



Artist Feature:

Nicola White Gives New Life to Found Objects and the Self

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*“Time flies by
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-Nicola White

Abstract

Nicola White, a 46-year-old English artist, works with lost and discarded items she finds along the beaches of Cornwall, England, and the banks of the River Thames. She uses pieces of broken glass and pottery, rope, metal, plastic, and other found items to create collages and sculptures. In a recent exhibition entitled *Words from the Water*, she displayed messages in bottles that she had found in the Thames Estuary. She aims for her work to inspire viewers’ imagination by giving new life to everyday, discarded objects. This artist feature explores her work by juxtaposing an artist interview with ideas for using found objects in the field of art therapy.



For 20 years, she worked as a secretary in the corporate world. She began to feel she had nothing in common with this corporate environment while the artwork she had been creating in her recreational time began to take over more of her life. The art making process helped her to get in touch with what she refers to as her “real self,” and she made the decision to leave the corporate world.

The word *art* is often associated with formal training and gallery openings, but artmaking extends to include the use of repurposed materials and objects. These materials, called found objects, are defined as a natural or man-made material (or fragment of an object) found by an artist and kept because of his or her intrinsic interest in the item (tate.org.uk). During the 20th century, artists began using found objects in sculptural works. Work by artists like Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* in 1917 and Andy Warhol’s repurposed commercial goods in the 1960s, forever altered the way art was perceived and created. This shift in art making emphasized concept as a product of the artist’s mind rather than of technical skill or training. Today, the accessibility of found objects allows for artists from all walks of life to create art and engage in meaningful dialogue with materials.

One such artist is English artist, Nicola White. White feels a “real and absolute need” to make art. For 20 years, she worked as a secretary in the corporate world. She began to feel she had nothing in common with this corporate environment while at the same time the artwork she had created in her recreational time began to take over more of her life. The art making process helped her to get in touch with what she calls her “real self”. This deep connection to identity development through artmaking eventually pushed her to leave the corporate world. Using the work of Nicola White, this article discusses the benefits of creating altered forms through the process of coming to know more about ourselves. Nicola’s practice serves as a means of mindful meditation focused on the transient nature of our existence, and eventually allows us to push contemplative making into spaces for others to consider

The Process.

“My work starts with putting on my wellingtons and driving down to the River Thames foreshore in Greenwich or Woolwich (in London). I have a tide timetable app on my phone, and at low tide I take my trowel and my rucksack to go “mudlarking”. This word has been around since the 17th century and was used to describe poor children or adults who searched the Thames mud for pieces of coal or lost trinkets to sell. Mudlarks, now, are people who scour the foreshore for pieces of history. At low tide, it is possible to find many treasures from the past, including coins, buttons, old



Figure 2: Nicola beachcombing for materials
Photograph provided by artist

In the search of found materials, Nicola becomes deeply engrossed in the physical, emotional, and cognitive activity of collecting and working with materials that possess unique traits. Here, found materials have the potential to evoke various interactions or forms of expression.

pieces of jewelry, lost toys, marbles and pieces of shrapnel. The list is endless. For my artwork, I like to integrate some of these finds into collages. The shards of glass, pottery and metal I collect have been in the River for well over 100 years (the Thames has always been used as a receptacle since London began). The glass is worn by the water. There are all sorts of colours: blue, green, yellow, orange... and lots of different

textures. I take them back to the studio, wash them and sort them into colours and sizes. In the studio, I'll put some music on and then start to stick the glass onto an acrylic background to create what I call "Thames bottle fish". Sometimes, though, if I find a particular piece of pottery or metal that inspires me, I will dedicate my time to that. I often don't have a plan of what I am going to make. At the end of the afternoon I can find myself looking at a creation that I hadn't planned at all. I like to 'go with the flow' Time flies by at a rate of knots whilst I'm engrossed in my work." – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

Nicola describes a lengthy process that allows for active engagement with materials both in the environment and in the studio. According to the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC) (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978), expression and interaction with art materials during the art making process can exist on any of four levels: kinesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, cognitive/symbolic, and creative. Although this continuum is widely used to guide art therapy sessions, the information can help explain the powerful use of found objects as a means of creative expression.

