

**A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE FROM AN INTIMATE PARTNER'S  
VIOLENCE: A PERSONAL CATHARSIS THROUGH ART**

by

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## DECLARATION

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VIOLENCE: A PERSONAL CATHARSIS THROUGH ART**

I declare that **A Traumatic Experience from an Intimate Partner's Violence: A Personal Catharsis through Art** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



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Signature

February 2025

## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to my father and grandmother, who just wanted me to finish; my mother, who is always supportive; my supervisor, who pushed me beyond my own comprehension; and my son, who missed a lot of mommy time while mommy was studying.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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I look up to everyone who has supported me in different ways, and I thank God for all of you. Lastly, I thank myself for not giving up and finding the bravery to seek the right help.

**TITLE: A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE FROM AN INTIMATE PARTNER'S VIOLENCE: A PERSONAL CATHARSIS THROUGH ART**

**ABSTRACT**

This study explores art as a means to work through a lived traumatic experience because of an intimate partner's violence. It examined the therapeutic qualities of artmaking to process past trauma and facilitate personal catharsis. Practice-led research methods culminated in an exhibition forming part of the research process. The artworks readdress the researcher's past traumatic experience of intimate-partner violence and represent her journey of working through her experiences through art to reach personal catharsis. Narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling theories facilitated this study. The theories advance therapeutic outcomes of healing and catharsis by crafting metaphorical narratives of difficult experiences and expressing them through art. Data were collected by means of a multi-method approach within artistic research design and practice-led research methods, together with thick descriptions. Reflective narrative and autoethnography formed the method of analysis. The findings demonstrate that art offers multiple pathways to safely revisit and express traumatic experiences of intimate-partner violence and to share one's experience, inspire dialogue and facilitate personal catharsis.

**KEYWORDS:**

Intimate-partner violence; Narrative therapy; Therapeutic journaling; Visual journaling; Practice-led research; Thick descriptions, Nombeko Mpako; Angel Estrella

**THAETLELE: MAITEMOGELO A KGATELELO YA MONAGANO AO  
A BAKWAGO KE DIKGARURU TŠA BARATANI:  
TŠWELETŠO YA BOHLOKO KA GO DIRIŠA  
BOKGABO**

**SETSOPOLWA**

Dinyakišišo tše di lekola bokgabo bjalo ka mokgwa wa go šoma ka maitemogelo a kgatelelo a monagano ao batho ba phetšego ka ona ka lebaka la dikgaruru tša baratani. Di lekotše boleng bja kalafo bja go dira bokgabo bja go šoma ka kgatelelo ya monagano ye e tseneletšego ye e fetilego le go nolofatša tšweletšo ya bohloko ka matšwasehlabelo. Mekgwa ya dinyakišišo ye e laolwago ke tirišo e feleleditše ka gore go be le pontšho ye e bopago karolo ya tshepedišo ya dinyakišišo. Bokgabo bo ahlaahla leswa maitemogelo ao a fetilego a kgatelelo ya monagano ye e tseneletšego a dikgaruru tša baratani ebile bo emela leeto la gagwe la go šoma ka maitemogelo a gagwe ka go diriša bokgabo gore a kgone go fihlelela tšweletšo ya bohloko bja gagwe. Diteori tša kalafo ka kanegelo le kalafo ka kgašo di nolofaditše dinyakišišo tše. Diteori tše di tšwetša pele dipoelo tša kalafo tša go fola le tša tšweletšo ya bohloko ka go hlama dikanegelo tša tshwantšhišo tša maitemogelo a boima le go a tšweletša ka go diriša bokgabo. Tshedimošo e kgobokeditšwe ka tsela ya mekgwa ye mentši ya dinyakišišo ka gare ga tlhamo ya dinyakišišo ya tša bokgabo le mekgwa ya dinyakišišo ya go laolwa ke tirišo, gammogo le mokgwa wa tlhathollo ya tša leago. Kanegelo ya kgopodišišo le kanegelo ka ga maitemogelo a gago di bopile mokgwa wa tshekatsheko ya tshedimošo. Dikutollo di laetša gore bokgabo bo fana ka ditsela tše ntši tša go etela leswa le go hlagiša maitemogelo a kgatelelo ya monagano ye e tseneletšego ka polokego ye e bakwago ke dikgaruru tša baratani le go abelana ka maitemogelo a gago, go hlohleletša dingangišano le go nolofatša tšweletšo ya bohlokwa bja maitemogelo ao.

**MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA:**

Dikgaruru tša baratani; Kalafo ka kanegelo; Kalafo ka kgašo; tšwetšomaikutlo ka diswantšho; Dinyakišišo tša go laolwa ke tirišo; Mokgwa wa tlhathollo ya tša leago, Nombeko Mpako; Angel Estrella

**ISIHLOKO: AMAVA OMENZAKALO KUBUNDOBONGELA  
BEQABANE: UKUKHULULA INTLIZIYO YOMNTU  
NGOKUSEBENZISA UBUGCISA BOKUZIBA**

**ISISHWANKATHELO**

Olu phando luphonononga ubugcisa bokuzoba njengendlela yokuqubisana nomenzakalo ophilwe kumava omntu ngenxa yobundlobongela beqabane/umntu omthandayo. Luvavanye iimpawu zonyango loxinzelelo ngobugcisa bokuzoba ukusebenza umenzakalo owadlulayo kwanokukhuthaza ukukhulula intliziyo yomntu. lindlela zophando ezikhokelwa kukwenza zakhokelela kumboniso ukwenza inkqubo yophando. Umsebenzi wobugcisa bokuzoba ubonisa phandle amava okuchukumiseka okudlulileyo komphandi ngenxa yobundlobongela beqabane/umntu omthandanayo kwaye umele uhambo lwakhe ngokujonga amava akhe ngokusebenzisa ubugcisa bokuzoba ukuze afikelele kokumchukumisayo. lingcingane/iithiyori yonyango ngokubalisa ngokutsha nokubhala kwijenali okuphilisayo zizo ezenze lula olu phando. lingcingane/iithiyori ziqhubela phambili iziphumo zonyango lokuphila nokukhulula intliziyo ngokuthi kwenziwe ubaliso ngezikweko ngamava anzima ukuze avakaliswe ngobugcisa bokuzoba. linkcukacha zophando zaqokelelwa ngendlela yeemethodi ezininzi kunkqulunqo lophando lobugcisa bokuzoba kunye neemethodi ezikhokelwa kukwenza, zikunye neenkcazelo ezibanzi. limethodi yohlalutyo yenziwe ngembaliso engamava nenzululwazi yebali elibaliswa ngumbhali ngokwakhe ngamava nangeentlanga. Iziphumo zibonakalisa ukuba ubugcisa bokuzoba bunika iindlela ezininzi zokuqwalasela kwakhona ngokukhuselekileyo kwaye zivakalise amava omenzakalo wobundlobongela beqabane/umntu omthandayo nokwabelana ngamava, ukuphemelela incoko nokukhuthaza ukukhupha okuchukumisayo emntwini.

**AMAGAMA ANGUNDOQO:**

Ubundlobongela beqabane/umntu omthandayo; Ukunyanga ngokubalisa;  
Ubhalo lwejenali olunyangayo; Ukubhala iingcinga ngokuzibonakalisa;  
Uphando olukhokelwa kukwenza; linkcazelo ezibanzi, Nombeko Mpako;  
Angel Estrella

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

*...when you are able to imagine something abstract like emotions as an image, form or object, it brings validity to it (Sintnicolaas 2018: 6).*

This research explores the use of art as a means to work through a lived traumatic experience from an intimate partner's violence. It explores the therapeutic qualities of art for processing past trauma and facilitating personal catharsis. Artworks which look back at the researcher's past traumatic experience of intimate partner violence and represent her journey of working through the trauma to reach personal catharsis were created and showcased in an exhibition entitled "Crossing the Rubicon", [Click on the link below to access the full exhibition catalogue: (<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:b1c38e82-15af-4ab6-857f-278feb0ffcd7>)]. These artworks are seen through the lens of narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling, which involve constructing metaphorical narratives that represent a difficult experience and expressing it through creative and artistic means for therapeutic purposes. The use of artistic methods as a therapeutic tool has been explored within art practice and art therapy by artists and therapists, especially in contemporary art practices (Corriveau 2016; Sholt, Gavron et al. 2006 & Masters 2005).

Experiencing violence from an intimate partner is a traumatic experience that can shatter the victim's sense of the world, as Malina Sintnicolaas (2020: 29) states that when a person experiences such trauma, they become a different version of themselves. The experience of abuse from an intimate partner is additionally a difficult and complex experience to deal with (Sintnicolaas 2020: 29). The abuse involves conflicting factors of love, intense fear, attachments, personal, community and social circumstances, and is an experience that negatively affects both the individual and society. It is both an individual and social experience and is impacted by personal, social identity and structural identities (Douglas 2014: 4). Trauma of intimate partner violence creates emotional, physical and psychological wounding that is contextual and unique for different victims (Bryant 2020: 21). This makes both its experience and trauma complex. Thus, exploring creative ways to work through the complex

trauma of intimate partner violence provides ways to share the experiences and create dialogues around the issue (Bryant 2020: 21).

Artists use art to express difficult experiences, memories and emotions. The use of art is found to afford victims ways to process extreme traumas and find safety and containment when dealing with the trauma in both art practice and therapy (Bryant 2020: 24). Art-based therapies are said to have beneficial results with victims dealing especially with domestic violence due to art's non-threatening nature, and ability to uproot deeply buried thoughts and feelings (Bryant 2020: 10). The study followed a qualitative research methodology and used artistic research design. Practice-led research methods were used together with thick descriptions to collect data, and the reflective narrative method was used together with autoethnography as a method of analysis. Narrative therapy and journaling were followed as theoretical frameworks in this study.

The study is composed of five chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the study and introduces the research's rationale, problem statement, aims and objectives and the significance of this study. Chapter two presents a comprehensive review of the literature and the theoretical frameworks in support of the study's aims and objectives. Chapter three presents the artistic influences and how they were incorporated into this study's practical component, as well as the complementary methodology applied. Chapter four considers reflections on the artist's practice, referencing relevant artists and or artistic discourses. Chapter five articulates conclusions and recommendations emerging from both the dissertation and the practical works of the study.

## **1.1 THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

This study is important as it explores art-based methods as alternative and safe ways to confront, deal with and process difficult experiences such as the trauma of intimate partner violence. Art is also explored as a meaningful platform to work out the meaning of one's personal catharsis. The production of art can represent victim's abstract feelings and experiences, and transform

them into physical forms or objects (Sintnicolaas 2018: 7). The trauma of having experienced violence from an intimate partner constantly and involuntarily reoccurs in the victims' daily lives in intense dreams and flashbacks, therefore affecting the victims' present lives. Artmaking transforms abstract feelings and experiences into physical, tangible forms and makes it possible to bring the traumatic feelings into a physical realm where they can be seen, acknowledged and worked through in order to make sense of them (Desmond 2019: 15). According to Sintnicolaas (2018: 2), this can also bring a sense of validity to these feelings. Art provides a space for victims of domestic violence to create meaningful art that can craft their journeys of personal catharsis from the traumatic experiences (Bryant 2020: 24). This study both explores and sheds light on the phenomenon of utilising art for therapeutic purposes. There is additionally a lack of research on the use of arts-based methods with individuals who have faced domestic violence (Bryant 2020: 22); this study lessens the dearth.

Violence from an intimate partner is considered not only a personal problem but also a social problem because of the staggering rate of occurrence and the negative effects on society (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021). However, consideration of the problem is filled with numerous misconceptions and stereotypes, particularly regarding ways in which victims experience the abuse and should deal with it (Douglas 2014: 14). Work that explores different angles of unique experiences of intimate partner violence can be beneficial in expanding understanding about nuances that make each experience complex (Kulkarni 2019). Promoting a wider view of the problem can therefore increase the chances of society being efficiently involved in ways that are fruitful to victims facing the trauma.

The practical component of this research, which culminated in an exhibition entitled *Crossing the Rubicon*, conveys a personal journey in which individual, social and institutional axes that intersected to create the researcher's unique experience are highlighted and shared to open up a dialogue. These aspects are important to understand because they bring to light the complexities that victims face when faced with the experience. As the researcher narrating my

own experience, the study demonstrates how small and big nuances play a role in shaping unique traumas for different victims. Sharing my own story can provide a wider understanding of intimate partner violence through my own experience. It can broaden the perspectives on trauma and its complexities. It is important that a wider view of the complexity of dealing with the experience of intimate partner violence and its trauma is explored, as this can foster a better understanding of the experience, empower persons to be able to support victims in the right way, and shed light on stereotypes.

Research, furthermore, establishes that some victims can recover from domestic violence; however, information is lacking on how these victims do so and whether or not they continue to be successful over the long run (Anderson, Renner, Danis 2012: 1280). In narrative theory, re-telling a story through art provides a safe space for personal contemplation, comprehension and understanding of one's trauma and experience in a subjective and meaningful way (Bryant 2020: 13). In my work, I explored this phenomenon by looking at my own traumatic experience of intimate partner violence. According to Bryant (2020), by using art and narrative methodologies in a safe, controlled, therapeutic space, victims can create art that is meaningful to them and recounts their unique stories of abuse. Art is a creative medium of expression which affords metaphorical and creative storytelling through images and imagination. It yields a space to tell one's story in whatever one decides (Bryant 2020: 13).

Through art, victims can use symbols that are subjective and meaningful only to themselves to express things that they may not be ready to share or are not yet comfortable sharing with others; alternatively, they may use universal symbols to share their symbolic meanings with others (Desmond 2019: 10). This use of art can lead to victims expressing even some of the deepest, shameful or difficult parts of their experiences in a way that makes the experiences become important to the victim (Bryant 2020: 13), which can subsequently provide feelings of empowerment and catharsis. Therefore, art offers a way to record one's journey of healing and share it with others.

## 1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

Trauma of intimate partner violence has negative impacts on a victim's present life (Estrella 2019: 2). The experience of trauma leaves psychological, physical and emotional impression on an individual, which is embedded in or as memory (Estrella 2019: 2). These memories are often repressed; however, in an intrusive, persistent and uncontrollable manner, they consistently find ways to resurface in a victim's current life, causing victims to feel as if they were involuntarily reliving their trauma (Van der Kolk & Hopper 2021: 11; Estrella 2019: 2; Talwar 2007: 22).

