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PuzzleArt Therapy: Connecting the Pieces in Search of Answers

Abstract

Alli Berman, a New York based artist, provided the cover art for the Fall 2016 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Sunlight Underwater" is a 12 piece PuzzleArt painting made from acrylic on American maple that measures 22x30. The PuzzleArt concept began as a simple exercise that evolved into a therapeutic modality. When a sudden stroke impacted Berman's well-being and quality of life, it was art that helped her to make connections during recovery.

Keywords

Occupational Therapist, Occupational Therapy, Stroke, Sensory, Cognitive, Arts and Crafts, Healing, Perceptual, Vision Therapy, Interactive PuzzleArt, Alli Berman, PuzzleArt Therapy

Everyone approaches puzzle solving differently, but the real challenge begins when the first pieces are set into place. When you cannot find what you are searching for, then feelings of frustration surface. Try as you might, you cannot force the pieces to fit. Solutions may appear through trial and error or, at times, require a concentrated effort. Something special happens when people come together to solve a puzzle. The pieces fall into place faster and the bigger picture begins to take shape. Solving a puzzle elicits feelings of closure. In a metaphorical sense, the pieces of a puzzle serve as portions of a more complicated answer. Similar to life, our goal is to fit all of the pieces together. To feel whole.

Alli Berman is the creator of PuzzleArt, a series of small abstract paintings that combine to form a modular puzzle. Berman has been an artist, educator, author, and lecturer for more than 25 years. Her art can be found in private, corporate, and nonprofit collections around the world. A typical PuzzleArt painting contains 12, five-inch square paintings; however, larger installations may consist of thousands of small paintings. Berman provided the cover art for the Fall 2016 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (Figure 1). The painting, titled “Sunlight Underwater,” is a 12 piece puzzle measuring 22”x30” made from acrylic on American maple (Figure 2). Unlike a traditional puzzle, Berman’s PuzzleArt paintings may be used to target a variety of visual-perceptual and motor skills. PuzzleArt stimulates the senses. Abstract swirls of vibrant color engage the eyes and mind. Thick layers of paint provide rich tactile feedback. The flow of

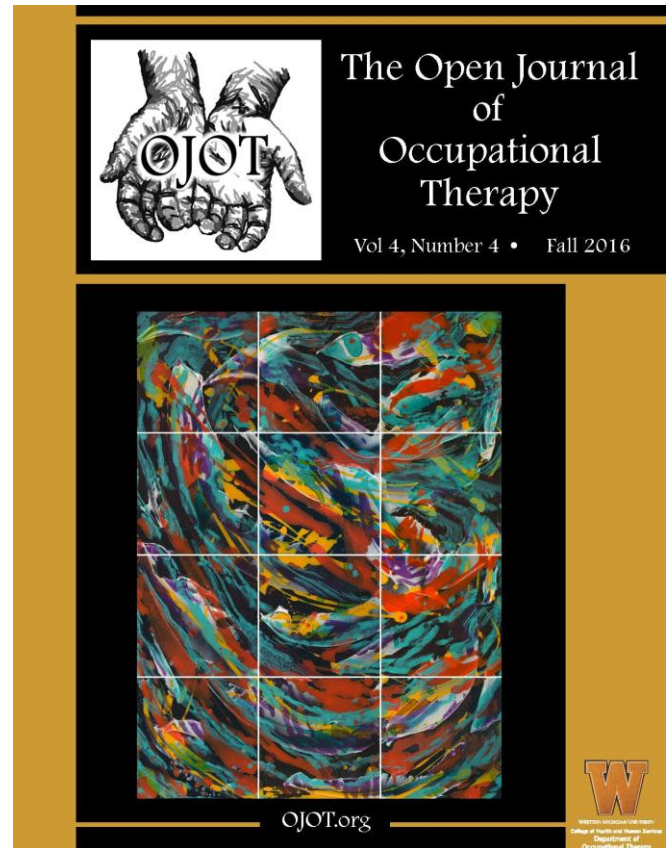


Figure 1. Cover art for OJOT Volume 4, Issue 4, Fall 2016



Figure 2. “Sunlight underwater” by Alli Berman

paint swirls can be traced with the eyes, fingers, and arms. Children and adults alike enjoy searching for the hundreds of hidden pictures concealed in each painting. Special PuzzleArt 3D glasses encourage the eyes to work together as a coordinated team.

Berman's art has been described as Pollock-esque, yet she has developed a specific 12-step formula. In a recent interview, she explained: "I don't just throw paint on canvas. I have a method, so when you deconstruct the PuzzleArt you can put it back together in many different combinations" (A. Berman, personal communication, July 19, 2016). Berman's art installations are mounted on walls, affixed to floors, and suspended from ceilings to encourage social interaction. Her art is open to individual interpretation, yet it facilitates social participation and group exploration.

