I was a better painter when I combined weed, wine and coffee? I remember the sense of being a conduit, of the work coming through me. Do a few drinks possibly provide a shortcut to the mental state psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as “flow”? Flow is the headspace within which “...people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Csikszentmihalyi, who interviewed 200 artists in a longitudinal study, says that the idea that drugs are beneficial is popular with artists but completely without evidence:

...for the past quarter-century we've been told with increasing confidence that drugs are “consciousness-expanding,” and that using them enhances creativity. But the evidence suggests that while chemicals do alter the content and the organization of consciousness, they do not expand or increase the self’s control over its function. Yet to accomplish anything creative, one must achieve just such control. Therefore, while psychotropic drugs do provide a wider variety of mental experiences than one would encounter under normal sensory conditions, they do so without adding to our ability to order them effectively.

This summarizes quite accurately the responses I received from participants when asked what their art practice was like when they were in active addiction. While a few were able to produce a lot of good work (with long-term personal consequences), many were more like realist painter Nick Bierk:

Before I got sober making art was hard. Alcohol was a daily respite from feelings of sadness and depression and unresolved grief. Waking up and getting to the studio was a chore. Getting down to work and focusing was difficult. Distractions were welcomed. Projects and paintings went unfinished for months and sometimes years. Grand plans came when a buzz or a high were running through my bloodstream but remained plans, never to be started or practiced or finished.

While films like *Basquiat* tend to focus on the dramatic elements of addiction, the reality is slower, sadder and often unseen. The glorification of a few crazy stories is frequently at the expense of greater insight and productivity.

The Archetype

Where exactly did my misconceptions come from? Did my seemingly fully-formed projection of the addicted genius come from watching too many movies, or did it originate in an unconscious place? Though it is often colloquially referred to as an “archetype,” does the tortured artist qualify for this title in the Jungian sense?

While the term is not originally his, Jung defines archetypes as, “(u)niversal images that have existed since the remotest times.” He explains that the archetype is essentially unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to

appear. This is to say that there is some collective well of unconscious themes which are essentially formless until they are expressed. By this definition it is impossible to tell if the tortured artist qualifies or not: does an individual identify with it because of an unconscious truth, or because they have witnessed expressions of it in the world and it satisfies some need in them? When asked if she had identified with the tortured artist trope, artist Inez Genereux's response was standard (except in its exuberance, of course):

I LOVED it!!!!!!!!!! Oh my god i loved that concept, i remember writing on the wall of my bedroom "intoxicated with maddness i'm in love with my saddness." a phrase that i saw spray painted somewhere on TUMBLR!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! ... when i was in highschool i loved to read Bukowski. I thought he was a genius. The demented alcoholic sitting on his high horse, seeing the world for the sheer and utter sham that it actually was.

It's possible that the appeal of famously-wasted writer Charles Bukowski (who, by the way, I have heard even non-writers and non-artists summon in order to justify their bad behaviour) is less the element of addiction than the image of a sage outsider who sees things as they really are.

A true Jungian archetype (which is a highly contested concept) must be "universal" across cultures and time. Perhaps the trope of the addicted artist is a conscious coloration of a broader unconscious tortured-artist archetype. But while the association of creativity and inebriation goes back to Dionysian rituals, it doesn't appear to have been consistent. Csikszentmihalyi argues that "throughout most of history, artists were craftsmen and women similar, to say, wool-dyers or ironsmiths. They were expected to be reliable, steady, and sober workers." It's my sense that emphasis on the specific vision or experience of the artist sometimes overshadowed the work itself.

In *On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry*, Jung positions himself clearly as believing that the psychology of the artist does not dictate the success of their work: “One might almost describe [a work of art] as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium, and playing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfillment of its own creative purpose.” While he does acknowledge that the artist is often driven to create because of some or other form of internal suffering, he refuses to psychoanalyse creative products. When I gave my talk on “The Creative Clit” and shared my recipe for inspiration, did I even show any images of my work? I don’t remember.

Are Artists More Likely to be Addicts?

