

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

**Art as thinking:
MA Art Psychotherapy staff artmaking group in the context of the
neoliberal university**

The MAAP Team 2023-2024

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Artworks

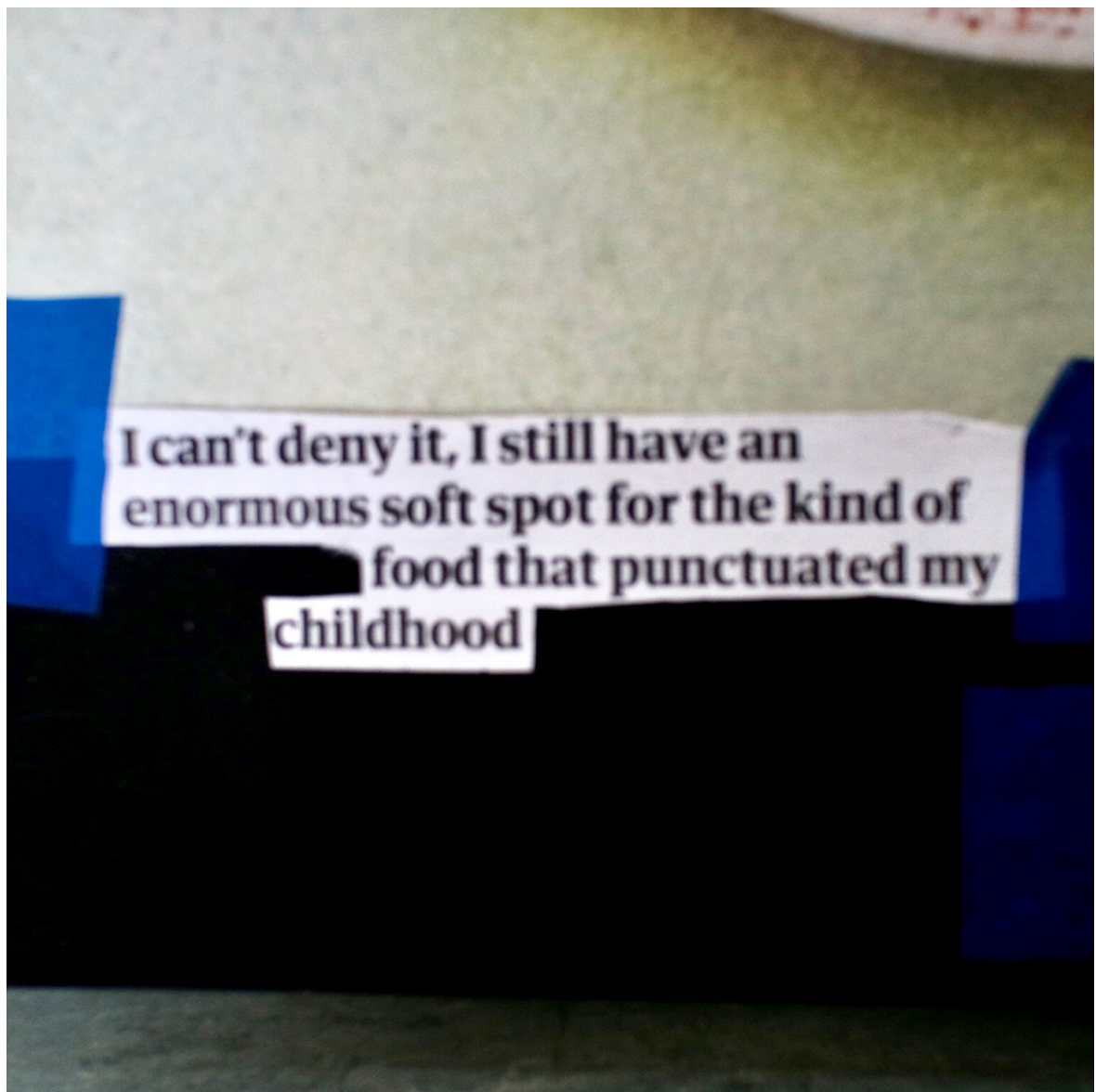


Figure 1.



Figure 2.



Figure 3.

