

T o y s S

for Survival

Playful activities and thoughts
on pleasure, written by survivors,
for survivors.

“The greatest pleasure in my life has been discovering, or rediscovering, that life itself is made out of pleasure. ...the very fact that we experience life, that there is this steady hum or pulse of livingness and awareness with only one purpose, living more, reaching more greedily for life—connecting to that and feeling it is pure pleasure for me.”

A. Starr



Introduction

This publication is one of the outcomes of a project that has grown out of my own experiences, both as an artist and someone surviving sexual violence. Toys for Survival started life as a series of sculpture workshops for women survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, that have been documented in both an exhibition at The Glasgow Women's Library and in this booklet. I decided to do this project because I found that recovering from trauma was a process that focused a lot on pain, yet as an artist I was taking time to play with materials in my studio, a pleasure that helped me to process that pain. In this booklet you'll find a few thoughts about pleasure and some creative exercises designed to help you explore safe touch. Some of the exercises were done in the workshops and some have been contributed by the participants themselves. You'll also find some feedback from the workshops, in the form of a poem and a short story.

In preparing for this project I was inspired by a few writers, most notably Bessel Van der Kolk, whose years of research into trauma and PTSD have been condensed into an excellent book called *The Body Keeps the Score*. This book helped me to see how the trauma I had experienced had affected my body, and it also showed me how pleasurable bodily experiences could help to undo the hold that the trauma had on me. In my studio I was experimenting with

this idea through the materials that I was playing with: plaster, clay, fabric and paint, and it made me think that maybe the things I was making were toys for helping me survive.

One of my all time favourite feminists was a huge source of wisdom for me, Audre Lorde, whose essay 'The Uses of the Erotic, The Erotic as Power', centres the experience of pleasure deep within one's body as a source of immense power for women. She says: "For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of". Once you know yourself to be capable of joy, you will come to expect it from all aspects of your life—your relationships, your work, your friendships—it amounts to a deeply held knowledge of your own worth, which cannot be undone.

Audre Lourde also reminded me that "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." And so from her and many other incredible women, I recognised the necessity of sharing what I had learned about the pleasure of play, creativity and touch with other people. The activities I've shared here are simple, cheap and easy to source for, and at the back of the booklet I've included a list of books, instructional videos and suppliers of the materials for the activities. I've also included a note for anyone who is thinking of facilitating similar workshops, including a list of questions to help find materials to work with. So be bold, be curious and enjoy this booklet, consider it my bridge to a wide community of women who need pleasure now more than ever.

Leah Miller-Biot

A Breathing Exercise

We started each session of the workshops with a discussion about how we were feeling that day and a breathing exercise that I was taught as a way of overcoming dissociation. Many of the participants would arrive in the sessions feeling at least a little bit nervous, and so doing a breathing exercise helped us all relax and feel present in the room and our bodies.

For this exercise you want to be seated with your feet firmly planted on the floor. Start by simply taking a deep breath, fill your lungs slowly then exhale, making the exhalation longer than the inhalation.

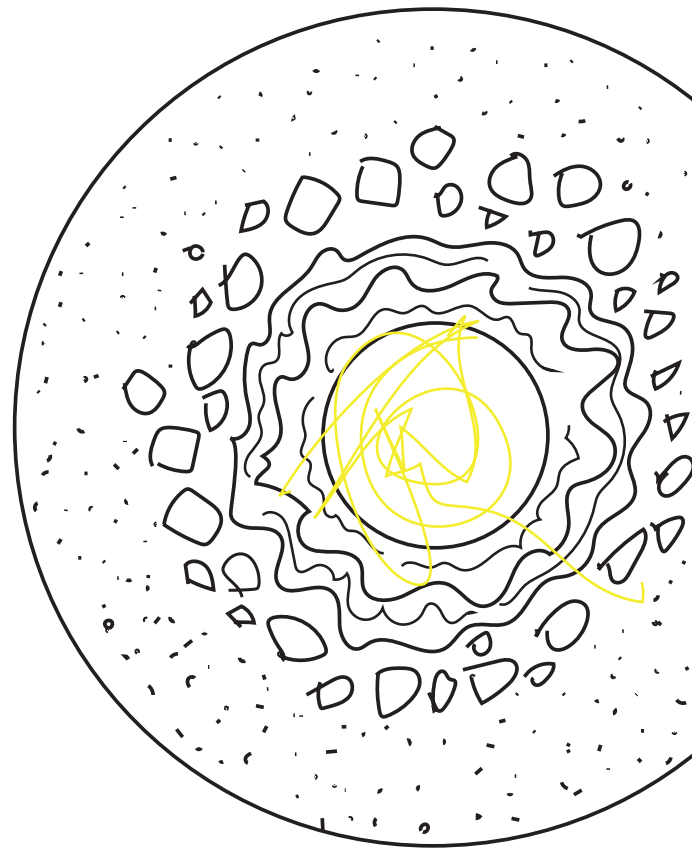
Take another breath and imagine that you are breathing a breath that is coming from the soil beneath the floor, up through your legs, your back, your neck and out through your mouth.