As science debunked beliefs I had held since adolescence and my own projections were revealed to me, I wondered: are artists truly more likely to become addicted to substances? Or, unlike accountants and dental hygienists, are we just more likely to publicize and express our issues? Studies of writers and inebriation have hypothesized that there are “five interacting factors making writers easy victims of alcoholism: (a) the solitude/isolation of the writing-process, (b) the strain inherent upon entering and exiting the world of fiction, (c) anxiety and personal discomforts, (d) the part alcohol plays in the creative process, (e) the writer’s participation in a wild-night life, the bohemian tradition.” When asked about their substance use, most respondents talked about anxiety and personal discomfort. Painter Erin Loree described how substances compounded the problem for her:

My art practice, like the rest of my life, seemed like a bit of a scramble. Because I was constantly dealing with a buzzing feeling of anxiety and overwhelmment caused by lingering hangovers and alcohol in my system, I always felt like I was drowning. From the outside, it looked like I was highly functioning artist, but

inside I felt like I couldn't keep my head above an ocean of thick black tar. (a little dramatic, but totally accurate)

Csikszentmihalyi hypothesizes that the seemingly high levels of depression and entropy experienced by artists is not the result of the sometimes alienating nature of their work, but that the creative work is "...a therapy for shaping some order among the confusion of feelings." If the catharsis of creation, with its inherent pressures, solitude and social expectations, both aids and further alienates the artist, it could promote a cycle of creation and inebriation which eventually devolves into addiction.

In a comparative study of the personalities of art students and other students their age, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi found that in fact the artists were more "...socially withdrawn, introspective, independent, imaginative, unpredictable, and alienated from community expectations." The same study, much to my surprise, revealed that students did not believe substances enhanced their work, and found that they derived their identities from their classmates, the studio, openings and conversation. One has to wonder what happened to these students after college when they no longer received the structure and support of art school.

The Reality of the Genius Drinking

Francis Bacon, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Bukowski, Joan Mitchell, Nan Goldin, Jean-Michel Basquiat: the exact models of the would-be archetype of the genius addict. Their images were what I glorified during my own drinking and romanticisation of my excesses. I created while under the influence, as I was sure they did, and felt betrayed when my brush faltered and became slack in my hand. I saw the movie *Pollock* and internalized that he was a raging drunk and a great painter. Only when recently re-visiting

the film did I realise its message is that all of his best work came from his two years of sobriety. This was me projecting.

Deeper reading of Jung reveals that the idea of the tortured artist may be less about archetype than about *persona*, which he says is an image associated with every profession. The danger, he says, is when people identify too closely with their personas: “...the professor with his textbook, the tenor with his voice. Then the damage is done henceforth he lives exclusively against the background of his own biography.” While the professor has their textbook, some might consider that the artist has their suffering. When asked if he identified with the concept of the tortured artist, the now-sobber New York sculptor David Hines says, “THAT IS FOR AMATEURS. ANYONE WHO FEELS DEEPLY KNOWS YOU DO NOT NEED TO ARTIFICIALLY MAGNIFY PAIN.”

Norlander found that of all his interviewees, only two regularly created work under the influence. Most claimed they could not produce while drunk. Ernest Hemingway’s granddaughter, Mariel, has gone on record condemning the glamorization of addiction and insisting that her grandfather never wrote while drunk. Likewise, for all the people he inspired to drink themselves to success, Bukowski’s publisher claims never to have seen him drunk. So why then do we propagate the glory of the inebriated genius? Jung may have an answer for this as well:

One could say with a little exaggeration, that the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which one's self as well as others think one is. In any case the temptation to be what one seems to be is great, because the persona is usually rewarded in cash.

This aligns perfectly with how Brad Phillips perceives the effect of his sobriety on his career:

Before I got sober I sold everything I made. Since then I can’t sell shit. I think people much preferred the trainwreck version of me because I fulfilled a cliché.

Also the cliché idea of well, Brad might die tomorrow, this made my work more appealing. Now I'm just boring.

Boredom, being boring, being average, being “normal” were huge fears of mine when considering sobriety. The artist persona had clouded my vision to the point where I did not realize that most artists, and most successful artists, are more like the diligent, guild-oriented craftsmen of the 1660s than the self-indulgent art-stars of the 1960s.

