Chocolate or shit aesthetics and cultural poverty in art therapy with children

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CHOCOLATE OR SHIT
AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL POVERTY
IN ART THERAPY WITH CHILDREN

by Felicity Aldridge

ABSTRACT
In my employment with social services, I have worked with children from very poor homes; the children often being the third generation of a family that have lived on benefits. Children arrive for their art therapy sessions physically hungry because the benefit cheque has not arrived. What effect does this have on the children coming to therapy?
The art room is a place of great plenty and wealth, described by the children as a treasure trove; many children have no idea how to use such a place or even what is possible. However, a common theme emerged in the work of these children. The children start with mixing all the colours of the paint together, wondering how much they can use and what happens if all the colours are mixed. The resulting brown liquid is a fascination.

Introduction

This essay is an exploration of a theme which kept repeating itself through the work of children I worked with who were involved with social services. All the children said how they felt muddled or messy about the things that had happened to them. All produced work which they called chocolate or shit. For most of the children, their time in therapy saw a change in the names they called the work, from chocolate to shit and vice versa. This essay concentrates on the artwork the children produced. It looks at how the images produced in the art therapy session explore similar issues to the work of adult artists presently exhibiting in galleries. I wonder if both the artists and the children are exploring the same issues of loss and neglect.

In this essay I concentrate on the images made rather than the clients' histories for two reasons: first, this essay is about the similarity of images produced by a variety of children; second, for confidentiality of those involved.

The images
The children liked to mix up all the colours of the paint together. For some children this was experimentation to see what happened when all the colours were mixed. It was also boundary testing as, according to the children, mixing colours together at school is not allowed. For a few, the mixing together of the liquid paint to make brown seemed to express how they were feeling inside, and their attempt to get this feeling out to see what it was. The children made the mixtures every week and gave these creations names. Sometimes the mixture was called ‘chocolate’, at other times it was called ‘shit’, often it was called a ‘mess’. As they became more familiar with the medium of the liquid paint and learnt how to control it, they allowed the ‘shit’ to transform into ‘chocolate’ and vice versa with the addition of different amounts of colour. It did not take long to discover that if the mixture was left for a week it would change; if very liquid it would separate, or if thick it would go solid. The transformation of their mixtures became a focus of the therapy, and the way in which the addition of other materials like plaster, sand and paper, was also of fascination.

Sessions where the making of food predominated brought questions to my mind about whether they were looking for physical or emotional nurturing. Some children arrived for their art therapy sessions physically hungry. I later read in The Observer (11 August 1996) in an article ‘Breadline Britain’ that: ‘Malnutrition is no longer a third world problem. It is now evident in the UK on a scale not seen since the thirties.’

The article stated that child poverty has recently come into the news with the report from the United Nations highlighting the growing rift between the rich and poor in Britain: ‘A 1991 survey showed that one in five parents and one in ten children had gone without food the previous month because they didn’t have the money to buy it.’

How does this poverty of food affect the child’s inner world?
My hypothesis is that this poverty factor does affect the inner worlds of these children strongly. Some of the images I am going to discuss are the primary constellations from which my first thoughts have emerged about this process.
An art sink

Tom (age seven), who attended a group, liked to paint the large sink in the art room with his brown mixture made of all the paints mixed together. He respected the boundary imposed of only painting on the tiles and sink. He mixed the colours with the group and then painted the sink; when he'd finished he'd name the sink according to the colour — they were called shit, vomit, diarrhoea, piss, sick. These sinks took nearly three-quarters of an hour to complete as they were very carefully painted so that none of the white showed through.

After about nine months of this weekly ritual of painting a sink — he called it ‘making a sink’ — he arrived to ask for the first time if he could make a special sink. Instead of mixing a colour, he found a large pot of white paint and with a two-inch brush painted the white sink, white, including the tiles and tap. When he had completed this sink he titled it ‘an art sink’.

It felt wonderful to me that he was able to transform the horrible contents of the sink into art.

I was reminded of the work of Rachel Whiteread, who makes casts of household objects, including sinks.

Learning that mess is OK

David (age fifteen), whom I worked with individually, was much clearer in his explanations of what was happening. As someone in long-term foster care, David knew how he had to behave both at home and school. The only way he managed this was to suppress his feelings. This angered his foster mother greatly as she wanted/needed an emotional response.

He went through the process described previously, mixing colours and making a mess. However, he was able to see that making a mess was useful in itself. If he had had a bad week he would arrive and say he wanted to make a mess and did so.