The trauma of intimate partner violence can be incredibly difficult to work through. It is a complex experience for victims to navigate within their societies. The trauma of intimate partner violence carries extreme physical, emotional and psychological bearings (Bryant 2020: 21). Trauma of intimate partner violence is difficult to recognise in normal living circumstances and address it as it is largely characterised by fragmentary and intense effects with little or no verbal narrative substance: the re-calling of images, smells or sensations (Estrella 2019: 1; Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 25; Talwar 2007: 22). Many times, trauma requires victim to actively take a decision to work through it and to find non-threatening ways to do that (Estrella 2019: 1). In society, intimate partner violence has a lot of stigma, stereotypes and misconceptions associated with it (Douglas 2014: 4). However, it is a significant social issue which can benefit greatly from positive societal awareness and engagement.

In many cases, victims find it challenging to identify interventions for working through their violent experiences, as their complex nature requires unique victim-focused interventions to cover different contexts for victims. Traditional interventions that are set up are said to currently be struggling to meet the complexities of intimate partner violence, being ineffective, expensive or inaccessible (Perez-Patron *et al* 2020: 1; Kulkarni 2019). The ineffectiveness often leads to negative implications for victims and society and promotes the likelihood that victims will not find adequate ways to deal with their trauma

(Kulkarni 2019). In such cases, victims often choose not to deal with their trauma or to stay silent rather than share their traumas (Kulkarni 2019). As Perez-Patron *et al* (2020: 7) state, it is now a commonly held view that only a small fraction of victims of intimate partner violence seek help from the criminal justice or the health care systems. Therefore, it is a necessity to explore intimate, accommodative and subjective solutions to meet the individualised needs of victims and accommodate the complex nature of dealing with the traumatic experience of an intimate partner's violence (McPhail *et. al* 2007: 831; Bryant 2020: 16-17; Kulkarni 2019).

Art is a safe and effective way for victims to explore extreme, difficult and complex experiences (Riggs 2012: 10, Pizarro 2004: 5). However, there has been relatively little research covering its use for dealing with the traumatic experiences of intimate partner violence. Although a vast array of research covers the therapeutic qualities of art, and art has been used by artists to explore personal traumas (Riggs 2012; Anderson, KM, Renner, LM & Danis, FS 2012; Sintnicolaas 2018), there is little research documenting the use of art for dealing with the specific trauma of intimate partner violence. Art as a non-traditional intervention is known to be fairly useful for guiding victims of extreme and complex traumas towards safe expression and healing journeys (Malchiodi 2013: 2). Therefore, art as a non-threatening and effective means to explore the trauma of an intimate partner's violence requires further exploration.

### **1.3 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

The main aim of this study is to explore art as a means to work through a traumatic experience of violence from an intimate partner and move towards personal catharsis and healing. This study sees healing from a traumatic experience of intimate partner violence as personal, contextual, and dependent on the needs or situation of the victim. Artists use art as a pathway to explore personal traumas and as a tool to express difficult emotions. Art consists of therapeutic qualities that provide a non-traditional, safe, alternative means to help victims work through extreme traumas (Bryant 2020: 19). A personal definition of catharsis offers victims the space to figure out their most

significant issues and areas of concern or agency, according to their perspective, which they wish to work through, and at their own pace.

This study also sought to inquire into the therapeutic qualities of art for working through my personal experience of trauma from an intimate partner's violence. In this, the researcher utilised therapeutic qualities of art through art making to confront her own traumatic experience towards personal catharsis. She additionally used art as a means to deliberately focus on the problem, express it, externalise it and foster a release or "clean up" of the trauma from her soul (Mpako 2021: 23), thereby gaining an increased awareness of her trauma and a better understanding of the experience and its traumatic effects.

The primary objective of this study was to seek personal catharsis through art and artistic processes, as personal, contextual, and dependent on the needs or situation of the victim. In addition, this study was to advance knowledge of the use of art making for working through the difficult and complex trauma of intimate partner violence and for achieving personal catharsis. Art has been used throughout time as a means to facilitate catharsis and healing and to assist many victims of trauma to find an alternative pathway for expressing their emotions (Masters 2005; Riggs 2012; Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012; Sintnicolaas 2018).

The objective of the exhibition was also to foster two particular dialogues: the first was to represent the researcher's journey of personal catharsis through art, by working through her trauma and sharing the journey with others. The second dialogue was around the intricacies of the factors and variables associated with different experiences of violence within a range of intimate relations that create a complex traumatic experience for all victims to work through. The practice reflected on the interplay of some of the personal, social, and structural factors of the researcher's own complex experience. By sharing her experience, the aim was to foster these dialogues. Through practice, her journey of healing and finding personal catharsis from a painful experience with an intimate partner through art was presented.

## **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The main questions this study addresses are:

- How can personal catharsis of a traumatic experience of intimate partner violence be explored through art?
- How can artmaking be utilised as a therapeutic tool to process the difficult and complex trauma of intimate partner violence?
- Which areas within the scope of art practice can this study advance knowledge?
- How can exploring personal catharsis of a personal experience of intimate partner violence reflect the larger societal issues of domestic violence and gender based violence?

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY**

It is important to explore methods of art because they provide a safe space in which to confront, deal with and process the difficult and complex experience of violence from an intimate partner <sup>1</sup>(Malchiodi 2013: 2; Pizarro 2004: 5). They foster effective ways for working out the meaning of one's personal catharsis and healing objectives. The artmaking process not only helps victims revisit and express trauma but also transforms and represents the abstract trauma and feelings into a physical form or object (Sintnicolaas 2018). Art transforms abstract feelings and experiences into tangible forms, which, as Sintnicolaas notes, can bring a sense of validity to these abstract feelings (2018: 2). In this study, I crafted my journey of personal catharsis safely through art (Bryant 2020: 24). By exploring my catharsis through art, I found healing and shed light on this phenomenon.

This was a self-study, and since there is an established lack of research relating to the interests of the study, limitations on validity are inevitable. Validity in this study was managed through thick descriptions that include

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<sup>1</sup> Shanti Kulkarni specifically addresses the issue of "safe space" from a perspective of survivor-centred interventions (2019). Safe space speaks to any platform that allows victims of IPV spaces and choices to address their traumas according their specific contexts and needs.

secondary accounts of victims from other studies in the literature review and reflections on artists who have utilised similar practices. These studies demonstrated gaps not only in the information describing how many victims find recovery, but also in how they were able to maintain it over the long term. This study is limited to the short-term effects of the therapeutic process using art and to explorations that trace backwards to how victims who utilised art found either short-term or long-term healing. Thus, this study's application is limited to victims who can use art practice as a therapy.

## **1.6 INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling, which are further unpacked in chapter two, are employed as theoretical frameworks in this study. Narrative therapy is employed in this study as a way to craft narratives to work through a traumatic experience. Narrative therapy is a theoretical framework that proposes a way of seeing and thinking about one's life problems as shaped and given meaning through crafted stories and narratives (DeKruyf 2008: 445). Therapeutic journaling is also used as a theoretical framework for this study. Authors Shilagh Mirgain and Janice Singles (2016: 1) describe therapeutic journaling as a private reflection of our thoughts, feelings and personal life experiences. This practice allows people to sort through past events in their lives and problems which they are still struggling with; it thus helps individuals come to a deeper understanding of themselves. It is therefore suitable for dealing with upsetting or traumatic life events (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1).

## **1.7 ARTISTIC INFLUENCE**

The artworks of Professor Nombeko Mpako (2021) and Angel Estrella (2019) influenced the practical work of this study. I reviewed artist Mpako's exhibition *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art*<sup>2</sup> to underpin the practice of healing through art, conceptually. Four works from this exhibition were of direct relevance to the topic of healing through art, intimate partner violence and

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<sup>2</sup> Mpako N. 2021. *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach Art*. Pretoria: University of South Africa (Exhibition catalogue, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria, 24 September 2021).

gender-based violence, and these were reviewed as inspiration for the development of my work. In Angel Estrella's work, her exhibition *IN: Vulnerability* was reviewed. This exhibition was a part of the artist's requirements for a Master's submission and explored how trauma can be made visible in fragmented ceramic sculptures (Estrella 2019). Visual strategies that the artist used in the development of her work were reviewed and applied in the development of the practice of this study. The practices and relevant artworks of both of these artists are presented in detail in chapter three of this dissertation.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is concerned with exploring ways to work through a traumatic experience of intimate partner violence using art. The study analyses how art can be used as a tool for processing this difficult and complex trauma. The literature review addresses, in part, the context of a traumatic experience, its effects, the meaning of personal catharsis, and the use of art as a tool for personal catharsis. This is followed by a background of narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling as theories that are used to frame the explorations and objectives of this study.

### **2.1 TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE FROM AN INTIMATE PARTNER'S VIOLENCE**

Several authors assert that violence from an intimate partner is a serious problem that affects mental health and results in significant social and economic costs (Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019: 63; Perez-Patron *et al.* 2020: 1; Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858). Trauma by an intimate partner is known as intimate partner violence or spousal violence. When it takes place with individuals of different genders, commonly male to female or female to male, it falls within the category of gender-based violence (GBV); further, because it takes place within a domestic context, it is also commonly referred to as domestic violence (Perez-Patron *et al.* 2020: 1). Intimate partner violence defines behaviours within an intimate relationship (past or current) that cause or have the potential to cause short- and long-term physical, mental and emotional harm (Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858; Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019: 63). It includes acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviours such as financial abuse, and can result in traumatic injury, chronic pain, depression, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, chronic pain and even poor reproductive system (Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858; Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019: 63).

The experience of intimate partner violence happens to partners of different genders and sexual identities, and every case is experienced differently (Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858). Victims of intimate partner violence have different intimate relationships with their perpetrators that involve different degrees of emotional connectedness to each other, are in regular contact with one another, have children together or may even share a single residence (Ogundipe *et al.* 2018: 1). Although this kind of abuse takes place in different contexts, Dziewa & Glowacz (2021: 644) state that victims are commonly females who live with their partners. The determining degree of the severity of domestic violence abuse is normally the frequency and the duration of abuse rather than the severity of injuries caused (Platt, Barton & Freyd 2009: 188). Many victims of intimate partner violence report suffering serial abuse, such as being beaten once a week when they are perceived as having done something wrong or with victims whose partners exhibit narcissistic traits (Yakeley 2018: 307), as in my own case, when their abuser goes through those narcissistic moments, et cetera (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 647). Although most of these assaults involve acts that would be considered minor if taken in isolation, the cumulative effect over time is a level of vulnerability and fear that can be paralysing (Platt, Barton & Freyd 2009: 188). Intimate partner violence happens across all kinds of social backgrounds, classes, age groups, sexual identities, ethnic groups and various social groupings (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644).

Additionally, it differs within the defined groups (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644, Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858). For example, prevalence of intimate partner violence is said to take place at a similar rate in both rural and urban areas, although, research states that there are more hospitalisations in rural areas than in urban areas (Perez-Patron *et al.* 2020: 1). This is linked to difficulty with accessing preventive services within the abuse or before the violence escalates (Perez-Patron *et al.* 2020: 1). Such areas with limited resources are also associated with higher levels of homicides associated with violence from intimate partners (Perez-Patron *et al.* 2020: 1). Although intimate partner violence takes place in different sexualities, most research focuses on the experiences of women, and much of what is currently known about intimate

partner violence is from the experiences of women, and cisgender heterosexual women in relationships with men (Scott-Storey *et al* 2023: 858). Studies on other genders and sexual orientations are scarce (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 643; Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 858). The focus on women is because victims of intimate partner violence are still predominantly women/female, and this form of abuse is still considered a gendered issue in that it still disproportionately affects women and is inflicted by men (Scott-Storey *et al* 2023: 858; Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). Studies demonstrate many varying contexts in which intimate partner violence can take place, whether within a specific gender, type of sexual orientation or across all types of intimate relations (Kulkarni 2018).

Experiencing abuse from an intimate spouse takes place in complicated circumstances. Complex and conflicting sentiments play out in an intimate, abusive relationship (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). Feelings of love, admiration, care, dependence, closeness to the partner, and empathy towards the partner can intersect with feelings of fear, self-blame, and self-esteem, which can further intersect with elements of grooming, feeling trapped, or instincts to protect loved ones (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). Grooming in intimate partner violence can take place not only within the relationship but also at a societal level, which many times affects the victim's perception of abuse (Douglas 2014: 4; Kulkarni 2019; Scott-Storey *et al.* 2023: 859). Studies show that victims who experience or witness spousal abuse several times throughout their lives may perceive abuse as normal, not comprehend any sense of urgency or abnormality towards their abusive experience, and never intend to seek help (Govender 2018: 2, Scott-Storey *et al* 2023: 644). It is recorded that in Botswana, childhood experience of abuse or violence seems to play an important role in later experiences or perpetration of violence by intimate partners (Govender 2018: 2). Instances of grooming at a family level, lack of support, past experiences of abuse, personal strengths, and institutional identities intersect with the abusive situation, then impact differently upon individual victims to create unique and complex intimate partner violence experiences (Anderson, Renner & Danis, 2012: 1289; Govender 2018).

Such nuanced factors of personality, personal views and past experiences, among others, significantly add form to the ways in which victims can experience abuse. Readily available justifications for a perpetrator's abuse are always present in an intimate context and can make abuse not so apparent, especially in first instances (Platt, Barton & Freyd 2009: 185-191). Therefore, contrary to predominant essential views of intimate partner violence, the victims do not all experience intimate partner violence in the same manner and within similar context, and therefore all require creative ways to accommodate their unique healing objectives (Kulkarni 2019).

Some of the biggest concerns from both communities close to the victims and observers from afar, and which often create hesitation to offer assistance or get involved, include the question of why the victims do not leave and the misunderstood views of why victims go back to abusive partners (Kulkarni 2018). A picture of the varied factors that take place in abusive relationships, is provided by the trending case of a famous singer, Ms Cassandra Ventura, also known as "Cassie", who was in a decade-long abusive relationship with the now infamous music mogul Mr Shaun Combs, also called "P. Diddy".

