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Developing a Holistic Outlook through Art

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Developing a Holistic Outlook through Art

Abstract

Dr. Guy McCormack, PhD., OTR/L, FAOTA, an occupational therapist and retired academic program director based in Seaside, California, provided the cover art for the Summer 2023 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Tree of Life" is a 20" x 24" painting made from acrylic on panel. McCormack has served as an occupational therapist and educator for nearly 50 years. His career includes many notable clinical and academic achievements. Today, he finds joy in painting landscapes, animals, and abstract compositions. Since his retirement, art has helped McCormack develop a more holistic outlook on life.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, painting, PTSD, Guy McCormack

Credentials Display

Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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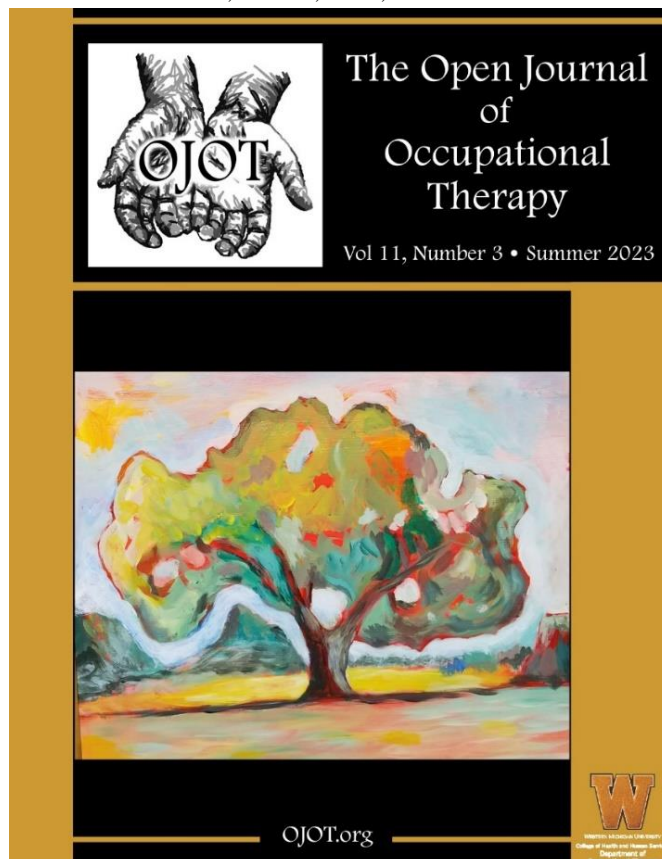
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The profession of occupational therapy was built on a pragmatic foundation where the concept of occupation (or, the act of *doing*) provides both an end and a means for health and well-being (Gray, 1998). Occupational therapy has a rich history of using art as a therapeutic tool to rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Physical reconditioning often involved manual labor and handcrafts (Cole & Tufano, 2020). In addition to physical injuries, many veterans returned home struggling with symptoms of shell shock, known today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Crocq & Crocq, 2000). PTSD is an acute psychological reaction caused by exposure to a traumatic event (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). People with PTSD often experience psychological symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares, disturbed sleep, exaggerated startle response, and difficulty concentrating (APA, 2023). These symptoms can cause significant distress in daily life. During the moral treatment movement, work programs housed in sheltered workshops and convalescent homes aimed to promote mental health and self-sufficiency. Treatment often involved therapeutic use of art. The handcrafted goods produced were sold to the public. The goal of therapy was to restore both physical and mental functions. Approximately 56 years ago, Guy McCormack returned home from the Vietnam war with symptoms of PTSD. Painting helped him cope with unresolved trauma experienced during combat. As a result, these symptoms have subsided. Art continues to provide a means for healing that traditional therapies could not.

