



Image 1: Photo chosen by client A, courtesy of Sisi Burn



Image 2: Painting by client A

## Exploring the Self through Photography

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The self portrait has been a recurring theme throughout art history and the history of photography. The self portrait is the representation of oneself by oneself. We are both subject, and photographer and viewer. To make a true self portrait we are in control of all aspects of the image making; what we show in the frame and when we decide to press the shutter. These two elements of the picture making are what makes the image unique. By making our own decisions about what to show in the frame, we are capturing a true representation of ourselves at the moment we choose. The moment is not chosen by anyone else.

Photography is a powerful form of communication, but what about photography as a therapeutic tool? And can photographing ourselves assist in any kind of healing process, for example to help us come to terms with grief and loss, self acceptance and strengthen our self-esteem? Our journey through life is full of varied emotional states which are not only documented by other artists, writers, film makers and photographers but also by ourselves. After all, we are a fascinating subject, and often seek deeper understanding of ourselves through some sort of creative expression and of course any kind of creative activity can be therapeutic if engaging with the activity leaves us feeling better and temporarily forgetting our worries.

In his recent book *Therapeutic Photography*, Neil Gibson argues that, ‘For an activity to merit the term “therapeutic”, there have to be clearly defined outcomes for the end user so that they are not arriving at the benefits accidentally’ (Gibson, 2018, p. 15). In other words, one has to pursue the creative activity with the intention of working through an inner process and with the outcome in mind.

Photography has become so much more accessible with the development of technology that one no longer needs an expensive camera to benefit from the practice – a mobile phone camera will do. People can engage readily with the familiar device in their hand without feeling they need to be an expert photographer, whereas the idea of Art Therapy often causes a reluctance to be involved, as people wrongly assume they need artistic talent to take part, which causes a barrier.

The therapeutic use of photography comes under two headings: PhotoTherapy and Therapeutic Photography.

### Photo Therapy

Phototherapy is the method devised by the Canadian psychologist Judy Weiser, who uses a set of five techniques to assist with the counselling process. To merit the term phototherapy, these techniques are used in the presence of a trained counsellor or therapist. The therapy session might use existing photos as well as the taking of photos as tools to further explore the emotional impact of the image on the client. Just as in art therapy it is often easier to talk about emotional problems once an image has been formed. It becomes externalised and put at a safe distance. This often makes it easier for the client to share information and, by doing so, come to terms with their own experiences. The five phototherapy techniques are:

- 1 *Photos taken by the client*: The photos we take ourselves contain both factual and emotional information which can be explored further during a one-to-one session with a therapist.
- 2 *Photos taken of the client by other people*: This provides the client with an opportunity to see how other people perceive them. What is it about the client that matters to the person taking the photo? And how might this be different to a photo they take of themselves?
- 3 *Self portraits*: Self portraits are pictures we have taken of ourselves where we are in complete control over the making and taking of the image. 'Self portrait Photo Therapy work can help clients clarify their self image and raise their self-esteem and self-confidence through making, viewing, and accepting images of themselves' (Weiser, 1999, p. 130).
- 4 *Family albums*: Clients may bring in family photos to a counselling session. These photos can help to facilitate a dialogue around the client's background and history. Relationships in the family and where the client sees him- or herself within the family can be explored. The images which a client brings may have significant meaning for the client.
- 5 *Photo projection*: This refers to how we see and interpret the world around us, and how we see and interpret the world being unique to us. When we look at photos, our interpretations, likes and dislikes are based 'on our internal maps of the world' (Weiser), be that conscious or unconscious. We see what is important to us and therefore project ourselves on to the image we are looking at. This projective technique uses photography to elicit an emotional response. The image may remind us of something or someone, and bring up associated feelings with those memories.

In my work with clients at a Recovery Café for adults who experience a range of mental health issues ranging from being on the autistic spectrum to having suicidal thoughts, I have a box of photos which I invite them to look through. I ask them to choose one which speaks to them the most. We then talk about why they chose the image. What thoughts, feelings and memories do they associate with the image? One of my clients chose a photo of a ship out at sea. He told me it brought up feelings of isolation, feeling adrift, vulnerability and fearfulness. He thought that perhaps he was on the ship. He went on to paint his own version. The sea became more rough and unsettled in his own painting, and perhaps this was a reflection of his unease.

