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Artist/Art Therapist Denise Malis: In tune with her artistic psyche

On March 21, 2013, Wilderness House Literary Review had the pleasure of interviewing artist/art therapist Denise Malis about her art therapy practice and her own artwork inside her Somerville art studio. Here is the result:

Canadian-born Denise Malis has lived and worked as an artist in the United States for over two decades. Currently, she teaches art therapy and drawing at Endicott College, Beverly, Massachusetts. A Ph.D. candidate at Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Malis leads the Art Mentoring Group in her Somerville art studio for developing, self-taught artists who struggle with mental health issues.



The Art Mentoring Group has been in existence for approximately 10 years, with a combined total of about 15-20 artists. Three artists have consistently participated in the program over the past decade. Malis runs this group as a way to pay back the individuals with whom she loves to work.

"I practice as a group therapist using art. But with the group that I run here – the Art Mentoring Group – I don't practice art therapy in this group. But I create, and I am very in tune with creating a therapeutic holding space. So it's not art therapy per se, but they're just allowed to explore. There's no teaching. There's no critique. People work on things. They get feedback. But it's not a critique, per se. It's really a support for them," she said in a recent interview with Wilderness House Literary Review.

First introduced to art therapy at an antroposophical "wet-on-wet" painting class based on Rudolf Steiner's painting method, Malis said, "This class opened my eyes to the alternative experiences and approaches to painting as well as the artwork that can emerge from untrained artists."

She began to create art with people who "had never been trained, so to speak, in schools. And I really thought their work was wonderful," she said.

Malis is an expressive art therapist. "That means," she said, "that I have the training and capacity to use art-based modalities in therapies. So I integrate that."



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To Malis, art and the practice of art therapy converge at times. Her work as an art therapist is impacted by her artwork, and vice versa. But, as a therapist, she realizes that some people choose not to work with art.

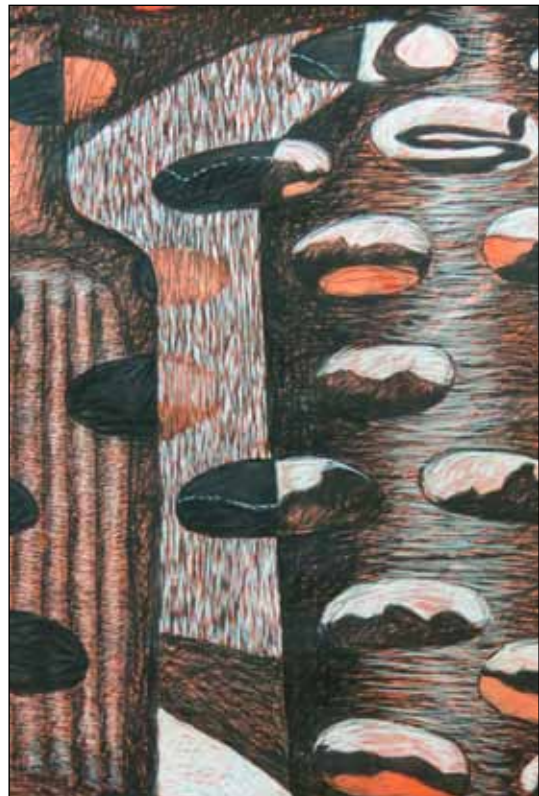
Since childhood, Malis has enjoyed creating art. "I have memories of doing art in class. I remember specifically making art when I was in grades 1, 2, and 3. I lived in Nova Scotia at the time, and I was taught by nuns. I remember there was a teacher that would come in. She was this little old lady, and she would teach us how to do things. So we had to draw a scene or do a landscape or draw a picture. And I remember that I just instinctively used pencil-crayons and crayons. I remember she came around to me. Now I really liked the drawing that I did. And she said, 'Oh no, no, no. You never mix media.' This is really ironic because now that's what I love to do. I love mixing media. And I collect things. And I get really inspired by different materials. To this day, I like integrating them into my work.

Malis's artistic style is not a stagnant one. It has developed immensely over the last three decades. For example, when Malis was in her B.F.A. program at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, she concentrated mainly on drawing and then painting. It was at University of Cincinnati, where she received her M.F.A., when she began with painting and then soon developed her mixed media skills. And for a short time, after graduating University of Cincinnati, she lived in New York City where she progressed with fabrics and other materials and started creating fabric assemblages that are similar to sculptures.