The Sobered Artist

The question I really wanted answered as I came to terms with the fact that my hangovers were perhaps impeding my ability to paint and perform was “what happens if I quit?” It was impossible, after nearly 20 years of daily drinking, to imagine who I would be or how I would exist in the world. Nan Goldin describes how disorienting early sobriety can be:

In new sobriety you don't have anything. It sounds incredible, but when I signed out of hospital I realised that, sober, I didn't know how to get down the hill and take a bus. I started photographing myself every day with a tripod because I didn't know how to face the world. I was terrified.

I can relate to this so completely. In an attempt to understand and document my own transformation, in 2017 I drew a self-portrait representing every day in the first year of sobriety.

It's one thing to be a sober artist who just never really drank, or a person who can have a glass of wine at an opening and call it a night so they can make it to their studio by 9 am. It's another thing to build your self-image on the persona of the drunken outsider and to make the psychic shift to another identity. Jung would qualify this transformation as a form of rebirth, which he characterizes as an unobservable

process. I tried in a variety of ways to illustrate how a person's calm exterior may be concealing an invisible battle, or unseen forces at work, but most seemed too literal.

Jung says the only reason we know that these massive psychic transformations take place is by people recounting them. This is why it is important to compile these accounts of recovery, to reframe the persona, to build a neonarrative. Of his art practice in sobriety, Hamilton painter Tyler Armstong says:

The passion and interest which was once altogether lost has been somewhat restored and what was once a private practice has transitioned into exhibiting publically. Through this evolution I received and still receive tremendous support and feedback, both positive and critical and have found this overwhelming support extremely beneficial.

Without open discussion about the reality of substance use, it is difficult for artists, as a community, to support one another and to check in.

In the same drug-glamorizing interview with David Bowie that I referenced earlier, Tracey Emin said,

A lot of my life has been fucked up but even an idiot can see it's getting better and better. The strange thing is that all the major mistakes that I've made in my life have been decisions fuelled by alcohol, mainly vast amounts of whisky. I haven't drunk spirits since September 1999.

I have to wonder if she asked Bowie about the effect of the tortured genius on him for the same reason I'm curious about the effect it had on her. This interview is from 2001, so Emin would have been less than two years sober, just as I am now. I imagine she was still very much trying to unbraids her substance use from her practice and from her ideas of herself.

Results

My hypothesis was that “there is a perceived benefit for artists to succumb to their addictions in the name of their work and that this perception acts as a justification for addicted artists to use substances to unhealthy and possibly fatal degrees.” By combing through existing interviews, looking to Jung and to people in my community, I thought I was going to prove that there was a dangerous, universal archetype of the drunken artist, and that I would be able to dispel it.

For my studio work, I set out to create a new archetype (I still didn’t really understand what the word meant): I decided to make a series of paintings of artists who are sober. I committed to making twelve of these portraits for my MFA thesis exhibition.

I painted the first of twelve planned portraits of the painter Erin Loree. She then wrote to me with concerns about being included as an interviewee and as a painting subject. She had been sober for six months, had never felt like addiction was the source of her drinking, had done a bunch of personal work, and was re-introducing alcohol to her life in a thoughtful way. As she explained (and consented to me publishing):

My reasons for enjoying a drink have changed, and I realized I was being very rigid with myself about things. I'm a pretty black and white person - a this or that type of person. That cuts off the flow in my life and I want to be more fluid.

My first instinct was to exclude her interview and to doubt her personal choices. My own thinking was quite rigid and binary at that point: sober or drunk, good or bad. But what is the point of asking a research question if you already know the answer? The more interesting question became, if I had painted a glorified and sober Tracey Emin in 2001, what would this painting mean if she decided to drink again in 2009? (I have no idea if she’s sober or not, or what that word even means to her).

By examining the science and the psychological theories of Carl Jung, and to a lesser extent Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, I came to see how my conflation of artistic genius

and substance use maybe had less to do with some universally accepted myth and more to do with my own attachment to a persona and my own projections of this onto others. My thesis exhibition was looming, and I couldn't help feeling "I don't want to do this show, I don't want to paint these portraits". And then, scrolling through photos on my phone, I came across one of a building I often stop to admire at Harbord and Brunswick. I was like, "this is me. This is what it feels like to change".