Using photos in this way can provide a useful way of opening up a dialogue. It is also a way of accessing a client's concerns. Talking through the photo enables the client to explore what is troubling them without actually naming it.

## Therapeutic Photography

Therapeutic photography refers to photos taken which are self-initiated, and don't need the guidance of a qualified counsellor or therapist. It is the use of photography to gain further self-knowledge and self-awareness. It is the making of photos for one's own personal healing, insight and exploration pertaining to the self. It is also a way of reflecting and contemplating on the world around us. When used in this way, photography cultivates an attitude of wonder, and opens ourselves up to receiving rather than taking, as Howard Zehr explains in his book, *The Little Book of Contemplative Photography*:

To photograph in this spirit is a matter of opening ourselves to receiving. Like meditation or contemplation, photography-as-receiving requires us to cultivate an attitude of receptivity, an openness to what might be given to us. Such photography is more like a meditation or a spiritual discipline than a hunt. (Zehr, 2005, p. 16)

Image 3: Tree branch floating on the water, courtesy of Sisi Burn



Image 4: Water, an empty void, courtesy of Sisi Burn



Of course there are times when the two techniques overlap, and it may be that while exploring the self through one's own photos and due to the nature of the issues that may arise, it may be helpful to be guided by a trained counsellor.

I began using therapeutic photography as a way of coming to terms with, processing and accepting the loss of the man I had loved in my life.

I found I was able to mirror my own feelings as I went for walks and took photos, as I reflected on what I saw in front of me. In many of the images, the subdued light and element of water represented an empty void, as did a tree branch floating on the water represent stillness and a loss of life. The American photographer, Robert Adams (b. 1937), described landscape photography as being a mirror of what goes on inside you. In *Beauty and Photography*, Adams writes of '...something in the picture that tells us as much about who is behind the camera as about what is in front of it' (Adams, 1996, p. 15.)

This is exactly what I found I was doing. The things we notice, and therefore the things we focus upon, will always reflect our own experiences, inner beliefs and our own understanding of the world around us, otherwise we would not choose to focus on that particular view. Weiser expresses it similarly when she writes, 'Every picture we take is a self portrait. This may sound quite a bold statement to make, but when we take a photograph, we actually make a series of decisions prior to the point at which we 'take' it. For example, we decide on the composition of the image. What do we keep in the frame, and what do we leave out? And, crucially, we also decide on timing. At what point do we decide to press the shutter button or tap the camera button on our smartphone? Because we are making all these decisions consciously or unconsciously, the resulting images will ultimately say something about us. Why did we take the photo in the first place? The camera offers us an opportunity to focus on what is important for us. We take a photo for a reason, and that reason says something about us.



Image 5: Re-enactment scene 1,  
courtesy of Sisi Burn

Being able to reflect on the images one has taken is an important aspect of personal growth, including increased self-awareness and recognition of what might need to be changed in ourselves. The whole process was about creating beauty out of trauma, and beauty out of pain. I thought that if I could make my experience into something beautiful, it would become bearable.

Another method I found was to process my experience using re-enactment photography. I decided not to use myself as the subject, but to work with an actress to tell my story. I felt that in order to come to terms with what had happened, I needed some emotional distance from the events. I needed to re-create some scenes leading up to Michael's death during heart surgery which I found

particularly distressing. Working in this way put me in a position of power rather than one of helplessness. Working from behind the camera I became both the director and observer, which was far more liberating. Through this collaboration I was able to re-evaluate, question and distil what had been going on, and thus it became a therapeutic and cathartic experience.

Image 6 Re-enactment scene 2,  
courtesy of Sisi Burn



Collaborating with Anna, my actress friend, allowed me to take a step back and look at the experience from a different perspective while she was able to effortlessly put herself in my position. Being an observer and a witness to these events was certainly a shocking and painful experience, but it was through this re-enactment that I felt I had to validate it for myself and push through the pain, which ultimately became an emotional release. The photos we created are for me a testimony of this event.

This is of course the stuff of theatre. Acting out is about embodying emotions – giving them a voice and a strong presence. The French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) explored two basic elements of a photograph relating to the emotions and feelings they evoke:

1. The 'studium' photograph – an ordinary photograph of general interest and which does not touch the spectator at a deep emotional level.

