LEARNING TO LOVE: RECONSTRUCTING AND EXTENDING NARRATIVES THROUGH THEORETICAL AND ART PRACTICES

Susan Helen Taylor



Figure 1: Susan Helen Taylor, Learning to Love, paper, textiles, and glass. Installation view at Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2010.

The main subject of this article is the conceptual theme on which my 2010 artwork, *Learning to Love*, rests. This theme is an exploration of the human potential to move from a primary negative position of lovelessness towards a mature decision to reject this scenario and take up a self-selected positive position of love towards oneself and others. A position of lovelessness is a negative psychological survival choice made by a child at a very young age. It is the decision to introject the projections that have been pressed upon them by their primary attachment figure

or figures.⁴ I have chosen this conceptual theme for my work not only because I find it theoretically interesting, but also because it reflects my own personal process of development. This melding of intellectual and emotional perspectives is important because I believe it to be textually more enriching than a singular approach. Here, I am talking about both this article and the artwork as texts. Correspondingly, as I am strongly influenced by second wave feminism, I am committed to weaving personal perspectives and experiences with academic perspectives and knowledges. I use this as a feminist strategy for subverting the patriarchal division between the public and the private in which the public is seen as masculine, active and dominant and the private as feminine, passive and submissive.⁵

My academic research fields are psychoanalytic, social/cultural and feminist theories and expressions, as well as personal experiences and observations by myself and others. The psychoanalytic and social/cultural theories, usually sourced from feminist or feminist-friendly perspectives, relate to the development of ego states and emotional intelligence⁶ in children and often explore how primary attachments and object relations affect development of these states and thus psychic development. Following on from this, they also explore theories and practises related to understanding and healing childhood traumas.⁷

To allow for a comprehensive understanding of *Learning to Love*, I will explain some of the long and dense history from which this artwork was developed. This title is derived from my reading of a trilogy of books, and a follow-up book, by bell hooks on the subject of love. Bell hooks, who defines herself as feminist and black, is a writer, academic and activist whose sensitive and positive theoretical approach to socially marginalised people, as expounded in the late 1980s and early 1990s in texts such as "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," aroused my theoretical interest and personal empathy. Throughout these writings, hooks postulates love as "an ethical construct consisting of tangible elements that need to be learned and practised." hooks partially unpacks this statement, in *All About Love: New Visions*, when she writes: "To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients — care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication" and "responsibility."

Familiar with previous writings by hooks, it did not surprise me that hooks mirrors my own experiences when she opens the preface to All About Love: New Visions with the words: "When I was a child, it was clear to me that life was not worth living if we did not know love. I wish I could testify that I come to this awareness because of the love I felt in my life. But it was love's absence that let me know how much love mattered."

An artistic expression of this sentiment, "Lost, One Blue Rabbit," an episodic short story written by me (1980s, revised 1990s), became the direct inspiration for the artwork *Learning to Love*. "Lost, One Blue Rabbit" is a story about how children project their difficult or painful states of mind onto their play objects – in this instance, a young female child onto an early 1950s rabbit, teddy bear, koala and glamour doll – in attempts to rid themselves of these unwanted ideas and feelings that have become introjected aspects of their personality. The epilogue to "Lost, One Blue Rabbit," however, alludes to the fact that adults need not remain stuck in these primal traumas, which will still be numbing their being and adversely affecting their experiences, especially their relationships. They can use human attributes such as intelligence, awareness and creativity, and human knowledges such as disciplines and their discourses, to resolve and transform these internalised conflicts into life-enhancing paradigms for healthy living."

When deciding to bring this written work into a fine-arts arena by reconstructing it as an artwork, I also decided to shift the emphasis away from the trauma of the episodes and onto the healing potential inherent in the epilogue. With these decisions, I set myself major challenges in how to conceptually and materially achieve these transitions. After trying to reduce all of "Lost, One Blue Rabbit" to a single printed piece, or expand it into a complex diorama, it occurred to me that the rabbit and the teddy bear, being major constructs within the original story, were conceptually strong enough to carry most of the altered and expanded meanings and feelings I wished to portray. And, I concluded that any audiences might well operate as valid stand-ins for the child in the story and the adult in the epilogue as, with their varied perceptions and responses, they would bring many introjections and projections to the artwork. Anything else needed from the story could be minimally expressed within the site in which the toys were eventually contextualised.