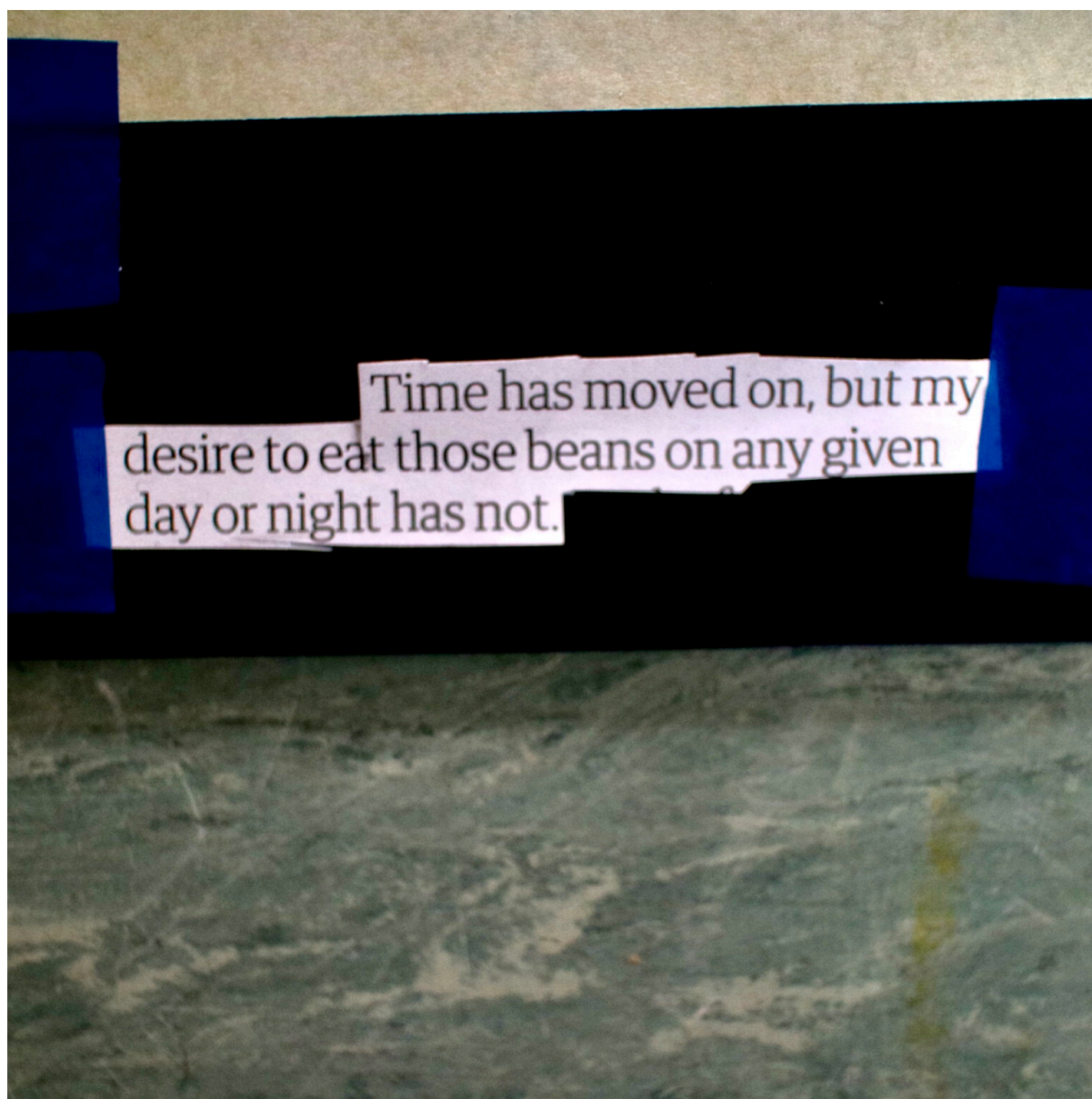


Figure 4.

In making this artwork, I was exploring something about an idea of introjection during early infancy and later childhood. I was thinking about home cooking and feeding as a metaphor for this.

How difficult might it be for a latency age child to think of their primary caregiver's views as racist? What might it be like to think about racist aspects of an upbringing later on, as an adult?

