

Re-storying pregnancy loss

Threading narrative, artmaking and textile-weaving into an embodied grief work ritual

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Abstract

In Western societies, certain traumatic losses are met with a lack of grieving rituals or grief work templates to acknowledge, process, or integrate these losses. This can lead to disenfranchised grief. This article is based on a visual auto-ethnographic study of pregnancy loss in South Africa. It explores the creation of a secular, ritualised form of grief work in line with non-linear models of grief that emphasise connecting bonds. In this article, I explore how a combination of narrative, artmaking and textile-weaving can be employed in traumatic loss and disenfranchised grief as a form of ritualised embodied grief work. I show how creating a personalised, secular ritual can help restore bonds of connectivity according to Dennis Klass's oscillation model of grief. This form of narrative weaving is posited as an alternative way of giving voice to that which is unbearably hard to voice and 're-storying' the narrative for meaning-making. This article proposes, therefore, that the threading through of these complementary techniques is an effective model of embodied grief work to acknowledge trauma and loss and combat disenfranchised grief.

Keywords: Art therapy, auto-ethnography, grief work, narrative, pregnancy loss, ritual, triptych, weaving

Introduction

This article is based on a self-study deploying an arts-based auto-ethnographic narrative. Arts-based methodologies use the processes and products of artmaking to interrogate, inform and challenge linear, text-based research (Smith-Shank & Keifer-Boyd, 2007, p. 5). An auto-ethnographic study enabled

me to place my lived experience at the focal point, to identify the social, cultural, and historical relationships in which I am embedded. Art objects and narratives, as the tools of this auto-ethnography, enabled an embodied exploration of the lived experience of pregnancy loss¹ in a Western, neo-liberal context in South Africa. This type of methodology allowed for reflection on the sociocultural and power dynamics around femininity and the experience of pregnancy loss within this context.

Pregnancy loss is an extreme experience in that it intersects temporal, social, and existential realms, and can entail much ambiguity and liminality.² The physical aftermath of pregnancy loss or lack thereof can be equally disorientating, incurring psychosomatic symptoms such as intrusive recall and psychological emptiness mirroring the emptiness of the womb (Wojnar, Swanson & Adolfsson, 2011, p. 553). Framing pregnancy loss as a traumatic event,³ lacking appropriate social channels to articulate grief, I explored avenues to combat resultant disenfranchised grief⁴ and created an embodied grief work ritual. Art and ritual⁵ can greatly aid the processing of pregnancy losses in Western societies (Seftel, 2001, p. 96). There is a culture of silence around pregnancy loss in Western contexts, which may perpetuate the negative and pervasive effects on women. Pregnancy loss is regarded as a “non-event”, with a lack of condolence messages or more public, complex rituals such as funerals (Frost & Condon, 1996, p. 58). This can leave women isolated, without legitimising their pain and grief (Frost & Condon, 1996, p. 58). Dominant patriarchal narratives and the adoption of the biomedical model⁶ have compounded the negative effects of these types of losses (Layne,

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- 1 The term ‘pregnancy loss’, for the purposes of this article, is defined as the intrauterine death of an embryo or foetus before 20 weeks’ gestation with resulting losses of self, identity (as a mother) and imagined futures (Kurz, 2020, p.195).
 - 2 A liminal event is such that something “is and is not”, and women experiencing a pregnancy loss can be left stuck in a transitional phase between “becoming” and “not-becoming” (Reiheld, 2015, p. 15)
 - 3 The DSM-V criteria for a traumatic event is one that “involves actual or threatened traumatic events, death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 812).
 - 4 Disenfranchised grief could arise when traumatic grief is not expressed due to a lack of appropriate social channels through which to articulate the loss (Lang et al, 2011, p. 187).
 - 5 Ritual, for the purposes of this paper, is defined in a contemporary sense, as a way of addressing a transitional period and marking it with concrete symbolism (Brin, 2008, p. 125).
 - 6 The biomedical approach is the dominant model of illness in Western societies, defining health as the absence of medical illness and negating emotional, psychological, social, and practical implications (Frost et al., 2007: 1005).