2. The 'punctum' – which, according to Barthes, '...is the element which rises from a scene, shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me' (Barthes, 1984, p. 26). He also describes the 'punctum' as a wound, a sensitive point and an accident that 'pricks me' (ibid., p. 27). For me it is this second element, the 'punctum', which resonates. I experienced the 'punctum' as operator from behind the camera, where for a brief moment I felt that sensitive point like a wound as I pressed the shutter button. And it was at these moments of feeling the pain again that I knew the picture had worked.

### Coming through Grief – Transforming Pain into Art

The secret is to look inside, suffer from it, face it and photograph it – Christina Nunez



Image 7: Self portrait,  
*Anguish*, courtesy of Sisi Burn

Christina Nunez is a Spanish artist / photographer who, since 2005, has developed her own self-portrait method called the Self Portrait Experience. This she has taught in prisons and mental health institutions, and has run workshops in Europe and the USA.

This is what I attempted to do. I went on to embark upon a series of self portraits called *Coming Through Grief*. I now felt ready to put myself in the picture, literally, as an attempt to push through the emotional pain I was still carrying. I decided to photograph myself in a very distressed state. I call this picture 'Anguish'. This is how I felt at that moment when I took the photo. It was shocking initially, but I had managed to externalise the pain, put it outside of me and at a safe distance.

When we encounter loss, a loss of any kind, we inevitably face change. Photography is an effective tool for addressing these issues. It is empowering, enhances self-esteem and helps us to objectify those painful emotions.

Following on from the self portrait series, 'Coming through Grief', I have begun another series which I call 'A Dialogue with Myself'. To begin with, these images are based on the feeling of uncertainty. They are about checking in with myself and seeing where I am at. It is therapeutic in that I am able to view myself from different vantage points. This I am able to do physically by placing the camera in different positions to illustrate the mood or feeling that I am in.

When viewing the photograph, some form of analysis takes place in how I see myself. Any feelings relating to issues with self-esteem, self-worth, feeling undervalued and the feeling of uncertainty are externalised. The process is also about strengthening my inner self – trying to see myself as if the camera isn't there. Again, observing myself and taking a step back. This is where I find myself now, and accepting that that's okay. It is important to recognise how we feel about ourselves first, before looking at how others see us, as Neil Gibson explains: 'Any therapeutic intervention should begin by looking at how the client feels about themselves and work towards trusting self-acceptance before the client can trust others to accept them.' (Gibson, 2018, p. 78)

Image 8: Self portrait in long  
grass, courtesy of Sisi Burn



It is interesting to note that while self portraits allow us to see how others see us, each viewer is still going to see something different in the image which may not be the same as what we see in the image. However, this is still useful, as it brings to our attention another side of ourselves with which we are perhaps less familiar. I experienced this when I showed these portraits to an artists' Peer Group that I attend. One of the members pointed out 'how strong I looked'. I was initially surprised by this observation, as that was not how I felt, nor what I was trying to portray. But through further reflection with the image I can acknowledge what she meant. The low camera angle looking up at me through the grass does suggest strength and power, and I do feel stronger through making and viewing these photos. Neil Gibson again: 'Self portraiture through photography allows us to see how others see us, and allows us time to reflect on how we

project ourselves.’ (Gibson, 2018, p. 79)

Being able to reflect in this way allows us to see different possibilities and change our perceptions of ourselves. Similarly, when working with clients’ self portraits, seeing images of themselves offers the possibility of change and acceptance.

In discussing self portraits with clients, Weiser writes, ‘...as clients get to know themselves better, they can become more assertive and confident about making their own decisions and less emotionally reactive to the whims and expectations of others’ (Weiser, 1999, p. 121).

As a photographer and through my training in art therapy, using photography as a therapeutic tool has opened up many more possibilities and different ways in expressing emotions. Working therapeutically using photography has widely broadened my creative vision, as well as providing further tools in my therapeutic and personal practice.

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**Sisi Burn** has been a professional photographer for 25 years. She has worked primarily within the arts and music sector providing high-quality portraits and live music photographs of musicians. Sisi has had many photos published in the national and international press. Throughout her training as an arts counsellor at Tobias School of Art and Therapy, she has been using photography as a therapeutic tool in her own work, and more recently she has begun to use photography with adults suffering from mental illness. She is keen to develop the use of therapeutic photography and to run workshops in the future. Website: [www.sisiburn.com](http://www.sisiburn.com).