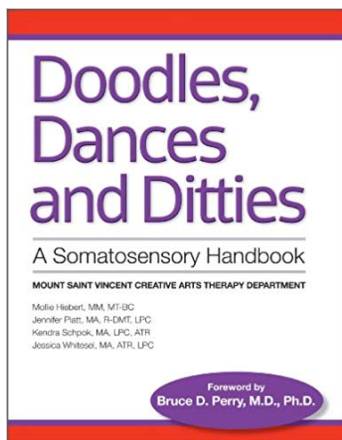




## Art Therapist Spotlight Interview: Jessica Whitesel, LPC, ATR-BC

Jessica Whitesel, LPC, ATR-BC, is a core faculty at Naropa University, teaching in the graduate and undergraduate art therapy programs, and maintains a private practice working with children and adolescents, specializing in trauma, dissociation, and attachment issues. Her focus includes the integration of EMDR and creative arts therapy, dissociative processes, and Jungian approaches to art therapy. While working as an art therapist at Mount Saint Vincent Children's Home in Denver, Jessica co-authored a treatment manual to help clinicians utilize somatosensory approaches in working with traumatized children, called *Doodles, Dances, and Ditties: A Somatosensory Handbook*, which includes an introduction by Dr. Bruce Perry.



Available on [Amazon](#).

## Interview

### **What originally drew you to the field of art therapy?**

“I had always been interested in art since I was young. When I went to undergrad I got a degree in painting. At the end of that, I was a little disillusioned with the art world. I didn’t think I wanted to be an artist who made paintings that people would buy.

At the same time I was volunteering at a local homeless shelter, making art with kids. Offering bucketfuls of paint to children in a homeless shelter I learned the lesson of regression and containment. This experience made me realize more of what I am interested in and what inspires me.

I was also a practicing astrologer which allowed me to enter into a therapeutic space with people. Since I didn’t have a background as a therapist yet, I think all of these aspects led me to Naropa because of Naropa’s spiritual foundation and the opportunity to combine these interests that I had.”

### **Can you tell us about the journey to Naropa?**

“I entered Naropa without any career understanding of what art therapy was. I went there with a naive interest in wanting to help people and use art to do it. In art school, I think I had always used the art process inherently for my own healing (which may be true for a lot of artists, but some more than most). While I was in art school, developing my own voice and identity, I was really using the art for my own growth and healing which was counter to the philosophy and approach I found in art school. The two art worlds collided at that point to steer me into the direction of Naropa.”

### **Can you talk about the power of art therapy in your life and your work?**

“In relation to my work with others, I think seeing the way that images and art can illuminate the nature of what’s happening in a person is powerful. It can be that somebody creates an image that communicates to me something very deeply or it can be a cognitive level where something clicks about how they are showing up in the room and what they are experiencing. [This same process] can also happen for the client. There is a revelation that happens through the art. To be able to hold that and refer to that, there is something about that process that is profound and humbling to me.

A child I am working with will create an image and the image is shocking to me because it could be something they revealed about themselves that I wasn’t tracking. The art that is made helps us make sense of things, make sense of the world, and of each other.”

### **Do you see transpersonal elements manifest in your professional work?**

“The nature of transpersonal, how unwieldy transpersonal is...the reality is that each person discovers [transpersonal elements] for themselves in their work and in their life.

For me, it's honestly a really intimate and personal view I hold. It may or may not manifest with a specific client, but it is powerfully present when I allow myself to open up to the heart of what is happening with another person, especially when it involves their suffering. I was in supervision with my supervisor and I was talking about countertransference with a client who was talking about a horrible relationship with her father which I drew my own parallels to and my supervisor told me she also had parallels to her childhood. We can acknowledge something that is invisible and important, always seeking expression within us, that allows us to touch into interpersonal connections. What's happening in the room with me, with the client, with my supervisor? The mystery of our psyches is that they are always trying to make connections to the world. There is something about it that holds a lot of magic that we can be appreciative of."