2002, p. 30; Scuro, 2017, p. 15). Consequently, narratives of how to support a particular woman and the personal experience of pregnancy loss, situated within a Westernised cultural context, are glaringly absent (Lindemann, 2015, p. 81).

In the interests of space, I will not be able to discuss at length how and why this silencing and silence occurs, but I will rather focus on the journey of grief and loss through the silencing. Artmaking and using various art mediums can be beneficial in this context as it can enable a symbolic release. Art can also depict symbols and images of experiences unique to women. As such, art can challenge the silence and invisibility around pregnancy loss (Seftel, 2001, p. 97). The power of ritual is manifest in that it enables an acknowledgement of loss and trauma, incorporates support networks, and instils the comfort of tradition (Brin, 2008, p. 124). Rituals also mark the liminality of this transitional space and engaging with it promotes emotional healing and resolution (Brin, 2008, p. 124).

A dearth of literature on pregnancy loss in South Africa mirrors the lack of supportive narratives and ways to acknowledge and process the incumbent grief. This article aims to bridge this gap by delving into my own personal experience of pregnancy loss and tracing out an art-based therapeutic frame for grief work. I discuss my use of a combination of artmaking, written narratives, and textile-weaving to inform and embody this process.

By adopting an arts-based approach, a multi-layered, multimodal narrative for acknowledging and processing my loss emerged. This permitted numerous channels of voice to be present simultaneously, prompting the articulation of things left unsaid. I explored three multi-layered narratives of pregnancy loss. The first is the story within my artmaking process, the second is the written dialogue, and the third is that of the woven narrative and its products.

I propose that the narrative triangulation in this self-study effectively illuminated new perspectives, insights, and notions of transformation, connection, and integration. This method fostered the creation of an appropriate, individual ritual for processing pregnancy loss.

Theoretical frame

This study is positioned within a feminist paradigm to situate pregnancy loss in relation to models of grief. By adopting a feminist lens, I have been able to give voice to sociocultural factors compounding pregnancy loss in Western

contexts. Through the combination of narrative, artmaking, and textile-weaving methods, all of which have feminist precedents and underpinnings, I have been able to embody my losses and create a personal ritual to integrate fragmentary aspects of self. This has enabled a re-storying of a connected, feminine self.

Literature review

Embodied grief work ritual

Embarking upon a retrospective self-study of my lived experience of pregnancy loss meant choosing art materials, processes, and products that would enable an embodied and somatic exploration. The transition from art-making into textile-weaving seemed to lend itself to the reveal of the emotional, psychological and psychosocial impacts of my past experience. It was, however, the addition of written narrative that illuminated the intricacies threaded through this experience, leading to rich insights. As such, the literature included in this section is geared towards merging three modalities to outline their value in informing an embodied griefwork ritual.

Multiple narratives around this lived experience act as the building blocks of a bridge to access grief and loss. The merging of narrative inquiry and arts-based research in this study allowed for multimodal literacies to emerge. The stories reflected meanings in the making and the made whilst eliciting voice through symbolism and metaphor. Semiotic and non-textual artistic constructs can represent myriad communication and meaning-making avenues (Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011, p. 340). These alternative ways of finding voice are useful in addressing disenfranchised grief that may arise from these types of losses.

The process of artmaking is a therapeutic way of meaning-making, as well as providing a concrete platform for these meanings to be negotiated, developing internal structures for growth (Meyerowitz-Katz, 2003, p. 60). The image (whether two-or three-dimensional) forms an art object for reflection and contains both visible and latent narratives (Mannay, 2016, p. 28). In the instance of this study, the act of visually bringing my insides outside led to a new perspective of my own body.

The writing of my story, in my voice, allowed me to be accompanied in my vulnerability whilst reconstituting identities around the self. Narratives are essentially discourses through which individuals and communities are

able to effect choice, construct identities, and motivate action (Ganz, 2008, p. 1). The written narrative in this study revolves around finding voice and transformation.