The kinesthetic components are experienced when the individual interacts more physically with the materials, and the sensory elements are related to the way the materials stimulate the senses. The perceptual interactions resonate in formal and compositional elements, while the affective nature rouses emotions. Cognitive

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elements are composed of skills related to thought and problem-solving, where the symbolic nature of objects has to do with the individual's personal interpretations and understandings. Each of these levels enables the individual to achieve self-actualization, allowing for creative expression and a more solidified understanding of personal meaning.

When viewing Nicola's mudlarking experience through the lens of ETC, it becomes clear that Nicola becomes deeply engrossed in the physical, emotional, and cognitive activity of collecting and working with materials. Here, found materials have the potential to evoke various interactions or forms of expression. In addition to utilizing movement and the senses to collect the objects, there are also perceptual and affective elements associated with selecting which items to take back to the studio. If she perceives the object as appealing on a formal level or the object evokes a certain type of emotion, Nicola will then go back to the studio and begin the



Figure 3: Nicola's found object work - Photograph provided by artist

Through this creative development, the artist becomes lost in the art making process, not only by connecting with the history of forgotten items from all times and places, but also to connect with the inner self that is only found when creativity unites the mind and body.

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deeply engrossed process where she simultaneously engages her senses and mind. Nicola must think cognitively about how she wants to use the objects or, if she prefers to follow the lead of the materials, cognition allows for her to problem-solve when working with various types of materials. Finally, she can begin to reflect on the product or the process and see the symbolic elements of what the work means. Through this creative development, Nicola becomes lost in the art making process, not only by connecting with the history of forgotten items from all times and places, but also to connect with the inner self.

Self-Empowerment.

“The inspiration for my work comes from the sea and the River Thames, the historical objects I find whilst mudlarking and beachcombing, and the people who have previously owned them. “I use driftwood, pottery, metal and glass in my art that have been rocked by the tide in the River Thames and the sea, some for well over one hundred years. It is like wakening them from a long sleep [sic]... they can share their stories and memories by stirring our imagination. These objects for me are evocative of past lives, mysteries and stories that we will never know. They are tangible pieces of history that we can hold and touch – a small link between the past and the present. Though the owners have long disappeared or have moved on, these items still have a story to tell. I love to reincarnate them and give them a new life in a piece of art. Be it a lost toy in a photograph, a fish made from fragments of ancient glass or a collage made with scraps of metal, each piece has its own history.” – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

As Nicola mentions, these objects possess rich histories related to the original intent behind their creations. Born through a lengthy process, the resulting art piece can empower both the artist and the viewer by promoting the idea that a simple, discarded, and broken object can become something new and beautiful. The items, taken out of their original contexts, are laden with meaning. Nicola connects the past with the present to create something beyond the original intended use. These items take on another layer of meaning and serve a metaphorical purpose. Thus, one therapeutic aspect of this art making process is its ability to



Figure 4: Fish from pottery fragments
Photograph provided by the artist

Through the active process of creating an artwork from found objects, the individual has a dialogue with the artwork in which the objects conjure something within the artist and the artist gains meaning when reflecting on the work or the process itself.

prompt the artist to see “the beauty and promise in the mundane” (Nicola White, personal communication, 2015). This art making experience may also be perceived as challenging due to the complexity of the materials, which can potentially help individuals work therapeutically through frustrations. This challenging, metaphoric process can provide the creator with the opportunity to work through emotionally difficult experiences and gain new insight.

Constructing Personal Meaning.

“The theme changes constantly. Often my work is related to the water, the sea, the river, or something that has caught my attention that week or that day. Equally, it might be a particular object that I find on the Thames foreshore that will determine the theme and will become central to the creation of a picture. The theme is often reflecting what is going on for me in my life at that time.” – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

Relative to previous experiences and personal perceptions, the use of found objects can help to facilitate the therapeutic process by enabling “thoughts, feelings and memories to be connected to, recognized and processed” (Brooker, 2010, p. 25). This occurs because nonverbal thoughts manifest into a physical space allowing for further reflection. Objects connect individuals to a “constructed reality” by engaging us in a dialogue around the creator’s personal narrative (Fenner, 2016).