According to the records of the United States District Court of the Southern District of New York (2023), Ms Ventura (Cassie) was trapped in a cycle of abuse, violence and sex trafficking for over a decade. Several fear-and-control tactics were used by Mr Combs, her perpetrator, to keep her trapped in the relationship. Further, Ms Ventura was raped in her own apartment when she tried to leave her partner. She was also punched, beaten, bruised and coerced to take alcohol and drugs throughout the relationship. The perpetrator blew up the car of another man who showed interest in the victim, and he made her carry his gun in her purse to demonstrate how dangerous he was. Finally, there is a video circulating on social media that shows Mr Combs running after Ms Ventura, kicking her, dragging her and throwing a ceramic jar at her as she tries to get away from him (United States District Court Southern District of New York 2023). This story sheds light on one situation of complexities

involved in being in an abusive relationship with an intimate partner, difficult factors that may hinder victims from seeking help, escaping abusive relationships and staying in abusive relationships.

In a relationship with a perpetrator that exhibited narcissistic traits, manipulation and fear tactics are predominant and grooming tools (McKenna 2024). In my case, this was coupled with my own naivety towards the issue. It is important to note that there is a distinction between exhibiting narcissistic traits and being diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). Yakeley (2018), distinguishes between narcissism, narcissistic personality disorder and the DSM. Supriya McKenna (2024), however, states that if victims are aware of or know what narcissistic behaviour patterns are, it is not difficult for them to determine if they have been in a relationship with a narcissist or not. She argues that narcissistic behaviour patterns are very specific. A narcissistic partner is characterised by intrinsically low self-esteem and can have perceptions of being inadequate; they also constantly need external validation and control. However, this is taken in this study as exhibiting narcissistic traits, since no psychological test was taken. The author also points out that in an abusive relationship, narcissists use their partners to feed their constant need for validation and control, and they will use manipulation and force to achieve it. This constant need for validation is also known as “narcissistic supply” (McKenna 2024). Although not all abusive partners are narcissists, a proportion of abusers who carry out specific patterns of behaviour are doing so as a result of narcissism (McKenna 2024).

From personal experience, living with a narcissist partner can be both difficult and easy at the same time, as narcissistic partners can be extraordinarily loving and fun. This fun is in many cases however accompanied by small incidences of constant complaining or unreasonable outbursts of anger (Costin & Rad 2021: 902). Further, big apology performances and love-bombing tactics often follow these outbursts of anger. Thus, covert emotional abuse is always there with narcissistic partners (McKenna 2024). Although there is not always physical abuse involved, it frequently escalates to it (McKenna 2024). Double standards are also a big part of living with an abusive, narcissistic

partner (Costin & Rad 2021: 904, McKenna 2024). There is full freedom for the perpetrator but obedience and submission is required from the victim. Narcissists do this through covert emotional abuse and a continuous cycle of manipulation and betraying trust (Costin & Rad 2021: 904).

### **2.1.1 Dealing with Violence from an Intimate Partner**

Dealing with intimate partner violence in this context refers to dealing with the abusive situation in that moment. This can be getting away from an abusive partner or situation, reporting the abuse, or finding help. In more complex situations, this can involve preparing to get away, retaliating or coping within an abusive relationship (Kulkarni 2019). Many complex social factors impact the experience of dealing with an abusive situation (Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019:68). These include support, or lack of support, accessibility of hospitals, police stations, community responses and structural responses, as well as a victim's personal attributes, such as previous exposure to violence (Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019: 68). Negative encounters create help-seeking barriers which can also be reinforced by negative self-perception and internal feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, or powerlessness (Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019:68; Perez-Patron *et al* 2020: 1). Trauma can also be mentally, emotionally and physically exhausting as well as paralysing for victims (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1288). It can result in victims feeling extremely afraid to seek help or being mentally depressed and exhausted, creating a mental inability to leave (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). In cases where victims may feel trapped, the cyclical nature of violence can impact the victims' ability to perceive success in their actions and reduce their motivation to react (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). Often, rather than leaving, such victims can start developing coping mechanisms (Dziewa & Glowacz (2021: 644).

Several research studies have found that many victims who leave abusive relationships often go back (Kulkarni 2018). Based on this, research that looks into why victims leave or stay in abusive relationships has started to develop. This is now making visible a new gap; that there is a dearth of significant

research that looks at how victims recover and their recovery process once victims leave an abusive relationship (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379). Victims report enduring adversity, but those who achieve a degree of positive recovery show strong signs of resilience in the process (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379; Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). Trying to build an independent life after suffering violence from an intimate partner is deemed a highly intricate process of recovery as victims are often dealing with negative physical, mental or emotional effects of the abuse (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379). For example, in one study, a woman describes having to put herself back together, piece by piece (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379). Clearly, recovery from intimate partner violence does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it involves complex emotional components (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379).

### **2.1.2 Implication of Experiencing Violence from an Intimate Partner**

The negative effects of trauma have a remarkable impact on the victim's present life. Victims experience intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and nightmares following violence from an intimate partner (Pugliese *et al* 2024). The aftermath is a life filled with fear, terror, and anticipation, especially right after leaving an abusive situation, where the trauma remains even long after one has left the abuse (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379). The recurrent intrusive recollections and nightmares then become triggers of panic (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 11). They are experienced as if the event and one's responses to it: the sensory, cognitive, emotional or physiological remembering, are taking place all over again (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 11).

Trauma is characterised by disruptions in traumatic memory processing (Pugliese *et al* 2024). Researchers have shown that traumatic memory is often hidden from a victim, which can sometimes make it difficult for victims to know and comprehend their own trauma (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 12). When an individual faces trauma, the brain has varied pathways to protect the person, which include storing memories in ways that may not be

completely remembered at all times (White-Gibson 2022). While this memory can be recalled using special strategies, it often returns to haunt the victims in their present life through intense flashbacks and nightmares (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 11). This often provides a strong motivation for victims to act on their trauma. Trauma additionally affects victim's comprehension of their own trauma: many victims of severe trauma like sexual assault have reported that initially, they had no narrative memory at all of the events; although they always knew that the trauma had taken place, they could not tell a story about what had happened (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 17). Many times, they could only remember isolated details, such as visual images, smells, sounds, affective states and bodily sensations (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 17). Victims can even describe how it felt, or whether it was vivid or loud, rather than what actually happened to them (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 17). Sintnicolaas (2020: 25) likewise writes that she recalled the memory of her sexual assault as dark and violent, but found it difficult to describe (2020: 25). Unfortunately, only with time can many traumatised victims remember some details or aspects of the events and construct a form of narrative that can describe these traumatic experiences (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 17).

Psychological implications of trauma from intimate partner violence include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, antisocial behaviour, deliberate self-harm and suicide in females, lack of trust in others, emotional detachment or sleep disturbances (Ogundipe *et al* 2018: 2). Trauma alters victim's sense of self, and they become different versions of themselves (Sintnicolaas 2020: 29). Trauma involves a level of personal psychic shattering (Sintnicolaas 2020: 29). This view is shared by Dziewa & Glowacz (2021) who state that the experience of violence within an intimate partner relationship upsets the fundamental conceptions and perception of the victim's world and/or themselves and also their relation to the world (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). Lewis, Henrickson & Watts (2015) describe many women as having problems with their future relationships, having a completely shattered trust in men, and always looking for signs of an abusive tendency. Similarly,

some female survivors report being much more vigilant of men's behaviours after their abusive relationship ended.

Intimate partner violence not only causes problems for the individual but also creates social problems because society plays a significant role in the trauma and experience of this form of abuse (Douglas 2014: 6; Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 643). Domestic violence is a violation of fundamental human rights (Pathak, Dhairyawan & Tariq 2019: 63). It affects the quality of life of a particular society (Perez-Patron et al 2020:1). A study that compared the experience of intimate partner violence between young and older people found that 30 days before their survey, 10% of high school youth had already experienced violence from dating (Perez-Patron *et al* 2020:8). A society that perpetuates domestic violence (intended or unintended) can cause problems for victims and the society in which they live. Douglas (2014: 1) examines societal or cultural elements of shame and its unintended perpetuation. She states how difficult it can be for some people to approach the subject of interpersonal violence, as this intense subject is often fraught with feelings of shame and anger. Douglas also gives an example of how society can promote acts of domestic violence because of a culture that is overwhelmingly pervasive with a disconnection between words and jokes we say and the actual physical violence that is perpetrated against victims (Douglas 2014: 1). In such a context, it is easy to dismiss rape jokes if one is not a rapist without realising that these jokes contribute to a greater community ignorance which not only permits domestic violence but fosters cultural permission and acceptance (Douglas 2014: 2). Similarly, in *Faces of War* by Gabrielle Goliath ([www.goodman-gallery.com](http://www.goodman-gallery.com)), the artist observes that this type of violence is pervasive in our communities but rarely discussed openly, instead, women are taught to be ashamed of abuse and to present a false identity to the community ([www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za)). Goliath further states that shaming and self-shame not only create further damage to a victimised person but can additionally contribute to the number of underreported rapes and assaults experienced by victims ([www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za)).

## **2.2 PERSONAL CATHARSIS**

Victims of violence from intimate partners exhibit different trauma experiences. All victims face violence uniquely, and they perceive what is most essential in their individual contexts (Kulkarni 2019). I, therefore, view personal catharsis in this study as a unique healing required by each victim and defined by the victims themselves. Research shows that although all victims of violence from intimate partners display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, victims with prolonged and repeated subjection to the trauma develop an additional sinister kind of trauma, one which invades and transforms their personality (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). In many cases, the more exposure to trauma there is, the more severe the symptoms experienced, and the more difficult it is for victims to find recovery (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). Trauma of violence from an intimate partner is more complex than initially thought, and many programs to help victims, such as reporting the incident when it happens, have developed over the years; however, as demonstrated, more creative interventions need further exploration (Kulkarni 2019). As Kulkarni (2019) argues that gaps still remain, and most are evident in the set programs themselves. These gaps are even more prevalent among victims in the most marginalised and vulnerable survivor populations (Kulkarni 2019).

Kulkarni (2019) advocates for the emergence of reimagined approaches that strive to more broadly address unique trauma experiences in diverse populations. Personal catharsis in this study can be found in finding oneself, expressing trauma, externalising, coping, seeking support, or seeking empowerment. I found that personal catharsis can also be unknown, or parts of it, during a therapeutic process. Artists, for example, are urged to have a broader objective when using their practice to work through their personal traumas, and this broader objective forms part of their personal catharsis (Sintnicolaas 2020: 32). Although their broader objectives often emerges naturally in their art practices, as artists share their work with others and speak to experiences that both respond to their lived worlds and are impacted by their worlds. It is, however, important for artists to make it explicit and to be

intentional about pursuing a broader objective. Sintnicolaas (2020: 32), for example, states that when she uses her art to make physical her traumatic emotions, it is not solely meant to heal her from her own experience, but also to acknowledge her emotional vibrations from trauma by bringing them to the public sphere and creating dialogue and an empathic atmosphere. Sharing her work allows her subject matter to transcend her and be available beyond just her therapeutic context through aesthetically charged forms (Sintnicolaas 2020: 32). For non-artist victims, by using art to work through their trauma, their expressions can be solely personal or symbolic in ways that are only accessible to them (Malchiodi 2013: 4). Their core objective may be just to materialise their emotions so they can express them or reflect back on them, to make sense of their situations (Malchiodi 2013: 4).

Victims can achieve a state of personal catharsis or recovery and gain new balance and meaning in life after the violent relationship (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). However, information pertaining to what helps these victims achieve this state has not been fully illuminated (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). In a study addressing this gap, participants have stated that they experienced trials and tribulations in personal recovery (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). Survivors have also recalled facing stressors during the aftermath of domestic violence (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1279). Some victims still face persistent attempts by their perpetrators to control them, including stalking and harassing them and even their friends and family (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1288). Others have experienced recurring trauma symptoms of depression or anxiety (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1288). Additional challenges have included lingering effects on the ability to make decisions, concentrate post-exposure, and tolerate negative emotions (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1288).

Knowledge about this gap is important because authors who write on the services provided to victims of intimate partner violence report that many services are not consistently responsive to the diverse needs of survivors (Kulkarni 2018). New socio-political and economic trends have been unfolding over the years, bringing broad structural changes that present new challenges

both for survivors of intimate partner violence and for the service providers charged to assist them (Kulkarni 2018). Although they state that many societies have improved capacity and developed new ways to serve the specific needs of survivors, further creative exploration remains essential (Kulkarni 2018).

### **2.3 ART AS A MEANS TO PERSONAL CATHARSIS**

Artists delve into shadowy places, they inhabit dark spaces, and are fascinated by what can be repulsive to others; these spaces provide endless opportunities for exploration and metaphors for artists (Riggs 2010: 8). Abstract, challenging emotions are fertile but important subjects to work with especially because they are widely misunderstood, both by people outside the individuals dealing with such and by the individuals themselves. Artists use their creative spaces to look at what hurts, disturbs and stultifies in order to probe what reveals, transforms and restores (Riggs 2010: 8). It is widely understood that art is a therapeutic tool that can promote health and well-being (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 1). It has been used to assist many victims of trauma find alternative pathways to express their emotions. Aesthetic experience is proposed as the device for engaging in art making and developing artworks for therapeutic purposes (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 1). Aesthetic experience involves a process of engaged, directed and focused art making that naturally facilitates a cathartic experience (Sintnicolaas 2020: 31).

#### **2.3.1 Various Benefits of Art for the Trauma of Intimate Partner Violence**

Art provides useful means for victims who faced intimate partner violence to express and process extreme trauma and craft new narratives that explore their personal catharsis at their own pace (Bryant 2020: 13). Art turns abstract subjects, such as emotions and anxieties, into physical forms that can be reflected upon and shared with others (Sintnicolaas 2020: 31). The main value in making abstract emotions physical and sharing them is the reflexive dialogue that emerges from reflecting back on the expressive artworks and the interactive dialogue with viewers (Riggs 2010: 8). Beyond this, art possesses

many therapeutic qualities that can be highly beneficial for victims wishing to work through their past trauma of intimate partner abuse.

To begin with, art taps into the non-verbal realm of imagery (Talwar 2007: 23). Talwar (2007: 23) argues that, in trauma treatment, non-verbal memory is more important than verbal accounts, and this is how traumatic memory is mostly stored. Art is demonstrated to be a compelling form of expression to unearth such non-verbal and unconscious material, and is known to provide a safe and therapeutic space to revisit disturbing memories in order to process them (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 3). Art has inherent relaxing effects which are said to come to the fore even when victims are representing or conveying distressful memories (Pizarro 2004: 10). The relaxing effects of art can balance the intense and negative psychological stimulations involved in representing negative subject matter, although it is not clear how art accomplishes this (Pizarro 2004: 10). One of the gaps regarding art and well-being is that mechanisms that underlie the relationship between art and well-being are still unclear (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 3).

