

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Interview with Art Therapist Eileen P. McGann

By Lucia Šimončíčová

Biography

Eileen P. McGann, MA, ATR-BC, LCAT has over thirty years experience working with people who have experienced trauma, particularly adolescents and their families. Her approach to art therapy has been published in the United States and Europe; she has lectured extensively nationally and internationally; her publications address issues of trauma, violence, aggression, racism and identity in art therapy. She is on the Editorial Board of Art Therapy, Journal of the American Art Therapy Association and a long-standing faculty member of the School of Visual Arts and New York University graduate art therapy programs, in New York, where she teaches and supervises art therapists in training. Ms. McGann is also a faculty member of the Honors program at Molloy College, Rockville Centre, New York, teaching Nursing Students about Art and Healing.

Ms. McGann has worked in mental health agencies, schools and art programs in the New York area collaborating with multi disciplinary staff in program development; providing art therapy services to school age children, adults survivors of sexual abuse,

women veterans and adolescents. Her clinical work is focused on therapeutic milieu and studio approach with persons who have experienced trauma.

Ms. McGann is currently developing and leading the art therapy program at MercyFirst an agency in New York devoted to helping children and families who have experienced traumas, including refugee or undocumented immigrant children to the United States.



Introduction

The first time I came across Eileen McGann was through reading her fascinating article about her art therapy practice with adolescents who had been victims of racism called 'Color Me Beautiful: Racism, Identity Formation, and Art Therapy'. I got an opportunity to translate this article and publish it in the Czech Art Therapy magazine *Arteterapie*. Some time later, we got a chance to meet personally, in Ireland, and discuss her special art therapy approach that focuses on a symbolic visual communication of the therapist with the client, coming from the client's imagery. In October 2013, I co organized an International Art Therapy Conference in Slovakia 'Overall Care of Children in a School Setting' and we invited Eileen McGann as the main speaker. She introduced her special approach there, which received enthusiastic feedback from people attending the conference.

I asked Eileen McGann if she would agree to be interviewed since I was very interested in the context of her approach and her clinical experience. I had not interviewed another art therapist before. The interview was done through email communication on 7th September and is presented verbatim.

Lucia Simoncicova

What motivated you to choose art therapy as a career?

Eileen McGann

In many ways, art therapy chose me as a life pursuit. I feel very fortunate in that I have always been clear about my interest and passions to work with and help people and my love of art. It really was a natural evolution of steps, studying art, working with children with special needs and finding my way to "art therapy". I have always been inspired by the power of the image, the process of art

making as personal communication and revelation of what lies within that we often do not have or even care to have words for.

Lucia Simoncicova

You mentioned you studied Art Therapy at New York University with the well-known art therapist Edith Kramer. Would you like to tell us a little more about that? How did it influence your art therapy practice?

Eileen McGann

Yes, I did study at New York University with Edith Kramer. I had many teachers whose practice and approach influenced my development as a therapist and to whom I am grateful. Edith was an incredible person to study with. Full of high energy and a brilliant mind, she was a tough teacher who made us work very hard... hard work is good, and you learn much. Her understanding of psychodynamics, combined with her sensibilities, as an artist was quite important in her approach. Edith saw the relationship of the art therapist to help support the process of sublimation and maintain art making in the sessions. She challenged her students to develop as competent artists, and in this her approach emphasized personal skill building in the art expression as well as depth of psychological understanding. These are two core or central tenants of my approach: to have the artistic skills to support client's process and to understand their process from a well-informed, psychological perspective.

I can also share some very light hearted times spent in the company of Edith Kramer. In class she would get up on the table, bring a student up with her and together they would dance and jump around. Our job was to be able to draw the figures in motion as it happened. This was to develop skills of quick observation and artistic expression. It is very hard to help your client draw a figure in motion if you cannot do this yourself!

You must be able to have a highly developed range of artistic skill and expression if you are going to help someone in art therapy. The art materials and art making process are our primary tools, we need to be able to take clients to the next step and understand what will happen when using a wide range of media.

Another “Edith story” which will be well known from anyone who went to NYU or knew her is that Edith always hosted an annual holiday party. We would all bring food and drink, gather in her studio loft, surrounded by her paintings and sculptures, first hand view her works in process and affirm our place as artists. She decorated a small evergreen tree with hand painted ornaments, eggs and candles. Yes, the candles did some years set the tree in flames! But no one was ever hurt.

Lucia Simoncicova

What are the key art/psychotherapy theories that influenced your art therapy practice? How is it reflected in your practice as an art therapist?

Eileen McGann

My approach in art therapy is based upon training from a psychodynamic perspective. This is the foundation of my work to which I have included psychological understanding of a relational approach, milieu treatment and trauma treatment. As my practice has evolved to be primarily with persons who have experienced trauma, the understating of a trauma perspective to therapy has been critical. Understanding the physical, neurological imprints of trauma are essential in order to consider the range of impact for the person, and then the manner of intervention. The art aspect of my work focuses on working in the metaphor, art as therapy from a studio approach and visual communication through art interventions.