Additionally, there are three main constructivist tenets to consider when using three-dimensional work in therapeutic processes (Mahoney, 1995; Fenner, 2016). First, active engagement with the materials draws upon multimodal ways of creating. Second, there is a tacit and implicit understanding of the message the object is communicating. Finally, there is a social construction of meaning where the artist sees patterns and themes that are contextually relevant. Through the active process of creating an artwork from found objects, the individual has a dialogue with the artwork in which the objects provide for and open up possibilities for the artist to grasp at deeper meanings.



Figure 5: Seaweed Mermaid
Photograph provided by the
artist

"I'll look at it and it feels as if someone else made it. They kind of create themselves and as I don't have a plan for them, I never know how they are going to turn out. It's always a surprise. This is a great exercise in letting go of the outcome, which is how I try to live my life in many respects."
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Meditative and Transient Qualities.

"When I'm creating, it's my inner child that comes to the fore. I'm completely in the present moment. It's almost like a form of mindfulness meditation. It's such a release too. When I have finished an afternoon of creating, I feel light and happy. When I am making little birds and creatures from the materials I collect, it puts a lighthearted slant on things, as generally, I'm a pretty serious kind of person. It's a delight when I've finished making a glass fish. I'll look at it and it feels as if someone else made it. They kind of create themselves and as I don't have a plan for them, I never know how they are going to turn out. It's always a surprise. This is a great exercise in letting go of the outcome, which is how I try to live my life in many respects. It's hugely rewarding. When I worked in the corporate world, I never felt this sense of achievement. It's worth more than money can buy." – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

In the case of an individual who feels the need to have control over life circumstances, as many naturally do, the process of creating a temporary art piece provides the opportunity for the individual to embrace and gain from the present due to the realization the piece is only temporary.

By trusting in the art making process, Nicola can engage in a meditative practice that provides her opportunities to engage in mindful activities and work through frustrations. When considering this mindful practice in a therapeutic context you begin to see how the mind and body work in tandem. Specifically, in the act of creating art from items that are usually used in specific, culturally determined ways, the maker must rely on context and perception to connect with the item and transform their meaning. At times, this process may become frustrating due to the complexities of working with materials in new ways, but this frustration allows for the individual to take a step back and focus on overcoming the obstacle. By working through frustrations in the process, the artist can momentarily escape their everyday life while simultaneously gaining skills to better cope with new challenges.

“I particularly enjoy making spontaneous art on beaches with materials I find around me (pieces of plastic, glass, flotsam and jetsam). This is partly because I adore being outside in the elements, and I love the fact that the artwork is temporary and transient. I’ll take a photo of it before it’s blown away by the wind, or washed away by the tide.” – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

In addition to the meditative qualities of the form of artmaking, there are transient qualities that aid in the process of focusing on the here and now. As Nicola stated, “the permanence of a found object sculpture or collage can be limited, and the artist must embrace this component.” In the case of an individual who feels the need to have control over life circumstances, the process of creating a low stakes piece provides the opportunities to embrace and contemplate on the present. This practice emphasizes the process rather than the final product. Although the final product can also have valuable meaning, the transient aspect of the work can help individuals to slow down the pace of everyday life and enjoy the journey instead of only focusing on the aesthetic outcomes.



Figure 6: Fish from pottery fragments - Photograph provided by the artist

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-Nicola White

Beyond the Self.

“Each piece has its very own history. Each collage or fish is made up of many stories that we will never know about. My creations may just look like a basic collage in many ways, but I see the shard of pottery and wonder whose table it was on and what conversations it was witness to. I see the piece of blue glass from a poison bottle and wonder which Victorian household it was sitting in once upon a time.” – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

The stories these found objects hold is another valuable facet of this type of making. In therapeutic contexts we may ask participants to create using found objects, essentially giving new life to a discarded object. Through this process the maker is creating something as an extension of the self, but still the material is situated in a much larger story or context. When the final piece is created, the buttons, bottle caps, bottles, etc. evoke universal understandings. These artifacts have stories from before they became art, and those stories impact the current work of art. Just as all of the found objects have very different histories and origins, the viewers of the artwork come from unique backgrounds and have individualized perspectives. The artwork can unite the viewers in discussions about the universal qualities of the work to find commonalities while still allowing room for developing unique perspectives. This type of productive dialogue can provide an appropriate context for group dialogues.