There are parts of our bodies that are emotionally charged when actively or inactively experiencing or relieving trauma (Sintnicolaas 2020: 5). An exercise or approach of body awareness can help to identify these sensations in the body (Hansen 2018). However, art goes beyond just identifying the sensations in the body as art expresses them and represents them physically, locking the sensations in time onto a physical object that can be reflected back upon (Sintnicolaas 2020: 9). An art image/object is seen to be able to facilitate dialogue as well as concretise inner conflicts (Masters 2005: 25). Sintnicolaas (2020: 9) used ceramic balls to externalise the sensations she felt through her body when she had to remember her traumatic experience of sexual assault. The writer relates the cognitive value of art to imprint and mirror expressions which can then be reflected back on (Sintnicolaas 2020: 9). Not only is it challenging to represent the abstract emotion, but it is also challenging to represent it in a physical form (Sintnicolaas 2020: 7). Through metaphors, art allows one to imagine something abstract as a form, where the form allows for communication of the emotion beyond language and brings validity to the

emotion (Sintnicolaas 2020: 7). Shifting difficult emotions from the body into the three-dimensional realm allows for both personal and aesthetic transformation (Sintnicolaas 2020: 31).

The benefits of using art are unlimited. Traumatic memory often requires special interventions to recall or place events in the right order in which they took place (Talwar 2007: 23). Masters (2005: 27) states that art therapy carries the ability to be a very powerful and immediate way of communicating repressed feelings and experiences while simultaneously being less threatening to the individual creating the work. For artists, it provides a way to represent both individual searching and the interactive or interpersonal objectives of sharing one's experience (Sintnicolaas 2020: 31). Individuals can intimately connect with their most vulnerable feelings and painful experiences and decide their own meanings through art-based methods (Malchiodi 2013). This provides them with space to fully engage and express their most painful, shameful and difficult emotions in ways they can consciously choose to use image, language and symbolism that is meaningful only to themselves or others (Masters 2005). Victims can engage in the process of meaning-making out of their traumatic experiences (Masters 2005: 23). Art can facilitate meaningful motivation, in that, the investment in the physical labour of creating and completing artworks has been proven to be a source of personal artistic inspiration in Sintnicolaas (2020: 31), which can be translated into personal healing aspirations for victims of intimate partner violence trauma. With limitations faced by many victims of intimate partner violence, Riggs proposes that art is accessible; a creative space can therefore be a kitchen table, an artist's studio, bedrooms or community venues (Riggs 2010: 9). An intense need for expression can facilitate creativity, and creativity can be expressed with any available materials.

Art is seen as an alternative form of emotional expression through symbolism, which can be in images, fantasies, thoughts, concepts, dreams, hallucinations, symptoms, and language. With symbols, the creative setup can also be utilised as a staging ground for the emergence of the creator's relational pathology (Masters 2005: 19).

### 2.3.2 Art Therapy

Due to the poor verbal memory associated with trauma, and higher visual and sensational expression of traumatic memory (Niet, Knipscheer et. al 2015: 220, Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 11; Pugliese *et al* 2024), art therapy is seen as an appropriate theory to frame the use of art and therapy to probe into healing processes and cases for non-verbal expressions of traumatic memory. Art therapy methods are characterised by experiential and nonverbal character (Niet *et al* 2015: 220). Art therapy is considered a creative therapy which makes use of art practices, including drawing, sculpting, dancing, or music therapy, to treat psychological and mental problems in a purposeful and methodical way, as applied in this study (Niet *et al.* 2015: 221).

This study not only incorporates integrative modes of methods, including practice-led methods, autoethnography, and thick description, but also employs theories of narrative art and therapeutic journaling, found within the broader spectrum of art therapy. In clinical practice, art therapy is in many cases applied within a multilayered and multidisciplinary approach, in combination with other treatments, therapies and theories (Niet *et. al* 2015: 221). The consideration of art therapy in this study, therefore, makes a case for the use of a multi-modal integration of methods and theories in advancing comprehensive healing (Niet *et al.* 2015: 221).

Although art therapy can be applied solely as a theoretical framework (Talwar 2007: 22), it is not considered in this study as a theoretical framework, but as the rationalisation of multi-methods for the realisation of comprehensive healing. It is additionally considered for contexts of narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling (Shafir *et at* 2020: 4; Niet *et. al* 2015: 221; Talwar 2007: 26). The use of different modalities and multidiscipline in art therapy is seen to be beneficial in achieving complex and varied therapeutic goals (Niet *et. al* 2015: 221; Shafir *et at* 2020: 4). Various articles demonstrate and explore potentials of how art-based therapies can bring about positive and sustainable change and potential for complex transformation that takes place

in the nexus of art-based expression, reflection and relationships (Shafir *et al* 2020: 4).

## **2.4 NARRATIVE THERAPY**

The exploration of art making as a cathartic process can be thought of in terms of contributing towards providing a space for the individual or victim of intimate partner violence to give artistic expression to their emotional pain in order to craft positive outcomes for themselves (Masters 2005: 19). In this study, I work through my personal experience of violence from an abusive partner through art. This involves revisiting traumatic memories and working through them towards healing. Narrative therapy uses art to confront difficult, complex personal trauma. Narrative therapy as a theoretical framework proposes a way of seeing and thinking about one's life problems as shaped and given meaning through crafted stories and narratives (DeKruyf 2008: 445).

Art is seen as a narrative tool within the narrative therapy approach, in which individuals can craft deep and meaningful personal narratives to find meaning in the difficult problems they face (DeKruyf 2008: 445). Lingering trauma becomes frustrating to live with, as it is triggering; painful episodes and recurring nightmares remain persistent throughout a victim's life. This forces continuous retrospection, so that victims begin to realise the depth of their trauma. These realisations can make victims gradually perceive the true weight and persistence of trauma. This can often lead to negative impressions where victims find themselves feeling stuck in a reality of persistent trauma that they cannot see a way out of (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). The narrative therapy approach works by letting victims with a hopeless view of their problem first craft narratives which help them express and externalise their problem, then by changing their views of their problems, and then begin to craft new stories which offer new views of a way out and positive outcomes (Bryant 2020: 10).

Narratives and stories crafted in narrative therapy are developed from a subjective viewpoint (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). However, more than just being

creatively crafted stories, narratives in narrative therapy are employed as tools for exploring and interpreting personal experiences (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2; Bryant 2020: 12). Narrative therapy proposes that individuals shape the meanings of their lives through stories in order to help them regulate their lives; whether the story is tragic or heroic, is determined by the storyteller (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 150; Bryant 2020: 16). Narrative therapy is a rich engagement of re-telling one's story from an individual perspective (Bryant 2020: 16). It is a therapeutic approach to storytelling which, according to Bryant (2020), encourages the use of senses not usually utilised in therapy, that is, through storytelling and the natural way that people make meaning of their experiences in life (Baştemur & Bas 2020: 147; Bryant 2020: 24). Narrative therapy asserts that, individuals already have metaphors related to their lives which are similes they can use to express problems they encounter in their lives in symbolic ways (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 148). Through the narrative approach, the researcher considers their own trauma as a metaphorical story which they express and make meaning of by conveying it through art (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 148). The stories become metaphorical descriptions that reflect not only an individual reality but also a social one (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 148).

Narrative therapy is a solution-focused approach that posits that although circumstances shape a person's identity, people are masters of their own lives and play a significant role in crafting their life stories (DeKruyf 2008: 448). Narrative therapy considers the individual's personal responsibility and intentionality (DeKruyf 2008: 448). It therefore not only focuses on telling stories about problems but also on crafting solutions to them (DeKruyf 2008: 448). Narrative therapy attempts to shift the often-observed tendency for people to focus on what is wrong when they enter therapy, which can make their stories saturated with the problem rather than the possibility of overcoming it (DeKruyf 2008: 448). According to the narrative view, problem-saturated stories limit perspectives and often edit out threads of hope and positive meaning (DeKruyf 2008: 448). One of the foundations of the approach's narrative basis is the view that people can change their stories by re-authoring them (DeKruyf 2008: 448). Problems can steal people's sense of agency and trust in themselves to overcome their difficulties (DeKruyf

2008: 450). Especially with the traumatic experience of violence from an intimate partner, which can often be challenging to confront, and leaves victims feeling stuck in their cycle of trauma (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021: 644). To reclaim authorship over their lives, crafting alternative stories provides victims with the freedom to speak about their situations, address their self-identified problems, and create alternative realities in their own voices (DeKruyf 2008: 450).

#### **2.4.1 Background and Assumptions**

Various discourses influenced the development of narrative therapy. Narrative therapy was influenced by discourses including post-structural theory, anthropology, feminism, ethnology, and psychoanalytic studies, and is derived from the traditions of individual psychology (Bryant 2020: 16; Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). It draws from humanistic ideas which highlight confidence and problem-solving abilities in the individual, while recognising the significance of interactions, contexts and appraisals (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). Narrative therapy was developed and introduced by the social workers and therapists, Michal White, of Australia, and David Epston, of New Zealand, based on the ideas of a wide variety of postmodern thinkers (DeKruyf 2008: 445). The post-modern ideas are based on findings that many people just need their attention drawn to subtle changes accompanying their work on their problems in order to foster their own resourcefulness. This helps those seeking therapy to gain a clearer picture of how they can move forward differently and more productively (DeKruyf 2008: 445). The findings show that people can construct stories to make meaning of their experiences and that these stories strongly influence which experiences individuals choose to further express (DeKruyf 2008: 446).

The narrative thinking approach is based on certain theoretical assumptions. The main theoretical basis of narrative therapy is that people are experts in their own lives and are distinct from their problems (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2; DeKruyf 2008: 452). Narrative therapy argues that individuals have a choice about how their journeys and stories develop, while also considering the

uncontrollable effect of circumstances imposed on people (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). According to narrative therapy, people do not fully control their circumstances but play an important role in how they respond to their life circumstances (DeKruyf 2008: 447). Narrative therapy also holds that people possess an arsenal of skills, competencies, and knowledge gathered from their past experiences, which enables them to overcome the challenges they are currently facing. The competencies guide them to draw on that aspect of their experiences that can help them overcome their current problems (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). Social and cultural interactions are key factors in narrative thinking (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). The way individuals experience themselves and their situations is strongly constructed within social and cultural interactions which form their views on life and problems (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). This influences what and how they see and define problems. Narrative therapy positions the ways people tell stories as directly related to the communities they live in and the stories they encounter in their lives (Baştemur & Baş 2021: 147).

#### **2.4.2 Objectives and Processes**

When utilising narrative therapy as a framework, it does not follow a formula, although various processes describe narrative therapy. It is also not a collection of techniques but a different way of thinking and seeing (DeKruyf 2008: 445). Nevertheless, certain general techniques have come to be identified with the narrative perspective (DeKruyf 2008: 452). This includes using a process of externalisation, where victims provide problem-saturated stories as the first step to crafting new stories (Bryant 2020: 66). Other processes include using narrative metaphors as ways to re-author the problem-saturated stories towards a more desired outcome (Bryant 2020: 11). The key process in the narrative approach is that victims must find a new way of looking at their problems and commit to engaging in life processes which lead to that new possibility of living (DeKruyf 2008; Bryant 2020). The objective of narrative therapy is not to transform the individual but rather to attempt to transform the impact that the problem has on the individual (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2; Baştemur & Baş 2020: 152). It aims to help individuals form more

satisfying stories in line with their views and language that make sense to them (Baştemur & Baş 2020:152). Narrative therapy drives people to change how they speak about the problem and what they speak about it and to give new meaning to life through storytelling (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 150, DeKruyf 2008: 448).

In narrative therapy, the problem is outside the individual's control; however, the individual's beliefs and skills can be used to craft solutions (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 148). The process of constructing new stories begins with intentionality by the patient, which then carries on to expressions of the stories or externalisation of the problem. It then continues with an emphasis on the individual's personal strengths needed to overcome their current problem (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 152). Finally, alternative stories, which include new points of view related to the individual's life, are produced and shared with others (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 152). Sharing the narratives is one of the key processes of narrative therapy; narratives are not only expressed, but they are accounts that are shared and told to listeners (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). It is crucial in narrative therapy that individuals re-author new outcomes within a community, based on the view that by inviting others to witness the transformation, the gains for the victims are solidified (Bryant 2020: 13).

The use of narrative therapy has been specifically beneficial and suitable for victims of domestic violence (Bryant 2020: 1). Narrative therapy uses a theoretical lens that is effective for evaluating artworks of women who have experienced various traumas of domestic violence (Bryant 2020: 1). Narrative therapy has been demonstrated to be a method that allows clients who have been traumatised by domestic abuse to regain their voice in a safe and controlled manner that has the potential to foster a healing process (Bryant 2020: 10). Narrative therapy is used in the study to explore artworks made to express lived experiences of the trauma (Bryant 2020: 13). Narrative therapy is an approach where individuals learn that they are the experts of their lives (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 148). From a narrative perspective, people naturally try to ascribe meaning to their lives; however, external sources (such as social

norms and gender-role stories) also shape this meaning and the individuals (Baştemur & Baş 2020: 150).

## **2.5 THERAPEUTIC JOURNALING**

According to Mirgain and Singles (2016: 1), therapeutic journaling is a private reflection of our thoughts, feelings and personal life experiences. It is suitable for dealing with upsetting or traumatic life events. Therapeutic journaling is, however, mostly considered within the context of writing, although it is possible and effective with other forms of expression, including art (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1).

In this study, both writing and art journaling are considered. Pizarro (2004: 5) observes both writing and art journaling as creative arts therapies and states that both have been shown to be effective in helping individuals recover from traumatic experiences. The use of art therapy, for example, has been noted to reduce reporting of illnesses across varied conditions, while several studies have demonstrated that writing about stressful or traumatic events is significantly successful in decreasing health problems and rumination over stressful matters across various situations and populations (Pizarro 2004: 6).

