

## THE ART OF SELF-CARE: THERAPEUTIC ART USING FOOD REMNANTS WITH SENSORY PRACTICE

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### Abstract

*In the realm of emotional well-being, the value of art as a therapeutic tool has been known for a long time. Before this research investigation, the researchers underwent a study with the Pakistani undergraduate students that focused on connecting emotions with creative narratives through the amalgamation of organic materials and other ingredients. Learning the effectiveness of these media among the Pakistani students, the researchers sought to expand these ideas into a new environment. The possibility of conducting an online workshop with thirteen students from China's Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts provided a distinctive chance to research this therapeutic art practice in a unique educational and cultural context. By incorporating Gillian Judson's Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) theory, this research aimed at studying how delving into these abstract nature-inspired artistic practices can stimulate self-discovery and emotional well-being in individuals. Being Qualitative research, the researchers used observations and unstructured interviews as research tools to gather rich, detailed feedback from the participants. Through this research, the focus was to examine the therapeutic value of working with organic materials, i.e., food remnants, along with their sensory experiences in developing one's emotional healing and narrative building. The results showed that these artful activities motivated participants to connect with their unexpressed emotions more deeply, finding solace during the process. Through sensory experiences, the participants showcased heightened engagement and mindfulness during the activity and found comfort in their creative explorations, thus enhancing their narrative building. In conclusion, this study brings forward the impact of art in therapeutic practices through the lens of Judson's IEE theory. The findings suggest that creative experimental amalgamation of food remnants along with sensory experiences can be a powerful means for an individual's emotional and psychological growth. Further research could explore the broader applications of these practices across varied cultural contexts to deepen one's understanding of emotional well-being.*

**Keywords:** Therapeutic Art, Healing, Organic, Food Remnants, Imaginative Ecological Education, Tactile, Process, Narrative, Mindfulness, Solace.

### Introduction

Art has long been appreciated for its therapeutic qualities, offering individuals a means to express themselves openly and find solace through their emotions. From traditional paintings to more contemporary art forms - performing arts and digital arts, to name a few- these creative processes offer individuals various opportunities for self-discovery and emotional expression. In the context of art therapy, these sensory-rich practices are not merely artistic endeavors but are deeply intertwined with psychological well-being. Therefore, this study delves into an innovative approach that integrates organic materials and food synthesis into the therapeutic art process, providing a fresh perspective on emotional well-being and self-care.

Additionally, depression clinically is described as a mental illness that affects how one functions in everyday mundane tasks <sup>iii</sup>. According to a neuroscience study, individuals suffering from any form of anxiety or depression are positively affected by nonverbal forms of psychotherapy that include art therapy as well. In another study it has been established that art therapy is fruitful in boosting self-healing expression and building resilience towards negative thought processes, both in individual and group-based activities <sup>v</sup>.

Furthermore, focusing on the researcher's interest in the intersection of art and therapy, their journey began with their teaching experiences in Pakistan, where they had to counsel undergraduate students grappling with anxiety. Sessions were held with these students, where the researchers engaged them in exploring the emotional dimensions through organic materials; a

creative process that aimed towards helping the undergraduate students gain insight into their feelings and deal with anxiety issues with the help of creative art therapy approaches. Likewise, in these sessions, experimentations were done by students in which they developed art forms and structures that resonated with the students, on a personal level. Henceforth, following the experimentation, the subsequent intriguing yet interactive questions were part of the sessions with the undergraduate students such as: How did using organic materials and food helped them in better understanding and healing their emotions? How did the blend of food, fabric, and paper mâché in art therapy supported emotional healing and their personal growth? As a result, the use of organic materials became a powerful medium for expression, enabling the students to explore and articulate their emotions in a way that felt both authentic and intimate. Moreover, it has also been revealed in many studies that the openness of the elements, change, diversity and interaction with the natural environment affixes the healing process more effectively<sup>vi</sup>. While traditional art materials are widely used in therapeutic settings and connectedness to nature seems to benefit mood and mental health<sup>vii</sup>, the therapeutic potential of amalgamating organic materials and food synthesis to evoke a deeper connection with one's emotions and foster a more profound narrative-building process, remains underexplored.

