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PAINTING AT REST HOMES: EMBODIED MOTION AND NARRATIVE IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS—REFLECTIONS FROM A PAINTING PROJECT IN RESIDENTIAL AGED CARE

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PAINTING AT REST HOMES: EMBODIED MOTION AND NARRATIVE IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS—REFLECTIONS FROM A PAINTING PROJECT IN RESIDENTIAL AGED CARE

Siau-Jiun Lim

INTRODUCTION

Painting with Residents began as a simple initiative to provide residents in residential care with a more active and creative alternative to passive activities. Over six years, it evolved into an opportunity to understand painting as an embodied act involving physical movement, mental engagement and interaction with materials.

I began this project as an artist, not as a therapist, health researcher or academic researcher. The workshops were not initially designed as research. However, through ongoing collaboration with rest home management and art facilitators, and with funding support, they gradually became a site for reflection on the act of painting, using a practice-led research approach I have employed for many years.[1]

Throughout this article, I use the term 'embodied motion' to describe how artistic decisions emerge through bodily engagement with materials, and 'embodied narrative' to describe the traces of experience carried through the process of making.[2] Unlike dance, where movement disappears as it occurs, painting preserves physical actions through marks that remain after creation.[3] These marks constitute an embodied narrative through their relationship with the maker and the context of their creation. The painting carries traces of the embodied motion that produced it, with each mark functioning as an index of actions and experiences embedded within the creative process.[4]

Emotions arise in many forms of human activity, but in artmaking they are integral to the process and the outcome. Artistic expression involves a continuous negotiation between expressive intentions and the methods used to externalise them, with the artist monitoring and adjusting their actions throughout the creative process.[5] Therefore, observing residents' emotions and responses while painting provides insight into how embodied intention is both planned and emergent, evolving through bodily engagement with materials. My research question for this inquiry and reflection is: How does the embodied narrative of movement, emotion and material interaction inform the act of painting?

This article draws from six years of sustained observation, workshop adaptations, resident interactions, exhibitions and reflective practice developed throughout the project.[6] The research

was practice-led in the sense that the residents' creative process itself was the basis for gaining new knowledge, rather than serving simply to test a predetermined theory. Here, I will introduce the project, offer observations from the workshops, examine embodied motion in artmaking and discuss its implications.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Painting with Residents project began in 2012 when I volunteered with Enliven Positive Ageing Services, visiting older people in their homes. Initially, I took residents on outings to gardens, beaches and cafés. As their mobility declined, these activities became less accessible, so I began painting with them instead. After two residents I regularly visited passed away, I stopped volunteering. However, one image remained with me: residents sitting in front of a television at a rest home, disengaged from what they were watching. It prompted a simple question: What if they could paint instead?

In 2018, I approached Highview Rest Home and Hospital to establish a weekly painting workshop. With the support of manager Lee, who generously provided art materials, the workshops have continued since then. Over time, the growing collection of residents' paintings have revealed distinctive approaches to mark-making and creative engagement. In July 2025, the project culminated in its first exhibition at the Dunedin Community Gallery, supported by Creative New Zealand, which also funded part of the workshop delivery. The project has since expanded to a second site, Queen Rose Rest Home in South Dunedin, where two additional art facilitators now work alongside me.

The purpose of Painting with Residents is rooted more in process than in outcome: the value lies first in the engagement and social connection it generates and second in the paintings themselves.

NON-CLINICAL ART WORKSHOP

The workshops are not a form of clinical intervention, dementia care support or art therapy. Art therapy is a clinical discipline: a form of psychotherapy that uses art media as its primary mode of communication, delivered by qualified therapists, structured around therapeutic goals and evaluated against clinical outcomes.[7] Community-based art programmes, by contrast, emphasise expression, participation and social connection in non-clinical settings, without diagnosis or treatment.[8] Painting with Residents belongs in the second category: there is no assessment, no treatment plan, no clinical record-keeping; the goals are artistic and social, and residents take part as painters, not patients.

Many artists, including myself, do not hold clinical qualifications, yet we can offer safe and engaging experiences grounded in human connection and care. Studies have consistently shown that artist-facilitated participatory arts programmes support older adults' physical, emotional and social wellbeing without being framed as therapy.[9] Incorporating clinical goals would also impose regulatory requirements beyond the project's scope. Because residents living with dementia are naturally part of the workshop, the art facilitators meet monthly to share techniques and reflect on ethical challenges, while rest-home staff assist with any care needed during sessions.



Figure 1. Painting display for Queen Rose Home exhibition.