These two themes were paralleled in the processes and products of my textile-weaving. Weaving can be used as an art-based approach to trauma and loss, as a ritual to enable meaning-making, to engage a narrative, and to act as a tool for integration. The quality of textiles to be imbued with narrative or become “story cloths”⁷ means they have therapeutic value in the externalisation of trauma (Garlock, 2016, p. 61). The trauma narrative can be expressed visually, opening new pathways for the verbal articulation of the story. Textile-weaving enables a slow unfolding of events, adding sequence to the events (Garlock, 2016, p. 61). It can provide structure to chaotic, oscillating emotions, and enable the construction of a symbolic sense of closure (Reynolds, 1999, p. 167). Artist Allie Alden, who made a grieving bag in response to her own pregnancy loss, confirms that the slow, meditative movement of the needle aided in the processing, healing, and integration of her trauma (Alden, 2000, p. 3).

Michael White and David Epston (1990, p. 13) suggest that working through trauma involves vital steps, such as telling the story, meaning-making, and finally, re-authoring the narrative. This final step entails what Daniel Siegel (2017, p. 185) refers to as “integration”. This is a healing step, taking time and the ability to reflect meaningfully, and is, in essence, a re-working of the self to form a coherent representation in the mind. As a means of grief work, this triangulated approach follows these steps and parallels Dennis Klass’s oscillation model of grief⁸ in process and product.

Therapeutic value in art mediums, processes and products

Within the art therapy context, the materials and mediums are the elements that evoke meaning-making. They act as the intermediaries between internal thoughts, emotions and feelings and the externalisation of these as a tangible, sensory form of communication (Moon, 2008, p. xv). From a psychodynamic

7 A “story cloth” communicates scenes and narratives in embroidery or appliqué. This is an empowering way of “giving voice” through textiles and means that stories can be reinvented and new messages elicited (Mannay, 2016, p. 49).

8 Oscillation models of grief emphasise a non-linearity to the grieving process and the facilitation of an on-going connection with the deceased rather than a final step of “letting go” (Mallon, 2008, p. 13).

perspective, art mediums, processes, and products have the ability to access the unconscious and aid in the release of repressed material (Reynolds, 1999, p. 167).

The process of textile-weaving can transform the fragmentary effects of loss into an integrated self-identity by offering containment⁹ and a “good enough” holding.¹⁰ The woven product takes the form of a transitional object.¹¹ In this case, the woven triptych takes the form of a transitional object leading to the integration of self.

My method for journeying through loss

This was an arts-based, auto-ethnographic study. This methodology reflected the sociocultural and power dynamics around femininity and the experience of pregnancy loss within a Western context. Visual auto-ethnography incorporates art objects and processes of making to artistically represent and expound on the background to the narrative (Eldridge, 2012, p. 72). I explicate my method for journeying through loss as an example of a personal ritual using a triangulation of narrative. This type of grief work will always take the form of a personal, individualised ritual tailored around a specific experience of loss and grief within a certain context. This is vital for an embodied re-storying of the narrative and meaning-making.

At the start of my training as an art therapist, unconscious imagery around pregnancy loss was being made manifest in my artwork and artmaking (see Figure 1). I chose to explore this further in my research to understand this more fully. I revisited these artworks made in 2021, one of which was a warrior doll I wove at the end of that year, who seemed to be a symbol of voice (see Figure 3). The two-dimensional artworks were predominantly painted with much water and a tumultuous character. In early 2022, the loss of a child in my community prompted a further exploration of my own losses, specifically pregnancy losses.

9 Wilfred Bion defines the container as a mental operation, enabling psychic objects to be held in mind through processes of disintegration and reintegration (Cartwright, 2010, p. 24).

10 Donald Winnicott’s idea of holding, linked to the “good enough” mother. This refers initially to the mother’s secure physical holding of the baby in its fragmentary or disintegrated state. This sense of holding enables the development of an integrated self and less dependence on the mother (Winnicott, 1988, p. 117).

11 Transitional objects are external objects that are able to stand in for a relationship with a “good enough” other and lead to the development of self (Winnicott, 1988, p. 107).