The mess was usually contained within a washing up bowl and became more and more elaborate as he gained confidence that I would only interfere in the process if I thought it was getting out of control.

By the end he was putting anything he could find into the mixture, including flies and woodlice! The mess needed to contain as many things as possible to be a real mess. He was especially keen to add ‘school glue’ as school was a particular problem for him, hence the addition of ‘school’ to the mess seemed to add something to the creation (Figs 1 and 2).

This reminded me of the work of Cindy Sherman, who makes images of the imagined interior of the human body, particularly the contents of the stomach.

Mess making

David’s mess-making started by our making slime (thick cellulose paste) to which liquid paint was added. The big question was: would I put my hands in this mixture after they had put their hands in? All the children requested that I do this. It seemed very important to all the children that I could put my hands in their mess. I did put my hands in. This sort of mess feels amazing. It is cold and wet but also soft, sensuous and enclosing. It is both beautiful and ugly at the same time. The slime reminded me of Helen Chadwick’s Cacao; a large vat of chocolate bubbling in her exhibition ‘Effluvia’ (The Serpentine Gallery, August 1994).

When I commented to David that he seemed to make slime when he felt things were out of control, he agreed, but said that when I put my hands in he knew that I was on his side, not on the side that made him lose control. He then added papier mache pulp to the slime and made a bowl with the mess.

We also had long conversations about my clothes and how I would get all the paint off after he had
accidentally covered me in paint. He was very interested that I could clean myself, and remove the slime and he took notice when I wore the same clothes, observing that they really were clean. I wondered if this discovery enabled him to realise that solutions to mess were possible. His experience of a situation where someone is sharing the mess but yet can be cleaned up was of importance in his therapy.

**Toy pornography**

The most elaborate mess came after David received a police caution. He wanted to paint a doll’s hair the same colour as his football team – red (his team had just won an important competition) but soon the doll was covered with paint, plaster and glue. When making his messes he would work with his back to me standing at a work surface, I would sit behind. This reminded me of the more classical pose of analyst and client. He then seemed to free associate as he was working. Many of his associations were to dirty and hungry babies; this is what I felt the doll looked like as he was making it (Fig. 3).

He made another doll the day he got a bad report from school, his first comment as he got started was: ‘This is like toy pornography’. I thought this to be an exact understanding of what had happened to him and what he was doing to the doll. He seemed to have found a way of expressing what had happened to him in the medium of art (Fig. 4).

**Is it paint or food?**

Other children were more interested in the mess becoming solid by addition of plaster of Paris or wood pulp and making it into food.

Tracey (aged eight), another member of a group, transformed the group mixtures with the aid of plaster of Paris into wondrous fantasy cakes and food. As the cakes were being made, conversation would turn to food and the lack of it at home; how horrible it is to go hungry and frightening when you ask for some. We talked together about the irony of watching the television when you are hungry and all the adverts for expensive chocolates. These can be made for pretend in the art room because my junk box includes wrappers of empty chocolate boxes (Fig. 5).

Mark (aged five) made a brown mixture, which was called ‘chocolate cake’. The hardening ingredient was paper pulp for making papier mache. When the mixture was finished we spread it into the cake tin – a large circle of cardboard cut from the template of the lid of a dustbin.

Mark then wanted to bake the cake in the oven. I said we could pretend the drying rack was the oven. This would not do, it had to be a real oven. As the conversation continued I realised the child thought we had made a real cake and that we were going to be able to eat it next week! He had no understanding at all of pretend, or what were the real ingredients of chocolate cake. To him paint and wood pulp was as likely a collection of ingredients as anything else.

All these images had a very powerful and salutary effect on me, particularly the realisation of the extent of the children’s deprivation.

**Chocolate and shit in modern art**

I would like now to look at the work of artists that have been making similar work to that of the children, particularly Rachel Whiteread and Gilbert and George. Rachel Whiteread makes plaster casts of the inside of household objects and the inside of rooms and houses;
Gilbert and George, the ‘Naked Shit Pictures’.
Many children when working with plaster had wanted to make casts of my sink, the chairs or toys. These were usually too large they had to settle for the inside of boxes and containers. These casts were often incorporated into other images that they made later (Figs 6, 7, and 8). I saw these images very much as the exploration of inner space. I wondered if they wanted to see their insides to make sure that the unseen parts of themselves were in order. Perhaps they were trying to see what lasting damage there was from their childhoods.