### **2.5.1 Therapeutic Writing**

Within the context of writing, therapeutic journaling is a reflection of our deep personal life experiences by way of writing them down (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1). Therapeutic journaling is an internal process of using the written word to express a full range of emotions, reactions and perceptions that are related to difficult, upsetting, or traumatic life events (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1). Self-disclosing personal experiences through writing is said not only to improve emotional and psychological health but also improve physical health (Malchiodi 2013: 3). The actions of putting pen to paper to write about troubling experiences can make those experiences more manageable (Malchiodi 2013: 3). Therapeutic journaling was used in this study by the researcher keeping a regular visual diary, where she would write about emotions that were brought up as she researched and thought about artworks that brought about

upsetting feelings. Mirgain & Singles state that even positive emotions related to the troubling event can also be recorded (2016: 1).

Therapeutic writing is a type of autobiographical writing where individuals reflect on significant life experiences to give meaning to them, as is also reflected in narrative therapy (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1). This type of writing helps people recognise themselves as authors of their own experiences, with a sense of personal agency (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1). It affords a way for individuals to reflect upon and better understand their situations (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1). The aim of writing in therapeutic journaling is to provide a safe space to be completely honest and free to write anything, and in contrast to narrative therapy and artistic practices, this approach does not require one to necessarily share their contents (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2). With therapeutic writing, emphasis is not put on sharing because of the idea that the outcome of talking about difficult experiences to another person, including therapists, depends on the listener's ability to comprehend and accept the subject's narrative. There is vast research that demonstrates physical and emotional well-being from writing about traumatic or stressful personal events (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 3). In line with narrative therapy and expressive arts, therapeutic writing works because the writer openly acknowledges their emotions and accepts them, therefore being able to give voice to feelings that were blocked and to construct meaningful stories in a safe environment (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 3).

In a study comparing the efficacy of art and writing in reducing the effects of traumatic exposure, and of controlled and expressive art-making, participants who engaged in controlled and expressive art forms reported greater overall satisfaction with the process than those who wrote. Participants in the writing group, however, reported greater overall negative effects immediately after the end of the session (Pizarro 2004: 10), in parallel with the findings of existing research where higher levels of psychological arousal, anxiety, and negative emotions are seen with therapeutic journaling, directly after writing (Pizarro 2004: 6), but a decrease in health problems is noticed over time (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 3; Pizarro 2004: 10). Thinking about a stressful event can put

one in a bad mood (Pizarro 2004: 10). The study showed that participants who engage in writing therapy find it less enjoyable and feel more stressed immediately after the practice, although writing demonstrates a significant decrease in social dysfunction, a health benefit that is not found with journaling with art (Pizarro 2004: 10). It is argued that this benefit could possibly stem from the organisation of thought provided by the writing process compared with that in generating art, which may not offer enough cognitive organization and, therefore, may not provide the same level of health benefits (Pizarro 2004: 10).

Writing causes greater processing of negative events, and it is the increased thinking and organising of thoughts that leads to both negative effects and eventual better health outcomes (Pizarro 2004: 10). Due to drawbacks that occurred during the study, the researchers were not able to demonstrate concrete health benefits from art journaling; however, they were able to discover that because of its immediate psychological arousal, the writing approach discouraged a lot of participants from continuing the therapeutic process, while art, on the other hand, encouraged participants to continue due to its relaxing effects, even when dealing with expressing negative emotions (Pizarro 2004: 10).

### **2.5.2 Art/Visual Journaling**

According to Malchiodi (2013: 1), visual journaling is a practice that has a long history with artists and has become one of the basic methods used in art therapy. Visual journaling is used in a variety of ways within creative art therapy approaches to trauma interventions, including to assist victims of trauma not only to cope with negative emotions related to exposure to trauma, but also as a means of self-regulation and stress reduction (Malchiodi 2013: 2). Visual journaling is seen as useful for individuals who have experienced interpersonal violence, providing a simple, and yet empowering way to speak without talking about the violence or abuse (Malchiodi 2013: 2). This relates to the results of the study that regards art as more relaxing than writing because with art, one can ‘talk’ about their experience without actually talking, providing the “relaxing effects” that Pizarro (2004: 10) speaks of.

Visual journaling offers a way to de-stress, self-soothe and self-regulate through various forms of art and image-making, such as drawing, painting, or moulding (Malchiodi 2013: 2). It is a practice embraced not only for self-regulation but also as one that capitalises on right brain dominance and supports meaning-making (Malchiodi 2013: 2).

As with written journaling, visual journaling can also involve keeping a regular journal that individuals can use to self-soothe and express difficult and abstract emotions, especially in sessions where they are working through traumatic experiences (Malchiodi 2013: 2). In my own research process, I made small sketches and drawings in a visual diary as a way to represent some of the moments I remembered from my experiences or to try and represent emotions that are difficult to describe. I found that spending a considerable amount of time writing about my negative events in the diary often led me to make random sketches or doodles that didn't represent anything, just as a way to decompress from the writing. Therapeutic techniques, when explored through visual journaling, offer a spontaneous form of expression that helps individuals let go of control and judgment over their creative output (Malchiodi 2013: 5).

In line with narrative therapy, the effectiveness of art journaling involves the step of making an intention, which demonstrates a form of cognitive reframing and resilience-enhancing behaviour that is valuable in a therapeutic process as it not only serves as a reminder but also as an imagined commitment to change (Malchiodi 2013: 5). Because art expression is a whole brain activity that capitalises on non-verbal, sensory experiences, it is possible that when we draw and write about positive intentions, we increase the chances of behaviour change or at least establish what we intend in a deeper, more complete manner (Malchiodi 2013: 5). Available research proposes that self-exploration through visual journaling is an effective approach to treating stress (Malchiodi 2013: 3). Visual journaling helps with externalising traumatic stress and strengthening concepts of well-being (Malchiodi 2013: 3). With the current dearth of research on concrete health benefits of art therapy journaling (Pizarro 2004: 10), it is unclear if visual journaling can be effective on its own or requires

the inclusion of writing or oral interventions. Regardless, Malchiodi (2013: 3) proposes that visual journaling works well when used with written journaling.

### **2.5.3 The Duality of Writing and Visual Journaling**

Malchiodi (2013:3) suggests that visual and written journaling work well together in complementary ways. She gives an example that when creating an image, the elements, such as colours, lines and shapes, express the sensory parts of the traumatising event in a tangible way that words cannot adequately communicate or explain in a logical, linear way. On the other hand, the writer notes that writing about events, or the actual image, provides another important layer of healing. Creating both written and art narratives about traumatic events can begin the process of detaching from intrusive thoughts and putting them into a chronology so that they are no longer a disturbing and fragmented mixture of free-floating emotions, but experiences that are placed in an objective, historical context (Malchiodi 2013: 3).

Therapeutic journaling fosters emotional expression with the objective of good health, which this study aims to achieve. Therapeutic journaling was used in this study to foster the emotional expression of the researcher's own traumatic memories (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2). It was used as a means to express memories, emotions and feelings that arise when focusing on a personal trauma of intimate partner violence. This study applied the duality of art and writing therapy. The duality of art and writing creates a balance between visual expressions that might be limited in terms of a full range of expression, and writing therapy, which can cause a psychological burden (Pizarro 2004: 10). Writing helps to deepen the understanding of art expression, while art expression can balance the levels of psychological arousal (Pizarro 2004: 10). Although high psychological arousal is present in art, its relaxing effects deem it a less distressful way to revisit traumatic memories. At the same time, writing helps fill gaps in art expression, providing both short-term and long-term health benefits (Pizarro 2004).

Therapeutic journaling provides a view about releasing thoughts and feelings of upsetting events through simple expression (Pizarro 2004: 10). A combination of therapeutic journaling and narrative therapy was used to construct meaningful personal narratives about past experiences of trauma (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2). The objective was to explore traumatic events in a space that is safe and therapeutic. Therapeutic journaling provides the ability for self-regulation and the opportunity to clarify life goals and find meaning through expression (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2). Accordingly, writing fosters positive emotions because the practice of expressing our thoughts and feelings widens our scope of attention, promotes the need to find solutions and allows the mind to be more flexible (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2). Writing about or expressing particularly traumatic and painful situations can generate personal forgiveness and promote feelings of wisdom and hope in difficult situations because of its ability to go beyond our suffering in order to reach more positive perspectives (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 2).

### CHAPTER 3: ARTISTIC INFLUENCE AND METHODOLOGY

First of all, this chapter presents the works of two artists, Professor Nombeko Mpako and Angel Estrella, who influenced both the conceptualisation and creation processes of the practical components of this research. The next section explains how both artistic influences and theoretical frameworks were applied to this study and integrated into the development of the emergent artworks. It concludes by presenting the study's methodology. These were practice-led and practice-based approaches, as well as thick descriptions, which were used as data-collection methods. Practice-led and practice-based research, also referred to as "art practice as research" (Sullivan 2010), uses the creative/visual arts to inform the research process, aiming to generate and expand new knowledge and to improve creative practice. Thick description, on the other hand, was first coined by Clifford Geertz, who defined it as "the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context" (Geertz 1973:6). Along with both narrative therapy and therapeutic journaling, thick description was utilised in this study, textually and visually, to contextualise the researcher's experience of enduring violence from an intimate partner, subsequently to take agency over the situation, and to present the experience through reflective narrative and performance.

The study took inspiration from Professor Mpako's exhibition entitled *Obu Bubomi Bam (this is my life) 8 out of 8: I teach Art, 2021*, in which the artist used art as a healing tool. The exhibition featured several artworks that examined moments in the artist's life, both good and painful, which led her towards self-acceptance and forgiveness, that is, a kind of catharsis. Angel Estrella is the second artist who inspired the creation process of emerging artworks in this study. Her works, presented in the exhibition *In Vulnerability*, were developed as part of her Master's research. Estrella is a ceramic artist who creates ceramic sculptures to represent her personal experience of trauma. In the abovementioned exhibition, the artist created a body of work that captured memories and explored how trauma can be made visible through

fragmented ceramic figures. The art was mostly inspired by her use of visual strategies and metaphors to address the theme of trauma, particularly through the three-dimensional medium of clay ceramics.

### **3.1 NOMBEKO MPAKO**

Mpako is a multidisciplinary artist who uses her art to work through different moments of her life, specifically difficult ones. In her practice, she uses various media, including printmaking, installation, sculpture, and video, to represent her artistic endeavours.

Life is difficult... once we truly know that life is difficult – once we truly understand and accept it – then life is no longer difficult” (Peck 1983, quoted in Mpako 2021: 1).

This perspective embodies the fundamental views of narrative therapy within which this study is framed (Bryant 2020; DeKruyf 2008; Uzun & LeBlanc 2017). One of the underlying views of narrative therapy is that difficult circumstances affect people’s lives. Thus, people do not have full control of their life stories and the difficulties they face. However, people have an important role in shaping the outcomes of their problems. Narrative therapy motivates people to accept that circumstances influence their lives and can create difficult experiences, but that they can play a part in crafting a better life for themselves (DeKruyf 2008:447). The view and creative approaches of the *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach art* exhibition align with this study’s objectives and its theoretical framework. Therefore, Mpako’s approach in her 2021 exhibition served as a conceptual framework and a basis for exploring the creative practice of this study.

Mpako’s exhibition was a visual representation of the artist’s autobiography (Mpako 2021:1), suggesting that it was a reflection on her life story. The body of work was developed as a therapeutic process (Mpako 2021: 1). This echoes the primary objective of this study, which was exploring art as a therapeutic process to deal with a traumatic experience of violence from an intimate partner. Mpako’s utilisation of her art as a therapeutic process is in line with the views that artists probe into shadowy places to uncover what is revealed

(Riggs 2010: 8), and that art can be used as an effective therapeutic tool (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 1). This study also explored using art as a way to probe into a complex, difficult and traumatic experience of violence from an intimate partner and produce a personal catharsis. The objective was to explore the therapeutic use of art to explore difficult traumas, with the exhibition presented as part of the research outcomes for a Master of Visual Arts qualification.

Similar to the weight of carrying trauma, Mpako expresses that when she developed her *Obu Bubomi Bam 8 out of 8: I teach art* exhibition, she felt it was time to shed the baggage of painful experiences which she had carried for years throughout her life, move forward, forgive herself where necessary and progressing without fear of failure and regret for things she could not change (Mpako 2021: 1). Mpako shares that therapy begins with revisiting the difficult moments (Mpako 2021: 1). The exhibition presented reflections on some breaking points in the artist's personal life and family situations as well as some moments of difficulty she had faced as an academic (Mpako 2021: 1). When using art as a tool for healing, one usually has to relive memories to visually or artistically represent them. As the artist explains, when creating some of her artworks, she has to relive past experiences to express and capture them visually. During these performances, she sometimes finds herself "literally" feeling the exact moment when the event took place (Mpako 2021: 1). As explored in the previous chapter when specifically referring to traumatic memory, Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman (2001: 11) stated that a component of traumatic memory is that it can be experienced as if the event and one's responses to it are happening all over again. This performative practice of capturing moments visually inspired the creative practice of this study and is reflected throughout the body of work showcased in the emergent exhibition entitled "Crossing the Rubicon".

The main artwork of Mpako's exhibition that resonates with my own work is titled *Mayenzek' intando yakho Thixo nkosi Yenyanyiso* (Mpako 2021: 24). It is an animation that formed part of her main installation, a labyrinth entitled *Ndithunuke Ndizophola*, translating to mean "Inflict pain on me so that I can be

healed”. In this artwork, the artist performs the main frame of the animation after a major surgery while she is still in pain (Mpako 2021:24). Likewise, in *Mayenzek’ intando yakho Thixo nkosi Yenyaniso*, which translates to “Let your will be done O Lord of Truth”, she performs this work and means it to be an exorcism of pain, not only towards healing but also towards purification (Mpako 2021:24).

(Link: <https://creativeoutput52.wixsite.com/ndithunuke-ndizophol>: Open the link and click on the **Stop Frame Animation** to watch the performance).

Mpako states that the healing was meant for the physical wounds from the surgery and also as a representation of healing for her soul from the pain she experienced throughout her life (Mpako 2021: 24). Art allows one to be able to reflect on past experiences, release them and in the process create a visual and physical representation of the release or exorcism. The artist was in pain, but by turning her pain into art, the artist felt it was a way for her to defeat the pain (Mpako 2021: 24). Over the years, the artist has always used art to express herself so that her artworks are her main form of releasing negative and challenging emotions (Mpako 2021: 37). Mpako’s 2021 exhibition presented both old works and new ones. Her new artworks included performances reflecting on critical moments in her life, in which some were deliberate efforts to invoke pain towards healing (Mpako 2021: 52). The choice of working through difficult past memories by way of art indicates how art provides a safe space to evoke painful experiences with the objective of deliberate healing.