The building is chipping with many coats of paint, the brick is showing through in some places and there are multiple shades of the same colour where graffiti has been rolled over. All the textures and tones, together, equally accidental and intentional, were more beautiful than anything I could design on purpose. I wanted to paint it so badly. As I painted, I remembered a time in high school when I was late for a job interview. It was snowing, and as I rushed to get there I saw a house which must have had at least 30 shades of white paint on it. It caught me so deeply I just stood there and smoked a cigarette and tried to remember every single little thing about it.

Deciding to paint more of these buildings was easy. I discovered that I had been mentally mapping their locations for years without even being aware of it, these colourful, damaged places where many attempts at improvement can be seen. I see these structures as embodiments of change, for better or worse, as evidence and overwhelming beauty of transition.

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, my intention when starting this body of work, both the writing and the painting, was "to define and hopefully debunk the archetype of the suffering artist; and to adjust it to represent a more holistic, nuanced vision of creativity." But when I began to receive actually nuanced responses from artists,

it took me a while to internalize them. The painter Darby Milbrath, for example, had tried sobriety and come away with the following:

I have reintroduced alcohol after taking four months off and am currently interacting with it in a healthy and mindful way. Being sober really opened my eyes to how much I was abusing alcohol and how much I was resisting in life! I'm aware of my resistance to art and how it can pop up in different forms. Every day is a new day to watch for the resistances. Lots of work to overcome addictive urges daily but it's rewarding work. Today I'm still mostly sober as I find it's better for my art. I also don't ever want to slip back into the abusive patterns I was in before.

The true goal of this thesis was to provide a resource and to engage in a meaningful conversation, not to espouse a specific way of living or creating. But when I began my research, I unintentionally pursued narratives which expressed a massive binary shift, a total rebirth. Now, as I conclude, I find myself seeing a spectrum of ways to interact with thoughts about substances.

Buildings and All Things I Feel Like

The buildings which I relate to so much were all I intended to show in my thesis exhibition, like some sort of answer or culmination of the research I had done in my studio, the long hours of contemplation. One thing, for me anyway, about not drinking, was that I spent a lot more time at home. In this way, I built a close relationship with objects that had always brought me joy: vases of flowers, the house-dresses I wore, the tools of my trade. These ideas that I had explored in my first year and then abandoned, this *stuff*, began to find its way back, among the buildings, and into a more comprehensive and expressive thesis exhibition.

I pitched my thesis idea when I was less than three months sober. To me, it felt like the absolute most important thing in the world that this document exist. “How does

sobriety affect the art practice of the addicted visual artist?” is a question I was answering every day by just not taking a drink. My sponsor, Nada C., in helping me with this essay, wondered why so much writing about getting clean is by the newly sober, who really have no idea what they’re talking about yet (my words, not hers). I think it’s because sobriety settles in you eventually. The break between before and after seems less jagged, and you forget that you ever thought (or *knew*) that you couldn’t do it. Hopefully the problems you were drinking to solve begin to get addressed, and you recover.

If I were starting a Masters thesis now, a year and a half later, I would probably write about architectural palimpsest, aesthetic emotions or Maggie Nelson. Something more manageable and less raw. Sometimes I feel like it was a terrible idea to commit to this thesis topic, particularly in such a vulnerable way. I feel less and less like I want to be sober forever, and more like I needed a break to figure out who I was without substances. What if I decide to drink again? Will that somehow render this work untrue?

The answer, I found out through the research of living, and of exploring this topic socially and academically, is no, of course not. No one and nothing is a steady state. Our paint is always chipping, we can always apply a new coat. No matter what happens, I know now what I definitely did not believe two years ago: *there is no need to be afraid; you can make art without substances*. Possibly more art, possibly better art, possibly worse, but for sure and without a doubt the light inside you does not require alcohol to stay lit.

