

‘Time lived without its flow’: memory, remembering, and memorialising in contexts of complex perinatal loss

Claire Flahavan

This paper derives from the author’s work as an art therapist in the Department of Fetal Medicine at the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin, Ireland. This role centres on providing therapeutic support to women and couples who receive a diagnosis of a severe/fatal fetal anomaly during pregnancy. These diagnoses often bring complex dilemmas about whether to continue or to terminate what are usually much-wanted pregnancies. The therapeutic work takes as its focus supporting women/couples through their decision-making process and along their subsequent trajectory, whether that means an elective termination, continuing the pregnancy (awaiting an uncertain outcome), navigating in-utero demise or bearing the delivery of a baby whose lifespan may be brief (hours to days). Meaning-making and memory-making in the aftermath of these losses is a key part of the work.

The specific impact of any experience of perinatal loss will be unique to the individual or couple, resting on their subjective sense of ‘what it is’ or ‘who it is’ that has been lost. The termination of a highly desired pregnancy brings its own specific complexities, particularly within the current legal framework in Ireland, where it may be necessary to travel to obtain a termination.

This paper will explore the ways in which a creative arts therapy approach may usefully support these experiences. This may require attending to the bodily experience of the pregnancy itself, to traumatic memories of the termination and/or delivery, as well as facilitating a space in which a woman or couple can ‘be with’ their memories and experience of their baby, no matter how ephemeral or transient. There is a delicate kind of negotiation here between memory, remembering and memorialising but ultimately looking towards recovery of a sense of forward momentum. The paper will interweave case vignettes and images from the author’s own arts practice, made in response to this therapeutic work.

Biography

Prior to training as an art therapist, **Claire Flahavan** worked in medicine and psychiatry across a range of mental health services for over ten years. She set up a therapy service with the Fetal Medicine Team at the National Maternity Hospital, Dublin, Ireland, in 2019, having worked in the area of perinatal mental health in private practice for a number of years. She also works as an art therapist with the Child Sexual Abuse Unit at Crumlin Hospital, Dublin. Claire has particular interests in developmental trauma, complex loss/bereavement and psychological issues arising in the perinatal period. She contributes teaching sessions annually to the MA in Art Therapy programme at Crawford College Cork, and to the MSc in Child Art Psychotherapy, University College Dublin.

Recent publications and conference presentations

‘Room’: an exploration of physical space in the therapeutic process

Presentation: Abstract accepted for the Association of Medical Humanities Conference (June 2020 – Limerick, Ireland); conference deferred until June 2021, due to Covid-19

‘Lost and Found’: Locating meaning within the landscape of perinatal loss

Presentations: International Art Therapy Practice/Research Conference – London (2019).

Organisers: British and American Associations for Art Therapy

Rooted in the Landscape Symposium – King’s College London (2018)

Organiser: Paintings in Hospitals/Arts Council UK

Published: Book chapter in *Therapeutic Uses of the Arts in Pregnancy, Birth and New Parenthood*. (Ed) Professor Susan Hogan. Routledge (Aug 2020)

'I ain't looking for nothing in anyone's eyes': reflections on gaze and mirroring within the therapeutic encounter

Presentation: International Art Therapy Practice/Research Conference – London (2019).

Organisers: British and American Associations for Art Therapy