



# **A Poignant Playground**

By Kelly de Waal

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Self published by Kelly de Waal  
Cape Town, South Africa, 2021

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Artwork: Kelly de Waal  
Concept and Design: Kelly de Waal  
Printing: Wizardz, Cape Town

Michaelis School of Fine Art  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Cape Town

## Acknowledgements

Expressing gratitude is vital in my daily routine and with that being said, I have a list of people I am grateful for throughout my time at Michaelis. I would like to say thank you to my family and my partner for constantly supporting and encouraging me. A thank you to my friends for keeping my spirits up. Lastly, a thank you to my supervisor and peers for their patience and positive attitudes. I will be forever grateful for all these individuals for their time and energy that went into helping me make it through a challenging year.

Thank you.

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# A Poignant Playground

## Background

Trauma manifests differently in each individual, there is no 'one size fits all' for managing trauma. The way in which I manage trauma and pain has slightly elevated from my childhood. I tend to bottle up emotions and handle them privately and internally.

On my journey to becoming more self-aware, I realised how unhealthy my reaction towards trauma was and how badly it was affecting me and my wellbeing. Bottling my emotions and overcompensating with jokes and smiles was no longer the best option for me.

There are many studies that suggest trauma and pain is stored in our bodies. In an interview with the author of "The Body keeps the score: Brain, Mind and Body in the healing of trauma", writer Bessel van der Kolk suggests trauma confronts one with the best and the worst.

According to van der Kolk, experiencing trauma in our lives enlightens one about the true nature of people and the power of resilience, love, care and commitment. Additionally, possessing the knowledge that there are things larger than our individual survival.

With this knowledge, I knew my response to managing trauma and pain needed change and doing so through finding ways to self soothe through crochet, bright colours and soft comfort items -blankets, pillows, stuffed animals-. I found myself drawn to satisfying my inner child by allowing myself to once again enjoy the things I loved as a child.

## **Shirley Hayes: healing through art**

The article titled Trauma and Memory: Healing through Art by Shirley Hayes focuses on how trauma can create traces in the mind. Hayes describes trauma traces as everyday circumstances like death, loss, stress and grief which leave traumatic imprints or memories in our mind.

These memories allow one to visualise images in our mind that lead to disruptions or reconstructions of those memories or reality, can become powerful concepts for personal works of art. Hayes states that artists paint intangible images with words, the language of the artist becomes the paintbrush in communicating those ideas through their "performance monologue" (Hayes, n.d).

With hopes to challenge the reader to question how the meaning of art becomes a pathway for healing when identifying conceptual content of the work and reflecting on personal circumstances. Hayes suggests that art as a form of therapy can serve as a bridge across the blackhole of trauma using art by Errok Morris, Frida Kahlo and William

Kendridge to explain the effects of memory and trauma. Emphasising that artmaking can serve as a catalyst for self-reflection, artmaking and healing which provide an avenue for exploring stress, memory, and trauma.

Additionally, she talks about a personal monologue she created *Traces in the Mind* as a way to indicate ways in which we can be traumatised. Ranging from economic and psychological to the “seemingly innocent violence of childhood humiliations” and how these experiences impact various parts of lives. Providing an insight on how trauma can impact the brain with the assistance of therapist and theorists.

Aiming to challenge the trauma traces that define a person’s daily reality. The monologue opens with a brief definition of trauma traces which continues into an introduction of her family and childhood home with her parents and two older brothers.

She describes a leather jacket that represented the bittersweet relationship she had with her older brothers which gave

her a sense of freedom after the death of her older brother. She mentions the traumatic experience inflicted by the loss of her brothers and youngest daughter, the illness of her other daughter and two divorces.

According to Hayes one incident can be traumatizing but the accumulation of several incidents leaves scars from which you may never fully recover (Hayes, n.d). Furthermore, suggesting that many artists make use of the trauma theory in order to communicate their ideas to the public.

Trauma theory emerged in the 1990s when a group of critics began studying the cultural effects of trauma. As studies of trauma became more common, the term has been applied more liberally to circumstances beyond those initially imagined such as war, natural disaster, abuse and confinement to include psychological trauma that might not have resulted in or from physical violence.

The common denominator of my body of work and the work of Shirley Hayes is the understanding of trauma and how

they influence our perspective on the world and the way in which we react to situations. Serving as a catalyst for self-reflection and form of healing similar to the work by Hayes. Although my work deals with personal trauma created by everyday situations our approaches differ dramatically. Hayes's monologue is heartfelt and tragic, she exposes her vulnerability in a trite way whereas my own work is more abstract and subtle.