Take another breath and imagine that you are breathing a breath that is coming from the rocks beneath the soil, beneath the floor, up through your legs, your back, your neck and out through your mouth.

Take another breath and imagine that you are breathing a breath that is coming from the water that flows beneath the rocks, beneath the soil, beneath the floor, up through your legs, your back, your neck and out through your mouth.

Take another breath and imagine that you are breathing a breath that is coming from the warm core of the Earth, through the water that flows beneath the rocks, beneath the soil, beneath the floor, up through your legs, your back, your neck and out through your mouth.

"What you pay attention to grows."
a. m. brown



Mindful Touch

This exercise is part of a game called 'The 3 Minute Game' devised by Betty Martin who is a sex and relationship therapist. We're going to play the very first part of the game, which is done alone and with an object. The aim is to learn to experience your hands as pleasure organs in their own right, this means that instead of using our hands to do something, we learn to focus on how our hands feel.

To play the game you will need to sit or lie somewhere comfortable with your back fully supported. You will put a pillow on your lap and, with your eyes closed, take an object and start to touch it all over. Explore it with the tips of your fingers, with your palm or with the back of your hand. Explore fast touch and slow touch, light touch and heavy touch.

For the first few minutes you'll find that you focus on identifying the object, so once you've done this bring your mind to the sensation of the object in your hand: its weight, its edges, its middle. Naturally your mind will wonder, you may even find yourself getting a bit bored, when that happens just gently return your focus to the sensations in your hands.

Some people report a sense of relaxation, sensuality or even relief when they play this game, and some people can feel really emotional. If at any point you feel uncomfortable, stop the game, return to the room and do something else. You don't have to play again if you don't want to, but if you want to come back to it, try with a different object. The game works best with practice, you become more attuned to bringing your mind to the sensations in your hands and you'll access the space of deep relaxation much more quickly. This exercise is part of a series which you play with a partner, if you're interested in bringing this into an intimate relationship (this doesn't have to be a partner) a web address for Betty Martin's 3 minute game is in the resource section at the back of this booklet.



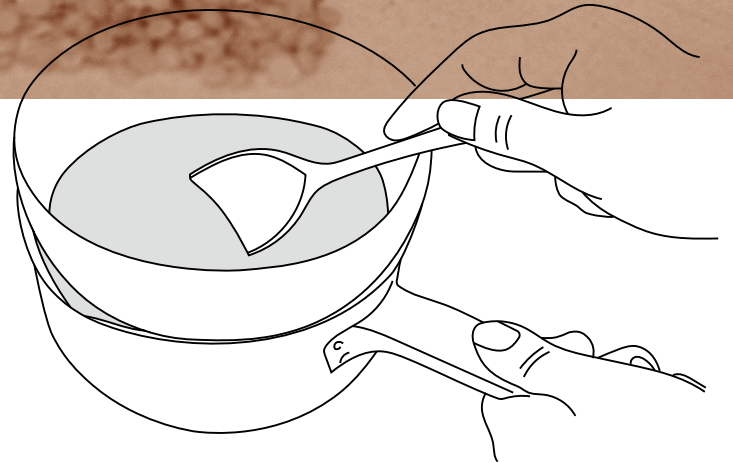
A Recipe For a Massage Bar

These ingredients might sound intimidating, but the cocoa butter, shea butter and beeswax can all be sourced quite cheaply online. Sunflower oil is readily available as cooking oil in supermarkets and lavender essential oil can be bought in most pharmacies.

