

I see what I am – I am what I see

Photography and the inner self: A discussion and reflection on a heuristic art therapy final project

By Elinor Assoulin

The camera is a very flexible way to have a meeting with the same vs different reality. Jerry N. Olsman

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a heuristic art therapy research project which utilised photography to explore whether therapeutic engagement with photography, had the capacity to enhance self awareness. A three level tier which included photography, dialogue with the image and response drawing was created with heuristic and traditional phenomenology as the guiding theories of framework. The results showed a range of new awareness and understanding in relation to different aspects of the self, which in turn led to a positive change to the way of being in the world. The medium was found to act as a transitional object and provide therapeutic holding. It was concluded that photography may be a powerful tool through which to explore oneself in order to promote positive change and healing.

INTRODUCTION

Since the age of fourteen, I have been passionately involved with photography as my preferred form of creativity. Many of my photographs were 'close-ups', a term to describe the use of macro lenses which allow a close and clear details of very small subjects. Until my post graduate art therapy studies, I did not consciously understand the messages coded in my images. I had an instinctive desire to go out and photograph small pieces of the cosmos around me, but did not understand the connections between these images and my inner-self.

In my Master of Art Therapy research project at La Trobe University, I chose to explore whether engagement with photography had the capacity to enhance self awareness. Black-and-white film is by its very nature the

medium of personal expression in photography. This is due to the graduation in shades from black through endless subtle distinctions of grey to pure white. The result is the ability to see the subject more graphically, as made up of lines, shapes and tonal differences. I wanted to explore further the ability of black-and-white film to promote personal expression, extended beyond the technical elements of line, shape and tone, to deeper personal meanings.

THERAPEUTIC USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Rubin (2005) advocated the use of multi-expressive modalities when working as an art therapist. She expressed the importance of individual preferences as to what expressive medium was easier to engage with. She found photography to be useful when trying to help clients understand and solve conflicts in relations with others. She further added