METHODOLOGY

Although the project did not begin as research, ongoing engagement with residents revealed new understandings of how intention, decision-making, emotion, bodily movement and mark-making interact during painting. These observations became a foundation for inquiry into the relationship between embodied experience and creative practice.

The methodology follows a practice-led approach, where knowledge emerges through the processes of making, rather than predetermined theories. The insights presented are practitioner-generated, developed through workshops and conversations, and ultimately refined through critical reflection.[10] They are organised around recurring experiences and responses observed during painting sessions, exploring how intention and meaning emerge through the act of making.

MAKING PROCESS AND WORKSHOP FORMAT

The workshop consists of weekly one-hour painting sessions, with a small in-house exhibition every five weeks and a public exhibition every two years, for a total of approximately 30 to 40 sessions annually. The workshops adopt an experimental and responsive approach, rather than following a fixed curriculum, encouraging participants to explore mark-making using a range of materials, found objects and unconventional tools.

Activities generally fall into four categories:

- Mark-making using brushes, stencils, found objects and textured materials.
- Storytelling prompts that encourage imaginative responses, such as recalling favourite places or experiences.
- Object observation, using everyday items such as flowers or cups as references.
- Painting from images, which provides clearer visual guidance and step-by-step support.

ETHICAL CONSENT

Consent was obtained from rest home management and from residents who were able to provide informed consent for the use of photographs, artworks and workshop observations. Some residents experienced cognitive decline or have since passed away. In cases where residents or their representatives had agreed to public identification through exhibitions or publications, their names and artworks are retained. This article focuses on observable aspects of the painting process while respecting residents' dignity and privacy.

OBSERVED EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS FROM PAINTING SESSIONS

This section presents my experiences during weekly painting workshops across two rest homes, focusing on particular moments that I noticed and reflected on over time. These observations informed the gradual adjustment of my facilitation approach. Residents' experiences became visible through their interactions with painting materials, responses to emerging marks and ways of engaging with the act of making. These reflections provide insights into the act of painting as an embodied and relational creative practice.

Struggling

Struggles in the creative process often stem from a strong desire to control the outcome of artmaking. This can lead to frustration when our inner visions conflict with our physical or cognitive limitations. As a result, we may feel challenged, uncomfortable and anxious.[11] For example, we may struggle to transfer the image in our minds onto the canvas accurately, or we might try to replicate others' work or a specific picture exactly. It is an inner battle or conflict toward the goal of accomplishment; as artist and teacher Matt Fussell states, "Accomplishments are born from struggle."[12]

Struggle in artmaking occurs when residents cannot find a way in or feel lost, leading to confusion and/or 'wrong' marks, such as an unwanted smear on a painting. It is necessary to guide participants in addressing these issues to prevent discouragement and the belief that they aren't good enough. For some who may struggle to articulate their feelings, the challenge of expressing their inner vision lies at the root of their limited understanding of the painting process, often leading to disappointment and potential withdrawal.

Doubts

Most paintings go through a stage where they appear unresolved before reaching completion. This "messy middle" often brings uncertainty and self-doubt when the outcome does not align with expectations.[13] External encouragement can help sustain confidence, but self-affirmation is equally important. As a painter, I recognise that doubt is not necessarily negative; it creates space for reflection—for questioning and evaluating decisions.

For new painters, encouragement can be essential, not as false reassurance, but as support that allows trust in the process to develop. Over time, this external confidence can become an internal belief, enabling individuals to continue in their practice, learning and allowing the work to evolve.

Intention

Residents' repetitive brushstrokes can serve as calming and regulating processes, in which physical movement develops into rhythmic patterns that support focus and engagement. These gestures, expressed through a limited range of marks or colours, or directional movements, create visual outcomes shaped by personal expression.

Painting involves the interaction of perceptual, motor and cognitive abilities.[14] While ageing does not necessarily diminish creativity, dementia can alter how these abilities interact during making. Residents may return to familiar subjects connected to memory, while others explore varied imagery through unique rhythmic approaches.[15]

These practices demonstrate that creativity remains shaped by personal memories, embodied experiences and sensory engagement. Recognising repetitive marks as intentional embodied actions, rather than meaningless movements, allows painting to support emotional expression and continuity of identity.



Figure 2. Intuitive brushworks from Queen Rose residents.