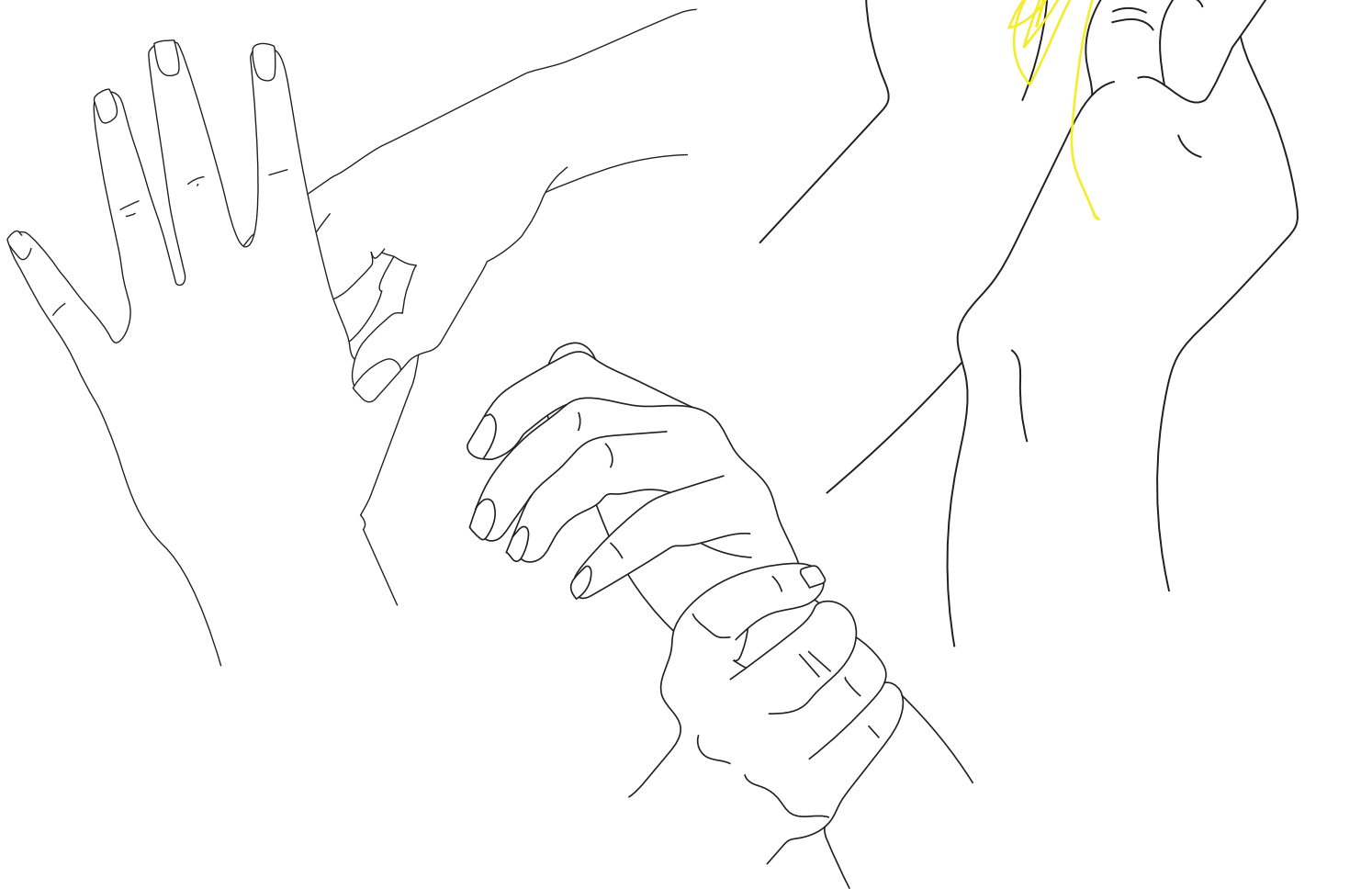
55g Cocoa butter
15g Shea butter
15g Sunflower oil
14g Beeswax
1g (or a few drops) lavender essential oil



