



ATACO recognizes Mimi Farrelly-Hansen, LPC, ATR-BC for the First Art Therapist Spotlight!

Our interview began with Mimi admiring the beauty of the changing seasons, watching over blooming daffodils as she sat in her Longmont home and art studio. We took a beautiful spring morning to catch up about art, life and career. Below learn more about this incredible Colorado pioneer.

Mimi standing near her most recent oil painting "Pilgrim Path (2015)" on display last month at the Art and Soul show at the SPACE Gallery in Denver, CO. Mimi was one of seventy five

artists chosen from over four hundred entries.

1 | Can you tell us what drew you to the field of art therapy?

The arts are humanizing. They are just so much what we are about as people. Visual art in particular continues to be a lifeline for me.

What drew me to the field of art therapy was my own need for healing. I had an eating disorder in my twenties and felt out of control in many parts of my life. A friend suggested I get an 18 by 24 newsprint pad and some charcoal and just start "making marks" for 15 minutes a day in my basement. Eventually I accumulated 4 or 5 of these drawing pads and scared myself. The things that were coming through were violent in a way that didn't match the persona that I had carefully cultivated: nice white girl from a good family goes to a prominent college and grad school – but everything wasn't fine. I remember taking my stack of drawings to a friend's counselor since there weren't any art therapists in Denver in the late 70's. He assured me that making art was the healthiest thing that had happened to me, like an inner door that was finally able to open. He cared enough to be a good listener and was very helpful as things became more conscious. I didn't have to manipulate anything and it would all come through, the good, the bad, and the ugly and I came to rely on this method of truth telling. I know that art therapy is powerful and I can offer clients that confidence. As my colleague Bruce Moon is fond of reminding art therapists: "My art comforts me when I am afflicted and afflicts me when I'm comfortable."

2 | In addition to your academic and professional career in art therapy, you are a published author, educator and you've done a lot with your own artwork in the community. What parts of your journey have been most satisfying? Most challenging?

What I've learned in life is the parts that are difficult usually end up being satisfying because you learn new skills. It took 7 years and 27 queries to get my book *Spirituality and Art Therapy: Living the Connection* (2009) written and published, but I met some cool people along the way, people that helped me in unexpected ways. I think the most challenging part is being seen as someone who never gets scared or never gets lost. It's ironic that my yoga teacher says the way to deal with feeling stressed is to stretch even more, take a breath, and reach further. I've learned that if I'm feeling isolated, then I need to pick up the telephone, write an email, call somebody, whatever it

takes. I used to think I'd get to this point in my life at 68 feeling totally confident. Fear and isolation are not my favorite emotions, but they are so utterly human.

3 | How would you like to see the field or profession evolve in the coming years?

More research, and it doesn't have to be fancy. We need more outcome studies in art therapy whether we like research or not. In the case of Soft Voices, the drop in center for persons with chronic mental illness that I helped found and have been active with for 13 years, we created a simple survey we used year after year. The data helps us with fund raising and grant writing.

Art therapists need to continue to communicate the link between neuropsychology, trauma and art making. An example is the recent Time magazine article that showcased mask making with veterans. That was amazing work, but I was disappointed that nobody talked about art therapy in that entire article. Perhaps we could write to the editors to offer appreciation, but also to emphasize giving credit to the field of art therapy.

Getting trained to be of service in times of crisis is so important too. In 2013 when Longmont had the flood, I went up to the local high school to offer my services. At first they were delighted, but when I went back the next day, the Red Cross had arrived. They had strict rules for who qualified to give assistance. I didn't have those credentials and nobody took over the art making. That is the sad part. Get the Red Cross training just to have in your back pocket.

4 | What advice do you have for prospective students and new professionals?

Stay connected. Join ATACO! Get involved. All those things you're told in grad school really *are* important. Don't just connect with other art therapists. Connect with other professionals too. Teamwork matters! Honestly there would be no graduate program in art therapy at Naropa had there not been a group of dedicated art therapists with diverse educational backgrounds and clinical experience who co-created the rich program you attended. So please, figure out where you fit on the initiator-follow through continuum and plug in. Our field needs you.