I thought the plaster images were very reminiscent of the images made by Rachel Whiteread’s plaster houses and sculptures of spaces. The children’s work does not have the same scale as the adult artist but their images appear to explore the same themes; possibly that of checking to see what is inside?

Rachel Whiteread
Whiteread’s house was considered a succès de scandale with issues raised covering housing to public identity. When she made casts of the interiors of wardrobes, critics wrote about confinement and concealment. Children have often been confined to their rooms. Space is not something children understand because they often feel confined. When they make casts of the interior of boxes, are they also exploring this theme?

Whiteread, and the child I spoke of, both used sinks as images. Much is made of Whiteread’s use of space. Space is the opposite of form – is the child learning who they are, while exploring the space around them? There are also connections to emptiness as something not there, not seen, a feeling children express often. Possibly the ‘not there’ relates to no longer being in their birth families. They talk about being empty inside, having no feelings, sometimes that they are dead or have been killed.

Adrian Searle in The Guardian (17 September 1996) said of Whiteread that ‘her works are the death masks of the solid world. We are confronted with displaced volumes the traces of objects which have disappeared, hidden emptiness made both viable and tangible.’ These objects that look as though they have disappeared are like the children’s parents who also disappeared, or the self that disappeared when the abuse started. House (1993–1994) and Ghost (1990) (Fig. 9) are two names of her pieces. The article goes on to say ‘Whiteread’s show is filled with the ghostly familiar; the traces of a vocabulary of silences and I am struck by the familiarity and the strangeness.’

The Observer review (22 September 1996) by William Feaver, of Whiteread’s exhibition at the Tate Liverpool, quotes Mondrian: ‘Empty space has no other function than to make life possible.’ I wondered if the children were exploring space so as to begin life again in their new situation.

Lynn Barber, interviewing Whiteread in The Observer (1 September 1996), asks:
Were they her hiding places as a child?
Whiteread replies ‘Yes in a kind of way. Kind of happy places, I suppose, where you went and dreamt. Places of reverie. Where you’d mutilate your dolls, cut their hair and everything.’
'There's always been a kind of sinister aspect to most of the work but I don't really know what that is.'

This reminded me of the doll covered in paint.

The interviewer then asks if the images are connected to death. She replies that she has known about ten deaths, not in her immediate family except her father's. Does Whiteread's work also look at the creative and destructive aspects of space?

It could be said that, for Whiteread, space and form are connected to her feelings about loss and death. I wondered if she was making art of the space that is left after a loss. Are they the 'Ghosts' that are left in the mind; the images of the fading memories of a loved one; the memory of a parent who is lost, whose image is disintegrating with the pain of losing them? Are the children too making images of the lost parent/object, whose memory is now unclear like that of a ghost? Taking this analogy further, Mark Cousins (1996) in Tate Magazine makes the connection between the inside and the outside in Whiteread's work. He writes:

'It signifies the negative dimension of what is not there. It refers to the breast as an absent object which, if it returned, would fit this impress. This shape, then, can be thought of from the point of view of the absent breast as its 'negative'. Present but negative, it refers to an object which is positive but absent. This negative, this cast, re-remembers the object which has gone, which has been lost. (Cousins, 1996, p. 36)

Possibly the children's plasterwork can also be understood as a re-remembering of the parents, or other memories from childhood. Could these casts be the memories of the early mother and child relationship, or their mother's face, its presence and its absence?

Cousins, discussing House 1993-1994, says House's definition could be 'something that ought to have remained secret but which has come to light' (1996, p. 40).

Children often have to keep adult secrets as the consequences of these coming to light could mean that they might have to go into care. Mark, the child who was hungry, had a great fear that I would tell and he would have to then leave his mother.

Cousins goes on to discuss the secrets of the house which have come to light in the sculpture, saying it is like: 'The materialisation of the space and the cast of the "outside of the inside"... The negative has been given positive volume and our perception of the event has to struggle to master what has happened' (1996, p. 40).

Are all the bad thoughts and feelings, the secrets the children have, being made into something – a cast? Are they coming out as a shape instead of whirling around in a mess inside? A cast of a house, the mourning for the death of a loved object, and the outpourings of grief, labours to keep the loved object alive, the memory of the good times. A tangible solid cast which you can view, which does not change. A feeling that you can view.