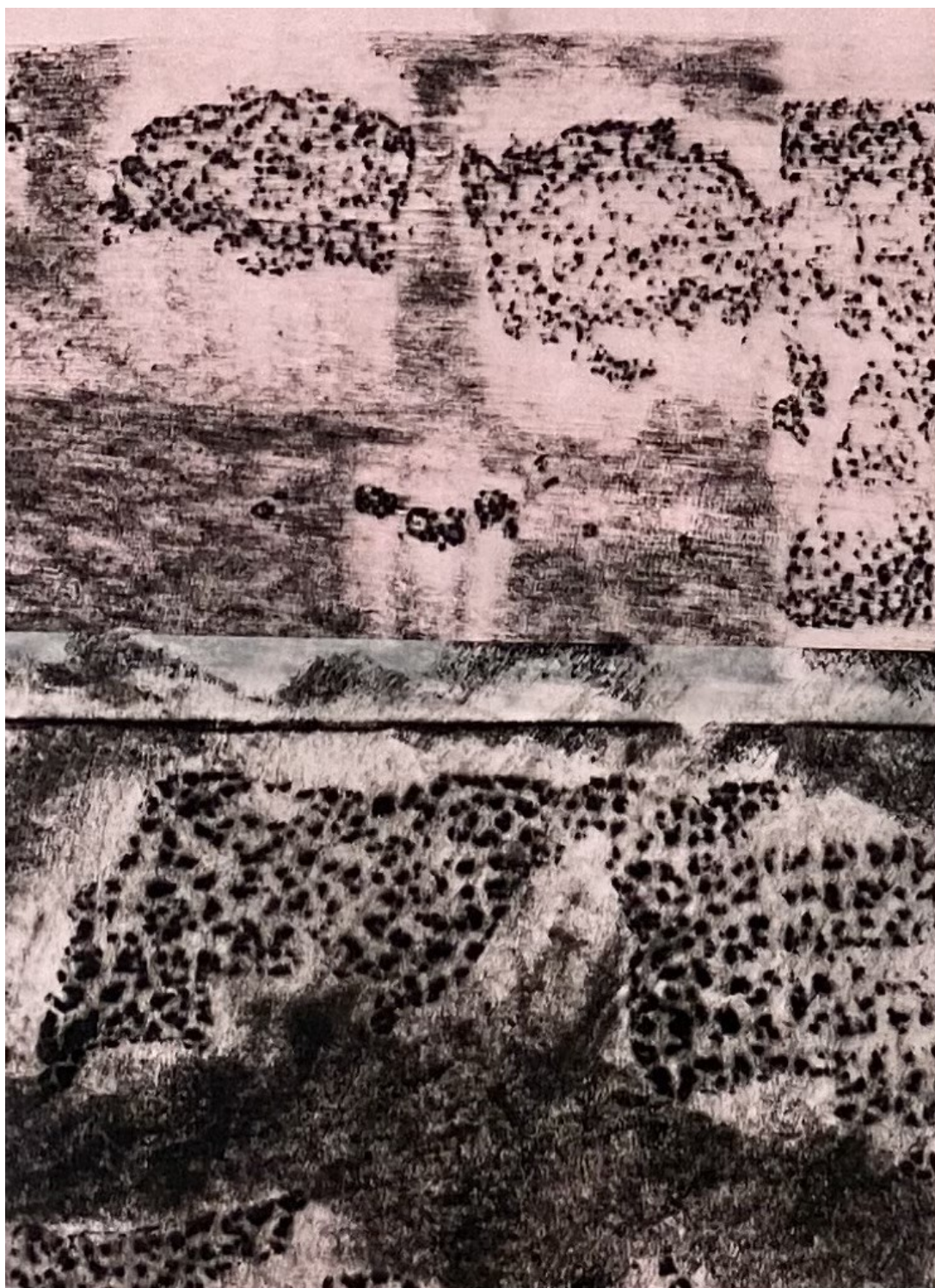


Figure 5.

After See Through

I wished to catch and hold the past to predict the future.



Figure 6.

Memory extraction

I used tracing paper to trace the cracks in the studio wall, as I thought about the years of staff and students using the room, and what the walls could tell us. I used red crayon, which began to have an unpleasant association in the moment, and I started to think about the violence of colonialism built into the structures of the university. The tracing paper was hard and crispy and I wanted to soften it and change its form, I dipped it in water and PVA to break down the structure of the paper, to round it and shape it differently. The end result felt reminiscent of an eyeball, a gall bladder or some other extracted organ.