Four specific artworks from this exhibition are considered and discussed as influences on this study’s practice. These are the first: Stop Frame Animation presented in *Ndithunuke Ndizophola’s (2021) installation entitled Mayenzek’ intando yakho Thixo nkosi Yenyaniso*, *Please Help* (1986), *The Vigil* (1988-1989), and *GBV* (2021). In these works, Mpako specifically deals with her personal experiences of domestic violence first by a family member, her late brother-in-law, and later, her then boyfriend.

*Please Help* is one of the artist's older works in which she expresses an ordeal she went through that left her humiliated, devastated, and violated (Mpako 2021:36). It was an ordeal of sexual assault which the artist wished would had never happened (Mpako 2021:36). Narrative therapy, which is also demonstrated in the artist's views, posits that people are not in full control of their lives, however, they have a hand in curating their present and future narratives (Uzun & LeBlanc 2017: 2). Mpako's deliberate choice to revisit the terrible experience of an ordeal in her past life demonstrates a sense of agency, of taking control over one's life, and a determination to heal through past traumas. *Please Help* (1986) (Figure 3.1) shows three naked female figures; one is wounded and lies helplessly in the foreground, and two are running away from the scene (Mpako 2021: 36).



**Figure 3.1:** Nombeko Mpako, *Please Help*, 1986

This event takes place in a forest-like context but inside a room. The artist conveys this context of a forest to symbolise loss, desperation, despair and danger (Mpako 2021: 36). The room in which the forest is placed represents the place where the violation took place and also denotes domestic violence (Mpako 2021: 38). This work, like most of the artist's works, are based on

personal experiences, usually have an intrinsic meaning, and are therefore often expressive. The artist notes that although the work is expressive, it was made in a way accessible to the viewer (Mpako 2021: 37).

In a therapeutic context, artworks only need to be accessible to the clients who create them and to the therapist (Mirgain & Singles 2023: 5). Within visual arts practice, however, artworks are made not only to be accessible to the creator but also to be meaningful for others for whom the work is accessible (Mpako 2021: 23; Estrella 2019: 4). As seen in this particular artwork, although the artist expresses a very personal story with this work, she also considers the viewer in how she develops the work so that it is not only accessible to her but also to viewers (Mpako 2021: 36).

When questioned about the work, Mpako states that she is one of the women depicted in the artwork (Mpako 2021: 36). When asked if she found help, the artist replied that she did, but she helped herself, as no one could help her (Mpako 2021: 36). However, for the woman who was lying on her back helpless, it was a race against time (Mpako 2021: 38). The artist's response reflects one of the sad realities about dealing with the experience of domestic violence, where many victims end up staying and even dying in abusive relationships or situations because they have no one to help them. The artist states, however, that, with this work, she is also cautioning other victims who find themselves faced with a similar situation that they must get away early and find a way to help themselves because if they do not, they might find themselves helpless or die, whether physically or emotionally (Mpako 2021: 36). Research has shown that staying in abusive relationships leads to tolerance to domestic abuse over time, underreporting and femicide (Dziewa & Glowacz 2021). While the work is based on the artist's experience, its meaning transcends her own experience and is shared to caution others. Speaking from personal experience and the narrative of self-help reflects many stories of domestic violence, including the researcher's own story.

Vulnerability is synonymous with domestic violence, and artists who depict personal experiences of domestic violence often also depict vulnerability. In

*Please Help*, the artist uses nakedness in the work as a symbol of vulnerability and as a way to denote helplessness (Mpako 2021: 36). Domestic violence is an important experience to share because, as the artist expresses, the issue of domestic violence is a scourge that has been experienced by women from time immemorial (Mpako 2021: 38). Although she perceives that it is better now because women can talk about the experience without the stigma of the abuse that often accompanies the experience (Mpako 2021: 38), the issue of domestic violence is still a significant social and personal problem for many people, especially women. In her case, Mpako lamented that the stigma was worse because it involved a relative or family member (Mpako 2021: 38). It is still the case that when abuse or rape takes place in a family setting, victims are often told to keep it quiet or are simply not believed. This artwork was created in 1986 but is still very relevant today. As the artist points out, the work portrays the scourge of the rape and killing of women, which is still a problem in today's society (Mpako 2021: 38), and demonstrates the need to keep creating dialogues around the issue and sharing personal experiences.



**Figure 3.2:** Nombeko Mpako, *The Vigil*, 1988-1989

*The Vigil* (Figure 3.2) is a ruminative artwork that echoes a sense of gentleness through its colours and dreamlike treatment. The artwork is made of hues of bright yellow and orange colours, which the artist refers to as sweet colours that she calls “caramel and custard” (Mpako 2021: 40). The title of this work refers to the night watch done a night before the burial of a loved one and illustrates a traumatic and personal incident of domestic violence along with coming to terms with the experience (Mpako 2021: 40). As described by the artist, the incident took place when she was only 23 years old, a few months after she returned from Zimbabwe after the rape incident (Mpako 2021: 40). In *The Vigil*, the ordeal is of her having to endure the painful process of aborting a four to six week old baby when she was not provided much choice since the decision was not hers but that of her then partner/boyfriend (Mpako 2021: 40). The artist’s story demonstrates an incident of indirect violence by an intimate partner which involves violations of the victim’s body and her freedom of choice.

In Mpako’s case, the perpetrator did not directly harm her but, put her in a situation where her body was violated without her intention. Although the artist describes the experience which was perpetrated by the boyfriend as an ordeal of her life, at that time, she still felt that the boyfriend was the best thing in her life, and did not want to lose him by contesting his decision, especially after just fleeing from another horrible experience (Mpako 2021: 40). Violence within the context of an intimate partner relationship is complex as it takes place in various forms and within conflicting love contexts (Dziwica & Glowacz 2021: 644). During this experience, the artist says that she also felt ashamed and blamed herself for letting it happen (Mpako 2021: 40). Dziwica & Glowacz (2021: 644) report that most abused victims often feel that they are responsible for their abuse and indicate that this can affect their ability to resolve the issue or their wish to face it. Factors such as love, self-blame, lack of support, and prior experiences are reflected in this one example. In *The Vigil*, the artist achieves a sense of gentleness in reflection through symbolism. The artwork depicts a foetus at the bottom left, in front of which lies a human head with headgear, the human facing the foetus as if watching it. In the far-right corner stands a deformed, naked woman. The woman appears to be reaching for the

jar depicted in the composition's centre. The focal point of the work is the triangle formed by the two subjects: the foetus on the bottom left and deformed woman on the right, and the jar placed at the top centre (Mpako 2021: 40). Although the artist states that it evokes unresolved emotional feelings, according to her, she had never explained the meaning of this work until the 2021 exhibition catalogue (Mpako 2021: 40). The artist discloses that this is one of her old artworks that she chose to frame and hang in her house where she can see it every time she goes to her kitchen and that she smiles every time she sees it (Mpako 2021:40). This shows that art can be used as a way to facilitate the processing of traumatic experiences over time, and through time, make meaning of unresolved emotions. In this context, the artist created a physical manifestation of this past painful event so that every time she sees it, she feels something (Mpako 2021: 40). The artwork also speaks to issues of domestic violence and abuse, young and teenage pregnancy in addition to backstreet abortion, which is well advertised on pamphlets in the streets in many towns in South Africa (Mpako 2021).



**Figure 3.3: Nombeko Mpako, *GBV*, 2021.**

*GBV*, figure 3.3, is an artwork that looks retrospectively at the ongoing issue of gender-based violence in a contemporary context. This work represents therapy and closure for Mpako and was created from *Please Help* (Mpako

2021:52). The work is meant to be an exorcism of the gender-based violence scourge that is still taking place (Mpako 2021: 52). The artist states that some of her new works portrays the removal of permanent bandages she has used to cover bleeding wounds (Mpako 2021: 52). As such, she uses the new works to revisit past unresolved issues that have travelled unchanged with her (Mpako 2021: 52). Therefore, her 2021 exhibition represented a final letting go: a resolve, to heal and move forward. The artist states that she does these artworks so that the wounds she carried for years can be addressed toward permanent healing (Mpako 2021: 52). When the artist started working on *GBV* in 2020, it was amid the many reports of brutal killings of young women, including a story of one who was 8 months pregnant and found hanging on a tree (Mpako 2021: 52). This work was the artist's choice to add her voice, not particularly from a stance as a victim, but rather as a call for help to stop the scourge (Mpako 2021: 52).

The artwork portrays four women in the background emerging from a forest-like environment (Mpako 2021: 52). These four women are holding hands, representing a coming together, while one is raising her fist, symbolising solidarity and resistance (Mpako 2021: 52). One is seen marching to join the scene (Mpako 2021: 52), which is in contrast to the images in *Please Help* (1986) where the women are running away from the scene. On the bottom left is a mirror image of the artist kneeling in a pool of thick liquid under a shape epitomising the womb of Mary (Mpako 2021: 52). The artist seems to be extracting liquid from the womb with her hands and dropping it into the circular liquid deposit in which she is kneeling (Mpako 2021: 52). Most of the images in this artwork are taken from *Please Help* (1986) and *Irhoqololo likaKim I, 2021* (Mpako 2021: 52), suggesting artistic reflections on past experiences that speak to current issues. The work comes from the reinterpretation of *Please Help* and is influenced by the recurrence of domestic or gender-based violence. The artist deliberately chose illustrative subject matter so that the work would be accessible to many viewers (Mpako 2021: 53).

Figure 3.4, *Ndithunuke Ndizophola 2021*, is an installation included in the exhibition's new works. The animation discussed earlier, *Mayenzek' intando*

*yakho Thixo nkosi Yenyamiso* (Mpako 2021: 24), forms a part of this installation. The title translates to 'Poke me so I can heal', which suggests that the pain inflicted on the artist's body has a healing effect (Mpako 2021: 53). For the artist, this artwork epitomises the journey of making the choice to work through past painful experiences in order to find personal healing. According to the artist, the individual pokes received through these works facilitate healing. This artwork suggests a deliberate act and a choice to have a healthy outcome. The work is a labyrinth constructed with a big, solid tree trunk, which joins sixteen triangles that hold the top surface together, where a maze is drawn. The maze is drawn in red lines and guides the viewer into the core, where the stop-frame animation of the artist performing an exorcism of healing from pain is playing (Mpako 2021: 53).



**Figure 3.4:** Nombeko Mpako, *Ndithunuke Ndizophola*, Installation, 2021.

The use of the labyrinth represents the complicated yet fulfilling journey of life, even as it symbolises the complex reality of life's experiences (Mpako 2021: 53). This work epitomises the journey of healing from painful experiences through art; hence, it was made to create a slope (Mpako 2024). The artist states that there is nothing that she has ever achieved without perseverance and hard work (Mpako 2021: 55). This is similarly reflected in

stories of other women who overcame their abuse from intimate partners (Lewis, Henriksen & Watts 2015: 379; Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1280). Many victims have also raised themes of resilience similar to those raised by Mpako in this work (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1281). Her exhibition was not only to tell the story of her life through visual metaphors but also to engage viewers in a dialogue seeking to cast light into what art is and what it can be (Mpako 2021: 55). The creative process for the artist has always been a cathartic process (Mpako 2021: 55). Her artworks present her lived experiences and the therapeutic effects from the creation processes. In so doing, the artist has reflected on stories of healing, exorcism, purification and victory throughout her works. In the artist's words:

There is always a significant relationship between the creative process involved in making an artwork and its meanings and the circumstances it represents. Thus, the circumstances my artworks present are not only unique to me but are common and hence can be accessible to the viewer (Mpako 2021: 81).

Her message is that “life is hard, but it has to be lived, and we have to live it. How one lives it is our choice” (Mpako 2021: 82).

### **3.2    ÁNGEL ESTRELLA**

Angel Estrella is a ceramic artist, and in her exhibition *IN: Vulnerability* (2019), she draws on past traumatic memories to create ceramic artworks that depict them. In this study, the researcher also drew on personal experiences of trauma and past memories to create artworks: *Let the Die be Cast*, *Having it Both Ways*, and *Arrived at the Rubicon*. In particular, the artwork *Arrived at the Rubicon* was rendered in clay. Clay, as a medium of ceramics, is said to hold reflective qualities that parallel real-life experience and trauma (Sholt & Gavron 2006). Estrella states that memory is a way in which human beings learn because it provides a point of reference for their experiences (Estrella 2019: 1). In her work, Estrella draws from her lived experiences and memories with trauma as the point of reference for her art production (Estrella 2019: 1). She specifically looks at body memory, and suggests that the body itself is

capable of storing memory in what is known as body memory (Estrella 2019: 1).

This study, on the other hand, observes general memory, which involves both body memory and mind memory, as well as any form of stored memory that the creative process can elicit during an embodied aesthetic experience of creating artworks. According to Estrella, body memory alludes to memory that is intrinsic to the body and has its own ways of remembering which is by and through the body (Estrella 2019: 1). Estrella looks at traumatic memory within the context of body memory (Estrella 2019: 1). From this perspective, a traumatic experience leaves an impression in the body, which is different from how memory is typically stored in the brain (Estrella 2019: 1). She explores this in a series of fragmented ceramic figures (Estrella 2019: 1).

In order to construct her fragmented ceramic sculptures, Estrella (2019: 1) draws on her current experience of stored traumatic memory and investigates how to make the processing of sensory impressions through the body tangible. She creates abstract ceramic human figures to represent a human experience, and in her exploration, the body becomes the focus of expression. Most of her figures lack critical senses for experiencing the world; this is represented through their surface and structure as headless, alluding to them having body memory and no other senses (Estrella 2019: 1). The figures also appear androgynous, lacking clear genitalia. The figures are also not given any racial association, as the skin colours are indicative of interior flesh tones combined with earth tones. The artist does this deliberately to give the figures anonymity and to appeal and relate to her general viewers, leaving them intentionally uncertain of the genders or races of the figures (Estrella 2019: 1). The artist thus provides space for viewers to bring their own experiences to her work. The artist uses various visual metaphors, such as poses, scale, fragmentation, and nakedness, to provide viewers with access to vulnerability as part of the human condition (Estrella 2019: 1). This strategy is applied in reverse in the development of artworks for this study, as there, the aim is to make it clear that the experience reflects a personal story. The researcher deliberately inserts herself both physically and figuratively into her artworks. There are clear

depictions of herself, and her identity is consciously shown and clearly visible. Gender, race and physical qualities are made clear through identifiable markers of identity that place the researcher within specific socio-political identities. This is seen to strongly shape how the researcher experiences a shared form of trauma that others have also experienced, but in a way that is unique to herself.