Figure 2: Susan Helen Taylor, Learning to Love: Rabbit, 2010. paper and textiles, 1.70 x 260cm.

Once the above underpinnings were satisfactorily formulated, my energy became focused on how to make the two toys in complementary visual forms. My first impulse, as a printmaker, was to stay within the bounds of paper and ink as much as possible. This led me on a long search to find methods, skills and materials through which I could achieve this aim. There were times, however, when I deviated from this aim. I believe that in order for my artwork to be effective, it has to have significance for me. I achieve this through things such as colour choices, material selections and other visual choices, as well as through the range of feelings I go through in the making of an artwork. For example, the bodies of the two toys are made from fabric taken from the lining of curtains that belonged to my mother. My mother shared her choice of these curtains with me with great pleasure, and I responded with equal pleasure. This created a moment of warm intimacy between us. Years later, however, these same curtains became objects onto which my mother projected much pain and distress. By using scraps of these curtains in *Learning About Love*, I hoped to imbue myself, and thus the artwork, with positive meanings and feelings while still retaining echoes from the curtains' previous life. My audiences may not be directly aware of these dynamics, but they are important creative emotional drivers in the construction of this artwork. To quote the Melbourne-based artist, Patricia Piccinini:

I see my work as a series of propositions that relate to theoretical issues, but which also contain an emotional element that complicates things. I like this complication because it is like life. Ideally, these things will disturb you even as they warm you. . . . The experience and possibility of empathy are important to me. My work is not dry, cool and rational: it is wet, warm and emotional. 12

Polonius, in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, counsels Ophelia: "By indirections find directions out." This advice bore fruit when I had to decide how and in what materials to construct the outer coats of the rabbit and the bear. In doing the research for this, I embraced the intense eclecticism to which I am drawn and worked with the belief that if I researched far and wide, I would eventually find 'something' that spoke to me in terms of what I wanted the work to say and the way I wanted the work to look. This 'something' turned out to be the floral aspect of the craft of paper quilling. Paper quilling is a traditional hand-made art/craft form that involves rolling, bending, pinching and sometimes fringing thin strips of paper into various decorative shapes and designs. Within the field of quilling I found inspiration from artists and craftspersons such as Margaret Haigh, a designer who, in 1989, spent six months

of evening work creating, in four shades of blue, a quilled facsimile of a plate from the traditional willow pattern china range. ¹⁵ The attention to detail, the intricacy and the beauty of this piece, that paralleled so well my own aesthetic tendencies, made me eager to explore the craft of quilling further. It was through looking at a picture of J Davies's quilled lion's head that I finally decided to use quilling in my artwork. Davies chose quilled motifs that reflected the shaggy look of a lion's head and used a range of colours that gave the lion character. Consequently, out of a wide range of options, I chose several different styles of quilled flowers for the surface of each toy to give that toy its individuality while, at the same time, connecting the toys through the common theme of quilling.



Figure 3: Susan Helen Taylor, Learning to Love: Teddy Bear, (detail) 2010.



Figure 4: Susan Helen Taylor, Learning to Love: Rabbit, (detail), 2010.

Quilling has other advantages as a material means. The paper strips used in quilling come in a workable range of widths and a multitude of colours, with many shades within each colour. This is very pertinent within my work because I am using colour both as a way of expressing a wide range of meanings and feelings, and as a way of attracting a wide audience. For example, the available quilling paper colour range allowed me to set up a colour palette for the bear that would symbolically represent the full range of human feelings. I created a 19-shade and tone spread ranging from glossy intense black – representing the most painful feelings or the blocking off of feelings by repression – through to radiant light cream, representing the lightest and most enlightened joyful feelings or the releasing of feelings from repression. The fact that quilled pieces are 3D in form allows for textural effects, and when they are clumped together or placed side by side they create surfaces that many viewers want to touch as well as look at. Paper quilling strips also conform to current conservation standards – a factor that I consider to be important in the type of work I am producing, as I intend these objects to last over a long time and to be passed on in some way, just as their prototypes often are in the domestic world where these type of toys are usually found. At the same time, the turned-back fringing on the flowers used for the bear's coat created a flat yet highly textured surface that was a viable substitute for a bear's coat. These fringed flowers also give the bear a spiky look and feel that could well represent left-over painful feelings from his past life of lovelessness.

