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Amplifying Art of a Friend with Alzheimer's Disease Through Collaboration

“As an artist I wondered how best to present coloring pages as artwork in a gallery setting, while addressing a personal challenge. Coloring pages were anathema to me. As an art educator at a large university's visual art department, displaying coloring pages as art gave me pause. Personally, I had to acknowledge my subtle dislike for coloring pages which I had considered a substitute for creative art-making. Therefore, I began to ponder: how might I collaborate with Barb to amplify her art and its value? How might I situate this as research? What might I learn by revisiting my perspective on coloring pages?”

Abstract

The act of coloring pages, is recognized for its therapeutic value and this research shows how amplifying the artistry of a practitioner with Alzheimer's disease enhances understanding about the disease, improves relationships and adds value to an underrated art practice. My collaboration with a neighbor experiencing Alzheimer's disease involved presenting her coloring pages as fine art in a gallery, increasing recognition of the practice as valuable for maintaining normalcy and serving as a model for other people with dementia (PWD) and their caregivers.

Keywords

Coloring books, Alzheimer's disease, collaborative action research, arts-based research

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When I met my new neighbor Barb Diedel several years ago, she had flower gardens, was a choir member and had a hobby of coloring. It seemed Barb always had a coloring book page she was working on. We became “over the-garden-fence” friends, often chatting at the fence, or on her side deck. When I inquired about her five adult children’s ages, she informed me she had Alzheimer’s disease, so wasn’t able to remember their ages, but it was several years later that her health failed and the dementia became apparent.

When I received a call for submissions for an exhibition, *Untold Stories of Aging*, to take place at the university I am employed at, I decided to share Barb’s artwork and her story, because I valued how it was a focusing element in her life with Alzheimer’s disease. I am an older adult artist/researcher/teacher and I wanted to collaborate with Barb as a friend, to elevate her coloring pages as art, and to honor her and the practice that was a focus for her while living with dementia. Although our age in years was not that different, there was a big difference in our life experiences, training and current situation. Within my position as an art educator, I could address the exhibition’s call “to cultivate a space for older adults to share aspects of the aging experience that are not typically discussed in legible spaces” (Jen, S. et al., 2022). One of the challenges in the *Untold Stories*’ call was for artists to engage in conversation and collaboration with an older adult. I wanted to collaborate to amplify the positives of Barb’s practice despite the challenges of other aspects of her life with Alzheimer’s. Alzheimer’s is a disease of dementia, which gradually diminishes memory and cognitive ability. Amplifying her work through collaboration would expand awareness and create a discursive space where life with Alzheimer’s was part of the conversation.

As an artist I wondered how best to present coloring pages as artwork in a gallery setting, while addressing a personal challenge. Coloring pages were anathema to me. As an art educator at a large university’s visual art department, displaying coloring pages as art gave me pause. Personally, I had to acknowledge my subtle dislike for coloring pages which I had considered a substitute for creative art-making. Therefore, I began to ponder: how might I collaborate with Barb to amplify her art and its value? How might I situate this as research? What might I learn by revisiting my perspective on coloring pages?

Methodology

Arts-based Collaborative Action Research

As part of the ongoing research for this project I addressed these questions using action research and art-based research methodologies. I surveyed my negative attitudes about coloring, researched why coloring pages are important, and grew to appreciate the benefits. The research was an invitation to explore an old bias, make new art and explore arts-based methodology.

As an art educator/researcher, I have collaborated with participants in conducting action research and involve them in planning, acting or creating, and reflecting in the research (Langdon, 2016). Action research is a living practice and is inherently relational and appropriate for pragmatic research problems (Sumara & Carsons, 1997). Sumara and Carsons (1997) point out that “the knowledge that is produced through action research is always knowledge about one’s self and one’s relation to particular communities” and the action is not merely activity but

“is a process through which one’s life is lived” (pp. xvii-xviii). This research was integrally linked to place and people in the community.

Action researchers not only work to understand, but also act to bring about positive change, often collaboratively, with the research process emphasizing the involvement of those being studied as active participants in effecting positive change (Stewart, 2024). Specifically, I approached this as *collaborative* action research, because it meets the criteria as a joint effort of artists, working together to address a challenge with an emphasis on mutual respect and co-learning (Stewart, 2024). The problem in this approach was the limited participation of Barb. As the main participant she had stopped coloring and had cognitive difficulties. But through the action of this research, I reconsidered the care-givers’ co-existence with the person experiencing Alzheimer’s and extend the definition of participant to their support team as well.