Cousins goes on to say:

'My wish to keep you alive by becoming you is not a question of becoming only like you. I remain myself as well; I will be the substance which takes you on in your absence. Perhaps I might say I am moulded by your absence, I bear your imprint and I become your trace.' (1996, p. 41)

Are the children trying to recreate the parent they lost by recreating the space? He goes on to say:

'When I am 'turned out' in grief, I do not look like you, or rather look like the you I turned into, being your imprint. You are exactly what is lost since only you fit into the mould which I have become.' (1996, p. 41)

He connects this to Freud's saying, 'The shadow of the object falls upon the ego.'

The articles on Whiteread's art helped in my thinking...
Figure 9. Rachel Whiteread – Ghost (1990), plaster on steel frame. Photo courtesy of Anthony d’Offay Gallery, London.

about my work with the children. It suddenly seemed so obvious that the work was about getting the feelings from inside, out. It created the possibility for change and the capacity to transform the mess to a richer and more pleasant feeling of chocolate rather than shit. Through the act of making, the feelings and the paint became solid, so that it could be looked at and viewed. In making the mess the lost object could be found, the parent cold be found from the shadows of their memories. These memories could now be given form, so that the pieces that were missing could be replaced.

Shit in art!

The common association of the mixtures of brown paint to shit by the children at first surprised me; but not nearly as much as when I heard the title of Gilbert and George’s latest work ‘The Naked Shit Pictures’ (Fig. 10). In David Sylvester’s review of the exhibition for The Guardian (24 January 1997) he starts: ‘shit remains a taboo subject even now’. He talks about shit being a source of embarrassment. As he goes on to review the work he says ‘the work may be meaningful to ordinary people, but this does not mean the meaning is clear’, a thought I often have about the children’s art. Are the children, like Gilbert and George, taking a substance they can form themselves and seeing the possibilities of what else it can be? In the exhibition Gilbert and George used the photographs of the faeces enlarged to make the building blocks of totem poles, crosses and rocks. They have made some sort of transformation. Sylvester says ‘so excretion and excrete are deeply associated with human vulnerability’. Are these artists looking at their own vulnerability like the children do theirs? Most children who have made and transformed the brown shit paint have had the innocence of childhood shattered and many have lost their parents – they are alone, scared and very vulnerable. Chocolate, which is usually the end point of the transformation, can seem a very long way away, another illusion they think might save them from being consumed by the negative manifestations of society. Sylvester states ‘It seems all these artists are dealing with the brutality of fact.’ The images by Gilbert and George and the children I’ve discussed seem to be looking at our culture and society and asking: ‘Why have you let this happen to me? What is it in our society that makes us so cruel to each other? Why do we hurt one another?’

The truth is that when we did these pictures they were the most complicated pictures on an emotional level for us. One’s feelings about romantic love, psychological, sexual were completely disturbed by making these pictures. We’re still slightly damaged by it. (1995, p. 51)

Chocolate art

Besides some artists working with shit, other artists have been using chocolate. I have not found any yet that have used both.

Real chocolate has been used by several artists recently. In 1993 Anya Gallaccio made a chocolate piece for an exhibition in Vienna. In an interview with David Lee (1996, p. 14) Gallaccio discusses this piece, Once coated in chocolate her small space became reminiscent of traditional Viennese rooms which had wooden panels to head height. She explains that the chocolate, as well as reflecting the Viennese obsession with chocolate cake was inspired partly by Mozart’s curious sexual desire to defecate on his wife’s head. The chocolate lightened as it oxidised, or it did in the places where the insatiable Viennese hadn’t already licked it off the walls.

In the article Gallaccio states that her work deals ‘with the changing state of things. They are not about death and decay. They are sensual, not morbid, and concern the fleeting nature of possession. Everything moves endlessly’ (Lee, 1996, p. 14).

This seems to be about children growing and changing, being never in one state, always fluid. This reflects the children’s situation of being moved from one foster home to another, of having several mothers in one year, our inability to provide for them, and the question of whether they are valued like chocolate, or treated like shit.

Body art

Rosemary Betterton (1996) talks about the artist Cindy Sherman, who uses images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc. She says these images are central to our cultural/socially constructed notions of the horrific. Each transverses the external boundaries of the body.

Betterton discusses Sherman’s reconstructions of her own body in a monstrous anatomy made up of prosthetic parts or fragments of it, in a waste of body fluids, decaying food, vomit and slime, saying ‘the interior of the female body is projected as a kind of lining of bodily disgust’ (Betterton, 1996, p. 135).