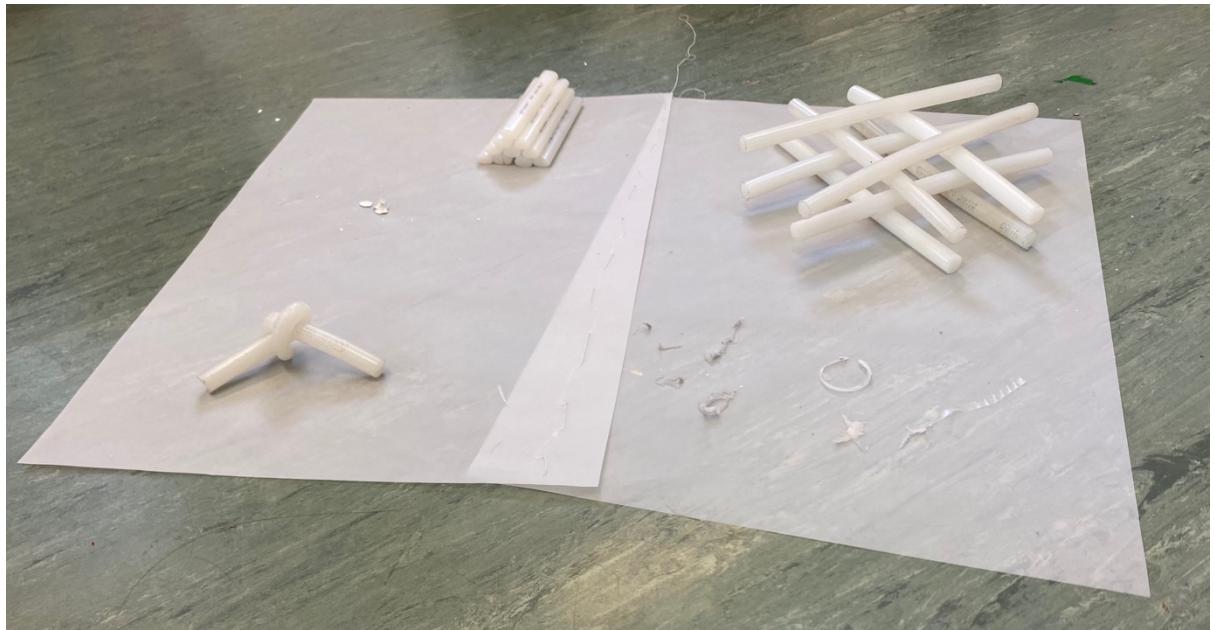


Figure 7.

White Fragility.

This piece attempts to explore the solidity of white fragility.



Figure 8.

Protected / Exposed



Figure 9

This art piece was made following a discussion around what gets left behind, and directed me to use scraps and leftovers from other activities, bits from students art processes and experiences with the art materials in the studio. I felt an urge to create something both rolled up and closed off, as well as wanting to tear it open, exposing either end, and I wondered about a possible sense of oppression experienced from this institution and who gets to enact changes, and creative destruction or destructive creation. The suggestion of text that may have been disturbed or disruptive hints at scrolls that enforce rules or give instruction.

The difficulty in knowing what this work was, (another object being left behind) and also how it might fall apart meant that additional layers were needed underneath to keep it from leaking. The red ties either end reminded me of early sanitary products, that were awkward and humiliating but provided basic containment of bodily fluids.