In creating art in collaboration with Barb through using her coloring work, the art would be the primary data produced from this research. Assessing the art, the exhibition and any outcomes from the exhibition would add validity to the research (Blaikie, 2009). This applies to arts-based action research as well because the creation of new art is the product of collaborative action (Blaikie, 2009). Art as data collected in arts-based research can include joint creation of an artwork with a participant(s) (Blaikie, 2009). Additionally, the art is dependent on collective interpretations for its meaning (Barrett, 2010). According to Blaikie, the researcher’s “voice” is present in the artwork, but not the focus, yet the research-creation and its meaning is carried out through the researcher lens. The art-based research has validity and integrity when it is complex, coherent, and consistent, and ethical processes help insure the end result’s validity and integrity (Blaikie, 2009). Comprehensively this research has the action/reflection feedback of action research, and the art-based data of images collaboratively created by me and Barb. The meaning of both, the artwork and the collaboration, are assessed by both me and Barb, and the community.

Assessing the Art of Coloring

An Art Educator’s History with Coloring Pages

In the 1970s I embraced an unquestioned Lowenfeldian anti-coloring book stance. Viktor Lowenfeld’s *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947/1964) was a seminal publication for art educators, reflecting 1950’s modernist values with an appreciation of the abstract and childlike drawings of artists like Paul Klee, Joan Miro and Picasso. Lowenfeld condemns the coloring book calling it detrimental and saying it makes children less confident in their own means of expression. Other art educators continue the critique, calling them at best recreational, and teaching conformity rather than celebrating difference (Milbrandt, 2016) while continuing stereotypical and biased representations of gender, indigeneity, and ethnicity (Stokely 2017). Yet, as I sought to address my bias, I learned that analysis of Lowenfeld’s claims have found problems and biases as well, with no research showing the coloring book is detrimental to child development (King, 1991). However, because coloring books reflect popular culture, they can be analyzed as such (Cowley, 1956) and can be an entry point to visual culture critique (Richard, 2007). For example, Glen Ligon painted a series of coloring book pages from 1970’s Black liberation themed coloring books that were reinterpreted by children 20 years later without understanding of the topic. The clown-like coloring on the Malcom X portrait page demonstrates how cultural perspectives and understandings change over time (Ligon, 2024). Ligon, is Black and his cultural critique makes a multi-layered statement about how random color choices in

coloring books leading us to perhaps rethink norms, and tropes of local color. Maybe it is the freedom of choice implicit in coloring pages that adds to their appeal.

As I revisit the coloring book page from a post-modern perspective, I rethink its function for the practitioner outside the realm of education. The current popularity of adult coloring books, with sales of \$150 million in 2023 (Verified Market Research, 2024) and a plethora of different books appealing to all age groups and interests speaks to its popularity and acceptance. Coloring books even earned recognition with their own day, August 2, celebrated by the Smithsonian Libraries who reproduce selected pages from their rare books for downloading and coloring (Smithsonian Libraries, 2018).

Coloring as Therapy

My initial research found a critique of the therapeutic role of the adult coloring book. Malchiodi (2015) argued coloring is more obsession than mindfulness, more a “feel-good” experience than an authentic creative expression, saying that it is not art therapy because it lacks in a relational aspect (para 6). Yet other research shows coloring does have therapeutic value for both an aging population and with selected younger participants in controlled studies. Coloring pages are even being recommended today by the Mayo clinic for their therapeutic value (Bobby, 2022).

The benefit of visual art therapy (VAT) for ageing populations has been well documented. In a systematic review and meta-analysis of literature documenting benefits of VAT to ageing populations, it is shown to prevent or manage dementia, as well as improve cognitive functioning, (Masika, et al., 2020). As one aspect of art therapy, coloring was shown to lower stress and reduces negative affect (Kaimal, et al., 2017). As a low cognitive demand activity, it was preferred over expressive drawing activity for generating greater states of flow (Forkosh & Drake, 2017). Flett, et al. (2017) showed that daily coloring can improve some negative psychological outcomes and is a highly accessible self-help tool. Holt, et al. (2019) study showed that coloring can significantly reduce anxiety, and improve attention span and creative cognition. Coloring designs for older adults with memory loss imparts sensory stimuli of shapes and colors, generates feelings of joy upon drawing completion, leads to enhanced vitality, and decrease patients’ apathy (Hatori, et al., 2011).