The opportunity to lead an online workshop with 13 students from Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in China provided a valuable chance to explore this therapeutic art activity in a distinct cultural and educational setting while also expanding and studying these ideas into a new environment. Thus, being a qualitative study in nature and using the research tools such as observations, visual images / videos extracted during the Workshop and unstructured interviews to gather data, the 1-day Intensive Workshop model addresses this gap, emphasizing on how usage of these materials in art therapy aids emotional exploration, healing of self and construction of meaning making.

### **Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) Framework**

The Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) framework, developed by Gillian Judson, is integral to the 1-day Intensive workshop design. IEE framework, focuses on helping individual develop empathy (either with self or the surroundings) and emotional intelligence. It also emphasizes interactive learning that encourages meaningful connections with nature and each other. IEE framework revolves around the three key themes: **Feeling, Activeness, and Sense of Place**.

#### ***Feeling***

Under the theme of “Feeling”, the emphasis is on the significance of emotional engagement in learning. Judson is of a viewpoint here, that when individuals connect emotionally with any given subject matter, they are likely to develop empathy. This, consequently, not only benefits the individuals have better understanding of their emotions rather they become compassionate towards others as well. This further improves their social interactions on daily routine.

#### ***Activeness***

According to “Activeness” in Judson’s IEE theory the focus is primarily on the role of active participation during the learning process. She highlights more on experiential learning that engages individuals physically and mentally. By involving individuals in practical and interactive learning activities, the IEE framework helps in unlocking their creativity, making the learning process more immersive and meaningful.

#### ***Sense of Place***

This theme talks highly about one’s connection towards a particular surrounding/ location– not limited to its physical state but also the memories or emotions tied to it. Based on the three key themes of IEE framework, the 1-day Intensive Workshop sets to explore how the practical integration of food remnants and their sensory experiences in art therapy can generate feelings and encourages narrative building while developing an understanding of their surroundings.

### **Purpose of the Workshop**

The primary objective of the 1-day Intensive Workshop was to explore the amalgamation of natural materials through the lens of the IEE framework, helping individuals reflect on their past memories or current concerns. The workshop also aimed to explore how organic materials and food synthesis fostered deeper emotional well-being and contributed significantly to the therapeutic process. Thus, by creating a communicative and spontaneous process of self-discovery, this workshop aimed towards providing innovation in therapy and a clear perspective for individuals, ultimately offering solace to life.

### **Research Questions**

- Q1) How does the principles of Imaginative Ecological Education integrated into art therapy using organic materials and food synthesis, facilitate emotional healing?  
Q2) In what ways does the art therapy practices using organic materials and food synthesis, contribute to creative narrative building in individuals?

### **Participants**

The participants were 13 undergraduate art students, and 1 Chinese Faculty Member from Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts in China. The selection was based on their willingness to participate and explore new materials in art therapy. The faculty member also served as a facilitator and provided English translation support for the researchers, bridging the language barrier during key aspects of the workshop.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The data was collected during detailed observations of the workshop sessions, the visual activity images shared by the participants, videos captured during activity and unstructured interviews with participants before, during and after the activity. The focus was on their experiences, narrations and emotional responses to the activities.

### **1-Day Intensive Workshop Design Model**

For this qualitative research study titled 'The Art of Self-Care: Unveiling Therapeutic Potential with Organic and Food Synthesis', the researchers' planned a 1-Day Intensive Workshop with 13 students of Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts, China to explore how using organic materials, food synthesis, and creative narrative techniques could serve as effective methods for emotional exploration of oneself and their healing. Thus, the 1-day Intensive Workshop was divided into 3 phases i.e., introductory session, practical implementation and interactive sessions. Each phase was restricted to 30 minutes, 3 hours, and 30 minutes, respectively to keep the participants engaged and not overwhelmed, focusing effectively on the activity objective.