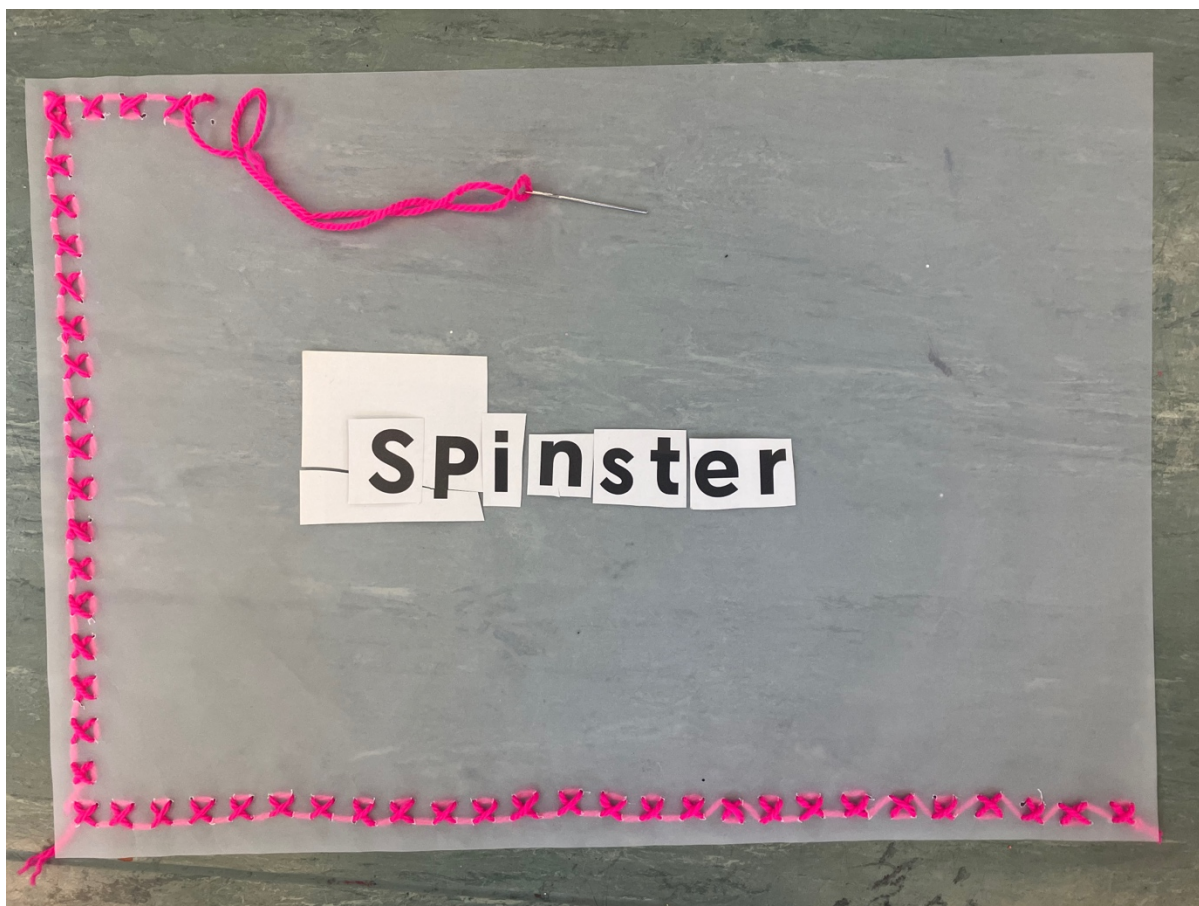


Figure 10.

“The issue of feminism is the issue of patriarchy, the issue of patriarchy is the issue of neoliberalism, the issue of neoliberalism is the issue of capitalism, therefore everything is absolutely connected. ... It is understood and assumed that the struggle will not be possible unless it is a feminist struggle.”

Erika Silva Urbano, director, Memorarte embroidery collective

<https://theworld.org/stories/2020-02-21/chile-women-use-traditional-embroidery-urge-political-change>



Figure 11.



Figure 12.

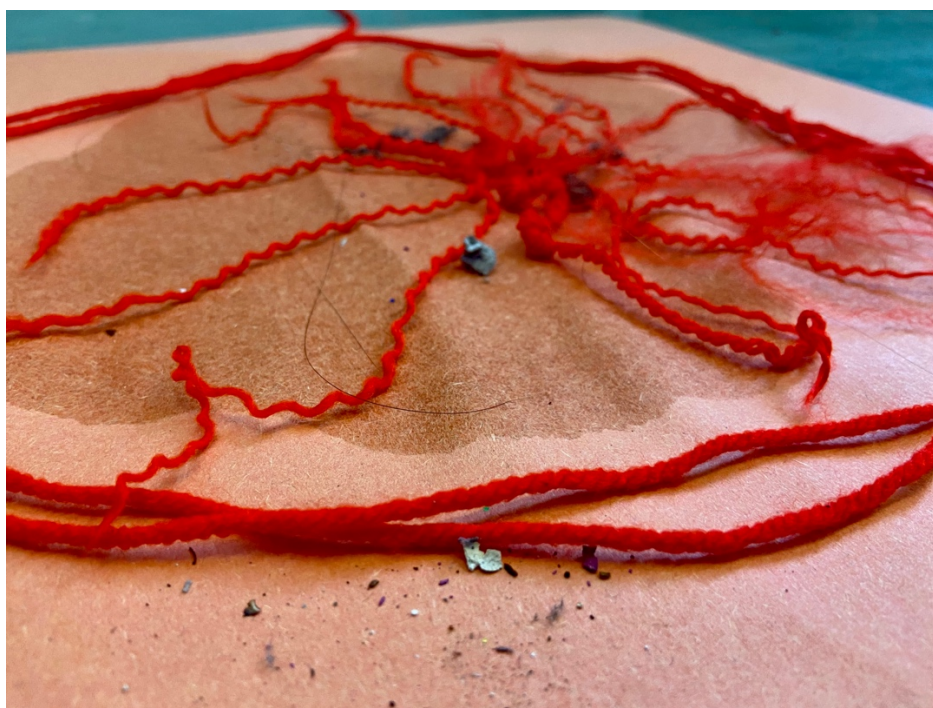


Figure 13.