I then embarked intentionally on art-making around the topic of pregnancy and loss. I began by creating a small, two-dimensional piece that depicted a blooming eggplant. This came to represent pregnancy. I used watercolour pencils, containing the amount of water added and deepening the shading on the eggplant, which made me, in essence, able to exert control over the process of ripening or pregnancy. This brief engagement led to a deeper immersion into loss. Again, a small image of a baby in utero emerged in watercolour blues and greys, surrounded by shades of red and brown (see Figure 4). This raw entry into grief led to a more embodied exploration, using materials such as clay, wax, and charcoal to unearth my repressed feelings around my two losses. These sensorial materials were able to gently evoke the visceral and layered nature of pregnancy loss, whilst providing containment. This led to a need for a full embodiment of grief, a reaching in to repair my insides.

I embarked upon weaving, starting with a baby in the womb (see Figure 5), then a placenta, followed by a cross-section of a womb (see Figure 6) and finally, a paper nautilus shell¹². The time spent on artmaking and the size of the art product increased throughout the process. Through weaving textiles as “story cloths”, I was able to foster a slow, intensive engagement with my grief. The stabbing and flowing movements of the needle felt like a movement through entrapped feelings of anger, sadness, bodily betrayal, loneliness, and shame, as well as towards acceptance and connection. Temporality seemed to be suspended. The intricate focus and detailing of the woven pieces meant that I would sit, immersed in the process of weaving for hours at a time, unaware of this passing of seconds, minutes, hours, then weeks and months. The placenta took a month to be birthed, whilst the womb took two months to develop from conception. The quiet, private nature of this griefwork was evident in that I worked at home, isolated in one room, closing the door on the product when I was not working with it, and not permitting ‘other eyes’ to gaze on it.

I formed three separate panels with these woven pieces that I would integrate to form a secular triptych (see Figure 7). Concurrently, I captured reflective notes and associations in a reflective journal, accompanied by sketches at the time of this artmaking. In parallel to the artmaking, I wrote

12 An argonaut or paper nautilus is a type of pelagic octopus, the female of which, makes and repairs her own buoyant egg casing or “shell”, a vessel in which to carry her eggs (Young, 2018).

a narrative¹³ in the form of a dialogue with my woven warrior doll. Sally Denshire (2014, p. 836) speaks to written narratives comprising fictional characters in monologue or dialogue as eliciting an emotional, integrative, sensory experience. The incorporation of journaling to accompany the artmaking was integral to my process. Three narrative voices emerged from these reflections. This multi-voicedness allowed metaphors and symbolism to evolve around the images that constituted the data (McIntosh, 2010, p. 157). Multi-voicedness also permitted dialogues between these metaphors and symbols. This combination, in turn, enabled a more reflexive and systemic analysis of the data, eliciting a deeper interpretation and allowing richer meanings to emerge (McIntosh, 2010, p. 157). Raymond Gibbs (1994, p. 20) speaks to metaphor being inherently linked to our reasoning and imagination and how we conceptualise our experiences.

After the intensiveness of these cycles of creating and meaning-making came the need for a rest from “doing”. There was a complete disengagement from reviewing literature, artmaking, narrative writing, and reflective note-taking. I needed to distance myself from all aspects of the study and engage in deep introspection. Shortly after this period, I reflected on what was primarily emerging from the data: formatted areas of interest labelled as pre-themes or ‘fuzzy’ themes.

The presence of multiple voices and multimodal narratives in this study led to an analysis of the structure and sequence and the ‘telling’ of the story. This was to enhance the reflexivity of the study and to identify latent and metanarratives. I used Catherine Kohler Reissman’s (2008, p. 121) thematic narrative analysis to focus on the content of the narrative or that which is “told”.

This was an attempt to elucidate the multi-layered threads that form the narrative identity of the narrator and their temporal and spatial relationalities. I also used elements of Reissman’s (2008, p. 172) structural narrative analysis to elucidate aspects of the narrative form or ‘telling’ of the story. Using these two approaches, I was able to identify symbolic representations and themes across narratives (see Table 1), as well as illuminate contextual factors and relationships implicit in the ‘telling’ and the ‘told’.