Dr. Guy McCormack, PhD., OTR/L, FAOTA, an occupational therapist and retired academic program director who resides in Seaside, California, provided the cover art for the Summer 2023 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1). “Tree of Life” is a 20” x 24” painting made from acrylic on panel. McCormack has served as an occupational therapist and educator for nearly 50 years. His career includes many notable clinical and academic achievements. He finds joy in painting landscapes, animals, and abstract compositions. Since his retirement, art has helped McCormack develop a more holistic outlook on life.

McCormack was born and raised in Poughkeepsie, New York. His father was a skilled contractor and Navy veteran of WWII. His mother was a homemaker who raised seven children: four boys and three girls. McCormack’s interest in art started early in life. He looked forward to art class in elementary school. In the 8th grade, McCormack received an award recognizing his artistic abilities. “This piqued my interest in art even more,” he said. “I was not sure if I wanted to follow in my fathers’ footsteps and pursue a career in the trades.” In junior college, McCormack enrolled in every art class he could. He was not financially prepared to pay for a four-year college degree, so he enlisted in the Seabees branch of the Navy and spent 13-months in Vietnam. “It was in Vietnam that I fell in love with painting to escape from the horrors of war,” he said.

Figure 1
Cover Art for OJOT, Vol 11, No 3, Summer 2023



Once McCormack was honorably discharged from the military, he began looking for a job. He applied for a position at a large psychiatric hospital. “I had experience in the trades and art, so they hired me to be an occupational therapy assistant.” In addition, McCormack received the GI Bill to help pay for his education. In 1972, he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy from the University of Puget Sound. As an occupational therapist, McCormack continued working at the psychiatric hospital where he managed a sheltered workshop program. The hospital offered paid jobs to clients who were able to work in the industry after discharge.

McCormack believed Western medicine had lost sight of the powerful connection between the mind and body. In response, he developed a Mindbody integration approach. Like the Biopsychosocial model (Engel, 1977), the Mindbody approach suggests the mind and body function as a whole. “The Mindbody approach is an interdisciplinary, integrated model that proposes the health and well-being of a person depends upon biological, psychological, and social factors,” he said. “All of these factors are equally important for improving well-being.” McCormack has disseminated his work through scholarly publications and books titled *Pain Management: A Mindbody Approach* and *Therapeutic Use of Touch*. “These books aimed to advance the concept of holism in occupational therapy, which was becoming very biomechanical at that time,” he said.

In 1975, McCormack earned a Master of Science degree in Allied Health from The Ohio State University. He started teaching and supervising students in the occupational therapy program at the University of Florida. “This was the beginning of my career in academia,” he said. In 1997, McCormack received the Roster of Fellows award from the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). This honor is awarded to occupational therapists who have made a significant contribution to the profession. McCormack was recognized for his work on the Mindbody integration approach. “It was nice to be acknowledged for this,” he said. In 1999, McCormack completed a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Human Science at Saybrook University in San Francisco, California. His dissertation focused on the scientific systems of healing. As a result of his achievements, McCormack was invited to lecture on healing and alternative health practices as the Keynote Speaker of the Joseph Picchi Memorial Lecture at Samuel Merritt University, Oakland, California.

McCormack has worked as an occupational therapist and educator for nearly 50 years. In academia, he taught courses on management, research, neuroscience, advanced clinical practice, conditions of dysfunction, and complementary systems of health care. McCormack taught courses in the occupational therapy department at San Jose State University for 16 years. In 1994, he became the founding director and chair at Samuel Merritt University. From 2003 to 2010, he served as clinical professor and chair of the occupational therapy program at the University of Missouri. In this role, he made it a priority to set aside time to see clients, including older adults and children diagnosed with autism. In 2017, the Occupational Therapy Association of California honored him with the Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2018, McCormack announced his retirement from academia. His retirement plans were put on hold when he was called to serve as the interim program director for a new Occupational Therapy Doctoral Program at the University of the Pacific, Sacramento Campus. McCormack officially retired in 2021. To recognize his remarkable career, the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) sent McCormack a certificate for retiring in good standing after 50 years of service.