Lay out 8 silicone cupcake moulds or place 8 paper moulds inside a metal cupcake baking tin so that they don't collapse when the liquid is poured in. The massage bar ingredients will be melted and mixed in a Bain-Marie, this means we place all the ingredients except the lavender oil in a container (pan, bowl, oven proof dish, etc.) which we then place in a large, shallow pan of warm water over a medium to low heat. The hot water surrounds the ingredients with gentle heat allowing them to melt evenly. Once the last of the wax has melted, drip in the lavender oil, mix, then pour slowly into the cupcake moulds—don't overfill the moulds or they might collapse. Leave to cool and set for a few hours.



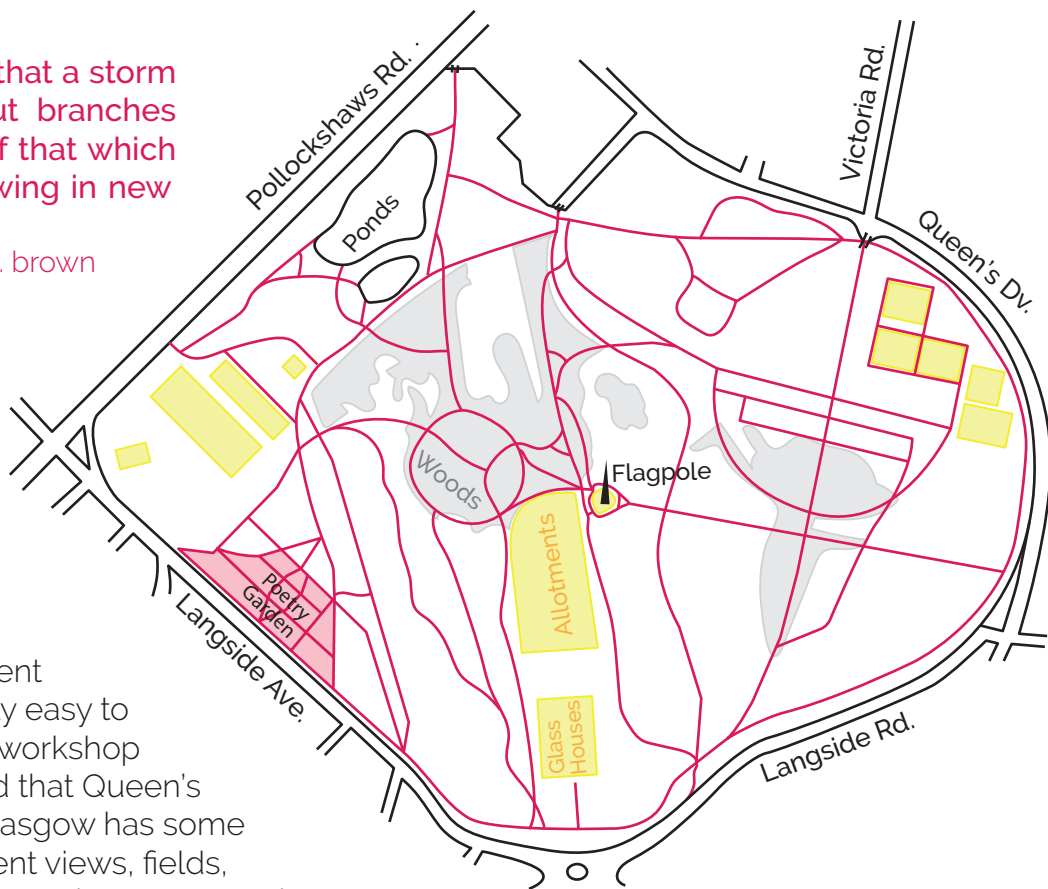
When I was experiencing the worst of my panic attacks, I was told that some strong smelling hand cream might help to ground me if I felt one coming on. Sometimes it worked quite well and my hands have never been softer. I've illustrated some hand massage techniques you can do for yourself. I have found massage to be a great way to introduce myself to safe and gentle touch with my partner. If I didn't feel up to being touched, giving my partner a massage meant I still enjoyed physical intimacy and the pleasure of being connected and relaxed.