It seems that Sherman is trying to look at both the inside and outside but also to remake her self. Are the children trying to remake themselves as Sherman is doing in her art? The children use images from the television rather than their own body parts. Are they trying to make themselves into an idealised image seen on television, a child from the adverts who has everything?

Helen Chadwick and Anya Gallaccio have both used chocolate in their art. Betterton is not surprised that the ‘fascination with the symbolic medium of chocolate can be partly explained by its richly ambivalent sexual and cultural significance’ (Betterton, 1996, p. 157).

She quotes Mary Douglas on Sartre’s discourse about stickiness: ‘The viscous is a state halfway between solid and liquid. It is like a cross-section in a process of change’ (1996, p. 157).

The chapter then goes on to look at how women prefer food – particularly chocolate – to sex, and how this idea is explored in art. Chocolate seems to be an object of fascination for adults and children alike. It
seems to have the qualities that we wish to obtain in our life: luxury, richness, beauty, exclusivity, sensuality, smooth, ever changing, sweet. Chocolate is also seen as wicked and naughty. It is no wonder that it comes up so often in the wishes and the artwork of the children.

Around the time I found the works with which to explain the art process rather than the therapeutic process, David made the image of the doll in the Quality Street tin. (see Figs 3 and 4). I wrote in my notes after the session that produced Fig. 4.

I feel it is an image of a baby who is dirty and neglected, isolated, alone, lost, hungry, very messy and dirty.

In a world of riches and plenty which he can see but can’t have.

This is the image of his inner world but possibly asking questions of the outer world about why is my life like this?

Why are things seen on telly not like I imagined?

How come nobody has told me these things?

Drawing the strands together

The adult art seems to articulate the primal issues the children were exploring. It also gives the children’s art a context which it did not have before. It is only in the last ten years that it has been possible to discuss abuse openly in the media. Psychoanalysis has tended to deny the reality of abuse, saying that it is an oedipal fantasy, yet we have forensic evidence, for some of the children that I work with, that abuse did take place.

The adult art seemed to validate what the children were expressing and the art of both children and adult substantiated the work of the other. All the art shares the common strands of how to express a bodily feeling when you are unable to find the words to think or discuss it.

The children were able to transform waste products into nurturing food. The sink turned from shit into a totally white sink, the colour of milk. They were able to change the worst into the very best, the white of milk or the brown of chocolate. Art therapy offered them an opportunity for creative work, a place to think in the chaos of their lives. The shit was possibly the only thing they had previously produced, it had been highly prized in potty training, and now prized by themselves in therapy as a substance of change and transformation.

The art was the link between the beauty of the fantasy and the ugliness of reality. The art could contain them both. It brought them together to create a whole something that neither the adults nor the children could do without the images. The thoughts and feelings that the children were trying to express needed to go into a symbolic framework, because to be literally reminded was too painful to bear.

Art provided for me the link between the emotions the children were expressing and the thinking needed in the art therapy sessions. The adult art articulated for me the primal issues that the children were exploring. It also gave the children’s art a context which it did not have before. Both the artists and the children were able to give their ideas a symbolic framework so that the viewer was not literally reminded of what they were seeing. The art was able to bring together the inside and outside, thinking and emotions, beauty and ugliness, something that could only be achieved in an image.

Both the artists and the children are making societal taboos beautiful and acceptable so that they can be discussed openly. The taboos of society: sexual and physical abuse, neglect, no food, family secrets, domestic violence, being dirty, death, loss, going into local authority care are still very difficult to put into words. Society would rather not hear about these issues. To be discussed, they need to be transformed so that the powerful feelings they engender can be borne. Art allows the feelings to be transformed. The children were able to fill themselves with the beauty of their art objects so the space inside was not so empty and did not hurt quite so much. Artists are bringing the same issues to the attention of society so that they can be further discussed. Things that have remained secret for many years are now coming to light. The inside of our lives is now becoming the outside.

This essay was first given as a paper at ‘Interiority, Necessity and Communication in Art’ at Edinburgh University Settlement, 1 November 1996.

Bibliography


Biographical details

Felicity Aldridge BA (Hons) has a degree in textiles fashion and further trained as an art therapist at Goldsmith’s College. Having worked for five years in a multi-disciplinary team for social services, Felicity now works for South Downs Health Trust in the Child and Adolescent Mental Health team. She also works for Families For Children (a private foster care agency). Felicity developed a special interest in working with children who are in foster care or who are adopted, while working for social services. Felicity has trained as a post adoption counsellor with the Post Adoption Centre in London.