Dust, Dirt and DNA



Figure 14.

I used my fingers as needle to crochet.

I used my body to create.

I used my body and creation to receive, to feel, to hold, to think, and to process what's left unsaid.

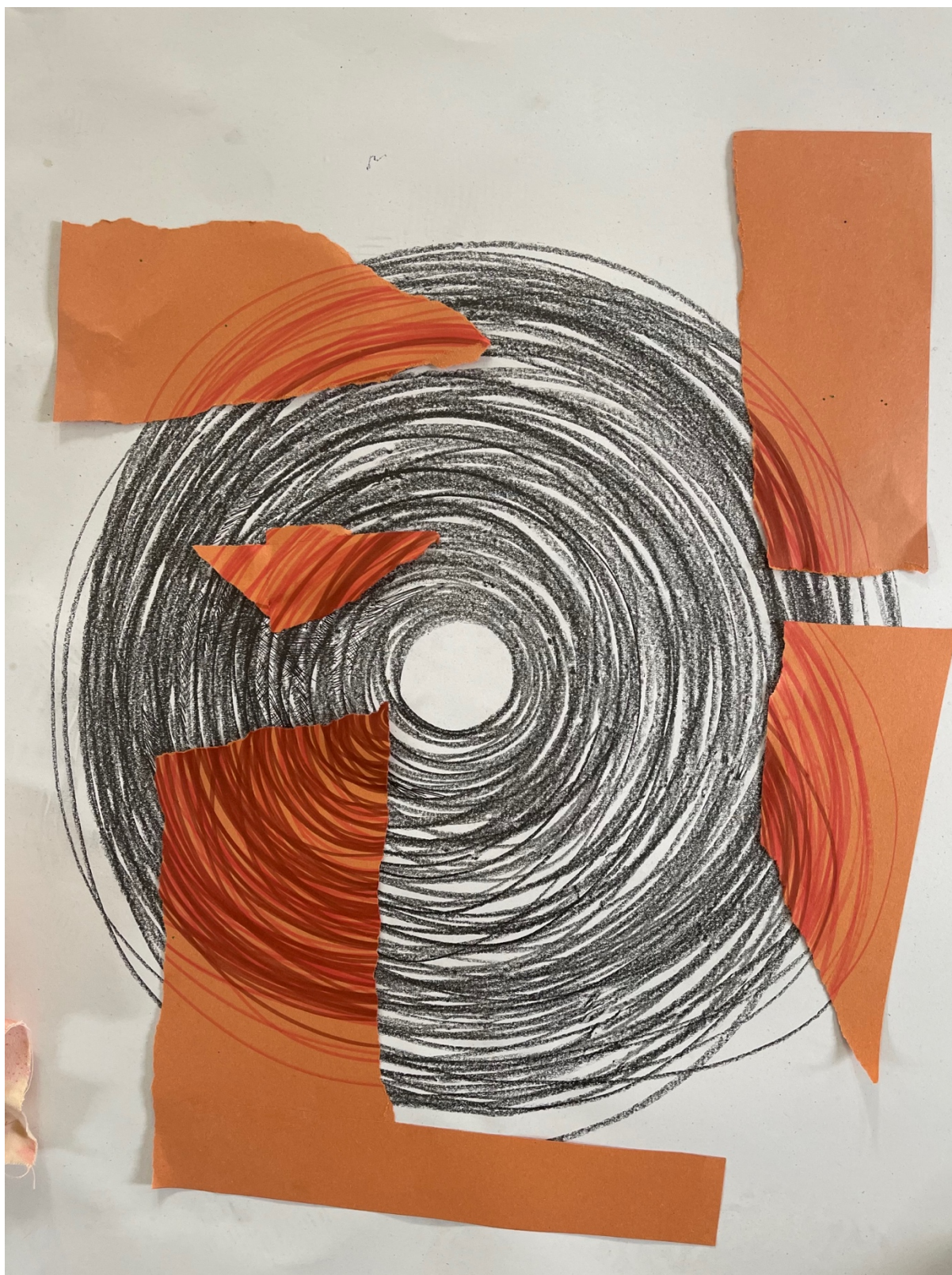


Figure 15.