For Learning to Love, I did a lot of research using children's picture books that are created to familiarise children with a full range of feelings and their healthy expression. For, as hooks says in All About Love: New Visions: "We learn about love in childhood." As social creatures, in order to lead full and healthy lives and develop into fully functioning adults, children need to learn to develop and maintain varying degrees of relationship. Also, as adults we are able, through a restructuring of our psychological processes, to mediate, unlearn and/or relearn how to live in the world, with ourselves and others, in better, more life-enhancing ways.¹⁷ It was with this purpose in mind, and with the purpose in mind of trying to encapsulate these ideas in an artwork, that I began to look at children's picture books as a form of expression for development away from trauma. It was through researching these texts that I found ways of shifting the toy's subjectivities from a position of trauma, as narrated in four episodes in the original short story, to a more balanced and healthy state of being, as posited in the epilogue to the short story and as represented in my artwork.

The multiple reading I did of these books became a very emotional and visceral experience, which was appropriate as one of the main artistic intents of my artwork is to communicate emotionally and viscerally with my audiences.

When I was a child, few such books existed. We have recently started producing them as we have come to understand the importance of positive feelings in a child's life and the destructive psycho-social effects of the traumatic negative feelings that are, all too often, part of some children's everyday experiences. For me, these powerful representations of childhood function as theory in practice. They give children, at a very early age, a means by which to learn about and identify with a wide range of human feelings and information on how to express and moderate such feelings, especially in relationship to self and others. To exemplify these children's books I have chosen lan Falconer and his "Olivia" series, in which he personifies a piglet. These books appeal to both children and adults and mirror myriad aspects of young children and their behaviour. In one instance, a sequence of pictures shows Olivia looking very assured and pleased with herself as she drags a long-suffering cat from room to room and back again many times (exactly as my 3-year-old friend Misha does with the family cat, Coco). Within Olivia's household there is no patriarchal figure who comes along and "wounds the spirit" with unnecessary stoppers and harsh words or action. Olivia's is a household where children can be fully child-like, and love blossoms because of this.



Figure 5: Susan Helen Taylor, *Learning to Love:Teddy bear*, 2010 Paper and textiles, 2.40 ×1.60cm.

No aspect of young children's behaviour or emotions, however, are glossed over or avoided by Falconer not even the most full-on tantrums or deepest fears. However, each aspect is presented in ways that are endearing, humorous and real. For a child reader, there are two or three main aspects to Falconer's methodology. Firstly, the words and drawings are simple enough for a young child to assimilate and, because of this, they can easily be used by the child as a mirroring technique to help them within a wide range of feelings, circumstances and relationships. And so it was with me, too. I found these deeply insightful and uncluttered books enabled me to reconnect with my child within that still needed and longed for meaningful connections with self and others, and a full range of feelings with which to achieve these connections. These children's books, then, became the main emotional base for the transference of these feelings from me to the toys in Learning About Love.

"Lost, One Blue Rabbit" was written from a position of feelings of lovelessness, as exemplified by the teddy bear's fate: "Teddy ... was a stupid, clumsy, nasty bear of no account By way of punishment, Teddy was consigned, once more, to darkness and isolation"21 Learning to Love, however, was constructed from an ever-growing and expanding position of feelings of love for self and others. That this new position was being expressed through the physicality of the bear was tested through my own feelings towards bear; feelings such as care, affection, respect and appreciation — responses that were a far cry from the girl's responses to bear in the original story. And, because bear was

completed long before he needed to be placed in situ, I was able to introduce him to many people in varied situations and places. An overwhelming number of people expressed feelings similar to my own. Interestingly, there were a few responses that indicated bear triggered feelings of distress and unease. I like to think this meant bear was echoing shadows from his previous existence, as I had intended. But I cannot be sure of this. However, these experiences strengthened in me the idea, inherent in hooks' model of love, that acting from a position of love is more likely to engender loving responses than acting from a position of lovelessness.



