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Introduction

The three keywords were chosen as meaningful words to me. Objects are important to me as I inherited a lot of objects from my mother that are important to me, alongside holding memories and unique stories. The trauma of losing my mother happened when I was already using found objects in my art from the landscape around me, it has made them more meaningful now. My interest in objects has led me to look at the symbols on certain items and meanings that speak to me. Since experiencing this trauma, I have been using art to help heal, entwining walking into my practice, narrating the seascape, creating and movement, which leads to my interest in trauma healing.

Trauma

Trauma can be defined as “severe and lasting emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Whilst an immediate and permanent reaction is caused, trauma is invariably an invisible feeling not apparent to others which can affect a person’s ability to process everyday information and daily events; a sense of overwhelm that creates a feeling of vulnerability (Williams, 2024). This dictionary definition describes exactly my feeling from the first phone call telling me of my mother’s passing to the lasting effects over the months and years that followed. The feeling of vulnerability and shock led to not being able to eat or barely speak or think. The United States definition in the same dictionary states ‘The death of someone we love is a traumatic event’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). For a person experiencing a traumatic event, the effects can be worn both internally and externally; the feelings felt can be invisible, but the pain is worn visibly on the face and in a person’s bodily responses. Psychosomatic illness

can follow as mental pain takes a physical impact on the body; “psychological and sociological phenomena has been shown to correlate with a variety of physiological symptoms” (Moerman, 1979, p.61). Although the pain may be internal and invisible to some, the body can react with a physical response.