The 1-day Intensive Workshop was photographed, and video-audio recorded with permission from the participants. Observations during the activity day were also conducted to gather data. To help the researchers gain clear insights on each participant's performance, the participant's moved closer to the camera to present their work. The Chinese facilitator translated responses for those who didn't speak English and also interpreted the researchers' questions into Chinese, when needed. Furthermore, the relevant participants were also briefed about the research study through a thorough informative email which was translated and explained to them by their facilitator in their local language, in order to avoid any inconveniences during the activity.

The workshop led towards potential group discussions (Guiding Questions), research information on food synthesis (through the process of empathy map), explorations and experimentations, leading towards narrative building or therapeutic atmosphere. The researchers reviewed each participant's activity in relation to their experiences and thoughts on their exploration. They

provided guidance to help participants develop a story or narrative about their work, where needed.

### ***Guiding Questions***

Q1) What do you see in the material or the process that you are exploring?

- Is it relatable?
- Can you recall any memory with it?
- What kind of nostalgia does it brings back to you down the memory lane?
- Is it functional? Can you convert this abstract form into a product?

Q2) How does the material and the texture of the pulp (paper, fruit, vegetable) relate to your personality or experience you want to remember?

### ***Critical Thinking and Reflection, Through Empathy Map***

An important part of IEE that is most beneficial in the healing process of an individual is the critical thinking process. Here the model of the workshop involves an empathy map that is structured around the core elements, such as: Does, Feels, Thinks, and Speaks. These are to act as a guide for the participants through a series of self-reflective questions, encouraging a thorough examination of their emotional and cognitive responses during the creative process.

**Does.** This section aims at encouraging participants to connect their playful explorations with their underlying emotions or psychological states.

- What actions did you take during the activity?
- Why did you choose certain methods or techniques?
- Did your actions reflect an emotional response, such as tearing paper to release frustration or layering materials to create a sense of security?

### **Feels.**

- What emotions did you experience before, during and after the activity?
- How did the explorations affect you personally as well as its' impact on your surroundings?
- Was the experience emotionally charged, and if so, was it comforting, sorrowful, or something else?

### **Thinks.**

These prompts act as a pathway for the participants to explore their internal thought processes and uncover deeper insights into their emotional states.

- What thoughts crossed your mind while engaging with the materials?
- How do these thoughts relate to your past memories or recent experiences?
- Does this activity challenge or affirm your current beliefs and emotions?

### **Speaks.**

These questions guide participants to think about the expressive qualities of their work and what their materials or creative process might symbolically "say" or communicate.

- What is the material "telling" you during this process?
- If the artwork could speak, what message would it convey?
- What thoughts or phrases come to mind as you work with the chosen materials?
- How does the process of making express what you are unable to put into words?



## Findings

### *Cultivating Emotional Connections: The Role of Feelings in Creative Exploration*

According to IEE's framework, feelings play a central role during the process of creative explorations. Participants were encouraged to recall any associated personal memories and experiences as they worked with the basic qualities of organic materials such as its' textures, or scents. The first participant, Jane who titled her art exploration sculpture as "Light Autumn Clear Grapefruit" (Figure 1), was assembled using grapefruit, daisy petals, and paper. Jane's decision to explore grapefruit as her main ingredient stemmed from her pleasant high school memories of sharing the fruit with her friend during the autumn/winter seasons.