Loud Concentric



Figure 16.

Pyramid Bisc



Figure 17.

Crumpled



Figure 18.

Crumpled's sister

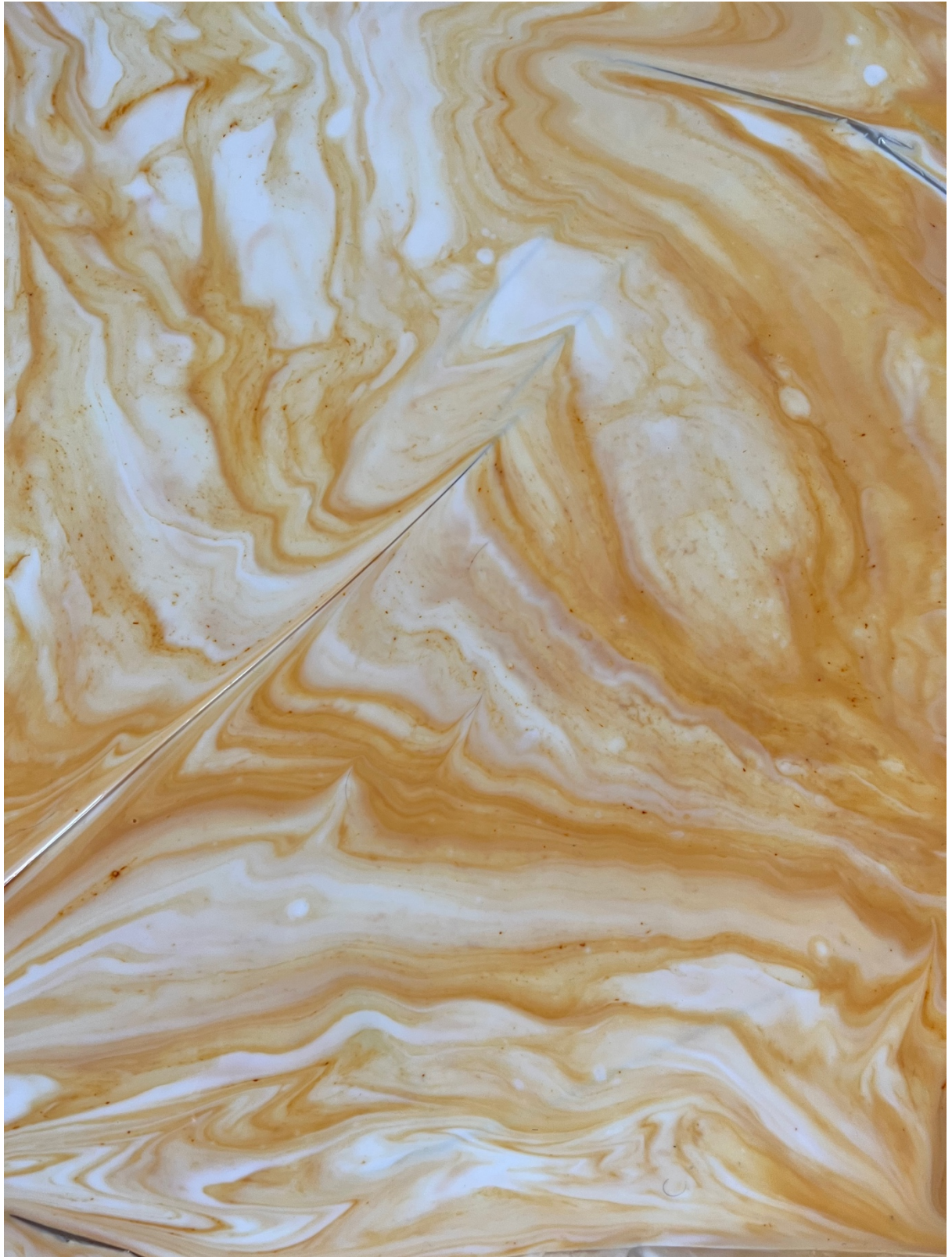


Figure 19.



Figure 20.