13 Valuable to read the written narrative, for insight into the multiple parallel narrative layers of the triangulation approach. Available: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Y0fXZ2tr03r2tyk-q-5Y0053iVU5bOOZ/edit?usp=sharing&oid=107021080200456695168&rtpof=true&sd=true>



Figure 1: Joanna van Zyl. Tides. 2021. Watercolour on paper (21cm x 30cm).
Westville: Artist's collection

Thirteen emergent themes from three multi-layered narratives were then condensed into three main themes: connection, containment, and good enough self. I also identified hidden or latent narratives of shame and resistance and metanarratives of internalised oppression and memorialisation. I would say that these themes organically emerged when creating and undertaking this ritualised grief work process.

I arranged the three triptych panels in sequence as the baby in the womb, the womb, and the paper nautilus shell, ensuring a connection between the three panels. There was then a period of memorialisation. Following this step, I transformed my reflective notes into another narrative.

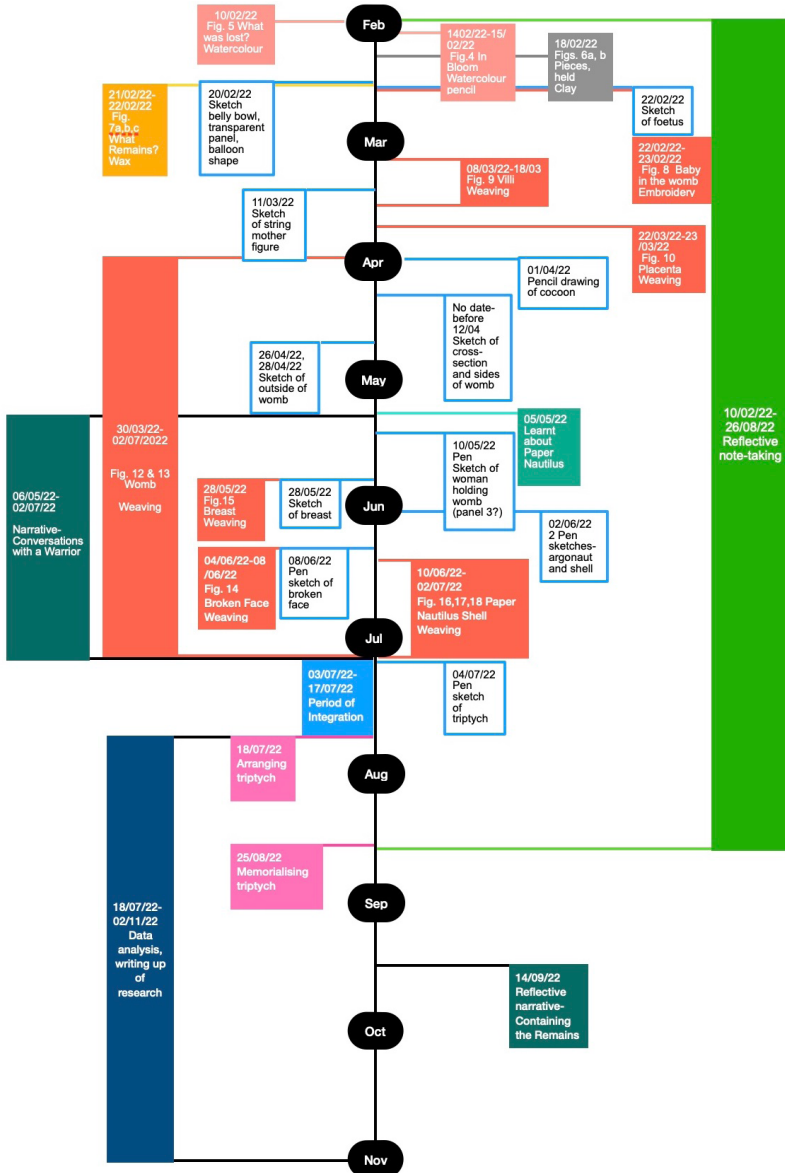


Figure 2: Timeline of making

Key		Weaving/embroidery
	Sketch	Information-Paper Nautilus
	Watercolour/watercolour pencil	Narrative
	Clay	Period of Integration
	Wax	Triptych memorialisation
	Reflective note-making	Writing up of research

Results and discussion

In this article, I argue that the triangulation of artmaking, narrative, and textile-weaving is effective in creating an embodied, personalised grief work ritual. In this section, I discuss findings in terms of structure and symbolism, as well as emerging themes and metanarratives. I also explore the mechanisms by which weaving can be therapeutic. By explicating these findings, I am able to evaluate whether my aims for the study were realised. I hope to illuminate the value of this triangulation as an appropriate method to acknowledge and process grief and trauma relating to pregnancy loss within a Western context.