The objective of Estrella's work is to visually convey a body that has sustained past trauma (Estrella 2019: 2), by representing traumatic body memories through her work. As she brings form to the intangible experience of traumatic memory, her aim is to generate a visceral response in the viewer, to bring them into contact with the physical and emotional vulnerability of humanity (Estrella 2019: 2). Estrella sees trauma as an interior impression onto the body, which provides access to sensations within the body (Estrella 2019: 3). With this view, one has to call on the trauma in order to access it. By harnessing memories of her personal experiences, she projects aspects of body memory to the viewer and uses the body as an entry point into possible sensations associated with traumatic experience (Estrella 2019: 8). In a similar way, as with Mpako in this study's practice, through art, the researcher uses her own body as an entry to access traumatic memories and capture them.

According to Estrella (2019: 8), the body documents more than we can imagine. The body remembers in an emotional and visceral way (Estrella 2019: 9), and, more often than not, traumatic experiences are not immediately recognised, as discussed in Chapter Two (Pugliese et al. 2024). Estrella deduces that this is because there is an emotional site within the body that memorises and copes with trauma (Estrella 2019: 9). Estrella's position is that all traumatic memory is experienced through the body as it is tied to emotional memory which produces physical sensations in the body; therefore, she sees the body as the site of traumatic memories and as the point of access and expression of those memories (Estrella 2019: 9). This study takes a similar position, of the body being the site of experience for traumatic memories and as the point of entry and expressions of those memories. Estrella represents this memory in her ceramic figures through various visual strategies, including

fragmentation. She represents trauma as she remembers it from personal experience (Estrella 2019: 1).

Estrella (2019:3) aims to materialise traumatic memory through various visual strategies in her works. The artist utilises elements such as fragmentation, textures, cracking, splitting, and tearing of surfaces to reference memory, trauma, or material traces of visceral processes (Estrella 2019: 3). The artist uses remnants of clay inherent in the processes of working with clay to represent remnants of a traumatic experience over time. She not only uses clay this way metaphorically, but also uses the physical memory of clay to represent this (Estrella 2019: 3). Metaphorically, she uses fragmentation, tearing or distance/space, while physically, she uses cracks and tearing that happen in the process of moulding clay (Estrella 2019: 3). Each crack and tear is unique, however, clay has memory. Thus, even if one hides a crack or tear on clay, if it is not covered effectively, the crack or tear will reappear during the drying and firing process (Sintnicolaas 2018: 7).

The artist imbues this process with intention, which, according to her, also captures the force exerted on the different figures, frozen in a state of transition (Estrella 2019: 3). The artist does not intentionally create cracks, but when they appear, she does not cover them. So, the artist allows the ceramic process to unfold, creating unique cracks and tears in her work as both metaphorical and physical representations of the remnants of memory over time. She expresses that the drying and firing processes make cracks and tears that are already inherent in the artwork more visible (Estrella 2019: 3). The artist also considers texture in her work as a way to provide a material representation of visceral sensations by acknowledging the viewer's senses of sight and touch (Estrella 2019: 3). Some areas in the sculptures are created with very delicate and fragile edges that were peeled away from the figure as a way to also elicit discomfort in the viewer (Estrella 2019: 3). The same practice is referenced in the body of work of this study, where the ceramic torsos and the tiles were made with uncomfortably thin sheets for the moulding processes used, thereby rendering the works fragile when handling them, especially during the moulding, drying and firing processes. Some forms and

tiles had cracks and tears, while others burst and broke during firing, although the artworks were stronger after the firing. Those that did not break became stronger after firing and a little more difficult to break, while those that broke during firing became stronger in their broken state. This was done deliberately to mimic the experience of intimate partner violence and the journey of healing through it (Estrella 2019: 3). In all of her artworks, Estrella (2019: 3) considers interior-exterior dialects as she aims to register sensations felt inside the body being made physical on the body's surface through the material of clay. The artist employs fragmentation as an implication of suffering or trauma, and expresses emotion through activating the clay surface of the figures with texture (Estrella 2019: 6).

Estrella (2019: 1) observes that traumatic imagery concerns the present experience of memory rather than simply past events. According to the artist, it is not simple to realize trauma in the extremity of the original event when it happened in the individual's past, but rather in how it was known in the first instance and in the way it returns to haunt the individual in the present (Estrella 2019: 1). Therefore traumatic memory is more of an issue of the present (Estrella 2019: 2). The artist represents this with the ceramic process as she states that each firing captures emotion and locks it into place so that even where colour is absent, it still exists (Estrella 2019: 8).

The artist also considers vulnerability in her work and with her forms invites viewers to contemplate how vulnerability might manifest in material and immaterial ways (Estrella 2019: 1). By deliberately shredding and tearing the material, Estrella hopes that viewers can consider physical sensations that are felt in and through the body and that this would allow viewers to see inner feelings represented on the exterior of a body (Estrella 2019: 4). By seeing through feeling, the artist urges viewers to have a visceral response which can bring them in touch with their own vulnerabilities and also possibly with their buried memories of trauma (Estrella 2019: 4). In echoing of this, the objectives of the practice of this study, is to form a connection with others who share similar experiences by the researcher sharing her own experience. To

advocate for others to unearth their trauma in cathartic ways and through processes that provide different perspectives on their past trauma.

Fragmentation is one of Estrella's (2019: 4) significant metaphors in her work, and she utilises it as a means for revealing an embodiment of the impact of trauma on the body. She also considers scale in how she attempts to connect her work to the viewer, for example, using child scale in some of her works to bring the viewer into the artwork and make them aware of their own scale. Similarly to other objectives in art practice, the artist considers how the viewer also experiences her work, as she immerses herself in a creative process of developing the artworks (Estrella 2019: 4).



**Figure 3.5:** Angel Estrella, *Release*, 2019.

*Release* (Figure 3.5) depicts a figure that seems captured in time as it attempts to move but is constrained by the layers of peeling material surrounding its body. The material that is peeling around the body is finished with darker tones at the bottom and lighter ones above, as if it is emerging from underneath the upper material, suggesting deterioration and renewal (Estrella 2019: 5). The

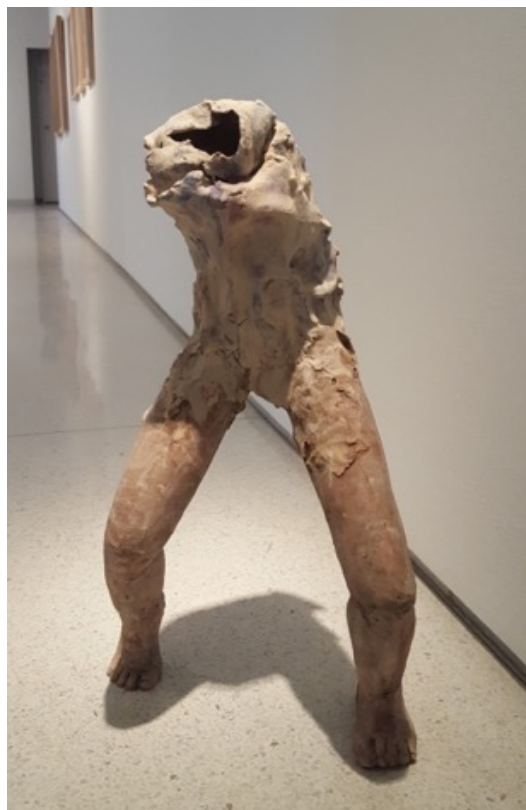
artist aims to portray a desire or need to move past the current state; however the figure is restricted by the surface and forced to endure through the slow processing of emotions and sensations associated with remembering the trauma (Estrella 2019: 5). The work demonstrates the need and willingness to move past, restriction and endurance; a typical process also demonstrated throughout this study, when choosing to deal with trauma from intimate partner violence. Although the figure is presented by Estrella as struggling to cope with trauma, the artist uses the title of the work, *Release* to offer a sense of hope (Estrella 2019: 6). The figure symbolically represents a change towards a sense of positive release and relief (Estrella 2019: 6), which is often met with struggling and resistance. *Release* suggests the potential for human beings to adapt and transform out of traumatic instances (Estrella 2019: 6). As this figure is enduring through the slow processing of emotions and sensations associated with remembering the trauma. The colours of the old and new allude to transformation or metamorphosis, and the figures show and capture a change or transition.



**Figure 3.6:** Angel Estrella, *Only Time Will Tell*, 2019.

*Only Time Will Tell* (Figure 3.6) depicts an exposed, vulnerable ceramic figure mounted on the wall. The legs of the figure are slightly bent, and according to the artist, the gesture is reminiscent of the crucifixion of Christ (Estrella 2019: 6). The artist connects the work to the crucifixion to denote the history of the human ability to connect over insufferable circumstances (Estrella 2019: 6). She states that the ability to connect reminds us that we are not alone in our sufferings (Estrella 2019: 6). Although the suffering of humanity has its own histories, the relation to Christ's suffering is also meant to open consideration for how a body can cope (Estrella 2019: 7).

The artist hung the work at a slight angle to resemble a position of pain and discomfort. The cascading folds also peel from the inside out to further emphasise the discomfort (Estrella 2019: 7). The artist considers colour in her visual communication. She uses warm pink hues on the figure to suggest a sense of healing of bruising and damage (Estrella 2019: 7). This artwork aims to propose that the process of healing is a long, slow occurrence towards coping and adapting to trauma (Estrella 2019: 7).



**Figure 3.7:** Angel Estrella, *Guardian*, 2019.

According to Estrella (2019: 7), the artwork prompts viewers to consider the idiom “time heals all wounds” by reflecting on the relationship between the title and the work. The figure is also curled in a foetal position on the wall, suggesting a protective instinct for its body. The artist sees the confrontation of internal feelings and struggles as a step towards understanding the healing process. The body memory of trauma is further evident in the figures' surfaces. The artist observes the body memory through the surfaces of the figure (Estrella 2019: 7).

In the exhibition, there was a single figure, almost excluded, hidden behind a wall. This figure is titled *Guardian* 2019 (Figure 3.7). *Guardian* is one of the figures that is given the scale of a small child. The figure is insecurely positioned with bent knees and a hunched posture that suggests crouching. *Guardian* seems to be positioned to find its way through the compressed space that is overwhelming it. The crouched gesture is made to suggest alertness and depicts a fleeing position (Estrella 2019: 15). Vulnerability in this figure is suggested through the damaged exterior and the child scale of the figure (Estrella 2019: 15). While the title *Guardian* speaks to ideas of protection, it also speaks to the care of others or being watchful over itself.

The figure is positioned so that there is enough room for the viewer to pass by it, creating tension between the figure and the viewer due to its precariousness and scale. Estrella states that she sees this work as part of the development of the visual language that describes the effect of trauma on the body (Estrella 2019: 15).

### **3.3 INFLUENCES ON THE CONCEPTUALISATION AND CREATION PROCESSES OF MY ARTWORKS**

The development of my artworks was inspired by the works of Nombeko Mpako, who provided a conceptual framework for the practice, and Angel Estrella, who inspired visual metaphors used in the body of work, primarily in the ceramic artworks. My exhibition *Crossing the Rubicon* is made up of a

variety of media, including ceramics, photography, video installation and fibreglass. The exhibition presented my personal, painful experience of violence from an intimate partner and my journey of using art as a space to work through the traumatic memories for catharsis. This creative and therapeutic journey was framed within the lens of narrative therapy, therapeutic journaling, and the utilisation of art to heal from difficult personal experiences. Mpako's artworks that address intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and gender-based violence, as well as Estrella's use of abstract and fragmented figures in ceramics, all influenced and inspired the development of my body of work and its exhibition.

Mpako shared that her therapy began when revisiting difficult moments (Mpako 2021: 1). In *Mayenzek' intando yakho Thixo nkosi Yenyanyiso* (2021), the artist engaged in performance as a way of exorcism, of releasing pain which was captured through photographs and video and used to create the animation. Throughout her exhibition, the artist uses performance to evoke memories of her past pain. This profoundly inspired the development of my work. Her performance in the work titled *Lamaphupha ithini kanti into Yawo*, where the artist used a shell to perform a pregnancy scene to explore closure for the past experience of losing a pregnancy (Mpako 2021: 75), inspired how I utilised an exercise ball to represent my perpetrator and my abuse simultaneously (Figures 3.8 and 3.9). I started performing acts of hitting and kicking the ball, and performing acts of trying to balance the ball with my body and my hands, but failing, as a way to evoke the past feelings of anger and pain that I experienced during my ordeal. During her performances, Mpako stated that she would sometimes find herself "literally" feeling the exact moment when the events took place (Mpako 2021: 1). This inspired both the literal and metaphorical use of performance in my own work, where my therapy began. This performance was captured photographically in *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series 1* 2024. I felt, in those moments as I performed, that my healing was beginning. I utilised a visual diary to describe how this performance felt, as this was fresh in my memory. As stated in the previous description of therapeutic journaling, writers would later reflect on this writing to better understand their experiences (Mirgain & Singles 2016: 1).

The series 1 performance inspired the black-and-white photographs of series 2, *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka)*, and the rendering in fibreglass in series 3 of this body of work. This was influenced by Mpako's predominantly print-based approach in her work, but she further explored expression through other media (Mpako 2021). For Mpako, this continually opens up new, interesting, and unique interpretations of the ideas she is exploring: for example, in the 2021 exhibition, one of her new bodies of work, entitled *Amarhoqololo kaKim III* (2021), is presented in a series of eight tapestry panels. This work is a re-imagination of her older print work, *The Vigil* (1988-1989), which was also part of the exhibition, repackaged in new digital media and re-manifested in fabric material (Mpako 2021: 24). The same work was further reimagined as a digital rendering in *Lala Ngoxolo Nomontoza*, (Mpako 2021: 76). In this 2021 exhibition, the artist uses a variety of mediums, from print to performance, to video and others. The multidisciplinary nature of Mpako's work inspired me to use a variety of art media to explore my ideas. My exhibition consisted of a range of media, including ceramics, photography, video installation and fibreglass.