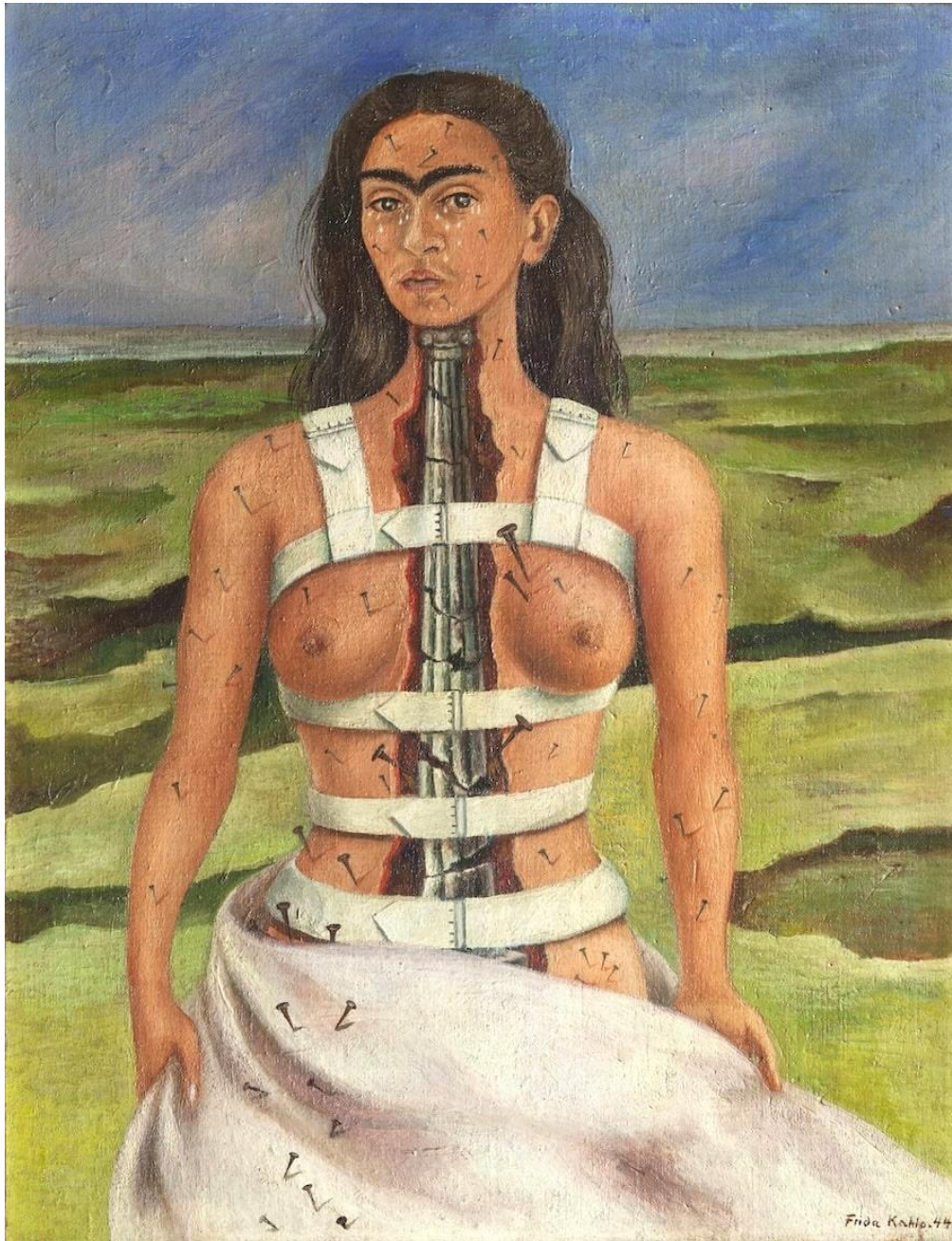


Fig. 1: The Broken Column (Frida Kahlo, 1944).

Frida Kahlo demonstrates the feeling of trauma as a physical reaction in her piece *The Broken Column* (see figure 1). The painting was made as a direct response to trauma caused due to an accident which left her nearly paralysed. A self-portrait, the painting depicts Kahlo being held together with bandages; her spine which received the most damage from her accident is visible to the viewer and has been shattered throughout. Kahlo is covered with nails sticking out from her entire body indicative of the pain felt throughout. Despite the obvious pain portrayed Kahlo stares directly at the viewer depicting strength and the feeling of facing her situation head on.

My experience of undertaking the rite of passage of grief, is that trauma overwhelms leading to the feeling of fight or flight. This is an unconscious process that happens naturally with trauma leading to a path of self-development to deal with the effects of trauma. Jung (quoted in Bair, 2022, p.82) believed art "to be the outward projection of inner experiences and used it at times of personal difficulty to gain insight and healing". Art therapy as a practice has been used to help deal with the impact of trauma since the 1940s with arts and crafts activities being used since the end of World War II to help soldiers recover (Bair, 2022). More recently the Covid-19 pandemic has led to soaring rates of trauma caused by isolation and the anxiety that accompanies this which in turn has led to a renewed interest in arts and crafts; "art may restore dignity and health following traumatic events" (Bair, 2022, p.73). Art can provide a sanctuary for dealing with trauma through providing an outlet for expressing feelings experienced. For Frida Kahlo her paintings provided an outlet for her ongoing battle with trauma. A failed operation on her back in 1946 did not improve her situation resulting in her painting *The Wounded Deer* (see figure 2) which expressed her disappointment; the deer has been shot with arrows multiple

times arguably symbolic of the pain she has been facing whilst the face of Kahlo on the deer stares stoically at the viewer, consigned to her apparent fate. “Health exists when mind and body function in harmony and illness results when stress and conflict disrupt the process” (Ronnberg & Martin, 2022, p.187). The deer becomes a visual understanding of the effect pain and thereby trauma can have on the body.



Fig. 2: The Wounded Deer, 1946 by Frida Kahlo

Mindful walking can be engaged as a method of realigning mind and body after extreme trauma and this can expediate the healing process. The process of walking “transcends the boundaries of the individual” encouraging a better understanding of wellbeing and encouraging a “shared sense of belonging and transformation” (Lin

& Wang, 2024, p.301). Following my mother's passing I started to walk along the beach, feeling the transformative nature of the light and touch of the sand. Walking became a sanctuary for me whereby I would be able to navigate my own emotions whilst also finding objects to use in my artwork, facilitating a return to creativity following trauma. "The rhythmic melodies of the crashing waves and the visual poetry of the landscape surrounded us, providing a backdrop for our creative process and journey" (Lin & Wang, 2024, p. 303). Mindful walking becomes a process for moving on following trauma just as for Kahlo, visually painting her internal pain acted as a method of dealing with the pain.