5 | Are there any myths about the art therapy profession that you can dispel for us?

One big myth I ran into is that getting clients to emote is always desirable. Attending grad school in the early 80's, I was less aware of art making's capacity for re-traumatization. Contemporary art therapists seem better trained to balance catharsis with containment and creating safety. Some people may misjudge the value of the clinical knowledge that art therapists have. They may not see things that an art therapist would see as red flags. Although well-meaning and not presuming to call themselves art therapists, some teachers or therapists may put people at risk and use materials in a way that ignores the continuum of media which is one of the foundations of our training. From time to time I have shared a word of caution and spoken up on behalf of a student or client who appears overwhelmed.

6 | Please tell us about your self-care strategies or philosophy.

I often use a 4-part holistic art assessment to help people express different aspects of themselves: body, mind, emotions, and spirit. I put laughter in there too, because my mind can be a real bear and it can be good to poke fun at it. Under 'emotional' I put 'honor them all, even the uncomfortable. It's often the emotional journey that gets me painting or writing something. 'Spirit' includes meditating and participating in some sort of spiritual community. I have a Buddhist practice and a Christian spiritual community. Several years ago I found an oil painting teacher with whom I paint regularly and who, like me, experiences art as prayer. 'Body' includes swimming, cooking, yoga and plenty of naps; walking our dog, gardening, just being outdoors. I'm so much more reenergized and revitalized after a half hour in the garden. At other times its family and

friends that nourish me most. The older I get, that's the stuff, along with gratitude and smiling, that keeps me going.

7 | Are you working on anything now that you're really excited about?

I just recently had a painting in a national show called *Art and Soul*, created by the head of the Denver Art Students League and juried by the head of the Denver Art Museum to examine the topic of Soul, looking for fresh expressions of that illusive concept.

For me the gala reception was all magic; I felt like Cinderella rewarded for two years of disciplined study and the willingness to take risks and paint larger (3'x4' canvases) and brighter. I learned to paint abstractly in oil, a medium I hadn't touched since the mid-70's and then only briefly, in a highly realistic manner. The painting has many layers and underpaintings. I investigate the sharp pointy shapes partially obscured and yet there is light, from above- a powerful bolt of light and to one side the warm steady glow of a tall ceramic vessel that could have been an Egyptian funerary jar or a container for the Dead Sea Scrolls. I ended up calling the piece *Pilgrim Path*, and had the distinct impression that another hand other than mine created the jar. You have those moments where you note to yourself 'where did that come from?' I honestly can't recall painting even part of it. I was painting this at the time ISIS and other places closer to home were perpetuating brutality. The world is very full of enticing mystery and horrific violence and somehow there's that tension that gets set up in the painting. There are the parts that are jagged and uncomfortable and scary. I realized intuitively I need to make sure I always have one of those beautiful jars to stand by as an anchor for me, a place of calm and wellbeing.

Another part of what made the opening so special was the company of my husband plus my teacher (whose large abstract piece just happened to get hung right next to mine) and my teacher's wife. I had all of these witnesses and all four of us were simply grinning with joy. Many also stopped to engage with my piece; "mysterious", "moody", "draws you in" were comments shared that matched my own experience. It was gratifying to know I wasn't the only person that stumbles around in those obscure places and I think that's the rationale for exhibiting work, whether for ourselves or our clients. Over 32 years of practicing art therapy I have helped many others stretch and grow into free-er, bolder self-expression. With this painting and process I got to be the student and dance in my own parade, and I felt its power.

If you're sensitive in the way that most artists are, you are going to be affected by a lot more suffering than you bargained for. That's the yin and yang of it. I got lost and found the way pilgrims do, and as long as I have a source of light to return to I will continue my explorations for a long, long time. Because I love to paint!

Interviewed by Meagan Sokol, MA, LPCC, ATACO Membership Chair