



ATACO recognizes Dr. Michael Franklin, PhD, ATR-BC for the Art Therapist Spotlight!

I began our interview on a beautiful summer afternoon, relaxing in the peaceful backyard of Michael Franklin, PhD, ATR-BC. Michael is currently the Coordinator for the Transpersonal Art Therapy Program and Director of the Naropa Community Art Studio at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado. This is his third academic appointment. Prior to arriving at Naropa University in 1997, he directed the art therapy programs at Bowling Green State University and at

the College of Saint Teresa. Read below to learn a more about this prominent art therapist in Colorado. You can also visit his website, artisyoga.com.

MS: What originally drew you to the field of art therapy?

MAF: Books, great mentors, and a safe childhood that valued intense imaginal play. I was one of those children who had a very strong interest in the way things looked and appeared. I was fascinated by bugs, clouds, water, even dead things and would innately respond to what I saw through drawing and making up stories. My high school years were challenging, as my father was very sick, always in and out of the hospital. I didn't understand what I was going through and somehow intuitively knew to spend a lot of time in the art studio. My high school had a wonderful art department with a very innovative teacher. It was there that I started to learn how to inwardly make sense out of the confusing events in my life. Eventually my father died when I was 15 and the benefits of art intensified. I went back, again and again to that art studio to work with materials and processes in order to understand what was happening for me. More and more, art became a reliable partner of contemplative place where I could loose and find myself. I also became interested in yoga and meditation at this time.

I knew I was going to study art in college in the 70's. Art therapy was practically unheard of at this time. I was a very serious art student focusing on lithography, ceramic sculpture, and photography. I also double majored in art education with a minor in psychology. I did my student teaching at a county magnet school for kids with disabilities - orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, auditory limitations, and severe emotional challenges. At this time I also had an amazing professor and mentor, Richard Loveless who was a student of Viktor Lowenfeld. He was involved in community-based arts in Ybor City which at the time was a very poor neighborhood in Tampa. In the late 60's Richard created a community art studio called the New Place as part of his research. It was quite successful and became an important part of this modest historic neighborhood. Additionally, Richard gently insisted that we go out into communities that were new and uncomfortable in order to bring art experiences to people who had access to the arts. To this day he and I are still close. His teaching methods and philosophy continue to guide my views about art and working within communities. It was also at this time that I studied ceramics with MC Richards, another great mentor and influential person in my life.

After college I moved to New York City. I was trying to be an artist while working in a professional photography studio. One day I was out delivering a job and stopped by the bookstore at NYU. As I rounded the corner, right in front of me was a book by Edith Kramer. I bought it, read it and decided to apply to graduate school. I went to George Washington University where I was very fortunate to have teachers who were pioneers in the field - Bernard Levy, Elinor Ulman, Edith Kramer, and briefly Hanna Kwiatkowska. I would spend many summers with Elinor at her Vermont farmhouse helping her out with cooking, gardening, and other chores. She was often editing articles for *The American Journal of Art Therapy*, which she started. She would ask me to read what she was editing, comment, and then we would take walks together in the forests or go canoeing and have long philosophical discussions about art therapy. She is very important to me as I learned a great deal from her and deeply valued her friendship. These are just some high-notes of how I found my way.

MS: Can you tell us about your journey to Naropa?

MAF: In college I continued to meditate and practice yoga. In 1975 I met and worked with MC and also took a class on Buddhism. One of our books was Trungpa's *The Myth of Freedom*. This was also around the same time that Naropa was beginning. So I would say the journey sort of started then. When I was working at Bowling Green State University I met my root teacher. I continued to deepen my meditation practice and study of Hindu-yoga-tantra traditions. Since I am a researcher, I began to publish articles on art therapy and contemplative subjects. In 1997 Naropa recruited me to direct their Art Therapy program. The program was still quite young, not yet accredited with AATA. I left a tenured position at Bowling Green State University and came here because I believed in Naropa's mission.

MS: Can you say more about the transpersonal nature of art making and the power of art therapy?

MAF: This is perhaps the most exciting and complex question. I just finished a book that will be published with SUNY Press in 2016 and the title is likely to be: *Art as Contemplative Practice: Expressive Pathways to the Self*. It represents 25 years of work. For me, engaging in creative behavior uniquely available through the arts is a way to join with the creator. To create is to sit with creator and art is a way to answer creation back with creation. I find it very meaningful to pray this way and to explore ineffable, wordless questions. Spirituality is often a wordless, silent subject and art is a trustworthy passport to this still place. Art then becomes a methodology for working from the subtle back to the physical or tangible. And from the physical back towards the subtle emptiness of silence.

I would also say that I am not always so transpersonal - moving beyond the personal. I actually want to move towards the personal and understand ego state relationships. My orientation as an artist, contemplative practitioner, teacher, and therapist blends these perspectives of Hindu/Yoga/Tantra traditions, the depth psychologies, and expressive therapies with the humanistic principals of transpersonal, imaginal, and client centered therapy. As an artist and writer I focus on integrating the relationships between visual art, social engagement, yoga philosophy, and meditation.

MS: How do you see transpersonal elements manifest in your own personal and professional work?