Symbols

A symbol is "a sign, shape, or object that is used to represent something else e.g. *A heart shape is the symbol of love*", the symbol thereby representative of a "quality or idea" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). An object can hold symbolism that speaks directly to the individual, often a sentiment or memory; when my mother passed I saw heart shaped stones regularly as if she was speaking to me. An object in this way can provide a connection between the living and departed. "In part, these relics served to mitigate the pain of separation between living descendants and their revered departed" (Ronnberg & Martin, 2022, p. 790). I started wearing my mother's jewellery after she passed, and this created a spiritual closeness. Edward Blake discusses in his book from 1877 the medical basis of charms as something to relieve us from the world's traumas (Blake, 1877). Despite the age of the text, symbolic attachment to objects is ever-present today with jewellery acting as a symbol, connecting me to my mother and when I wear her jewellery or personal possessions, I feel them protecting me. I feel an enlightened connection through the jewellery. "Jewelry is made to be worn; it is often bestowed or given as a gift at

significant threshold dates; and it is regularly imbued with or accrues sentimental or status value because of the giver or a previous wearer or donor” (Causey et al., 2019, p.4). Causey argued that although the charm or amulet was worn to bring good luck, health, protection or love the object derives a new significance when attached to the person, forming a powerful connection (Causey et al., 2019).

Jewellery belonging to someone deceased is referred to as mourning jewellery and was particularly fashionable in the Victorian era, where photographs were nestled next to the locks of hair of loved ones in lockets. Whilst for some mourning jewellery is depressing, for others it is a way of remembering those who have passed and keeping them present. “I always saw it more about life and the fact that somebody was remembering this person and honoring them and loving them” (Harper's Bazaar, 2024 p.2). The wearing of these symbols connect the past to the present, in a way keeping the past alive, showing the effectiveness of symbols and the two notions of the unconscious mind with the physical body.



Fig.3: *There's A Lot of Money in Chairs* (Tracey Emin, 1994).

There's A Lot of Money in Chairs by Tracey Emin (see figure 3) demonstrates the symbolic importance of objects creating a tangible connection to the past and to people departed. The chair previously belonged to her grandmother and since her passing Emin adorned it with physical reminders of her grandmother's sayings, creating a visual reminder of the past. Her grandmother was a clairvoyant, from a line of three generations and Emin travelled the country using the chair to complete 'readings'. "Emin 'caravanned' across the country, stopping at various galleries with her '*psychometric*' chair – a performance that symbolized an endeavor to save the

lost soul of the art world” (Vara 2002 p.181). For Emin the chair symbolised a physical and spiritual connection to her grandmother whilst also symbolic as a piece of art memorabilia in its own right.



Fig. 4: Tacimin - Can you hear me? (Tracey Emin, 1997)

Throughout history symbolic objects have been used to avert danger and as methods of protection. In the Neolithic era man would hold a piece of wood or stone to ward off enemies (Yonick, ND) and in Ancient Egypt papyrus and hermetic teachings refer to “the ability of stones to draw down the power of the planets and stars, and especially the rays of the sun” (Causey et al., 2019, p.50). Objects were both symbolically sought for protection whilst also holding a form of mysticism closely linked to magical properties and spiritual affiliation. Emin’s piece *Tacimin- can*

you hear me? (see figure 4) further explores the spiritual symbolism behind objects as she uses her grandmother's table turning it into a Ouija board. "With intimate care people all over the world have preserved the cherished relics of their ancestors - bits of native soil, ritual objects or personal belongings, bones of the dead that they washed, rocked, sang to, prayed to or blessed" (Ronnberg & Martin, 2022, p. 790). The chair and table are ritual objects not only providing a familiarity and personal connection through sentimentality and memory, but furthermore a possible spiritual connection also through the talismanic properties associated with both.

Objects

An object can be defined as "a thing that you can see or touch but that is not usually a living animal, plant, or person: a collection of precious objects" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). My own inherited objects and heirlooms feel precious as well as sacred, bridging a gap through the objects from the dead to the living.

The object becomes, therefore, a subjective trace, a bearer of memory, a monument, tiny as it is, a memorial, a relic, an inheritance, a thread linking an absent person to those present to each other and to us on the screen, transport across time and space (Pollock, 2009, p. 485).