Disengaging from reality while simultaneously connecting to experiences offer a way of working through unprocessed trauma and pain. Hayes explores the concept trauma traces which relates to the theoretical aspects of my concept and has provided insight to the root cause of some personality traits and coping mechanisms developed overtime. Illuminating the importance of creative expression as an avenue for exploring stress, memory and trauma.

## **My Practice**

My area of focus has shifted greatly during my time at Michaelis. In previous years I enjoyed focusing on environmental issues, some more successful than others. My most promising artwork was my sculpture from 2020 which was a response to the pandemic and how it affected my livelihood.

I explored the anxieties I experienced during this transitional time. Using my art as a therapeutic outlet to digest the drastic lifestyle and social changes. This work featured knitting and crochet to create a vivid whimsical environment including flowers, grass, and suspended clouds. Playing on the idea of childlike wonder and finding comfort in the imagination.

It influenced my final year body of work which includes crochet and vivid colours. My work revolves around navigating through emotions and finding ways to deal with trauma and pain. My artwork includes an installation in which a number of balls are clustered together around the space, making the terrain the focus and creating

a playground. The materials range from plush and crochet to concrete and plaster playing a role in exploring the duality of the presence and absence of trauma in the body of work.

### How it started

The experimental phase of my project focused on understanding my emotions and what that looked like. The experiments consisted of a series of daily feelings paintings I created over the course of three weeks. Finding that positive emotions manifested as circles in shades of yellow, pink, green and blue whereas negative emotions manifested as sharp triangles in shades of red, purple, and blue. I discovered an instant connection to circular shapes and bright colours.





## Colour

### The human bruise as a theory for colour praxis in my project

The colours range from vivid colours (including primary and secondary colours) to sinister fleshier tones. These flesh tones inspired by the colours produced by minor bruises which relate to the idea of trauma through physical injury. The different colours determined by colour psychology<sup>1</sup> and the aging of bruises.

We understand the brutality of these colours by looking at the development of bruises (Lewis,2021).

We all only become aware of a bruise once its purple and sore to touch, however we tend to overlook the range of colours and what they mean.

When a bruise occurs, it often goes unnoticed as it becomes a subtle pink or red hue. This is caused by the oxygen rich blood leaking into the tissues from punctured blood vessels<sup>2</sup>. As your red blood cells start to break down, your bruise will progress into

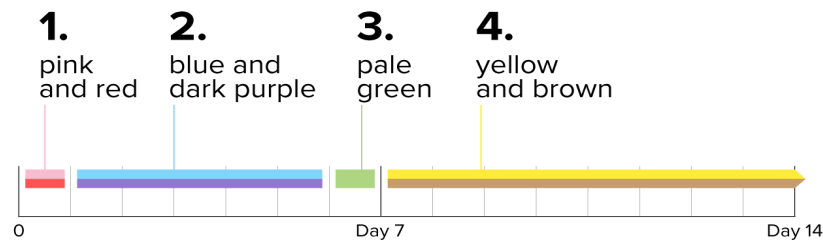
a deep purple or blue hue.

This is an indication that the white blood cells are starting to break the red blood cells. The purple hue is a result of the blood cells rapidly losing oxygen as the cells leak into the tissue.

Once the bruise begins to heal, it will obtain a green appearance. As your body breaks down those spilled blood cells, it turns haemoglobin- a red protein molecule found in blood cells- into a green bile pigment -biliverdin- that turns your skin green. The bruise is almost completely healed once it reaches the yellow or brown colour stage.

The consumption of these red blood cells then converts biliverdin into hemosiderin and bilirubin- by products of breaking down haemoglobin- giving the skin a yellow or golden-brown appearance. Once the spilled contents from the red blood cells are either reabsorbed or excreted from the body the bruise will disappear completely.

## The Stages of Bruise Colors



## Colour Protection in Nature as a colour theory in my praxis

In addition to these muted biological hues my work includes vivid colours such as: red, green, blue, purple, pink, white and orange. These vivid colours represent the playful way I deal with trauma and pain. The vivid colours informed by a trait found in the animal kingdom called Aposematism (colour protection).

These warning colours are good for both prey and predator and can be seen in a variety of animal species. These animals often have poison or other defence mechanisms to defend themselves. Predators avoid these animals because they have learned to associate bright colours with pain (Rojas,2015).

Although aposematism does exist in humanity, not in our anatomy but in our behaviour. Some of the most common aposematic colours are red, orange, and yellow amongst others, these colours have been adopted by society. Red is used in our traffic lights, stop signs and warning signs.

In a poem written by Stacey Star, she provides insight into how we perceive colour depending on our emotional and mental state which states that "trauma and pain cause the heart to ache and the eyes to open in search of comfort, as the eyes grow wider so do the colours too" (Star,2021).