Play

Play is characterised by curiosity and exploration as well as the development of sensorimotor coordination through experimentation with visual forms and tools.[16] While play is often encouraged in artmaking, it should not be understood as simply imitating children's behaviour. Adult forms of play may appear 'meaningless' to viewers who prioritise technical skill or realism. However, this perception reflects conventional expectations rather than a lack of artistic value. Authentic play involves intuitive exploration that can develop into complex personal expression.[17]

Residents' painting practices demonstrate a similar openness. Their intuitive marks and colour choices, and willingness to experiment, suggest a process guided by immediate



Figure 3: Example of residents holding a brush in different gestures, Queen Rose Home.



Figure 4. The late Laurie Taylor and I at the public exhibition opening, Dunedin Community Gallery, 2025. (Photograph taken with consent from Highview Rest Home and Hospital.)



Figure 5. Social media post for the *Together Through Art* exhibition in 2025.



Figure 6. Social Media post exhibition installation and artists beside their works.

responses rather than analytical decision-making. This engagement with uncertainty allows individual expression to emerge, reflecting qualities that many artists pursue. A 2019 study of dementia noted that the onset of dementia, particularly changes in visuospatial and planning abilities, may cause artistic production to change too, resulting in simplification or repetition. However, these changes can reveal alternative forms of creative engagement rather than a loss of artistic capacity.[18]

Determination

I observed deep determination in Laurie Taylor's painting process. Laurie lived with both physical and mental challenges. He was the youngest among the participants; his mother, Margaret, always brought him to art sessions from his room. Over time, Laurie's work evolved from unrecognisable, fluid patterns into an extraordinary grid system. He approached each painting with a quiet but intense will: "I'm getting this right." Every line demanded his full attention, and completing each stroke brought visible relief before he moved with the same determination to the next. The act of making a line might look small, but his determination was extraordinary.

Laurie brought meaning to me as a human being and an artist by demonstrating determination and confidence in adaptive creative processes. Shortly after the final exhibition, Laurie passed away. His journey through the programme illustrates the vital role of creative practice in affirming agency and a sense of meaning in life, even in the final stages. Here, I would like to thank Laurie for the opportunity to witness the possibilities.

EMBODIED MOTION IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The painting processes observed during the workshops reveal that artistic intention can operate through multiple forms. While artistic practice is often described as a sequence of idea, plan, evaluation and execution, this represents only one form of intentionality.[19] The planned process allows artists to organise form and subject matter toward an anticipated outcome and an accurate evaluation of the process.[20] The concept of intention is generally used when evaluating artistic authenticity: whether an artist has achieved an intended outcome through technical decisions, or whether a work successfully communicates its intended meaning.[21] However, intention is not limited to predetermined plans. It can also emerge through preferences, choices, responses and adjustments during making.

Planned process

Planning → Expression through action → Mark-making → Perceive and respond → Refining intention

In Painting with Residents, many residents experienced difficulty developing a predetermined visual strategy across the entire painting. However, they continued to demonstrate intentional engagement through selecting colours, rejecting materials, returning to preferred marks, repeating familiar gestures and responding to changes within the developing work. These actions suggest that intention can exist without a fully formed visual plan.

The residents' practices demonstrated a stronger form of intention-in-action, where decisions emerged through continuous interaction between perception, movement and materials.

Emergent process

Initial engagement → Expression through action → Mark-making → Perceive and respond → Emerging intention

Within this process, each mark creates a new condition that the resident perceives and responds to. The artwork is not simply the execution of an existing idea, but an environment where intention develops through action. This aligns with embodied cognition, which challenges the idea that thinking occurs only in the mind before being expressed through the body.[22] Instead, cognition develops through ongoing relationships between the body, environment and materials. Bodily actions are therefore not solely physical movements but forms of thinking through the body.

Movements leave traces within the artwork, creating an embodied narrative shaped by experiences, emotions, memories and engagement with materials.[23] The painting does not directly transfer internal states onto the surface; rather, it preserves traces of the physical and cognitive processes through which it emerged. [24]

As cognitive archaeologist Lambros Malafouris explains, a drawn line can be understood simultaneously as an action, an object and a sign—the movement of drawing, the mark left on paper and the trace of the gesture that produced it. Ontologically, these three ways of seeing the line are inseparable. Each one supports, informs, constrains, causes and complements the other.[25] A line is never produced identically by different individuals because each person's body, experience and perception shape the movement. Unlike performative practices such as dance, where movement disappears as it occurs, painting preserves physical action within the artwork. The marks, therefore, function both as a visual outcome and as evidence of the embodied creative process.[26]

Importantly, all artistic processes are forms of embodiment. The distinction lies not in whether embodiment exists, but in the role it plays: in a planned process, embodied interaction often supports an intention that has already been established; in an emergent process, embodied interaction becomes a primary site for the development of intention.[27]

	Planned process Predetermined intention	**Emergent process** Intention-in-action
Timing	A direction exists before a specific action	Direction develops while acting
Function	Guides choices toward an anticipated outcome	Guides responses to the evolving situation
Outcome tendency	Often greater coherence with an initial concept, composition or visual strategy	Often greater immediacy, responsiveness, and traces of the making process
Example	"I want to explore loneliness through a winter landscape"	"This mark creates a feeling; I will follow this direction"

Figure 7. Distinction between planned process and emergent process.