Findings in the stories

A shift is common to the structure of all three narratives: from a prompt to the exploration of loss through visibly oscillating cycles of grief to a point of repair, containment, and integration. In the written narrative, the use of language and the presence of the narrative voice further illuminated this shift and enabled an embodiment of emotion. Symbolism in the three narratives spoke to the transformation of self, vessels, and the ocean as resembling oscillating processes of grief and grief work. The ocean is ever-moving, shifting between calm and turbulence, resembling Dennis Klass's oscillation model of grief. The cycling movement in and out of grief, of remembering and forgetting, returning to thoughts of the past, and shifting to present moments are encompassed within this model (Mallon, 2008, p. 10). The findings in the stories also parallel mechanisms of change¹⁴ across three domains specific

14 Sequence of processes, backed by theory, explaining how or why therapeutic change arises (de Witte et al., 2021, p. 4)

to creative arts therapies: embodiment, concretisation¹⁵ and symbolism, and metaphors (de Witte *et al.*, 2021, p. 17).

Table 1: Excerpts from thematic narrative analysis

Quotes from written narrative	Themes
"The story begins with the creation of the warrior doll."	Beginnings and endings
"As she spoke of conquering, I heard in the pauses that there were losses too...I too, was reminded of the losses that led me here."	Journey/passage
"I turned in awe to the warrior but was greeted instead by trails of threads, a dismantled carapace."	Transformation
"Slippery odds and ends...I added them to the container I had brought along for such things... they were mementoes...and at the end would, together, form a sum-of-all-parts."	Connection versus disconnection Containment
"I drifted to shore, understanding that I would be back here again, many times, accompanying the warrior and becoming the argonaut."	Good enough self

Emergence of themes

Narratives of connection

The theme of connection was especially apparent within the woven narrative. The sensorial qualities of the textile, the process of weaving, and the woven product all lent themselves to the notion of re-connecting. This is helpful in the processing of grief.

The ritual of weaving and the process of cutting, joining, and knotting threads speak to a mindful embodiment of this connection. The woven

15 Concretisation refers to the conversion of abstract content into something tangible, enabling it to be physically perceived, experienced, and interacted with, thereby creating new perspectives (de Witte *et al.*, 2021, p. 17).

triptych invites connection, as it acts as a transitional object. The art object is an inanimate cultural object reflecting both internal psychic processing and environmental influences in its construction (Modell, 1970, p. 243).

There is an illusory sense of connectedness between the art object created and the real object that the symbol represents. This sense of connectedness seems to deny its separation from the artist, even though it is an object in the environment, outside the self (Modell, 1970, p. 244). The transitional object, therefore, creates a space that mitigates the experience of separation anxiety, as it represents connectedness when separated from a loved other (Modell, 1970, p. 248).

Narratives of containment

For art therapy purposes, the art object is an external container, a holder for intolerable or unbearable feelings, whilst they are being processed or reflected upon, leading to the feeling of containment (Dalley, 2000, p. 84).

The making of the womb and strengthening of this structure spoke to a container for the visceral and emotional trauma of pregnancy loss. The 'shell' represented the 'lid' of this container, allowing the art object to become a 'safe space' for these indigestible feelings to be held whilst they were in process. The large size of the shell mirrors the magnitude of the trauma it seeks to contain. In the written narrative, the warrior became the container, able to hold the uncomfortable wounds of loss and the defences built around these wounds. She was able to facilitate a process of transformation.

Narratives of the good enough self

According to Winnicottian theory (1988, p. 117), forming a good enough self would entail those aspects of process and product that render a good enough holding for the reintegration of self. In the written narrative, the argonaut represented a good enough mother, and the shell a good enough holding. The making of the placenta, with its gestational discourse and placing it in the womb, suggested the idea of a good enough mother and a good enough holding. All three panels of the woven triptych spoke to this holding, enabling the reintegration of a feminine self.