Figure 6: Susan Helen Taylor, *Learning to Love*, 2010, paper and textiles and glass. Installation view at Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2010.

I was unable to get similar audience feedback on rabbit before she/he (the gender of rabbit is still not fully established in my own mind) was placed in situ. My own feelings towards rabbit, though, were far less resolved than with bear. As far as I was concerned, bear was satisfactorily finished but rabbit was not. In the rabbit episode of "Lost, One Blue Rabbit," rabbit became the girl's love object, "and she poured out to it everything she had to give. The giving was immense." So, when "rabbit was lost and could not be found anywhere ... once again, her tiny world became stark and barren as priceless feelings dwindled and seeped away." The potential expressed in the epilogue to recover "the everlasting spirit (the soul, if you must) of blue rabbit" through "the act of creating stories and myths from the material of our life tenancies" has not been achieved to my satisfaction in the materiality of the rabbit in *Learning About Love*. From these personal reactions alone, I have concluded that there is still important work to be done on the psychological and thus the physical transition of rabbit from story to artwork.

This is also true of some of the other elements in the final installation. The glass swing and the glass plinth, with the ambiguity of their fragility and their strength, satisfy my sense of transition. So too does the booklet, on which the

sleeping rabbit leans, as it contains both hooks' ingredients for love and blank pages just waiting to be filled. However, the positioning of all the objects within the installation may need more thought for the work to be fully resolved. Does the positioning of the objects say enough about the relationship between bear and rabbit in terms of the transition? Am I really satisfied with all aspects of the work? Again, I have not yet garnered and considered a diversity of audience feedback on these aspects, let alone, I now realise, completed my own processes here. To do so could be both interesting and productive. Not least because embedded in these thoughts are questions, such as when is a work finished and how do we, as artist and audience, judge this?

The influences of researched artists and their works within a specific artwork, or an oeuvre, can be either explicit or implicit. It has been my experience — and I lean on my eclecticism here — that these many influences, and what they bring with them, may not be immediately (if ever) known. The implicit aspect of research was brought home to me during the making of this artwork when, needing a break, I leafed through *Elizabeth Thomson: My Hi-Fi My Sci-Fi*, a book published in 2006 to coincide with a major survey of this New Zealand artist's relief sculptures and prints. Presearched Thomson, then, because I had seen this exhibition in Dunedin and found her work stimulating and aesthetically pleasing. In works such as *Snake River*, 2004, and *Flight Test*, 2005-6, Thomson repeatedly used a green-coloured, stylised spiky form, produced in various sizes of heavy painted metal and placed in relief on a plain flat surface, to draw the viewer toward and into her works. This use of repetition became a major element in my artwork, *Learning About Love*, as a device for carrying states of mind and for showing the variety of feelings within those states. Relooking at photographs of Thomson's two works, I suddenly made a strong connection between her visual strategies and the strategies I had employed to make the outer covering for the bear and the rabbit in my work. I felt no doubt that this connection was an example of an implicit influence that had surfaced while working. Because of this experience, and others like it, I contend that the research on artists and their works that one does is not usually wasted, even if it seems not to be relevant at the time.

The many other artists and theorists I researched for my project, and who have strongly influenced me in my work, tended to fall into strands, with one artist pointing the direction towards other artists. Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Williams theorise, pictorialise and explicate artistically feelings and the formation of identity, especially in women. To quote Hans-Ulrich Obrist: "Bourgeois' words – spoken and written – are less about the meaning of her art than about the emotional forces behind it: namely, her autobiography, past and present experience." Explicit in this quote from Obrist is the fact that Bourgeois brought the force of her emotional life and her understandings of those emotions to bear in many of her artworks. This fact, which includes her feelings about gender, makes her interesting to me as a practising artist involved in a particular project and as a theorist who analyses art, including her own.