Lucia Simoncicova

I find myself being very inspired by one of our conversations. You spoke about your emphasis on the non-verbal visual communication that you have been using with clients. Could you please describe for us your specific non-verbal approach and how it is manifested in your sessions with clients?

Eileen McGann

In communicating with clients, developing what I call a “visual vocabulary” we enter into a mode of circular relating that is based upon, subtle and overt non-verbal communication. Working in the metaphor is critical in this, as is understanding psychodynamics, trauma, body expressions and visual processing. What this means is that I use art making as a way of communicating in session: drawing, painting sculpting side by side may occur, or being the

artist support to help them do their work. The main idea here is to understand how the process and image reflect the metaphor of experience and to respond in a similar manner. If we are asking our clients to communicate through art making, we need to be able to respond and intervene in this manner and not rely too much on our words.

Lucia Simoncicova

How do you see the relationship between the art therapist and the client? What role do you yourself take in session?

Eileen McGann

Each relationship of course has its own unique quality and defining characteristics and depending upon why someone is in treatment will impact how the relationship evolves. However, an overall way of looking at the relationship to me is in the role of developing a therapeutic alliance. I see my role as working to provide structure, safety and sanctuary where the young person can begin to feel safe. Once someone feels safe, they can begin to engage in treatment and trust. Without trust, treatment does not occur.

My role may vary and range from active participant, silent observer, teaching, modeling It all is in response to intervening in a way that is most aligned with the client's needs and goals in therapy.

Lucia Simoncicova

Do you favor, for example a directive or non-directive approach?

Eileen McGann

My approach is non-directive for art making, meaning I do not assign a task or ask someone to create anything specific. I work to help them find a voice in the art, tell the story they come in with. All the work is guided by assessment, observation and Intervention. All actions in session are therapeutic interventions and communication.

Lucia Simoncicova

What is the usual structure of yours sessions, if you could share that with us?

Eileen McGann

I begin sessions with a range of materials to choose from; typically basic drawing, paint and clay, to start. However, I always support any choices of media or process if available. I invite the client to use the materials to make what they would like. From this I assess the way in which they work, the process, image, body mannerisms and any dialogue. These observations guide me in assessment of the persons functioning and from this I provide support, intervention as needed. I do not, would never, interpret the work to the client, I allow them to tell the story. Sessions are generally about 45 minutes long.

Lucia Simoncicova

You are currently developing and leading the Art Therapy program at Mercyfirst in New York, an agency devoted to helping children and families who have experienced trauma including refugees and immigrants. Could you please tell us more about it?

Eileen McGann

MercyFirst is an agency that has for over 100 years provided support to children and families in need. There is an overall feeling of compassion and devotion in all the programs of support in this agency. Programs include, group homes, mother-baby residences, residential treatment centers, clinics, foster care programs and after school prevention and support.

The agency is trained and operates from a Sanctuary perspective, meaning that the focus of the work comes from being informed from a Trauma perspective. The treatment is to provide safety, emotional stability in a highly sensitive, psychologically informed manner that involves much collaboration on the part of staff.

The staff is devoted and highly dedicated the mission of the agency in their work to help children and families. MercyFirst provides internship-training opportunities for Psychology Doctoral, Social Work and Art Therapy students who then work directly with clients.

I feel very honored to be working at MercyFirst. In my role, I am developing the Arts and Art Therapy programs in the agency. This involves a wide range of planning to include the intensive, trauma informed individual, group and family art therapy sessions.

Also included is a broader scope of the Arts. In this work, community building by programs, yoga, outdoor art works and murals to engage the youth and provide a sense of artistic identity and competency. Additionally, in conjunction with another staff member, we provide workshops that address issues of compassion fatigue for staff. In these workshops we combine an educational approach about the impact of trauma and include an art experiential as part of this training. The response has been very positive.

The Arts at MercyFirst has grown in a short period of time to have four art therapy interns and myself on campus now. The response from the staff and residents has been very positive, there are more requests for art therapy and arts programming each week.

Lucia Simoncicova

Let's come back to art: Are you doing art in your free time?

Eileen McGann

Yes, I maintain my work as an artist. At certain times of the year, depending upon teaching and clinical practice, the amount of time I have free does vary, however, it is an ongoing experience for me. When I am away from it for any length of time, I miss making art. Creating is part of what is central in me to be balanced and whole. Art therapists believe so strongly in the need for and value of personal expression, it does not make any sense to abandon this in your life.

Most recently I have been working in mixed media, reconstructing images. Attached are several examples of the work I have done. The first is a sample of plein aire painting I often do, and the second is collaged mixed media.



Lucia Simoncicova

How do you achieve balance in the demanding work with clients, how do you manage to juggle your time between clinical work, personal life and art therapy lecturer?

Eileen McGann

I am very fortunate in that at this point in my life, I love all the work I am doing. I look forward to the clinical setting, working with the young people in residence, their families; collaborating with other staff and supervising and teaching graduate students. To keep a balance I do make sure to also maintain the things outside of work that keep me at peace. I spend time with my husband, children, family and friends; painting in the art studio; swimming; being outside; kayaking; reading, some cooking and more... it is so important to have things that are fun to do! You need to take good care of yourself and enjoy your life.

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