A Walk in Nature

"Nature has taught me that a storm can be used to clear out branches that are dying, to let go of that which was keeping us from growing in new directions."

a. m. brown



Glasgow has a lot of excellent walks to go on and it's really easy to get out of the city too. The workshop participants and I all agreed that Queen's Park in the South side of Glasgow has some of the best features: excellent views, fields, woods, rabbits, glasshouses and a poetry garden.

The easiest way to get there is by taking the train from Glasgow Central station to Queens Park, although buses 4, 5, 6 and 38 all head to the park too. There are entrances to the park at the very top of Victoria Road, on Pollokshaws Road, as well as Balvicar Drive and Langside Road.

I would recommend exploring the park slowly, following the paths or not, through the woods to the top of the hill where you'll find the flagpole, from there on a good day you can see Ben Lomond. While you explore you might want to try out the breathing exercise at the front of the booklet. Nature is also a wonderful source of materials for making things and over leaf you'll find instructions by one of our group for a Kokedama, which is a Japanese plant craft.



Make a Kokedama

Compost - (enough to double the size, that your plant was before)

Bag of moss - (this can be bought at any garden centre or foraged while on a nature walk)

Jute or twine

A spray bottle

Gloves

A bucket or tray - large enough to hold your compost

Something to protect your work surface

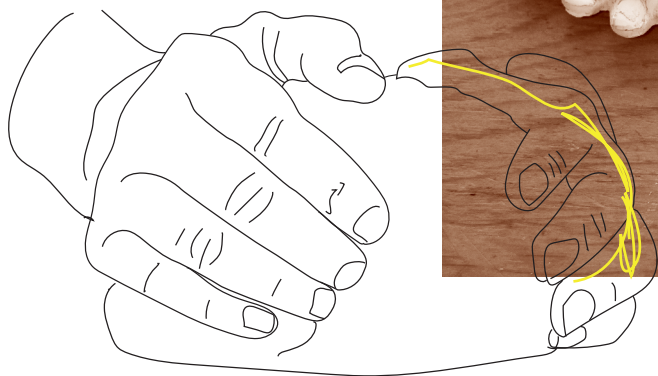
After protecting your workspace, add the compost into to the bucket or container. Add a little water to the compost, put on your gloves and mix into a thick mud. Once you've done this, shape the compost into a ball and squeeze out the excess water.

Now remove your existing plant from its container and shake away most of its soil until

you can hold it by its roots. Make sure your moss is damp by soaking it in water or spraying it with a spray bottle. Wrap the roots of your existing plant in some of your dampened moss and set it aside. Then carefully break a hole into the mud ball, and insert the new moss-wrapped plant into the centre. Wrap the mud ball in moss and pass the string around it as much or as little as you would like. Tie the string and cut off the excess.

You'll want to wait a week before watering. To do so, fill a saucer with water and let the moss ball soak it up. Once a month or so (depending on the type of plant), you can submerge the entire ball and give it a good soaking.