Through Jane's narrative on her cherished memories, she was not only deeply content with the outcome but the strong sensory properties of grapefruit specially its' juicy texture, and its sweet-smelling peel, proved to be a strong memory-jogger in recalling these cherished moments. Moreover, through this finding, the importance of physical involvement with material i.e. grapefruit is seen evoking a complete emotional experience. These connections underscores how the tactile engagement with organic materials can evoke comprehensive emotional memories, strengthening the therapeutic potential of such practices. The participant's ability to translate these memories into a creative form illustrates not only the effectiveness of art therapy in facilitating emotional expression but self-reflection as well.

**Figure 1**

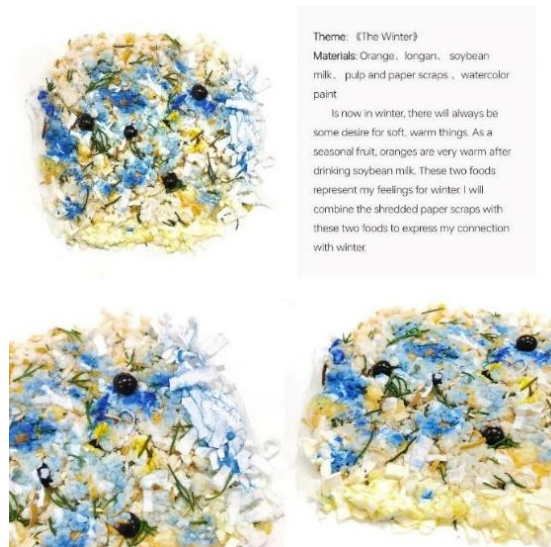
*Light Autumn Clear Grapefruit*



Interestingly, another participant worked using seasonal elements such as orange, longan, soybean milk, pulp, and paper scraps to evoke feelings of warmth and comfort associated with winter, hence naming the work "The Winter" (Figure 2). The use of these food scraps and materials, particularly the combination of warm, soft foods and tactile textures, provided the participant with a sensory-rich experience that was both grounding and comforting. During the interactive discussions in the workshop, the participant reflected how the use of familiar,

comforting materials in art therapy helped her cope with seasonal affective challenges or feelings of coldness and isolation. Hence, emphasizing the role of sensory engagement in promoting emotional well-being.

**Figure 2**  
*The Winter*



The hands-on interaction with organic and food-based materials formed an immersive experience that encouraged participants to be fully present in the moment, heightening their awareness of both the materials and their own emotional states. One participant described their exploration, giving it the title of "Chaotic Eating" (Figure 3) as a representation of disorder and emotional turmoil. It is interesting how he combined the leftovers from his meals and used the kneading technique to show chaos and confusion through his work. At the end, the outcome was a messed up look that communicated his feelings of frustration and inability to have self-control. Yet the sculpture gave him a sense of liberation and vent out of his emotions. The whole process gave him an emotional journey to recon with and in future deal better with his situation.

**Figure 3**  
*Chaotic Eating*



**Active Participation:**

***Harnessing Energy and Creativity in Experiential Learning***

According to the IEE framework, being active not only refers to one's physical participation rather, it's the enthusiasm and the creative spirit which the participants bring to their learning experiences. Participant's active involvement during the activity was heightened by the challenge of working with organic materials, which required a responsive and adaptive approach. Therefore, the processes of kneading, cutting, mixing, smelling and crafting became the essential components in bringing out their creative potential which not only promoted inventive experimentations but provided a ground for freedom of speech in some participants as well.

"The Language of Violets" (Figure 4) is one of the notable examples in which the participant made use of materials such as paper, dyes, yarn, and leaves. The violet colour palate in the experimentation wasn't merely simple aesthetics but it showcased the participant's emotional journey. By assembling and stacking yarn and pigments, the participant constructed a narrative that captured the feelings of growth, transformation, and healing. During activity discussions, the participant expressed the effectiveness of such organic explorations, by stating that, working with these materials allowed her to express her internal experiences, providing a therapeutic outlet for emotions which she might not have been able to express verbally.

Thus, this finding stressed upon the powerful potential that food remnants with sensory practice can play in strong narrative building. The individual was able to communicate her personal stories or feelings in a way that were deeply meaningful and emotional.