Similar results have been reported with the media and method of watercolor painting as Alzheimer’s intervention. In a case study about a father’s Alzheimer’s, the son reported that rich art-making can take place even when cognitive skills have diminished, that watercolor paintings had given his father multiple behavioral benefits including stabilizing cognitive loss, improved behavior, mood, daily living activities, and communication, all which gave him, the care giver, respite (Platzer & Potts, 2011). Potts submitted that what he saw in his father and his artwork demonstrates that the concept of self, the core of a person, may still be seen in people with advanced dementia.

Process and Project

All of these benefits seemed to apply to Barbara, as seen in her almost daily, continuous practice of coloring throughout her illness. Her husband Ray confided that at first, he was somewhat resentful of the time she spent coloring, but came to realize it made her happy and it was a respite for him. My first direct engagement with Barb’s coloring books was previewing the

collection of over 500 pages in 20 books filled with colored pages from the past ten years. Her color and design choices, both representational and abstract, gave me an appreciation of her persistence, skill and innate knowledge of color theory. I could amplify Barb's work by expanding the size and extending the complexity of the coloring page, in a way that demonstrated her aesthetic sensibilities.

I paged through and bookmarked selections from the many beautiful and intricately colored patterns. Barb's collection included a wide variety of designs, some culturally specific and some highlighting popular visual culture. They demonstrated a high level of skill and an innate understanding of color theory. I developed a plan to collaborate with Barb in a way that brought it off the kitchen table and onto the walls of the art gallery. I curated pages for similar color themes and patterns, and digitized and combined my favorites into colorful collages using Photoshop. At first, I wove edges of the rectangle pages of intricate patterns into a larger patchwork.

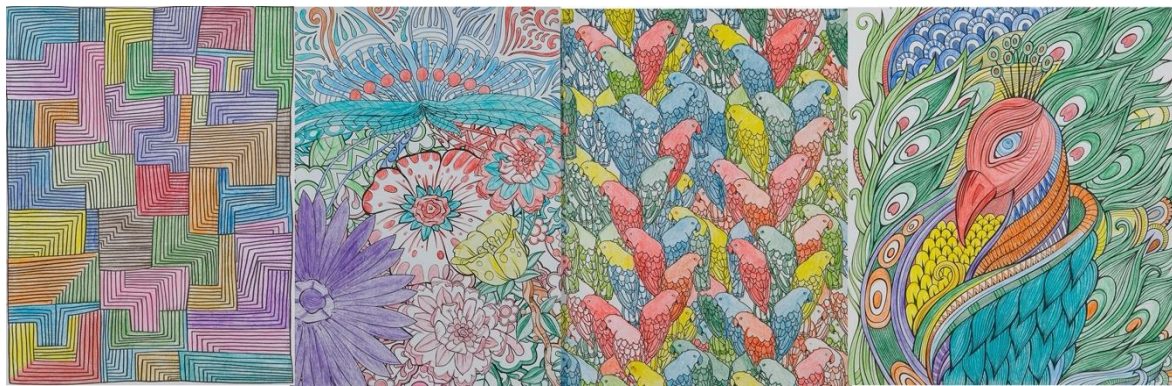


Figure 1. Four individual pages which combine into Peacock Pattern



Figure 2. Peacock Pattern, digitally reproduced and woven coloring pages

for display. I was a co-creator with Barb, and grateful for the use of her colorful designs and patterns.

For Barbara coloring was a positive and generative obsession. As I worked with the designs, I appreciated that there are cognitive challenges in creating color balanced symmetrical designs and self-similar patterns with limited color, as well as choosing color themes to express design narratives, all while working a variation of the four-color map problem, where no sides have matching color (Jensen, 2001). These cognitive skills or challenges may not be apparent to the casual observer or untrained eye, but as an artist I appreciated the skill I saw in Barb's pages and I gained an understanding of the complexity in the color patterned imagery and color themes that repeated in different books. After the first several woven images, I decided to have fun and create a surrealist bathroom inspired by her pink water buffalo and patterned lion's mane. My goal was to amplify the work she had done, and through my process of recombining images, I had fun too.