Clay Mould Plaster Casting



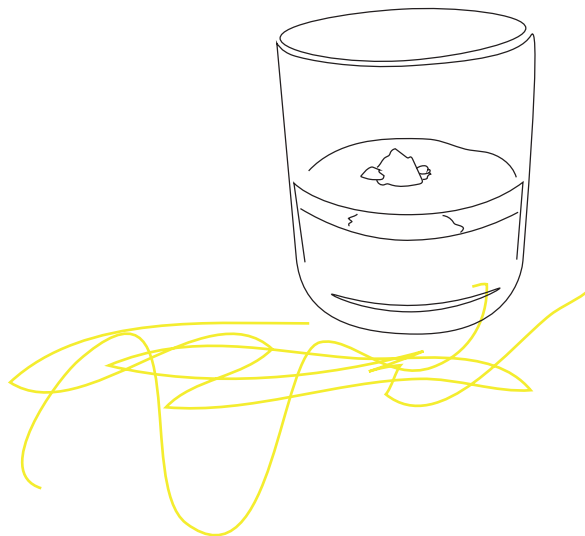
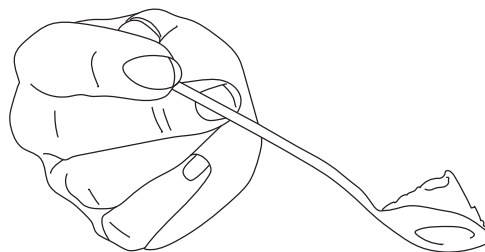
One of the activities in the workshops was a very simple casting process with clay and plaster of Paris. Casting is done by pouring liquid material into a hollow mould in the shape of the desired object. The material once hardened is broken out of the mould—we would describe the resulting object as having been cast, or we might call it a cast. Think of it like baking a cake, you pour your batter into a tin and once it's baked the cake has the shape of the tin you used—square, round, heart shaped, loaf shaped. The process that we used in the workshop involved making the mould (cake tin) out of clay using our hands or interesting shaped objects to create indentations that resulted in unusual patterns on the finished cast.

As with the massage bar, the materials are cheap and readily available in art supply shops or online. The plaster will likely come with instructions but here are some more just in case. I recommend getting it from an art supply shop, you'll have a chance to browse through all sorts of interesting materials that will entice your senses and spark your imagination!

But let's get stuck in. Grab yourself a grapefruit sized lump of clay and start squeezing, stretching, rolling or kneading it. Try pressing an object with a corner into it, then try an orange or an onion—how about a leaf, or twig, or twine? The first thing to experience is the pleasures of working with clay. If you wet it you'll find it has a completely different feel as it slips and slides through your fingers. Once you've played a little start shaping your vessel, remembering that you're working in negative, so a lump becomes a hollow and vice versa. You could try sprinkling it with leaves and flowers, or pieces of twine or coloured wool. These will become embedded in the plaster, which you might like.

Mixing plaster requires a little bit of care, the important thing to know is that you need latex or nitrile gloves and a dust mask. The material also heats up when it sets—this means you shouldn't immerse your hands in it, as it could burn you.

We mix the plaster by sprinkling the powder into the water. This way we get fewer bubbles in the plaster, making it stronger. Take a paper cup and fill it a quarter of the way up with water, then take a rounded teaspoon of powder and sprinkle it into the water. You might want to tap it off the side of the cup, but don't stir it, just let it sit. Repeat the process until the powder reaches the top of the water and doesn't get immediately absorbed. Then tap the cup on the table or surface you're working on to release any remaining bubbles and stir it through with an old spoon or craft stick. If you're not sure about the consistency, the ratio is roughly 1 part water to 3 parts powder and should feel like a runny custard. The plaster will start to set quite fast, you have about 5 minutes before it becomes too thick so quickly pour it into your mould. You will want to check in on it as it sets, sometimes the weight of the plaster will cause the edges of your mould to collapse so be prepared to reinforce the sides with more clay. It will be ready to unmount in an hour and to do so you just gently pull back the clay and reveal your masterpiece!



Some of the workshop participants are talented writers and, when I asked for contributions to this publication, they felt inspired to write about their experiences. In this section we have included their writing, to give some insight into what creative pleasure has meant to them.

Recipe for Flourishing

- Gather like-minded women
- Prepare with personal sharing
- Respond with active listening
- Present the sculpture materials
- Share the rules and individual learning
- Invite everyone to a creative party
- Encourage freedom of expression
- Push beyond the expected
- Experience new ways of presenting
- Provide shape & form to emotions
- Work beyond boundaries and limits
- Access new structures

Jo Beth Gray



Face of It

It begins with a piece of old cardboard. I tug it out from under a pile of dusty, untouched books and put it on my desk. Sitting there, freed, it takes on new life. As I gently stroke its ragged edges, it challenges me: "what will you do with me? How are you going to use me to show your presence in this world?"

