

ARTS & MORE

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Comforting creations

Psychologist paints world as a 'friendly place'

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Walk into the front gallery at the Marblehead Arts Association and a series of bright watercolors offer scenes of dream-like landscapes: angels play banjos, fish swim in the sky and polar bears gather people in their arms with warm embraces. The paintings are part "Animal Dreams," a 14 piece show by Dr. Mary Baures, a psychologist who specializes in helping people recover from trauma.

Baures, who started her career as a freelance journalist and has written for the Boston Globe Magazine, the Boston Phoenix and the New Age Journal, began painting seriously about eight years ago. At the time, she was in her last year of her doctoral program in clinical psychology at Antioch New England. In an attempt to relieve the "wordy, cerebral side" of school, she took up night classes in painting at Montserrat College of Art. Painting, she found, brought her to "another place."

"Towards the end of my career as a doctoral student, school seemed never-ending," Baures says. "I was overwhelmed and trying to find a piece of myself."

Painting, as it turned out, continued to provide a release for her when she began practicing psychology. As Baures explains, it can be "overwhelming to hear about pain all day," and painting proved to be both an escape from the stories that haunted her patients and a way to experience her patients' pain more sincerely.

To begin with, burnout is high in Baures' line of work. To truly be of help to her patients, Baures says she has to follow her patients down into their depths as honestly as possible, but that exacts an emotional toll from Baures to a degree. Painting pictures in the evening is a way to translate some of this aggregate sadness into a different form, helping to mitigate some of the emotional overload.

"I'm a pretty positive, upbeat person, but I have to hear a lot of sad stories," Baures says. "I don't want to escape (the sadness), because you have to go with these people to these very dark places. I need to feel sad sometimes and to feel sorrow sometimes to sit with them. It's very important for us to sit with things when they happen, but you don't want to sit all day. Painting, for me, is a way to escape from these things I see."

She adds, "I'm not getting rid of the sadness. I'm turning it into something — a symbol of sadness. There's something very satisfying about turning those sad feelings into an angel hug. The show is the opposite of trauma. The paintings create a kind of landscape where warm and connecting things emerge from dark backgrounds. Death is a part of life but not bigger than it."

"It's also about connection. It's very hard to go into places of horrific loss, it's very hard to do. If somebody is there with you, you're feeling some support from it. When people are hurt by other people, you have to help them understand the world is a friendly place. My paintings are about the world being a friendly place."

And it's here that the landscapes of her paintings begins to overlap with the landscape of her profession. In her practice, Baures works with patients to reconnect them to life in the aftermath of devastating loss. Her role as a psychologist is to help people reclaim a stable sense of the world so they can reestablish their place in it.

"We don't like to acknowledge the loss in this world — that we're all going to lose everything — and that's part of the trauma" when loss is experi-



Through her painting, psychologist Dr. Mary Baures has found a way to transform the sadness she listens to an experiences with her patients throughout the day.

enced, Baures says. "It doesn't fit our image of what the world is like. Our assumptions about life are shattered and we have to rebuild them."

A lot of people are badly damaged and then feel bad for themselves, never able to reconnect. In the field of psychology, Baures says, more is known about how people become mentally ill from trauma than about how people can recover. From personal experience, however, Baures knew people who transformed and grew as a result of their losses, and she concentrated on these successes over trauma for her doctorate study.

"In psychology, there's very little emphasis on how trauma transforms you in a positive way," Baures explains. "It's all about how trauma makes you worse, not better. One of the things we know about people who can't get over loss is that people can generalize loss to the world. There is darkness in life, but there is a lot of beauty and joy, too, and that's what I'm trying to get my patients to see again."

People who are able to return from their trauma to build a new life generally value helping other people, Baures says. The person has a sense that he or she "got through it," and they can take that feeling back into the community to offer strength to someone else.

"If you just see yourself as a victim, it's a different flavor than if you see yourself as a survivor," she says.

Painting is one tool people can use to face the traumas that tear at them, Baures says, and she encourages her patients to try creative approaches. If something very bad happens to someone and he tries to re-experience it, it can have re-traumatizing effects. But if a person revisits in an indirect way — by writing a story about someone else or by painting a picture — he can still feel whole and not so overwhelmed.



Baures says her art, like the example above, creates "a kind of landscape where warm and connecting things emerge from dark backgrounds" to illustrate that death and loss "is a part of life but not bigger than it."

STAFF PHOTOS BY MIKE MERGEN