“Being outside, beachcombing for materials to make a picture is therapeutic in itself. Holding a piece of sea glass in your hand, closing your eyes, and imagining its past life is magical. It takes you out of yourself. Taking children out in the mud to collect materials is great to watch. It’s history they can touch. It’s like going on a treasure hunt.”
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When introducing art as a therapeutic tool to someone who does not consider him or herself an artist, these objects possess inherent qualities that allow for the individual to think beyond the self to identify with something greater than apprehension about the art making process; as Nicola (personal communication, September 20, 2015) stated, this process “takes you out of yourself.” Additionally, for someone who is apprehensive about beginning the art making process, these objects may be more relatable and familiar than traditional art materials like paints and pastels. In one case of using found objects in art therapy sessions to improve mental health, Brooker (2010) reported the process of finding, relating to, and creating art with these objects helped to establish a different cognitive process for connecting to the external world



Figure 7: Birds from driftwood - Photograph provided by the artist

and reflecting on difficulties related to isolation and social concepts. Serving as a therapeutic element of this art making process, the process of the search for the materials can also provide a different outlook; potentially a metaphor of getting out of a contained space (or a cognitive mindset) to look for found materials can help to broaden perspectives in various aspects of life. Overall, individuals of varying experience, culture, and age can



Figure 8: Seaside Town

Photograph provided by the artist

use the accessibility and familiarity of found materials to their advantage to gain deeper understandings of themselves and the world around them.

Overall, individuals of varying experience, culture, and age can use the accessibility and familiarity of found materials to their advantage to gain deeper understandings of themselves and the world around them.

Not only can contemplative meaning making be experienced in this art making process, but the ephemeral qualities of the materials can provide insight to the meditative and transient qualities of our lives.

Summary.

“I love it when people look beyond the superficial nature of the art and embark upon a journey that explores the history and beauty of the individual fragments from which a piece of art is made. When someone is inspired to imagine the story behind a picture, or the objects in a picture, that for me is a memorable response. It’s magical to see someone examining a Thames bottle fish, looking at the individual pieces of glass and wondering what the history could be for each piece of glass.” – (Nicola White, personal communication, September 20, 2015)

Whether we are reflecting on Nicola White’s stunning work or embarking on our own art making journeys, we can imagine the stories behind found objects and discover personal resonance. One does not necessarily have to engage in formal art training or education to experience the powerful nature of interacting with found materials. Seeing everyday objects in new contexts and given new meaning, fosters a deeply involved process that can lead to creative expression and self-actualization. Further, found objects allow for us to give new life to previously forgotten and discarded objects, which serves as a metaphor for the transformative aspects of overcoming personal challenges and moving forward with newfound strength.

Not only can contemplative meaning making be experienced in this art making process, but the ephemeral qualities of the materials can provide insight to the meditative and transient qualities of our lives. Finally, these objects provide an opportunity for group dialogue to discover the unifying aspects that used and repurposed items can reveal about the human existence. Overall, the meaning we perceive from and pour into these materials transcends the idea that art must take a certain form; individuals from varying backgrounds can engage in an art making process with found materials to discover aspects of themselves as well as the world around them. As Nicola (personal communication, September 20, 2016) stated, found objects are “evocative of past lives, mysteries and stories that we will never know,” but giving new life to these materials allows us to redefine the understandings of our own pasts, present, and futures.

The Journal of Art for Life would like to extend a special thank you to Nicola White for the time and patience necessary to realize this artist feature. Her work is the first in series of artist features and we are honored to have had the opportunity to work with her on this article. For all those interested we encourage you to learn more about [Nicola and her most recent work with San Quentin inmates.](#)

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