Fired by this challenge, I find a long sheet of wire mesh. Fine and light, I imagine it to be amenable, as becoming something else. But it fights. Scratches and cuts my palms as I bend it. Pinches and clings to my fingers as I push it this way and that, moulding it into shape. Until it emerges, raw but unmistakable.

A face. My face? I'm not sure. Maybe a face within me that no one has seen. That I have barely dared to look at. And now, here it is. Its existence undeniable.

Maybe I've made a mistake. I could destroy it. Leave it lurking in murky depths inside me, easy for me to avert my attention. But it implores me with its blank stare: "keep me, touch me, make me whole."

So I stick it—carefully with masking tape in case it cuts—to the cardboard. Now it sits on solid ground, it shouts: "I must have flesh! Allow me to grow!" With PVA and tissue paper I meet its demands. Sticky fingered, I gently smooth and curve it into being, pinching to create nostrils, pulling to form lips. I sit back when it is done, prying strings of PVA from my hands. The face is quiet, satisfied in its existence.

And it is ugly. Its skin is warped and ridged. Its features protrude, furious, taking up all the air. Its eyes gape, swallowed into the deep holes I have sliced into the mesh. What is in there? What nestles within this thing? What is this that I know is there, that I feel is there? That, although veiled, I feel, I know, has a Medusan strength, traces back years, decades. Unformed, unspoken, childlike.

My hands move to pull it and out it comes. Filling up the eyes and pouring out, snaking over the face and beyond. I watch in stunned silence as it appears before my fingers. Playful. Giddy, almost, in its new found freedom.

No, this can't be. "You may demand to exist," I say to the face, "but I can still control you." I take two pans. One of hot water, one of shards of wax. And one held by the other I melt the wax into a soup — a witch stirring her potion.

And I pour the hot liquid over the harsh pointed nose, pursed lips, ragged skin, the colourful strands escaping the eyes.

Slowly the liquid hardens. Coated, the face looks beautiful. As shiny and smooth under my touch as porcelain. "No, this will not do!" I shout at it before it can make more demands of me. "I know you are there, that should be existence enough. You'll have to be hidden."

So I melt and pour.

Melt and pour.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The wax pools under the chin, above the head, encasing the face, obscuring the colour from sight. Slowly, slowly.

And I start to feel safe. The melting and pouring falls into a steady rhythm. All under control.

Until I turn, arms aching, to find an empty bag. The wax is gone, used up. I sit back. Arms on knees. Exhausted. Breathless. The face floats stubbornly. Strands slither from the wax encasement, reaching. To what, I don't know. I'm too tired to care. I watch it, waiting. We both are silent. That will have to do.



Sarah Dalzell

Notes for Facilitators

When I was designing this project I felt it was very important to share the breakdown of the workshops as a way of open-sourcing their methodology and encouraging other people to replicate them. But, as with all good participatory art projects, the ideas changed to suit the needs of the participants, who all came with uniquely creative voices. My role changed to become someone who facilitated their visions. One of the most important aspects of the workshops was that each session was supported by a trained support worker from Glasgow East Women's Aid. For many participants there were moments when they became overwhelmed, and our support worker was extremely adept at spotting when someone needed a moment to talk, to breath or just be away from the rest of the group. There were many moments when I noticed her skilfully enabling someone to fully participate in the activities I was leading, which gave me confidence to negotiate the dynamics of the group.

So, instead of sharing a breakdown, I have included some questions that I posed to participants to stimulate their imaginations and help them to search for sculptural materials in their own environment. I suggested that they should aim to bring a few things (2+) that could be interacted with in different ways, and that could be manipulated in some way during the class—i.e. its shape or appearance could be changed in some way, maybe by cutting it up, tying it, or covering it in something.