MAF: There are many ways to respond to this question. I did go through a cancer experience awhile back and I had been meditating for many years in a tradition/ lineage with a beloved teacher. I had trained myself to become a disciplined observer of my mind. Then the diagnosis of cancer happened and of course this type of news is devastating. It was 2004. Would this be the beginning of the end of

my life, would it severely change my life, how will my body change?’ As these questions rushed in, there was all this opportunity to make up crap and imagine the worst. Instead the fruits of meditation and other contemplative practices held me steady. My training helped me in a disciplined way to pull negative thoughts back and stay present – to move with what was moving without judging it. I went to a version of hell, took my reliable friends of art and meditation with me and did not have such a bad time. Meditation allowed me to become the observer of my mind and art allowed me to see the content of my mind; each alone is quite powerful, but when married together, the synergy is powerful. The possibilities for inner awareness are expanded exponentially. I don’t want to bypass the possibilities of how the ego experiences a trauma or how my personality is affected by something like cancer. I certainly did not want to spiritually bypass having this illness either. In fact I plowed my experiences into a PhD and a doctoral dissertation that focused on related art-based research methods.

MS: Are you working on anything now that you’re really excited about?

MAF: Yes, this book. I’ve cast a very wide net around a lot of different topics from contemplative and spiritual traditions, investigating how they relate to art. It should be out in about a year.

MS: In addition to your academic and professional career in art therapy you are also a published author. What parts of your journey to being a published author have been most satisfying? Most challenging?

MAF: I write articles and book chapters for my students. We just don’t have published material on the subjects we need in our classes. So I write these things in order to create the curriculum that I/we need. As with this book, these publications help create this field of Transpersonal/Contemplative art therapy – which is a field within the field of art therapy. My goal for my students is to create opportunities for them to fall in love with their minds and realize how bright and amazing they are. Sometimes I’m asking them to reach farther and to try to go a little deeper because I believe in them and I want them to discover and excavate their gifts and take that out into the world. Our communities need this work and the various versions of how art therapy can be applied. Each student has a trajectory for their life path and the more they are in tune with their inner wisdom and academic gifts, the more that evolving path belongs to them. Also this subject area is often highly abridged and people spend a lot of time on the surface of things. People like to talk and pontificate – but we need research and publications in peer-reviewed journals. Contemplative ideas deserve thorough investigation and scholarship that does justice to the subject. Like yoga, how do you honor a vast 5,000 year old tradition? I still don’t have a handle on its vastness even after writing this book. These are brilliant traditions that spring from gifted researchers exploring the phenomenology of inner experience and consciousness.

MS: How important is it to collaborate with your art therapy colleagues? How have your professional collaborations benefited your career?

MAF: It’s very important and quite necessary. In Eastern traditions you never know when the teacher is going to show up or bring forth the lessons of that moment. It could be a child. It could be an animal. It could be the way the breeze is blowing that day. Actually I met my meditation teacher that way, it happened quite randomly. And had I not met her I would not be here today. My view is that a good education trains people to hold multiple perspectives; at the same time to know firmly what you believe in and what your convictions are, and to certainly monitor emotional reasoning. To engage in

discussion and debate; to test whether your viewpoint does or doesn't work. Sometimes when exposed to the opinions of others we change and loosen our grip on what we hold tight and end up learning something new. Collaboration helps me know what I believe in and to believe it stronger. Sometimes it teaches me to let go of what I believe and bring in the views of others. The opportunity to work with other people can create new openings for research. And sometimes collaboration is not possible – people are just stuck in a point of view – knowledge becomes property and disagreement is trespassing. Debate is creative process and when this level of collaboration is working, wonderful unforeseen results emerge. Lastly, I have published and presented with students and graduates of the program, which I enjoy very much.

MS: Is there anything you would like to see happen through ATACO in supporting and expanding the Colorado art therapy community?

MAF: We used to have conferences called SoulFood. Perhaps we need to reinstate this legacy? I'd like to see art therapists honing their presentation skills and their research and presenting this material in as many venues in Colorado as possible. This way other professionals know the worthiness and benefits of the field. When they see the work, jobs emerge. I think we have to go out and do as much presenting as possible in order to get really good at explaining what we do, why it works, and why it matters.

I'd like to support a collaborative relationship between Naropa University and the Art Therapy Association of Colorado in order to manifest conferences. Also, the next generation needs good mentors. We really are building a fantastic art therapy community in Colorado.

Additionally, I'm always interested in community-based approaches and community based art therapy models too and I'd really like to see more community studios in as many places as possible; I think it helps communities to thrive. Trauma can happen to an entire community and often communities need to do healing together. Of course communities are made up of individuals, but when individuals come together there's a real opportunity to learn from each other. I don't know where people go to express the range of human challenge that they carry? Sports are not for everybody. At the time of the great depression there were art studios everywhere and I'd like to see as much of that as possible. I travel a lot and spend a lot of time working with people in other countries on how to create community studio spaces. Art therapists can be involved in software design, developing art studios in shopping malls where teenagers go or elders do their exercise. Art therapy does not need to happen in hospitals or in a private office, or schools or prisons. There are many ways to do this work and we need to think outside the box.

MS-Is there anything additional you would like to share with us about yourself or your experience as an art therapist?

MAF: I often say that the longest running love affair in my life is art therapy and the honeymoon has never ended! I started in 1979 and I am as amazed today as I was then of what is possible. I'm always seeing these unexpected possibilities emerge with art materials and process. I feel blessed to be a part of this profession.

Interviewed by Meagan Sokol, MA, LPC, Membership Chair