Jung says, “...a projection is abolished when you find out that the apparently objective facts are really subjective contents. Then these contents become associated with your own psychology, and you cannot attribute them to the object anymore.” I no longer

personally believe in the glamorous addict. I feel empathy for those artists in the throes of addiction, but no longer envy.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Approval



October 12, 2017

Ms. Rae Johnson
Faculty of Art
OCAD University

File No: 101099
Approval Date: October 12, 2017
Expiry Date: October 11, 2018

Dear Ms. Rae Johnson, Ms. Laura Dawe,

The Research Ethics Board has reviewed your application titled 'I Was Afraid I Wouldn't Be Able to Make Work'. Your application has been approved. You may begin the proposed research. This REB approval, dated October 12, 2017, is valid for one year less a day: October 11, 2018. Your REB number is: 2017-41.

The REB commends you on a very simply and clearly framed Masters-level research project, with positive implications for the well-being of individuals.

Please remember to remind participants early and often (throughout the interview) of their rights to withdraw without ramifications to themselves or the research.

Also, the requirement to request withdrawal in writing is onerous; a verbal request should also suffice.

Throughout the duration of this REB approval, all requests for modifications, renewals and serious adverse event reports are submitted via the Research Portal.

Any changes to the research that deviate from the approved application must be reported to the REB using the amendment form available on the Research Portal. REB approval must be issued before the changes can be implemented.

To continue your proposed research beyond October 11, 2018, you must submit a Renewal Form before October 04, 2018. REB approval must be issued before research is continued.

If your research ends on or before October 11, 2018, please submit a Final Report Form to close out REB approval monitoring efforts.

If you have any questions about the REB review & approval process, please contact the Christine Crisol Pineda, Manager, REB secretariat at (redacted)

If you encounter any issues when working in the Research Portal, please contact our system administrator via (redacted)

Sincerely,

SIGNATURE REDACTED

Tony Kerr
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Appendix B: Questionnaire

The following is the exact text that I sent to my respondents, which was approved by the Research Ethics Board.

Case Study Questionnaire

I am generally looking to know what it was like before, what happened, and what it is like now.

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you been a professional artist for?
3. Please describe your art practice.
4. How long have you been sober for?
5. Talk to me, to whatever extent you feel comfortable, about what your art practice was like before you got sober.
6. How, if at all, did substances affect the content of your work?
7. How, if at all, did substances affect your output?
8. Did your practice have any impact on your decision to get sober?
9. What is your relationship, if any, to the idea of the “tortured” artist?
10. Who are your heroes?
11. Did your heroes change with sobriety?
12. Did you think that sobriety would affect your art practice?
13. If so, how?
14. Did sobriety affect your art practice?
15. If so, how?
16. Do you think being sober has affected your reputation or your career as an artist?
17. If so, how?
18. Are you open about your addictions issues or your sobriety?
19. Do you have regrets with regard to substances and art?
20. If so, please share if you are comfortable doing so.
21. What would you say to an artist who struggles with addiction and is considering sobriety?
22. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to add on this subject?

Appendix C: Informed Consent

The following is the exact consent form which was signed by all participants, and which was approved by the OCADU Research Ethics Board:

This informed consent form is for sober visual artists who we are inviting to participate in case study research for an interdisciplinary Masters thesis, titled “*I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to make work.*”

**Researched by Laura Dawe
OCADU Masters in Fine Art Candidate
Advised by Rae Johnson**

Part I: Information Sheet

Introduction

My name is Laura Dawe. I am a Masters of Fine Art candidate at OCADU, currently writing my thesis about how sobriety affects the addicted visual artist. The project is tentatively called *I Was Afraid I Wouldn't Be Able to Make Work*.

I will interview 4-8 currently working, currently sober visual artists for insight into the lived experience of their changing mental state and its influence on the subject matter and methods of their visual art practice. Interviews will be presented as individual case studies to be analyzed for possible connections or broader insight. There will be a focus on presenting many images of work both before and after for potential visual analysis.

I am reaching out to inquire if you would be interested in participating in a case study addressing the realities of making visual art both before and after sobriety. The results will be published as a graduate thesis and whatever information you provide will *not* be confidential. Please feel free to talk to anyone you feel comfortable talking to about the research and to take time to reflect about whether you want to participate or not. If you are unclear about any words or concepts please let me know so I can clarify.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns,

Purpose of the Research

As a recently sober visual artist, I really struggled with the idea that my addictions were somehow helping me creatively. I realized that for me, the stereotype of the tortured artist had deeply impacted my psyche in potentially dangerous ways. This exploratory research document aims to discover if the trope of the tortured artist could be a construction? If so, it could be a helpful step toward stripping away the mythos that darkness and addiction are necessary for creation.