The questions to consider were:

1. When choosing an object, what's the first thing you think of?
2. What does it feel like against your hand, your cheek, your foot etc.? Does it feel good does it feel bad? What happens if you press it hard or soft? Does it feel better or worse?
3. How much of it do you need? If you have lots of it does it feel better?
4. Is there anything that it reminds you of? Or is there something that feels similar to it?
5. What can you do with it? Can you cut it up, or wrap it up, drill into, or mould it for example? Is there anything else you can do with it?
6. What could be the opposite of this material? Or a material that gives an opposite sensation? E.g. if it is soft can you think of something that feels rough? Can you move it or interact with it in a way that actually feels good?
7. What does it look like, and what do you think of when you look at it?

Reading and Resources

Books and videos:

a. m. brown - *Pleasure Activism*, AK Press, 2019. This book includes an interview with Alta Starr and a reprint of Audre Lorde's essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', both of which were quoted in the introduction. You can hear Audre Lorde herself read her essay here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0>.

a. m. brown - *Emergent Strategy*, AK Press, 2017.

A. L. Morales - *Kindling, Writings on the Body*, Palabrera Press, 2013.

B. Van der Kolk - *The Body Keeps The Score*, Penguin, 2015.

Instructional video about mixing plaster - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qxcWs_5YFJE

Instructional video about making a solid moisturiser bar, similar to the massage bar - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOQp5xasIFw>

Instructional video about making kokedama - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=as7Cd-0ocFDs>

Resources about the 3 minute game from Betty Martin - <https://bettymartin.org/videos/>

Material suppliers:

Massage bar ingredients - www.livemoor.co.uk

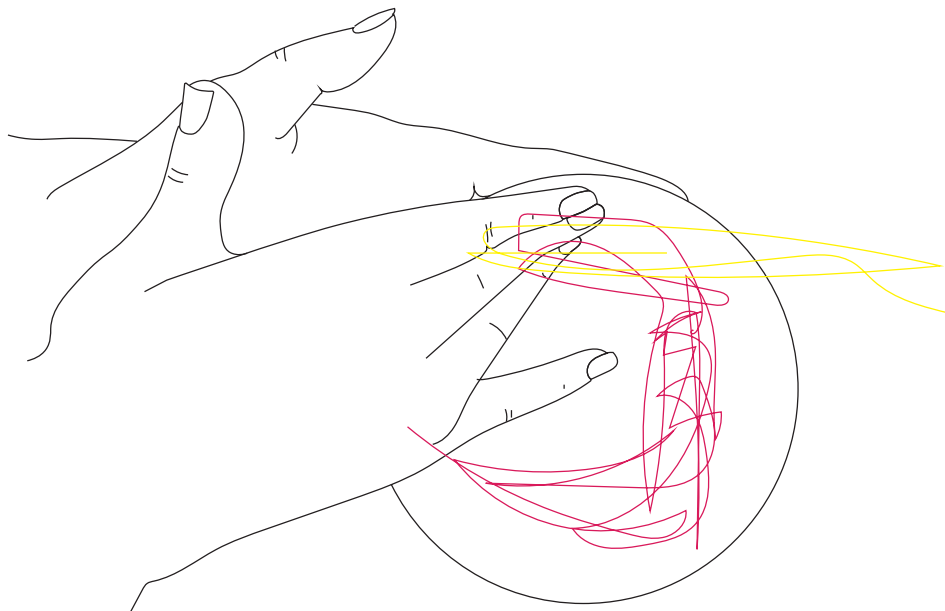
Plaster, clay and other fine art supplies - www.cassart.co.uk

Large quantities of just plaster and clay - www.alastairkettlespotterysupplies.com

Acknowledgements

The Toys for Survival workshops were devised by Leah Miller-Biot and the project has been a partnership between Uncovered Artistry CIC, Glasgow East Women's Aid, the Glasgow Women's Library, and Market Gallery. We would also like to thank Glasgow Women's Aid for their support during the planning stages of the project, as well as artists, Maria de Lima and Joanna Peace, who exhibited alongside the participants; Ali Kerr, our incredible support worker; the Market Gallery committee; Laura Dolan, Caroline Gausden and Robyn Mcmillan from the Glasgow Women's Library; and both Glasgow Connected Arts and Creative Scotland, who have generously funded our endeavours.

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