I enlarged the images, printed on a wide format printer and framed them

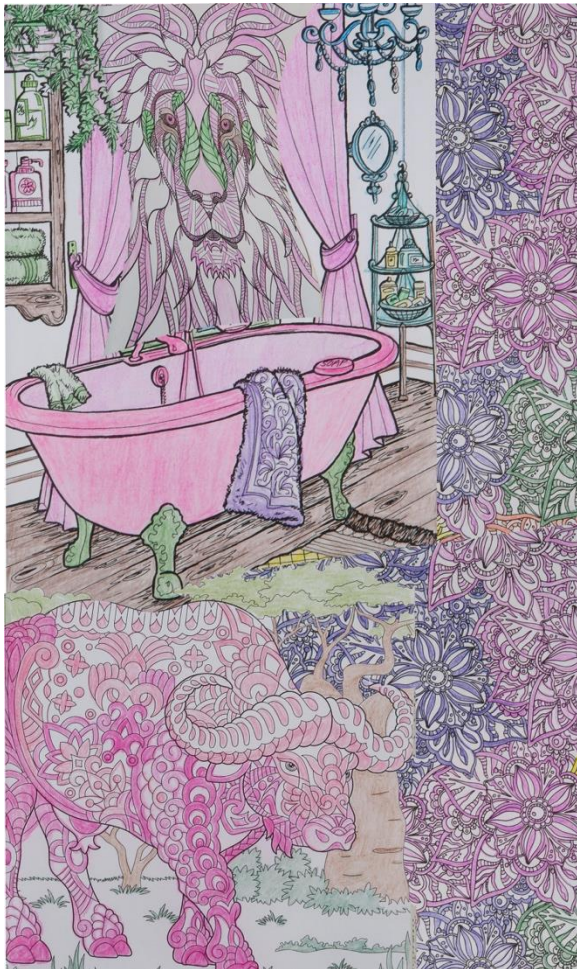


Figure 5 Four individual pages which combine into Buffalo Bath

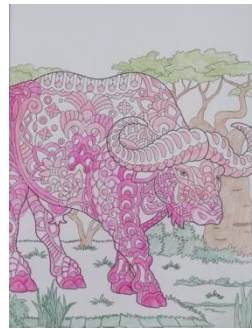


Figure 3 Water buffalo



Figure 4 Bathtub



Figure 7 Pink Lion



Figure 6 Floral pattern

My interactions with Barb, prior to and at the exhibition, show our engagement with the art was a commonality. We both had enjoyed working with the same designs and we could talk light-heartedly even at the late stage of her disease.

How I addressed my personal challenge and reached these goals led me to situate the work as collaborative art-based action research. I was in conversation and collaboration with Barb and her artwork, and my digital manipulations weaved her art into a larger more complex design that could hold a presence of its own in a gallery. The exhibit became a vehicle for conversation with her family and community, and a way of amplifying how an art practice is an inroad into a substantive conversation with an Alzheimer's patient.

Prior to the exhibit I met Barb and Ray's children when they gathered next door for a party and I made sure they felt invited to attend the exhibition. This began a relationship that continues until today. An end goal of collaborative action research is always creating shared knowledge and community. In Barb's case I recognized the artful application in her work and shared it in a way that was advocacy for the healing nature of art practices, not only for the practitioner but for their team of caregivers. The children appreciated their mom's artistic skills from earlier years when Barb planted beautiful perennial beds, created and ran a craft shop and did flower arranging for a local florist—utilizing her eye for color and design. They told me she had enjoyed coloring with them when they were small and with her grandchildren more recently. As Alzheimer's took over, the pages in these books became a way for Barb to focus, as other skills diminished.

Displaying the images in the exhibit elevated them to fine art status and brought together a community of support for Barb and her family. Her husband, children and their spouses and grandchildren gathered at the exhibition to honor her and enjoy the artwork. She was awarded a first-place prize for the display and enjoyed conversing with everyone. We were interviewed and recorded to document the collaboration and share this untold story (Sigler Family Aging Scholars, 2022). The five framed artworks for the exhibit hung in Barb and Ray's home and I had hope would eventually find homes with their five children.