Metanarratives

Narratives of memorialisation

Textiles have the ability to act as memorial reminders, the holders of memories of traumatic social events. They do not passively represent these memories but engage in a shifting dialogue between presence and perception (Odabasi, 2022, p. 10).



Figure 3: Joanna van Zyl. Warrior Doll. 2021. Weaving and embroidery (30cm x 50cm). Westville: Artist's collection

This dual exchange means textiles can both convey memories and personal stories, as well as alter their representation. The ability of textiles to hold strong emotions of anger, sorrow, and joy through many layers and textures also enables them to embody experiences and act as objects of remembrance (Odabasi, 2022, p. 12). A collaboration between mind, hand and heart enables past events to be mended or repaired, rehabilitating the trauma through a process of healing and revealing (Odabasi, 2022, p. 12).



Figure 4: Joanna van Zyl. When you left. 2022. Watercolour on watercolour paper (15cm x 21cm). Westville: Artist's collection

The completion of the woven triptych entailed stages of reframing and preservation. This took place when I transferred the triptych into the physicality of my home, a more public space.

I then transferred the triptych virtually into the public sphere through the dissemination of my dissertation and this article. This transition feels juxtapositional, balancing between healing and revealing. This public sharing or display of the triptych as a holder of memory is a significant part of my grief work process.

The taking of photographs further reframes the triptych as an object of memorialisation. Plastic yarn and the addition of dried rose petals speak to

acts of preservation, which enable this object to 'preserve' memories. The life of the object will continually evolve as a permanent physical space is allocated, and it assumes its virtual space online.

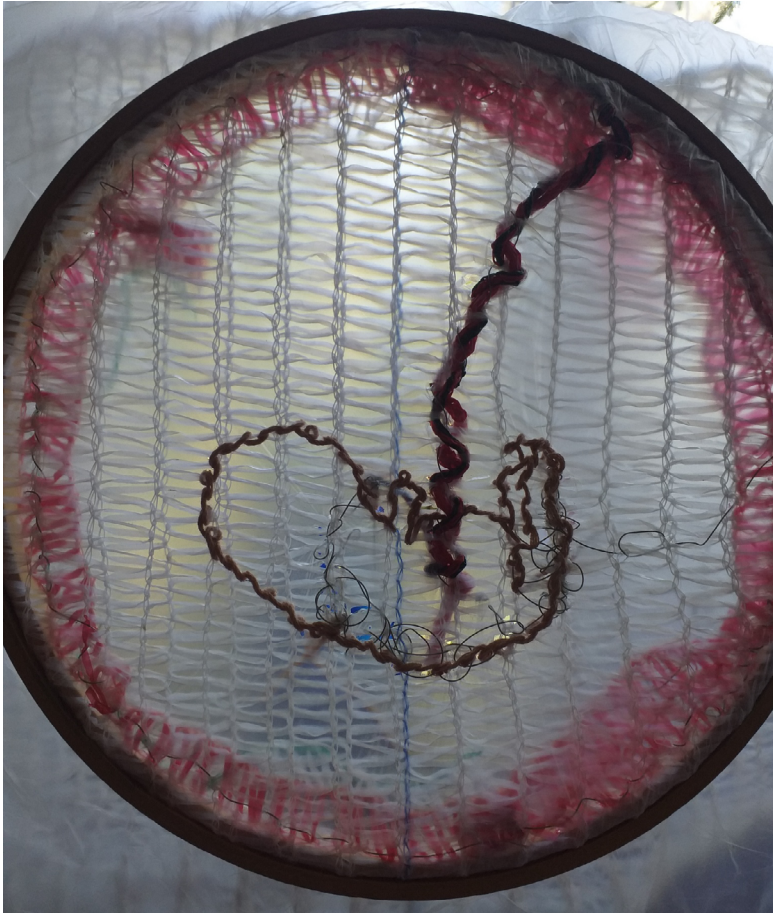


Figure 5: Joanna van Zyl. Baby in the womb. 2022. Embroidery on plastic (18cm diameter). Westville: Artist's collection

Weaving as a therapeutic process

Frances Reynolds (1999, p. 169) applies a cognitive-behavioural lens to creating a personalised ritual for processing grief. Reynolds (1999, p. 169) suggests

that the weaving of a trauma narrative can act as a type of “exposure therapy” and a gentler way of “staying with” and desensitising traumatic material.