The PuzzleArt concept evolved from a simple exercise to help Berman find answers. In 1989, she experienced a stroke that resulted in short-term memory loss and left-sided hemiplegia. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cerebrovascular accident (stroke) is the fifth leading cause of death and the leading cause of long-term disability (2016). A stroke is caused by interruption in blood supply to the brain. Each year, approximately one million people experience a stroke in the United States (Hall, Levant, & DeFrances, 2012). Upon discharge from the hospital, Berman was dependent on a wheelchair for mobility. At the time, she was only 35-years-old and the mother of two young children. Berman knew having one stroke put her at a higher risk of having another one. She considered the possibility that she might not be around to watch her children grow up.

During her hospitalization and rehabilitation, Berman participated in intensive occupational therapy sessions. She said, "I love therapists. They change lives every day. My

therapists recognized small incremental improvements, like when I could move my finger just a little bit. That gave me hope." Occupational therapy services made a significant difference in Berman's quality of life: "My therapists gave me an appropriate path to follow. They were holistic and took my whole body, mind, and life into account." When Berman was discharged from outpatient rehabilitation, she traveled to her art studio in Bali, Indonesia, to recuperate and search for answers. As soon as she began painting again, she realized her work was unlike anything she had created before. Combining two paintings together provided more answers. Turning the canvases allowed her to connect the colors, lines, and shapes in different ways. Interacting with the art made her feel relaxed and more connected with herself. It energized her brain. Berman continued adding paintings until a 36-piece puzzle materialized.

Arts and crafts have been embedded in the roots of occupational therapy practice since the profession was founded nearly one century ago. During the industrial revolution, the arts and crafts movement occurred in response to the skilled craftsmen and craftswomen who were losing their jobs to machines. Establishments, such as the Hull House in Chicago, IL, preserved handcrafts by offering instruction in artistries, such as woodworking, basketry, and printing (Cole & Tufano, 2008). The overall goal of rehabilitation was to facilitate re-entry into the work force. The founders of the occupational therapy profession understood the prevocational value of arts and crafts. Johnson (1920) notes that

Handcrafts have a special therapeutic value as they afford occupation which combines the elements of play and recreation with work and accomplishment. They give a concrete return and provide a stimulus to mental activity and muscular exercise at the same time, and afford an opportunity for creation and self-expression (p. 69).

Crafting also played an important role in the vocational rehabilitation of wounded soldiers returning home from the First and Second World Wars (Cole & Tufano, 2008; Quiroga, 1995). Arts and crafts continue to be the modality of choice in many areas of occupational therapy practice.

Occupational therapists are uniquely qualified to address the physical and psychological impairments resulting from stroke. Participation in the arts provides a creative alternative to routine therapy that is appropriate for all ages and ability levels. A study by Beesley et al. (2011) found the implementation of an art-based health program for community dwelling stroke survivors proved beneficial for increasing self-confidence, self-efficacy, community participation, and quality of life. Berman feels art is healing and a wonderful way to improve function and emotional well-being. She was the recipient of occupational therapy services again in 2007 and 2009 during recovery from two separate rotator cuff surgeries. The extensive therapies she endured to rehabilitate her upper extremities helped to solidify her interest in using PuzzleArt as a therapeutic tool.

A handful of PuzzleArt paintings were included in Berman's first solo art show in New York City. When people attempted to replicate the picture of the original painting as a whole, she

explained there was no wrong way to connect the pieces and encouraged them to connect the colors, lines, and shapes. "People got excited," she said. They created their own personal expressions. Berman observed as people interacted with the paintings. They formed personal connections with the puzzle pieces and with each other. Berman said there is a repeating pattern when people engage with PuzzleArt: "They are afraid to touch the puzzle pieces so they use one finger, then the entire hand, until finally they take the pieces off the wall and start to manipulate them. Soon other people join in and start doing the same." There is a tremendous social component to PuzzleArt. When one person needs a puzzle piece with blue paint, another person finds it and hands it over. People are looking, touching, and connecting. They make physical and emotional connections with the colors, lines, shapes, and hidden objects. They also connect with each other socially. "This pattern is the same all over the world. It transcends across all barriers and languages," Berman said.

Berman has traveled the world extensively using PuzzleArt to facilitate lectures and workshops that reinforce team building, creativity, and problem solving skills. In 2008, Berman was invited to Florence, Italy, to visit elementary schools where the art programs were eliminated due to budget cuts. Over the course of 7 weeks she worked with every teacher and elementary student in the city. She used PuzzleArt to help them to form connections. Berman believes we are all connected on the planet. "When you realize you are connected to people you become more understanding and tolerant of them," she said. In 2014, Berman was

invited to Shenyang, China, to lead a series of lectures and interactive art events. PuzzleArt was featured in a groundbreaking women's Social Practice museum exhibition. Berman's overarching message was: "When things are ripped apart you can put them back together." To reinforce her point, Berman ripped a large piece of paper into smaller sections and then roughly stitched them back together with a needle and thread. The participants colored their own puzzle pieces and attached them on top of the mended paper backdrop. "Life is not perfect," Berman adds. "We lose parts of ourselves, people, and relationships. We try to repair ourselves the best we can. Therapy and community help us to heal. It's social practice because we bring people together. People are looking, touching, coloring and connecting. It's wonderful," she said.