Analysis and Interpretation

As I reviewed literature on visual art therapy and Alzheimer's disease, and reflected on my own creative engagement in this art-based research, I realize I had gained greater experiential knowledge of both coloring, as an art form, and connecting with a person with Alzheimer's by sharing in this experience. Both Barb and I found an inner happiness by creating art, and even with advanced dementia, Barb still demonstrated that she held a concept of self that is the core of a person (Platzer & Potts, 2011). I was grateful to Barb not only to be able to play with her pages in digital collages, but also to engage in conversations with her about the formal properties and stories of these images. During visits we discussed ideas about her color choices as we paged through these books together. She said "Art is about playing...and making your own choices."

The validity of art-based research is gained by participant confirmation of the artwork's aesthetic qualities, a coherence in the art itself, and an ethical approach to participation, which insures the end result's validity and integrity (Blaikie, 2014). The artwork's aesthetic qualities, and the coherence within the color and design, speaks to the quality of our collaboration which was highly rated by the jurors. The digital collages had coherence as the combination of colors and patterns made visual sense. The collaboration was an ethical use of Barb's talents and mine as the artwork exhibited was stronger because of both of our skills.

Conclusion and Recommendations

One aspect of Malchiodi (2015) critique of coloring that may be true, is that without any social engagement accompanying the practice, the therapeutic aspect may be lacking. It is important to recognize the social value of collaborative participation of artists, arts educators and persons with dementia (PWD) and their family, which lends a greater appreciation for the healing value of visual art. An important social aspect of art is looking at and seeing what is in an image and gaining an appreciation for the artist and their skills. This was my experience with Barb's work and at the exhibition where people saw that some part of Barb was not the Alzheimer's disease. Through the exhibition and a subsequent article in the local publication of the Senior Resource Center (Langdon, 2022) more local people are engaged in conversations about coloring as a practice that may help those living with Alzheimer's, or caring for someone living with it. Dodson, et al. (2023) have shown that the impact of art therapy on the relationships between individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and their care partners showed a significant shift towards better self-esteem scores and may improve relationship dynamics between individuals with Alzheimer's disease and their care partners. I propose expanding a network of Alzheimer's caregivers to include those who fill the role of art therapy facilitators, by facilitating collaborative making, displaying, or simply engaging in conversations about practitioners' art. This training would include valuing the cognitive and creative skill involved in coloring. Training those who interact with PWD to recognize people's visual skills and to engage in conversations as an enlightened viewer, can be a bridge for building understanding and greater respect.

The most recent research in neuroart, does not reflect the inherent knowledge specific to the visual arts domain that is required in tasks of coloring (Magsamen & Ross, 2023). Future research should include identifying the kinds of cognitive skills that coloring and other art skills requires, and developing training for physicians, therapists and caregivers to encourage conversation and gain greater appreciation for what the art practitioner is doing and thinking. Coloring may sound simple, but it is not child's play, and documenting how it impacts PWD cognitive skills in multiple ways could encourage more participation.

I had always understood coloring with pencils as an effective media in itself, and yet, in prior research had not considered it as part of a healing practice. This new research asks me to reconsider elder artist Elizabeth Layton's artwork, which combined colored pencils with realistic contour drawing self-portrait-based narratives, which healed her after years of mental health issues (Langdon, 2018; Langdon, et al. 2022). I now think that the *act* of coloring her images may also have contributed to the healing process that vastly improved her mental health. Her art became an early exemplar of art recognized by the American Art Therapy Association as functioning as art therapy (Bretz, 1985).

One Final Note

Barbara died of Covid complicated by late-stage Alzheimer's two months after the exhibit. Two years later Ray's children are next door facilitating a sale to clear out 60 years of accumulated life, because Ray has moved to an independent living facility due to his own health problems. At the end of the estate sale, I notice one of the large framed pieces from the exhibit was still for sale. The daughters are quick to tell me that the smaller framed pieces had sold, that they were easier for people to handle and that the images seemed to hold an inexplicable appeal to the recipients. They said that is when they discovered, by sharing their mom's story, that the

recipient shared a life experience like theirs, caring for someone with Alzheimer's, and the art Barb made, was bringing together strangers to share in the grief and memories.

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