It becomes the responsibility of the person to mould them into their life, keeping the departed's life alive through them; "creating an intimate and intangible link to the past" (Ribeiro cited in Petrov 2012 p.223). Often broken through age or general wear and tear, I remember these objects from my childhood. Some are more relics as only a portion is left of them to remember them by, kept for sentimental reasons. "Objects become the site of affects and relays of time" (Pollock, 2009, p.483). An object gathers meaning dependent on its usage and connection to the individual.

Conversely, artifacts acquire meaning and symbolism as they are being crafted and used... they establish conceptual connections and organize experience; they create typologies and narratives of events... Numerous examples around the world show how ritual and symbolism become embedded in the technai of everyday life (Nikolaidou, 2007 p.184).

Objects are a way to connect a person not only to their departed but to historical time periods, to narratives from the past that can be brought alive through the object with close relationships created (Pearce, cited in Petrov, 2012). Objects can create a portal; despite often being man-made and unfeeling; a closeness can be established through an object and the symbolism attached. Through using symbol systems in my practice whether it be Egyptian eye of Horus or otherwise, these create almost a portal. Using belief as a tool, becoming the artist as Shaman, I have used teeth, bone and horsehair in conjunction with other associated objects in my own work which tap into sets of associations of ritual and death (see figure 5). The object becomes more than simply the product, expanding in terms of symbolic and ritual meaning; "an object never stands for only itself. It is, according to Mieke Bal's theory of narratology... infused with extra meaning by its context and interpretation" (Petrov, 2012 p.229). Objects function in terms of representation with each person intimating a different meaning to it through their own context and interpretation.



Fig. 5: Akhenaten Egyptian Ceremonial Whip, own work, May 2024.

Objects can function in terms of use and interaction. With *Red Dragon*, *White Dragon* and *Black Dragon* Marina Abramovic introduces the interactive, transitional object

All the transitory objects have one thing in common: they do not exist on their own; the public must interact with them. Some objects are there to empty the viewer, some to give energy, and some to make a mental departure possible (Sean Kelly Gallery, 2022).

Her pieces use natural minerals and stones such as rose and blue quartz, amethyst and soladite situated in a way for the viewer to either sit, stand or lie on them.

Each mineral is connected with some part of the human body. Quartz is for the eyes, iron for our blood, copper for the nervous system, amethyst for the stomach. I wanted to communicate this experience to the public so I made quartz cushions which fixed to the wall at chest-level and at head height so that people could lean against them (Sean Kelly Gallery, 2022)



Fig. 6: Red Dragon (sitting) (Maria Abromavich, 1989)



Fig.7: White Dragon (standing) (Maria Abromavich, 1989)



Fig. 8: Black Dragon, Maria Abromavich, 1994)

Her work acts on an interactive level with each piece situated off the ground so thereby through interaction the viewer completes the work. For Abromavic the objects are placed for the user to see themselves in the work, to mirror themselves (Sean Kelly Gallery, 2022). The object becomes not just transitory but also healing. Abromavic's collection is a commentary on the inner turmoil of humans and their disconnection from nature caused by the imbalanced nature of contemporary society (Sean Kelly Gallery, 2022); her artwork uses objects for healing, creating a sense of wellbeing for whoever interacts with them.

Conclusion

I chose these keywords to research as I wanted to explore my own connection to the healing journey using art and objects. Through undertaking this research, I have become interested in how artist Marina Abramovich uses healing crystals. One of the wellbeing and healing practices I take part in is reiki, and my last session used crystals, so I have a personal connection to this as a healing method. Reiki connects people to the earth, which links to the research about walking in nature. Crystals also relate to glass crafts which I have used in my own work, as well as other materials which are often symbolic and shamanistic.

Connecting these together, I would like to focus on healing, physical movement such as walking but also more defined movement like performative dance as a form of therapy, and objects. My proposed question is as follows:

How can the use of found objects and somatic movement within art practice facilitate healing from trauma? An investigation into using objects found in the environment and meaningful objects from the past in assisting with processing grief and how movement of the body can connect to the healing process.

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