Although residents' paintings may sometimes contain qualities associated with abstraction or expression, such as gestural marks or unusual colour relationships, these visual characteristics should not automatically be understood as abstract art. Abstract art involves an additional layer of artistic inquiry and conceptual engagement with the language of form, colour, space and representation.[28] The significance of residents' paintings lies not in their classification within an art movement, but in how they demonstrate the relationship between intention and material engagement.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that artistic intention should not be understood solely as the ability to create a predetermined plan to execute a desired image. Residents' painting practices demonstrate that intentionality can persist through embodied choices, preferences and responses in the making process. While planning and long-term visual organisation may become more challenging, this does not indicate a loss of artistic engagement. Instead, intention may shift toward immediate and embodied forms of decision-making. This challenges deficit-based perspectives that interpret changes in planning, representation or technical control as reduced artistic ability.[29] The workshops demonstrate that the significance of the work does not depend solely on the final image; the experience of making offers moments of joy, confidence and connection, and participation is in itself an important outcome for residents. The artwork is allowed to exist on its own terms and carries traces of the experience through which it emerged.

This understanding has practical implications for facilitation. Rather than requiring predetermined outcomes, creative environments can support intentions that develop and shift through engagement with materials. Open-ended prompts and accessible materials allow residents to experiment and to participate through their existing capacities. Support should focus on sustaining engagement and confidence.[30]

The project also reshaped my understanding of painting. Observing residents' responsive and material-led approaches challenged my assumptions about where artistic decisions originate, and clarified the distinction between planned and emergent creative processes. Their practices highlighted qualities central to contemporary artmaking, including uncertainty, repetition, responsiveness and dialogue with materials. The workshops expanded my understanding of creativity as an embodied and relational process.

This reflection is limited by its practice-led nature, based on sustained observation rather than clinical measurement or controlled research conditions. The interpretations are situated within my experience as a practitioner and facilitator and do not make claims about creativity among all people living with dementia. Instead, they offer insight into how painting can function as an embodied, relational and meaningful practice.

CONCLUSION

The Painting with Residents project explored how physical and cognitive challenges can be transformed into creative possibilities. Through this project, I understood more vividly that painting is not merely a task or the production of an image, but an embodied process where actions, emotions and experiences are integral to artistic expression.

The residents' brushwork reveals alternative forms of aesthetic agency, where intention—far from being absent or unfulfilled—emerges through ongoing choices and responses during making. The distinction between prior intention and intention-in-action demonstrates how different cognitive and bodily relationships with materials can produce meaningful artistic outcomes.

The emotional experiences observed among residents—struggle, uncertainty, determination and play—reflect experiences shared by many artists. The process of responding to challenges during making is not unique to residents but part of the broader experience of creativity.

Ultimately, the Painting with Residents project contributes to arts-based practice by demonstrating that creative engagement can support well-being and strengthen community connections, while challenging deficit-based assumptions about ageing. Through collaboration between artists, care facilities, community organisations and funders, this approach offers a meaningful model for integrating art into residential aged-care settings.





Figures 8 and 9. Participants and volunteers for the Together Through Art exhibition in 2025 at the Dunedin Community Gallery.

Siau-Jiun Lim is an artist based in Dunedin, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Her paintings explore landscape, atmosphere, movement, and time as shifting conditions rather than fixed images. Drawing from forested environments, life drawing, and everyday observation, she works across mixed media to investigate memory and the relationship between people and their surroundings. Gesture, colour, texture, and unconventional mark-making tools are central to her process, allowing paintings to develop through movement, accumulation, and response. Her practice moves between representation and abstraction, exploring how places and experiences are remembered, felt, and transformed through the act of painting.

She holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Honours) and a Master of Design. Her work is part of the Wallace Arts Trust Collection, and the Moray Gallery in Dunedin represents her. In 2017, she received the David Con Hutton Perpetual Trust Memorial Scholarship.

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