Figure 6: Joanna van Zyl. Making of the cross-section of the womb. 2022. Weaving with plastic and yarn (30cm x 24cm x 6cm). Westville: Artist's collection

Artists who create woven pieces, such as Willemien de Villiers, speak to the slow repetitiveness of the work, likening it to meditation and acknowledging this as a healing aspect (de Villiers, 2016, n.p.). This slow pace parallels the time taken to think, reflect, and remember, essentially to mourn and grieve. The creative skills used in weaving foster and integrate forgotten or unacknowledged positive facets of self. The woven product and its frame enable a memorialisation of an ending and the forging of a symbolic connection through their permanence (Reynolds, 1999, p. 170).



Figure 7: Joanna van Zyl. Triptych front view 2022. Weaving and embroidery with plastic and yarn (40cm diameter). Westville: Artist's collection

Recommendations

Creative arts processes allow for an active engagement with loss and trauma, enabling a move from the distance of words alone to an “embodied” processing of sensations, feelings, and emotions (Seftel, 2006, p. 11). This evokes a journey of transformation from the depths of loss to a restored sense of well-being and vitality (Seftel, 2006, p. 19). These types of rituals offer a gentle way to attend to the full range of emotions around a loss and an avenue for working through these emotions, which may have been inhibited or avoided (Reynolds, 1999, p. 166). Experiential arts-based processes enable access to buried emotions and can uncover inherent negative assumptions about the self. The visible and permanent nature of the art product created can challenge these assumptions and promote a healthier re-storying of the self (Reynolds, 1999, p. 167). Art-based rituals can provide structure around

the complex, chaotic nature of grief and make for “good enough” endings, enabling a sense of closure (Reynolds, 1999, p. 167).

From an art therapy perspective, these reflexive findings could promote a valuable form of grief work applicable to a larger context in processing pregnancy loss and disenfranchised grief. In my own process, using various art mediums and materials allowed for the embodiment of intense feelings and emotions, such as grief, anger, and despair, which had previously been repressed. The sensorial nature of certain materials enabled me to access the visceral nature of my loss whilst providing qualities of containment and holding. This allowed for a slow ‘mending’ or grief work to occur. The story, in and of itself, is accessible as a support mechanism for others. Emanating from this narrative is the notion that to be able to create in this way is therapeutic and can be transformational for the self. To be able to birth these art objects, these vessels of meaning, links creativity to creativity. Artist Frida Kahlo found the process to be helpful in processing her own experience of pregnancy loss (Herrera, 1991, p. 75).

Conclusion

This study has allowed me to accompany my grief, moving in and out of remembering and forgetting, on a journey of past and present. I felt a shift from an absolute avoidance of feelings associated with my losses (a minimising or distancing) to an embodied experience of intense sadness and shame and then to an acceptance and sense of deep repair. This grief work resembles the actual, oscillating nature of the grieving process (Mallon, 2008, p. 10). Through this process, I have been able to create a personal ritual, forging new connecting and symbolic bonds. The triptych sits in close proximity to me, in a significant yet private place in my study, where I am able to reflect on it as I work. I find myself adding precious stones, such as rose quartz and dried rose petals, an act of preservation, accentuating its memorialising function. Through the combination of narrative, artmaking, and textile-weaving, I have been able to embody my losses and create a personal ritual to integrate fragmentary aspects of self. This has enabled a re-storying of a connected, feminine self. My forays into auto-ethnography and multimodal explorations of this topic meant, at times, that I had to forge a bridge between a distancing and a full embracing of this vulnerable, emotive material. Narrative provided this bridge, enabling a creative response that further propelled visual,

sensorial, and embodied meaning-making around these losses. Through the explication of narrative themes, I am able to show how elements of both process and product are influential in narrative weaving and can apply to wider circles as a therapeutic model for grief work.

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