Basically we just want to find out how recovery affects the art practice of the addicted artist. We think this information could be helpful to artists who are suffering from substance abuse.

Type of Research Intervention

This research will involve your participation in an interview about your artistic practice before and during sobriety. Questions will focus on how substances and lack of substances affected your output, productivity, outlook and reputation. We want to learn if you believed your addiction to be an asset or a detriment to your practice, and whether your suspicions were confirmed or debunked in sobriety.

The interview will ideally take place in person, or on the phone if face-to-face is not possible. The interview will not last more than two hours. It will be recorded for accuracy.

Your responses will be published, along with examples of your work before and after. You will not be anonymous, though of course you may choose not to answer certain questions.

Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because we feel that your experience as a recovered visual artist can contribute to our anecdotal understanding of how addiction and recovery affect art practices and whether or not the trope of the tortured genius plays a role in artists' recovery.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures

A. We are asking you to help us learn more about addictions recovery and its affect on professional artists. If you accept you will be asked to participate in an interview and provide images of your work.

B. The interview can take place in your home or studio, over the phone, or really anywhere you feel comfortable.

Duration

The interview will take two hours or less. I can bring snacks or coffee. There may be a necessity for follow up questions or clarifying questions.

Risks

We are asking you to share with us some potentially personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion/interview/survey if you don't wish to do so, and that is also fine. You do not have to give us any reason for not responding to any question, or for refusing to take part in the interview. Because the interviews are not published anonymously, whatever information you reveal about your addiction or recovery will be publicly accessible.

Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you, we feel that by de-mystifying recovering and (hopefully) dismantling the stereotype that artists benefit from addiction, that we can provide a resource for artists struggling with substances.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any incentive to take part in the research.

Confidentiality

The information you provide will be published alongside your name. This interview is intentionally NOT confidential as it intends to help in removing the secret veil of substance abuse.

Sharing the Results

The results will be published in a bound thesis document which will be available in hardcopy at the OCAD University Library by the summer of 2018 and which will also be accessible online at some point in the future.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. You may stop participating in the /interview at any time that you wish, up until the point where I am writing the thesis. I will give you an opportunity at the end of the interview/discussion to review your remarks, and you can ask to modify or remove portions of those, if you do not agree with my notes or if I did not understand you correctly.

Who to Contact

Please contact Laura Dawe with any questions or concerns,
(redacted)

(redacted)

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by Christine Pineda, of the OCADU Research Ethics Board which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to find about more about the REB, [redacted]

Part II: Certificate of Consent

I have been invited to participate in research regarding my experience as a visual artist before and after sobriety. I consent to being interviewed by Laura Dawe about my experience, and to have my responses published in a graduate thesis.

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study

Print Name of Participant _____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

If illiterate

I have witnessed the accurate reading of the consent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm that the individual has given consent freely.

Print name of witness _____

Thumb print of participant

Signature of witness _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant, and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands that the following will be done:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this ICF has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent _____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent _____

Date _____

Day/month/year

List of Figures



Figure 1: *The OK Cupid*, 2016.



Figure 2: *Higher Power*, 2017.