## Materials

My work is made up mainly of acrylic wool and fleece. The balls are made up of stuffing, styrofoam, plaster, concrete, blow up balls and yoga balls. The choice of materials play on the idea of being unsure of where trauma exists.

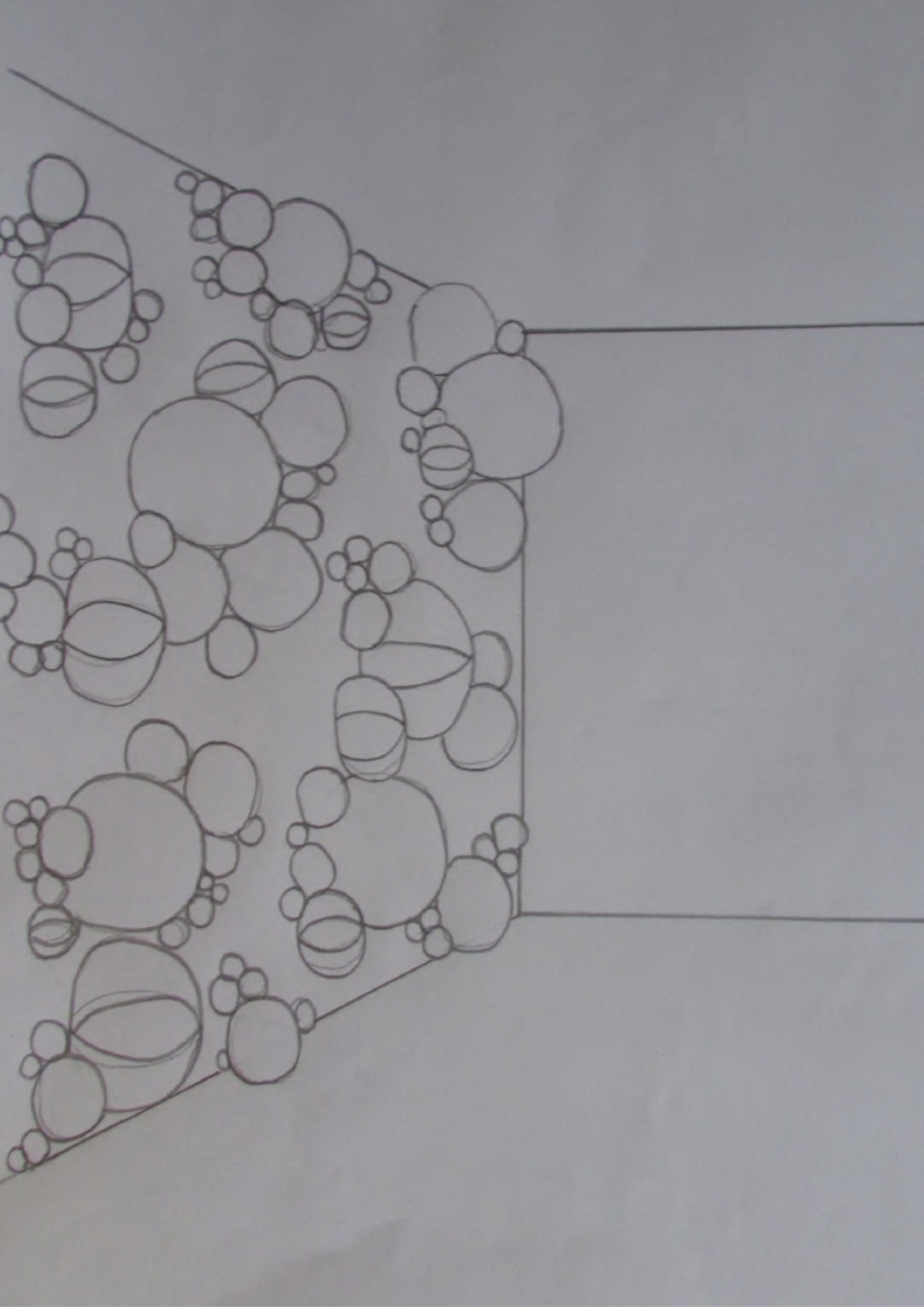
## Process

My artmaking process consists mainly of crochet and sewing and partially of filling moulds with plaster and concrete. Despite crochet being a therapeutic tool for healing, however doing repetitive movements over a long period of time can be strenuous on the wrists and neck. Tying to the idea that working through trauma is a long and hard process.

My life has always been a rollercoaster filled with obstacles to overcome; the process of healing is never ending. Thus, the process of making these balls will continue up until the exhibition day. The process of crochet has become sort of a crutch for me in many

ways- it allows me a space to be present in the moment or to be blissfully oblivious. It serves as an escape from the demands of the 'real world', as well as a pacifier from negative emotions.















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