**Figure 4**

***The Language of Violets***



Name: "The Language of Violets"  
Materials: Paper, pigments, yarn, rags, sand, leaves, grass soaked in water.

"Decay is also Beautiful" (Figure 5), is another participant's creative expression where the themes of decay and transformation are presented. Through the fusion of Chinese baking pastries, fruit pulp, fallen leaves, branches, iron wire, plush balls, and water colour pigments the participant demonstrated his personal reviews on the temporary nature of life and his acceptance of change. Thus, capturing the beauty of life and death. Moreover, this finding suggested the potential of art therapy using food remnant's ability to address themes of life-death in a non-verbal manner.

**Figure 5**

*Decay is also beautiful*



Name: «Decay is also beautiful»

Materials: Chinese baking pastries, pulp, fallen leaves, branch, iron wire, plush ball, watercolor pigment.

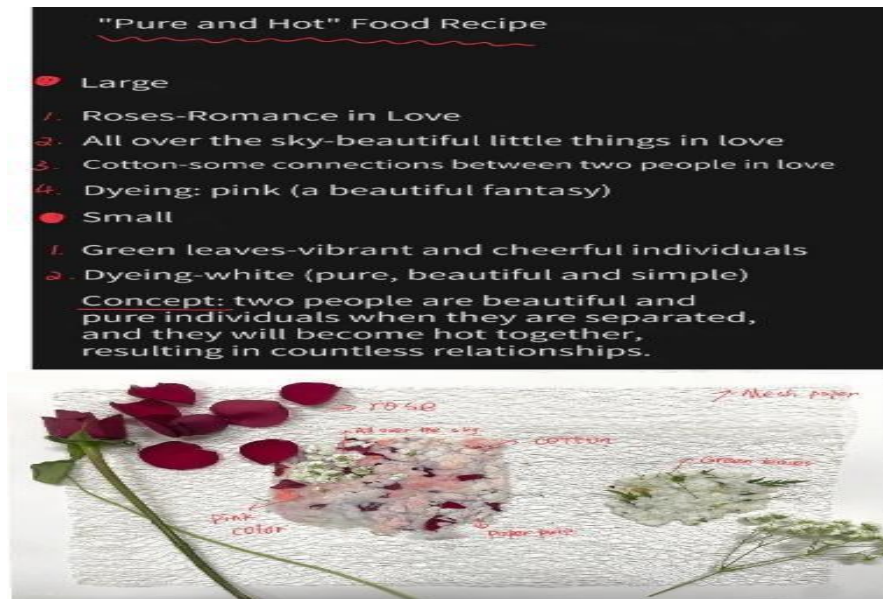
Production steps: Crush Chinese pastries into a rough powder, add moist pulp and let the pulp and pastry powder mix thoroughly to absorb excess moisture. Add torn leaves and broken branches, stick bent wire onto them, add plush balls, and finally color with blue, orange, and red watercolor pigments.

Participants in the workshop portrayed notable creativity, as they shaped their ideas by introducing elements and merging materials that were not only visually gripping but were also rich in symbolic and emotional content. Through this workshop, they not only got the opportunity to push the boundaries of traditional art-making, but also revealed their concealed emotions through the use of materials, blending conventional art supplies with organic and food-based items in their works of art. Henceforth, a particularly notable example is the work shown in Figure 6, titled "Pure and Hot", by one of the participants representing the individuality and innocence of a person within the relationship. To explore the complex romantic bonds, she employed a combination of roses, cotton, and dyed leaves, where roses signified romance and passion. These roses were cleverly juxtaposed with the gentleness and purity of cotton and the dyed leaves adding a layer of complexity, thus symbolizing the shifts in mood that occurs when two individuals come together in a close, romantic bond.