Then Malis returned to Canada. She lived in Toronto for 10 years when she decided to study for a second Masters in Arts. Her second M.A. degree would be in counseling and a specific study in art therapy. This time she journeyed to Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. The year was 1990, and she has remained in the area ever since.

While enjoying working with oils, acrylics, pencil-crayons, crayons, and fabrics, Malis has another medium that she finds intriguing: encaustic, or bee's wax. She finds bee's wax wonderful, especially when used with mixed media. She works on cradled wood bases and cradles or on tiles.

Malis's artworks are usually done in a series that takes a while for completion. "I tend to work in a series without really knowing [at first] that it's a series. Sometimes it can be around an image. Sometimes it can be an image with



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focused materials as well. And then I just follow that. Then all of a sudden I just can't work with it anymore. So it completes itself."

Imagination plays an important part in Malis's artworks, as well as reality. "Sometimes I use references based in the world and sometimes not. It really depends ... Sometimes it's around a certain photograph that I might have or sometimes it's around a specific material, actually."



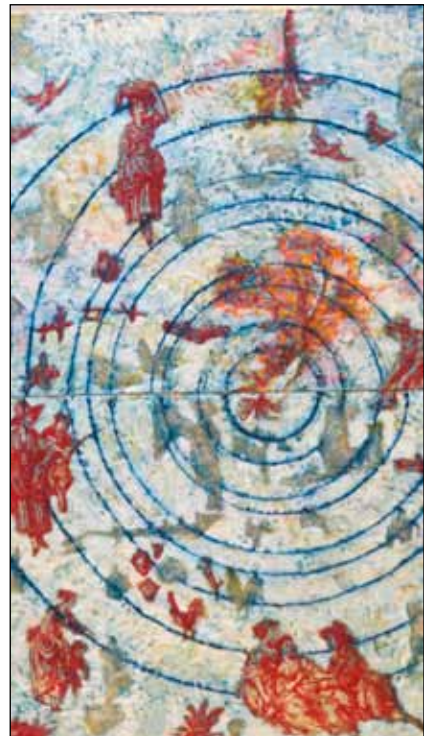
The colors that Malis works with vary from bright to dark, black-and-white to colorful. "There are some colors that I work with that are my comfort colors – like I have comfort food! And I find that every once in a while I have to definitely return to just working with black-and-white."

Malis went through a black-and-white period after the birth of her daughter. "Before I had my daughter, I was working with colorful sculptures and watercolors. And then, after I had my daughter, I couldn't work with color. I worked with black-and-white for about four years."

She used charcoal and then moved onto black-and-white enamel paint. Then, suddenly, she began to integrating colors again. Malis lets her artistic psyche lead her when creating art. "I just find that is how I approach art: it leads me. I don't feel like I lead it. I'm really interested in authentic engagement. I think that's what drew me into art therapy and why I also like working with people who are self-taught."

In her artworks, one can usually find a common thread that can be viewed in a group series, said Malis. "When I moved my studio to here, away from my home, I did a series lasting for about four years to five years. It started with exploring volcanoes and I initially worked with cold bee's wax and chalk pastel. I explored that image in a number of different ways. Then I started to integrate images of family, which is something that I'd never done before. That felt very strange to me and risky. It was actually very emotional work for me to do."

After the volcano and family series, Malis worked on another series based on fear and insomnia, nightmares. She started doing more painting than drawing and watercolor; she moved back and forth between



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color and black-and-white. Then she moved on to collage work and then onto encaustic painting.

Malis's artworks have been exhibited in several places over the years: Mercer Union, Toronto; a solo show at Lesley University; several exhibitions in the Somerville-Cambridge area; and lot of group shows. She's also part of a cooperative gallery. "I do think it's important to show your work and not let it pile up and just show to friends," said Malis. "It's just a really important step. It's really helped me to put together a body of work and to follow it, to present it, and all of these things." Artist/art therapist Denise Malis has some words of wisdom to aspiring artists, "Everybody has limitations. But don't let that limit you. Just don't stop. Even if you do stop for a while sometime – I've not been able to work sometimes for two years, and that was very painful – that's okay. But, when you can work, put as much of yourself into it. Be fearless and learn from that!"