In addition to a half-century of impressive clinical and academic achievements, McCormack has made significant contributions to the profession through service and scholarship. He served as a co-editor for the AOTA *OT Manager* and on the editorial board at OJOT. McCormack has authored two books,

including *Pain Management for Health Professionals* and *Therapeutic Use of Touch for Health Professionals*. He also authored numerous book chapters and published articles and presented papers at national and international conferences. McCormack has conducted research on neurofeedback training for children with autism spectrum disorders, the use of computer programs to prevent cognitive decline in older adults, and the effects of complementary therapies on pain perception and anxiety in people with cancer.

McCormack currently resides with his wife in Seaside, California. He enjoys living near the ocean and walking on the beach with his dog, Kaia, a mini-Australian shepherd (see Figure 2). Since retirement, McCormack paints almost every day. He converted one stall of the garage into a home art studio. “I play jazz music and enjoy my time painting,” he said. “It’s nice to have a place where I can make a mess and be creative.” McCormack’s early work was a tribute to human beings participating in daily life. He associates these paintings with occupational therapy. McCormack has also created numerous figure paintings. “Big Hair” (see Figure 3) is an 18” x 18” painting made from oil on canvas. He has attended renaissance fairs to take pictures, and then returns home to paint them. “I paint to capture the images before my inspiration fades.” McCormack plans to recreate some of these paintings with added detail.

McCormack finds joy in painting landscapes, animals, and abstract compositions. He has spent a lot of time studying classical arts. “I did some copies of famous paintings to learn how they were made.” McCormack’s painting style has evolved from classical realism to abstract impressionism. He is especially fond of the abstract impressionist paintings he is working on now. “This will be my style moving forward,” he said. McCormack’s recent work captures the beauty of California’s central coast, an area rich in art history. “When San Francisco had the great earthquake, a lot of artists moved to the central coast,” he said. “There are many galleries and a lot of beautiful art in the region.” “Monterey Cypress” (see Figure 4) is an “30 x 40” painting made from oil on canvas. The painting is currently on exhibit at Avery Gallery in Seaside, California.

Figure 2

Photo of Guy McCormack and his dog Kaia.



Figure 3

“Big Hair” by Guy McCormack.



For McCormack, painting provides a source of stability and positive inspiration that helps him cope with an unpredictable world. After returning home from Vietnam, he struggled with sleep disorders and startle reactions from combat. Art was a great escape that helped McCormack manage the symptoms of PTSD. Painting puts him in a “flow” state of mind. “You get so engrossed in what you are doing that you are not aware of time or presence,” he said. McCormack finds this exhilarating. Reaching a state of flow helps McCormack connect with his emotional intelligence rather than his analytical mind. “People who are in pain or have other issues can benefit from that,” he said. “Pine Forest with Waterfall” (see Figure 5) is an “36 x 36” painting made from oil on canvas.

Since his retirement, McCormack has noticed a change in his thought process. “In my role as an occupational therapist and program director, I dealt with a lot of facts and figures,” he said. “Becoming an artist full-time has allowed me to develop a more global and holistic perspective that affords spontaneity and permission to make mistakes as I paint.” As McCormack’s art evolves, so have his perceptions of the world. “I really feel this has been a manifestation of neuroplasticity and an immersive transition in my development,” he said.

Moving forward, McCormack plans to continue doing what he loves; creating beautiful paintings. Art provides a form of creative self-expression that holds meaning and helps him cope. McCormack also plans to host an art show at his studio. “I want to display my paintings with live music and wine,” he said. “Kind of like presenting a paper at a conference. It’s an ego trip!”

Figure 4
“Monterey Cypress” by Guy McCormack.



Figure 5
“Pine Forest with Waterfall” by Guy McCormack.



View more of Guy McCormack's paintings in the OJOT gallery:

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/43/

Visit the Monterey Peninsula Art Foundation to read Guy McCormack's artist statement:

<https://www.mpaf.org/guy-mccormack.html>

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