Hannah Höch, Paula Rego, Yinka Shonibare and Kara Walker all aroused the political activist in me (and, as a feminist, the private lives of children are very much a political matter to me) through their exploration, in their artworks and their writings, of political and social issues such as slavery, racism and sexism (Walker); violence, abuse and displacement (Rego); colonialism and racism (Shonibare); and sexism and fascism (Höch). Lotte Reiniger, the silhouette animator, was the starting point for looking at 3D shadow work which then became a research quest for paper artists, which lead me to contemporary artists in this field such as Andrea Dezsö, who creates tunnel books for adults and children; Helen Musselwhite and Peter Callesen, both of whom have perfected paper-cuts in 3D forms; and Sam Buxton, who has shifted 3D paper cutting into the realm of miniature and life-size architecture through his use of metals.

In looking at some of the photographic works of Loretta Lux, I got the closest I came in my research to a visual evocation of many of my childhood feelings. In the photograph "Girl with a Teddy Bear," the 1950s-type clothes the girl is wearing echo my school uniform from that time, and the teddy bear she holds evokes "the hard and unyielding" quality that is so traumatic to the child in "Lost, One Blue Rabbit." Lux's photograph "The Green Room" points to extremely uneasy psychological states of mind through the placement of the two children who feature in it, the framing of and type of architecture of the room they are in, and the aesthetic beauty of the soft, muted colours that created a nostalgic feeling of isolation and distance between the girl and the boy. The feeling in the

photograph reflects my relationship with my brother which is at the heart of the teddy-bear episode in "Lost, One Blue Rabbit," and that has been almost fully resolved in *Learning to Love*. Lux's photographs have allowed me to see that other artists are producing works (in other media, too) that resonate with me and allow me to understand that I do not stand alone, either in my childhood experiences or in my creative expressions of them. As Lux said of the children in her photographs in an interview with author, Louise Baring: "I use them as a metaphor for innocence and a lost paradise." ²⁴

"Lost, One Blue Rabbit" is primarily about such loss and the result this has on a child's development if this loss comes too early and too harshly. By contrast, *Learning to Love* is primarily about giving up childish fantasies, about being unconditionally loved and learning that adult love is about practicing the art of loving. It is not by chance that Eric Fromm ends his book *The Art of Loving* with the words: "To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not only exceptional-individual phenomenon, is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man."



Figure 7: Susan Helen Taylor, Learning to Love, 2010, paper and textiles and glass. Installation view at Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2010.

So, where does all this theorising, writing and art-making leave me at this point in time? In the end, for me at least, the difference between lovelessness and love lies in our human ability to become integrated beings who are able, much of the time, to be highly functioning individuals and members of society while, at the same time, accepting of our own and others' human limitations. To what degree *Learning to Love* reflects the shift from lovelessness to love that I desire is, perhaps, not for me to judge. Like all human beings, I still adopt introjections and ascribe projections that colour and distort my perceptions. This fact, however, will not stop me from making critical assessments and judgements and from carrying these into how I approach research and construct future projects. What I can say now is that the research and creative work done for *Learning to Love* and this article has been full of feeling, and has given me understandings and clarities that I did not have before. Hopefully, audiences who read this article and see and touch my artwork will gain such rewards, too.