It's sticky, messy, tricky work to try to contain. Constantly changing and moving and feeling like it could make something beautiful or could rip apart to a puddle on the

floor. This feels like the dynamism of art psychotherapy in the here and now. The mess and fragility held as it moves, gloops, gathers, and spills. Of blackness, brownness and whiteness as intersections meet and muddle. Of skin, of colonialism, of heritage, of class, of identity, of difference and sameness. It's the work and not everyone wants to hold it.

PVA glue and Tea

Discussion

In this piece we present a visual 'snapshot' of artworks made in a staff art making group for tutors on the Art Psychotherapy training at Goldsmiths University, London, as we start the academic year 2023-24. In the group, which happens twice termly, the teaching team gather in the studio to talk, make artworks, and reflect on their meanings for the staff group in the dynamic context of the training. Our art making as a team has come to signify a place for critical thinking, connecting, and creating together in a way that feels authentic and that has become an essential part of our cohesion and survival as a team. We decided to show this aspect of our practice to foreground the role of art to think about personal, political, social and institutional dynamics. We believe that the value we place on art making as art psychotherapists can be part of our functioning and resistance in 'the hostile environment of neoliberalism' (Skaife and Martyn 2022).

Our practice of making art together developed somewhat on the edges; some of us informally gathering, late into the evening to make, or finding ourselves together in the studio and instinctively being drawn to the materials whenever time allowed. With hindsight, this collective gathering around art came about over a tumultuous and difficult time in the long history of the training, where the traumas of the pandemic and upheavals in teaching and therapy practice converged with the intensifying of the university's neoliberal agenda; hierarchical top-down decision making over staffing changes and cuts, the erosion of employment contracts, and pay inequalities resulted in ongoing union strikes. Over these initial sessions, art became a lifeline for us to process painful experiences and institutional dynamics that felt violent and oppressive

and that were mirrored in other partner organisations, for example the NHS, third sector and educational institutions. Art became a way to be together, to think and reflect. It reminded us of what the artmaking and group can hold, and enabled a state of repair and recovery, to find our voices, establish changes and take risks. Gradually this space has become embedded into our structure, built into the timetable, and we protect it as such. Against the attacks on spaces to meet, think and make together in higher education, this feels like a rebellion.

The group tends to follow the same loose structure: we meet and talk about whatever issues are pressing, we make art for an agreed time (this can vary, but around 40 minutes to an hour) and then we come back together to reflect on the work. As in other art psychotherapy settings, the art has shifting, ever-changing meaning on many levels, for the individual who made it, for the group it was made in, or for the wider social political context, where it might deepen our understanding of the group discussion, or hold something of the unspoken disturbance in the socially permeated unconscious of the group (Dalal 2001). The artwork we present here came about following a discussion which amongst other themes, centred around ideas of the 'legacy' of the training, change and the status quo, the 'decolonising' movement, and the need to think about how we can actively oppose complex, oppressive, racist, patriarchal and misogynistic systems of privilege within the higher education system.

In deciding how, or whether, to write about our art practice, we encountered several issues that probably reflect the nature of groups – that we had different ideas and opposing feelings. For example, about, whether to write, how to write and how much to write. Opinions differed over whether the art 'spoke for itself' or whether as an art therapy practice it needed contextualising for the viewer, and if so, how much? Some of the group wrote accompanying words, others did not, and our process seemed to reflect wider problems of how to show art from art therapy more publicly; the problems of taking work from one context into another, and whether it can be understood by a new audience (Brown and Omand 2022). In the process of grappling with this we found ourselves reconnecting with the 'legacy' of past MAAP teams who had previously made and shown art together. It felt helpful to see our practice as both arising newly from a particular political context, and being part of a line of inquiry stretching back into the past. To reflect the context of the 'group as a whole' and resist

traditional academic preoccupations with individualised named authorships (first, second etc...), we decided to publish this contribution under a collective name, 'The MAAP team'.

In addition, we had a hesitancy about getting in the way of the team's delicate ongoing process of forming, amid upheavals and with new members joining. To balance this, we decided we would only include work from groups which came after the idea for an ATOL submission had been raised, so that, in a sense, this ATOL piece and these issues are also part of the context of making art. In agreeing to show our work we wanted to model something for our students about the ongoing centrality of art making as the living heart of practice. We also wanted to foreground visual processes rather than verbal ones, and as an arts-based exploration we wanted to rebel against the dominance of words, numbers and known quantities and embrace uncertainty, disagreement and ambiguity as inherent to our practice and research.

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