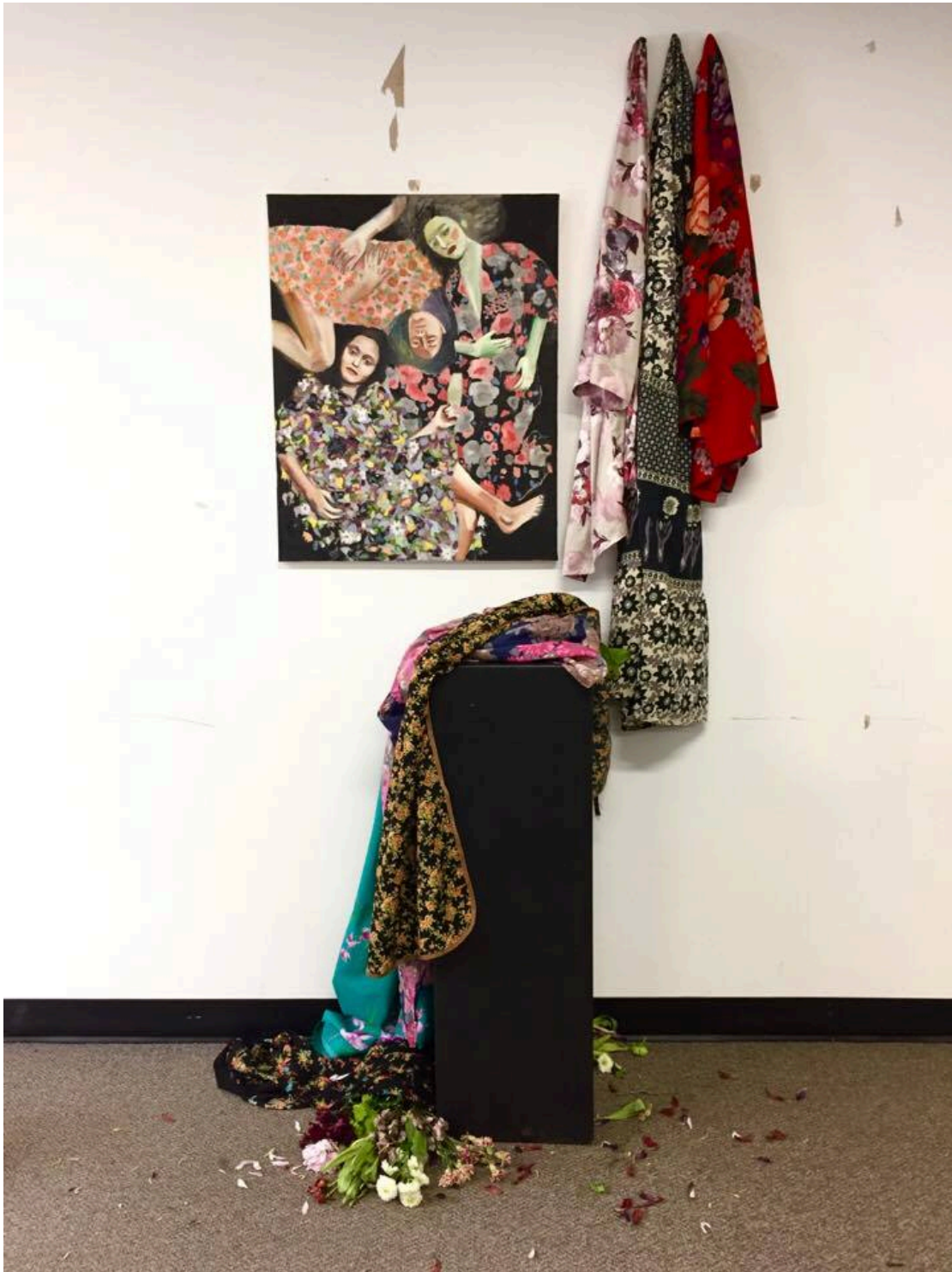


Figure 3: *Powerlessness*, 2017.



Figure 4: *Daily Reflections*, 2017.



Figures 5 & 6: *Days Sober*, 2017.



Figure 7: *Days Sober*, Installed at Artscape Gibraltar Point, 2017.



Figure 8: *Inner Outside*, 2017.



Figure 9: *Us from Us*, 2017.



Figure 10: *Recovery*, 2017.



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Figure 12: *Hometown Feelings*, 2017.



Figure 13: *Working on True Love*, 2018.



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Figure 16: *Cocoon*, 2018.



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Figure 20: *Holding His Affection*, 2018.



Figure 21: *Buildings I Feel Like*, Installation at Division Gallery, 2018.



Figure 22: *Buildings I Feel Like*, Installation at Division Gallery, 2018.



Figure 23: *Buildings I Feel Like*, Installation at Division Gallery, 2018.