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- Bell hooks, All About Love: New Visions (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
- The online UK version of the Encarta Dictionary defines 'to introject' as "the unconscious adoption by someone of the values or attitudes of another person, whom he or she wants to impress or be accepted by." In this sense, introjection is a psychological term. There are many people who have theorised introjections. The main source for this essay has been Fritz Perls, who founded the gestalt approach to therapy. See Fritz Perls, The Gestalt Approach and Eye Witness to Therapy (Palo Alto, California: Science and Behaviour Books, 1973).
- The online UK version of the Encarta Dictionary defines projection as "the unconscious ascription of a personal thought, feeling, or impulse, especially one considered undesirable, to somebody else."
- 4 Hooks, All About Love.
- 5 Hélène Cixous explores this theme in her essay "Sortie," in which she metaphorically searches for women within institutions structured by patriarchy such as Western religions and philosophy. See Hélène Cixous, "Sortie," in *Modern Criticism and Theory:* A *Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1987).
- 6 Although the term 'emotional intelligence' is being contested in many academic circles, in my opinion, no better term has yet been postulated. See *Emotional Intelligence: An International Handbook*, eds Ralf Schulze and Richard D Roberts (Washington: Hogrefe & Huber, 2005).
- Theorists and practitioners such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Melanie Klein are some of the traditional starting points for understandings of psycho-social phenomena, human development and therapeutic methodologies. For more recent theorists and practitioners, one might start with people such as John Bowlby, Abraham Maslow, Donald Winnicott, R. D. Laing, Fritz Perls and Eric Berne, from among many possible choices. Contemporarily, Robert Neborsky, Marsha M. Linehan, Peter Fonagy and John Bradshaw are some who have come to the foreground in this ever-expanding field.
- 8 All About Love: New Visions (2000) is the first in hooks' trilogy. Salvation: Black People and Love (2001) is the second and Communion: The Female Search for Love (2002) is the last, with The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love (2003) being the follow-up book.
- 9 bell hooks, "Marginality as a Site of Resistance," in *OutThere: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds R Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1990), 241-3.
- In creating this postulation, hooks refers to and builds on Eric Fromm's book The Art of Loving (New York: Harper, 1956). Interestingly, Fromm's book was one of the first philosophical/psychological texts I read, and I have thought about and referenced it many times since my first reading in the 1970s.
- II John Bradshaw, in his book *Creating Love: The Next Great Stage of Love* (New York: Bantam, 1992) gives a moving account and psycho-spiritual analysis of the state of emotional numbness and the processes through which it comes into being. Bradshaw also offers insights into how this state can be overcome. Bradshaw is an expert in the use of family systems psychology alongside other psychoanalytic and therapeutic systems.
- 12 Patricia Piccinini In Another Life (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2006).
- 13 Quote from William Shakespeare's play Hamlet, as given to me by Bridie Lonie in conversation in 2010.
- Quilling was also known, at different times and in different places, as paper-rolling, paper-scrolling, paper filigree and paper mosaic. Although the origins of paper quilling are not clear, they seem to be connected to the invention of paper in China in 105 AD. Entering Europe in the twelfth century, paper quilling was most often used in the decoration of religious artefacts and, later, in furniture decoration. The name quilling originated in England where the quill of a feather was used to roll the paper strips, and by the nineteenth century paper quilling had entered the home as a 'genteel' form of decoration for a wide range of objects as diverse as coats of arms, tea caddies and greeting cards. In the twenty-first century, quilling is experiencing a global resurgence within the art/craft spheres, with major quilling exhibitions being held in the US and England. See Trees Tra and Pieter van der Wolk, The Art of Quilling (NSW: Kangaroo, 1993) and Conny Freyer Troika, Eva Rucki and Sebastian Nöel, Digital by Design: Crafting Technology for Products and Environment (London:Thames Hudson, 2008).
- 15 Chinese porcelains in blue and white date from ancient times, and in the 1700s China exported tea sets to Britain. These became very popular, and around 1790 Josiah Spode developed a new range based on a Chinese pattern. This complex pattern was named the willow pattern.
- 16 This first became evident during the making of the toys when I passed them around asking for feedback.
- 17 hooks, All About Love.

- 18 See note 7 above.
- 19 Ian Falconer, Olivia Saves the Circus (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001); Olivia and the Missing Toy (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); Olivia Helps with Christmas (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).
- 20 The quote is from hooks' All About Love.
- 21 From "Lost, One Blue Rabbit." This story, written by me, has never been published.
- 22 Gregory O'Brien, Elizabeth Thomson My Hi-Fi My Sci-Fi (Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, 2006).
- 23 Louise Bourgeois, Destruction of the Father / Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997, eds Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998).
- 24 Louise Baring's interview with Loretta Lux, 12 March 2005, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3638552/l-use-children-as-a-metaphor-for-a-lost-paradise.html.