Observing the participant's use of these materials leading to a deeply conceptual idea, the finding stresses the potential of such innovative practices i.e. the enriched therapeutic art process, that allows individuals to articulate and explore complex emotions in ways that traditional art forms alone may not facilitate.



**Figure 6**  
*Pure and Hot*



***Rooted in Place: Developing a Sense of Belonging through Ecological Awareness***

IEE framework highly stresses upon supporting individuals feel more connected to their surroundings and emphasizes on promoting greater awareness of their ecological settings as well. Likewise, the workshop activities were designed to help participants develop a hearty connection to the places they reside in, whether through the use of locally sourced materials or the reflection on their interactions with the natural world. Hence through observations, a sense of belonging that extended beyond the workshop and into their creative expressions of self was evidently observed., as well. Moreover, the workshop's guided questions and structured reflective exercises proved to be valuable in nurturing profound self-awareness and mindfulness among the participants. These activities allowed participants to explore their concealed emotions through art therapy, leading to meaningful personal insights. For instance, one notable example is a piece titled "A colorful world in decay," (Figure 7), that highlights materials such as oranges, paper, and glitter powder, conveying message about perception and beauty. This representation signified the participant's comprehension that decay and corrosion, often seen as negative, might also be viewed as part of a pulsating and energetic process. Moreover, these explorations facilitated individuals grow emotionally and mentally redefining how they see life's changes. This research finding demonstrates the effectiveness of art as a tool and food remnants and sensory practice as mediums for fostering self-awareness and inspiring individuals to reflect and reinterpret their experiences and sentiments.

**Figure 7**  
*A colorful world in decay*



Name: (A colorful world in decay)  
Materials: orange paper, watercolor, pen, ball, glitter powder  
Work introduction: The tiny process of food decay can also be rich and interesting. When you think the world is gray, you can change your perspective and spend some energy observing to discover many colorful and interesting things, which are also worth it in an inconspicuous life.

Another noticeable example is one of the participants work titled "The Hope" (Figure 8) which expressed topics of renewal and life through the use of tattered leaves, roses, dirt, and green elements. This artwork echoed about the arrival of spring, a time of rebirth and hope i.e. the idea of decay was conveyed through the usage of tattered leaves and dirt, whereas the concept of new life was depicted through the blend of roses and green springs. Overall, the expression illustrated the recurring nature of life and the hope that emerges from hardship. The participant's innovative experimentations with these materials allowed them to connect with their own sense of hope and cheerfulness, presenting the effectiveness of art therapy in building emotional strength and encouraging a hopeful view of life.

**Figure 8**  
*The Hope*



Ultimately, the research findings reveal a prominent insight of how organic materials into art therapy along with its' sensory explorations, can stimulate intense emotional reactions, allow creative expression to flourish and promote self- inner healing. This is further supported by the participants' reflections which stressed the profound connections between the materials used and their personal memories, emotions, and experiences. Lastly, by sharing their personal narratives alongside their artistic works, the participants established a caring and empathetic community

flourishing collective healing and understanding. It also underlines the potential of art therapy to provide participants with a safe space to explore and resolve complex emotions through direct, sensory-rich interactions with their choice of medium. Collective sharing of experiences produced an interactive learning environment that not only enhanced the therapeutic potential of the workshop but also illustrated art as having the potential to serve as a bridge between personal and communal healing. Apart from this, the findings revealed that, the physicality of forming with organic materials in therapeutic art practices, also served as a powerful tool for emotional expression.

### Conclusion

If we evaluate the outcomes of the workshop in the perspective of the principles set by Gillian Judson's theory of Gillian Judson's Imaginative Ecological Education (IEE) theory, we can see many remedial processes. These therapeutic potential in these practices helps the participants to process complicated emotions and build a connection with their inner being. In terms of future implications, further research could explore the broader applications of these methods across diverse cultural settings to deepen one's understanding of their impact on emotional well-being and therapeutic outcomes.

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