In January of 2009, Berman shared her PuzzleArt concept with developmental optometrist Dr. Susan Fisher, OD. Dr. Fisher combined the puzzle paintings with traditional vision therapy exercises. She introduced Berman to medical terminology, such as visual discrimination, figure ground, and form constancy, to describe what was happening when people engaged with PuzzleArt. "Dr. Fisher's suggestions made the PuzzleArt more powerful," Berman said. Keeping the colorful puzzle paintings at the core, Berman and Dr. Fisher established the PuzzleArt Therapy System as a vision therapy modality. Dr. Fisher noted, "What I love about PuzzleArt Therapy is that I can work on oculomotor, accommodative, binocular, and visual perceptual skills using one activity. It's something fun and different. Kids really like it. In fact, they

request it" (S. Fisher, personal communication, August 14, 2016).

Since founding PuzzleArt, Berman's goal has been to create a safe environment for strangers to connect with art, themselves, and each other. Berman uses her workshops as an opportunity to reinforce skills for life, learning, and literacy, including letter recognition and vocabulary development. Berman assigns *Homework for Life* to encourage children to make connections between the lines, colors, and shapes found in art with objects found in the environment, such as trees, dogs, and bikes. "Getting people to think outside of the box has changed lives," she said. Berman uses the hidden pictures in her paintings to reinforce this idea. There are hundreds of hidden pictures in each PuzzleArt painting. The more you rotate the pieces, the more pictures you will find: "Kids see the hidden pictures very easily," Berman said. "When you learn to relax your mind and trust your heart you will discover things you normally would not see in the world around you. A lot more will open up to you."

Berman is on a personal crusade to help as many people as she can. Berman has trained therapists from several health care professions, including hundreds of occupational therapists. "Occupational therapists have increased my ability to help others in a big way," she said. Through further collaboration with Linda Hindy-Telford, OTD, and Serena Zeidler, OTD, a comprehensive collection of PuzzleArt Therapy tools were established. Recent additions include One Minute Brain Builders, Skill Builder Panels, and the Discovery Checklist for Visual Skills. Brain

Builders Nation (BBNation), an online PuzzleArt Therapy resource, was also launched.

When Serena Zeidler, OTD, was first introduced to PuzzleArt Therapy, she realized the potential for school-based practice immediately: “Underlying visual deficits are rarely screened for, or addressed in the school setting. The Discovery Checklist accomplishes this” (S. Zeidler, personal communication, August 9, 2016). The PuzzleArt Discovery Checklist assists in detecting underlying visual impairment, but it also makes it easy for clinicians and parents to select appropriate activities and exercises. PuzzleArt Therapy tools are portable and reusable, which makes them ideal for pediatric settings. Jamie Spencer, MS, OTR/L, uses PuzzleArt Therapy in her school-based practice: “What I really love about PuzzleArt is how it combines sensory, gross motor, and visual components into every activity. Each activity can be adapted and used in many different ways” (J. Spencer, personal communication, August 9, 2016). What started as a simple exercise has evolved into a

therapeutic modality helping thousands of children and adults. Today, PuzzleArt Therapy is used in vision therapy, occupational therapy, art therapy, and neurorehabilitation centers in 16 countries.

When a stroke impacted Alli Berman’s quality of life, she turned to art for answers. Engagement in a meaningful activity, such as painting, provided her motivation and strength for continued physical and psychological healing. Art helped Berman fit all of the pieces back together again. Berman believes how you deal with falling down and getting back up tells a lot about a person. “It’s really up to you how much you want to improve,” she said. Using PuzzleArt Therapy, she creates opportunities for people to connect with the arts, their inner-selves, and each other. Berman believes life is a journey: “We have a lot of choices on which pathway we want to take. The best path is the one where you learn to help yourself, but also surround yourself with loving and supportive people who will help you.”

Additional Information

- For more information on PuzzleArt, please visit www.alliberman.com, or email Alli Berman at alli@alliberman.com.
- To inquire about PuzzleArt Therapy and Brain Builders Nation, please visit www.PuzzleArtTherapy.com, or email Alli Berman at alli@PuzzleArtTherapy.com
- To learn more about Dr. Susan Fisher, OD, please visit www.susanfisherod.com
- Visit the Occupation and the Artist Gallery to view videos and see more of Alli Berman’s work http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/
- To access exclusive PuzzleArt activities created for OJOT readers, please visit <http://www.puzzleart.com/OJOT-CoverActivity>
- OJOT readers may subscribe to Brain Builders Nation at the reduced rate of \$77 per year (regularly priced \$199). For more information, please visit <http://puzzleart.com/OJOT-BBNationBonus>

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