### **From your point of view, what is the most important thing to keep in mind when working as an art therapist?**

"With this question, I am thinking about what thoughts do I want to give somebody who is a new art therapist in the field? With my other role being a teacher, the thing a person needs when they leave grad school is different than what they need to remember midcareer or when they are struggling with a difficult part of their career. Overall, I would say it is important to maintain your art practice. People need to allow themselves to be creative. One of the reasons why is because the field is challenging and confusing and sometimes difficult to maintain your sense of inspiration. The nature of making art is at the root of what we offer people, but recognizing that we need to maintain an artist's mind is important. Art offers a way of being that allows us the freedom to try something radical and new in contrast to the burnout that can result from feeling trapped, uninspired, or exhausted. Maintaining creative and spiritual vision in your own life can give you a guide. This is something I also need to hold: "How do I maintain my own individual creative vision for myself, my life, my work?" Creative processes are an essential component of that for me."

### **What are some important self-care practices you recommend or practice?**

"One of the important [self-care practices] is having interests that are outside art and therapy. There are aspects of my life that have no particular relationship to either, of course, one can say everything has a relationship, but if I am doing yoga or beekeeping, I am not in my role as an art therapist. Having space away from that on a regular basis and having relationships with people who aren't art therapists or therapists is also [an] important [self-care practice]. Early on, for me, by the nature of grad school everyone I knew were therapists and in a way it was inspiring, but it was important to get out of that world and know it isn't everything all the time. I also have small daily self care practices within the context of my work, but to me that is the most important one."

### **Are you working on anything now that you're really excited about?**

“I’m pretty excited about a workshop with 3rd year Naropa student Alyssa Gursky at Meow Wolf in Santa Fe, this past spring. I was talking about astrological archetypes and symbols, how they show up in the art and in the space of Meow Wolf itself. While we were in Meow Wolf we talked about the archetypes in the space we were in and how to tap into the energy of the room then come back and create art around it.

All the participants got to participate in linking astrological aspects of themselves to the different rooms of Meow Wolf, tracking how it felt to me in different, immersive spaces, and linking that to their inner psyche.”

### **How important is it to collaborate with your art therapy colleagues?**

“[Collaboration] is important, but I also really value cross pollination. One of the great strengths of the art therapy field is that we are incredibly flexible. Art therapy colleagues are important for our own sense of identity and strengthening, keeping ourselves engaged with what is happening in the field. And also, art therapy has an amazing way of building bridges. When I hear about somebody collaborating with others; people like comic book artists, someone who does VR, or someone from another field within therapy, it is really exciting.”

### **How have your professional collaborations benefited your career?**

“I wouldn’t say collaborations as much as it is relationship building that has benefited me the most. I know a lot of folks in the field and I think that in the professional environments I have worked in, I have been able to build a lot of connections with peers, staff, colleagues and others. If I work well with another therapist for the benefit of my clients then I think that helps them hold art therapy in a higher regard. I can be seen as representative of the field and be supported in that.”

### **How would you like to see the field of art therapy evolve in the coming years?**

“I don’t really have a good answer. It feels beyond the scope for me to say what is needed to re-inspire people. On one level it makes me sad to see the political and social issues that came to a head have not been adequately addressed and resolved. That was painful and unsatisfying. There was a big revolution and there was a sense of connection, community, liberation and strength whereas now it feels fragmented. However, when there is a split it brings to light the things that are important like transparency, equity, diversity, and who we want to say we are as art therapists, hopefully creating transformation.”

### **Is there anything you would like to see happen to support and expand the Colorado art therapy community?**

“There seems to be an uncertain connection between ATACO and Naropa. It always seems like we are separate from each other, although Naropa is the only place where art therapists get trained in Colorado. There haven’t been clear connections between the two, so I think it would be great for ATACO and Naropa to build a more meaningful connection.”