Figure 3.8: Boitumelo Mohale, *Extracts from the performance with the ball, 2024.*



**Figure 3.9: Boitumelo Mohale, *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series1* Kea Kolomaka 2024.**

Narrative therapy sees art as a narrative tool that artists can use to craft deep and meaningful personal narratives which they can use to find meaning in their life experiences (DeKruyf 2008: 445). Especially in *Please Help* Figure 3.1 and *The Vigil* Figure 3.2, I looked at how Mpako crafted narratives of her past painful experiences as a therapeutic engagement with the past. The artist uses her art as a tool to heal through her past painful experiences, but also, additionally, to celebrate her life. This duality of therapeutically conveying troubling moments with moments of celebration is seen in my work, *Having it Both Ways* 2024. I found myself using this technique in my visual diary as well when writing about, or making sketches of, the negative emotions, as I would balance them with doodles as a way to destress, applying the self-regulating

and destressing effects advocated for in therapeutic journaling (Malchiodi 2013: 2).

Mpako influenced the conceptual and creative development of my work in many ways, including the use of ideas of purification (Mpako 2021: 24). The ideas of purification and the clean-up of one's soul (Mpako 2021: 24) resonated with the aim of personal catharsis and inspired the ideas of clean-up in my work, as seen in *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series1* 2024. Mpako's ideas of defeating pain by turning it into art, using art to express herself, using art as a form of releasing negative and challenging emotions (Mpako 2021: 37) and the artist's deliberate efforts to invoke pain towards healing (Mpako 2021: 52) are also part of the artist's influence on my work. My work is a therapeutic journey grounded in my lived experiences.

Estrella's use of visual metaphors and concepts for expressing and representing trauma from a lived experience similarly influenced my body of work. Her form of expression inspired the development of my work. Although expanded into other media I used in my practice, Estrella's visual metaphors and concepts primarily guided the development of my ceramic artworks.

Visual journaling is seen as beneficial for individuals who experienced trauma since it provides a simple, but empowering way to 'talk' without talking (Malchiodi 2013: 2). In her work, Estrella (2019: 3) aims to materialise traumatic memory through art. She looks at ways in which traumatic memory can be captured in art. She achieves this by representing traumatic memory through creating human figures and fragmenting them, as well as through other means, such as juxtaposing child-sized forms with adult-like ones. In my work *Having it Both Ways*, I engage with traumatic memory by conveying my traumatic experiences. By representing her traumatic memory, Estrella was able to make her trauma visible, talking to her traumatic memory without actually talking (Pizarro 2004: 10). This is achieved in my work through visually journaling my traumatic experiences.

Estrella's use of abstract and fragmented figures influenced how I began developing ceramic works. I started creating fragmented parts of my body to represent physical trauma on the body (Estrella 2019: 1). This developed into the creation of full sculptural figures, which I later, through performance and force, broke into pieces as a way to reconcile with the naïve idea of a beautiful relationship that is suddenly and forcefully shattered by the harsh and unexpected perpetration of violence. **(Open the link to view the performance <https://youtu.be/92Oq3coHDbY>)**

These were some of the acts that brought up upsetting feelings, which I would also write about and sketch in the diary. This is seen in narrative therapy as giving voice to feelings that are blocked by constructing meaningful stories in a safe environment (Mirgain 2016: 3). Various ways that Estrella influenced my work include her use of abstract ceramic human figures to represent human experience (Estrella 2019:1). The deliberateness of removing the anonymity of the subject in order to remove its identity (Estrella 2019: 1). The use of delicacy in rendering her ceramic forms speaks to its fragility and elicits discomfort in the viewer, deliberately allowing, and not concealing, the inherent qualities of cracking and breaking in the clay that represents a literal expression of memory (Estrella 2019).

In her work *Release* (Estrella 2019: 6), the artist symbolically represents a change towards positivity and relief, meeting with the representation of struggling and resistance, which is seen in the journey represented in my exhibition and particularly in the series of *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka)*. In Estrella's work, *Only Time Will Tell*, the artist sees the confrontation of internal feelings and struggles as a step towards understanding the healing process (Estrella 2019: 7), while through *Guardian* the artist incites tension in the viewer (Estrella 2019:15). This is considered a juxtaposition of disturbing depictions with happy depictions in the same work as shown in my work *Having it Both Ways 2024*.

Both of the artists who have influenced my work demonstrate the importance of continually considering how a viewer will connect with one's artwork. With

Mpako, the artworks, although rendered in an intrinsic and expressive manner, incorporate elements and principles, as well as universal symbolism, to make the works accessible to the viewer. In other instances, such as *GBV* (2021), figure 3.3, the artist deliberately composes the artwork in an illustrative manner to appeal to a general audience. In comparison with Estrella, visual strategies are continually considered in terms of their impact on the viewer's experience of the work. The artist uses elements of scale, human figures, and disfigurement in different ways as she opens a dialogue between the artworks and viewers.

Both artists deal with issues of past traumas— Mpako also specifically engages with intimate partner violence and gender-based violence—and they deliberately represent vulnerability in their work. They both draw from their lived experiences of trauma and difficulties dealing with the trauma and from that point, they are able to capture honesty in their artworks. This is seen in both their personal and interpersonal objectives. Because of the issues of trauma and lived experience, the human body is an important metaphor in both artists' works. The artists both use the body's significant layers to unpack their artwork, alluding to personal experience, universal connection, other experiences and senses of trauma.

### **3.4 THE ARTISTIC APPROACH: EXPLORING EXPERIENCE THROUGH MULTIPLE INQUIRIES**

This research presents narrative accounts of the researcher's personal lived experience, and reflexive narrative methods are used to analyse the experience. Reflection here occurred after the event had taken place and documented as a way of looking back on the experiences (Johns 2021: 22). Artists engage in an interpretive inquiry of immersing in artistic production and experience (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). For artists/researchers, this is often conceived within an artistic research design, where the research is centred around an aesthetic object or on producing the aesthetic object as a main source of knowledge (Hannula, Suoranta & Vaden 2005: 42). In this case, researchers are flexible in how they go about conducting their studies: the researcher is a craftsperson, and the research procedures are shaped in response to the

characteristics and structure of the practice (Gray & Malins 1993: 7; Taylor, Bodgan & DeVault 2016: 11).

This study used practice-led research methods and thick description to collect data. Reflective narrative methods were used with autoethnographic methods to analyse and interpret a self-study. The researcher engaged in a dynamic aesthetic experience of creating artworks that delved into her personal experience of intimate partner violence in order to explore catharsis. In this research process, practice-led research methods were employed for the researcher to take the role of researcher/practitioner and inquire into her own practice (Nimkulrat 2007:2). The study drew from personal memory and lived experience and used thick description methods to collect data as a means to qualify data from lived experience and allow an in-depth description of the phenomena. Autoethnography is utilised in the interpretation of personal narratives to reveal their social and cultural significance. A reflective narrative was employed as a method of analysis to critically reflect on the artworks and the aesthetic process.

### **3.4.1 Practice-led**

The research questions of this study require the process of engaging in the practice in question of artmaking. The practice is an intergral part of the research process and practice-led research method is concerned with research inquiries that regard practice as an integral part of generating knowledge (Candy 2006: 1). Practice-led research is a fairly provisional term for classifying this recent form of research in art and design that can be conducted by a researcher who is a practitioner (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). The study engages in a conscious practical exploration by the researcher, researching her own practice, where knowledge is developed and found in the process of making art. This practice-led method involved an integral interplay between alternating roles as a practitioner-researcher and the process of developing artistic work (Nimkulrat 2007: 1). These roles are embraced by the researcher/practitioner in an altenating way, to a degree that Cortez (2013) articulated, that often times, there is not even a division between the

researcher/practitioner and between research and artmaking, as research becomes an intertwined part of practice (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). The primary focus of this research was to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within the practice, in order to improve the practice, which is applicable through practice-led research methods (Candy 2006: 1).

The emphasis of practice-led research in this study was on the creative process and the works generated from it. The artworks played a vital part in developing new understandings of the artist and her creative process (Candy 2006:3). It is argued in Candy (2006: 2) that the critical difference between a practitioner who undertakes research as an integral part of their artmaking process and a researcher/practitioner who operates within a standardised and publicly accountable methodology is that the latter aims to generate research that is of culturally novel apprehensions, and not just novel to the creator or individual observers of the art (Gray & Malins 1993: 3).

The practice of making artworks is carried out freely and expressively in research, but it differs slightly from the general conception of art/design practice. In research, the practitioner/researcher is required to document their creative process (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). Multiple methods of collecting data were utilised, including captured performance and the use of a visual diary to document thoughts, experiences and ideas throughout the research process. Video documentation captured aspects of the engagement with art materials, primarily the intricate ceramic process. Both feelings of the artistic production and experience were captured and used in reflection processes as material to answer the research questions (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). Such research feeds on practice as well as the practitioner's reflections, such that the practical and the reflective parts could stimulate each other in the process of analysis (Nimkulrat 2007: 4). It is important that practice-based research in arts attains an ideal of openness and criticality (Hannula, Suoranta & Vaden 2005: 43). Therefore, documentation is used to make the creative process somewhat transparent (Nimkulrat 2007: 4)

### **3.4.2 Thick Description**

According to Ponterotto (2006: 539), thick description is one of the most important concepts in qualitative research. The author attributes his approach to thick description to thinking and intentionality as observed behaviour. In this view, thick description involves absorbing and understanding a situation or behaviour and its context, and additionally ascribing present and future intentionality to the behaviour. Thick description, therefore, involves collecting a mass of relevant details to define and give context to a phenomenon (Ponterotto 2006: 539). Thick description involves more than just the collection of related data, because to thickly describe social action, one also begins a process of interpretation. As a result, the collected data must begin to give a particular episode character through interpretation (Ponterotto 2006: 540).

This study draws from memories of a personal lived experience. Thick description was employed through additional data that was collected to provide an in-depth description of intimate partner violence, and using art to work through it. In addition to the narrative accounts of the researcher's experience, some images represented in the artworks were taken from actual photographs that were taken days after the assault. This is supplemented by tertiary sources of other victims' personal accounts found in related research articles and literature reviews on the topic. Artworks of other artists who had similar experiences were reviewed and discussed. However, it should be noted that it is not the collected details, per se, that characterise thick description, but rather, the data's interpretive characteristics.

Effective employment of thick description builds up a clear picture of individuals and groups within their contexts and cultures or settings in which they live, as well as of the meanings, interpretations, and intentions of these (Ponterotto 2006: 541). Here, qualitative researchers are tasked to thickly describe social action so that thick interpretations of the actions can be made and presented (Ponterotto 2006: 542). Thick descriptions allow qualitative researchers to successfully merge participants' lived experiences with the researcher's interpretations of these experiences, ultimately creating thick

meaning not only for the reader and participants in this research but also for the researcher herself (Ponterotto 2006: 542).

### **3.4.3 Reflective Narrative Methods**

Reflection facilitates a process of making sense of lived experiences for individuals by examining such experiences in context, while narrative is also strongly linked with meaning-making and identity formation (Winter 2012: 21). Reflective narrative methods are therefore concerned with personal and individual life experiences and events, and involve gaining a deeper understanding of experiences through organising and analysing the experiences (Parks 2023: 58; Johns 2021: 19). A reflective narrative is a form of personal writing that is used to look back critically at incidents in one's life and to recount experiences and analyse them (Johns 2021: 19). It concerns how someone has changed and what they have learned from their experiences (Johns 2021: 19). This writing involves analysis of narratives which can be collected from various sources, including field notes of shared experiences, journal notes, and autobiographical writing (Parks 2023: 59).

In this study I used the reflective narrative method to reflect on an aesthetic experience captured through practice-led research and thick description. The experience was reflected upon to unpack and understand the aesthetic experience of using art as a therapeutic tool. Johns (2021: 19) views reflexive narrative as an abbreviated term for "reflexive narrative as a journey of self-inquiry towards self-realisation". In this context, he interprets 'reflexive' as looking back at something in order to see oneself-emerging (Johns 2021: 19). As the researcher I reviewed experience of making art that looked back at my traumatic experience. The journey of self-realisation in reflexive narrative involves a process of weighing and sorting insights as evidenced by particular experiences, then sequencing them; this journey is often unpredictable (Johnes 2021: 19).

Interpretations are subjective, the choice of how the researcher views the narrative has a profound impact on the potential meaning of the narrative

(Winter 2012: 24). Insights are often gained in moments of struggle to overcome barriers of self-realisation (Johns 2021: 19), and in this study, these were captured through the artworks that made up the exhibition. The outcome of this journey must be that the researcher comes to view and respond to that specific world differently (Johns 2021:19). The knowledge that is derived from the reflexive narrative is then of personal knowing that is used by the researcher in pursuit of realising a vision (Johns 2021: 19). This form of deriving knowledge reflects a typical qualitative process, where the knowing is particular and contextual, but still informed and synthesised with relevant existing knowledge (Johns 2021: 19).

#### **3.4.4 Autoethnography**

Johns (2021: 30) described autoethnography as research that is concerned with telling narratives in ways that reveal their social and cultural significance. These narratives use evocative language to engage the reader and tend to be written by the researcher looking back at their life as if disadvantaged, abused or discriminated against in some way, and are fuelled by the outrage sublimated into social action (Johns 2021: 30). The narratives seek to find and communicate social structures that underlie the researcher's experience with a view towards changing those conditions through social action (Johns 2021: 30).

This study enquired into the experience of intimate partner violence as impacted by a broader social context and society. Autoethnography attempts to re-centre the researcher's experience as vital to their research process and involves the researcher crafting creative narratives shaped out of their personal experiences within a culture (Poulos 2021: 5). Researchers draw from their personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences (Poulos 2021: 4). Autoethnography was used as a method of analysis and interpretation to write reflectively about the researcher's direct experience with violence from an intimate partner. Additionally, drawing from the narrative approaches, the researcher wrote from

memory and about social or cultural phenomena in a singular first-person voice (Poulos 2021: 3).

Autoethnographic researchers acknowledge and value the researcher's relationships with others and use careful and engaged self-reflections, referred to as reflexivity, to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, as well as the personal and the political (Poulos 2021: 4). The researcher is both observer and participant in the scene (Poulos 2021: 9). Autoethnography is an observational, data-driven phenomenological approach of narrative research and writing, with the goal of providing accounts of human social and cultural life that are gripping, striking, and evocative and that exhibit or arouse strong emotions, memories, or images (Poulos 2021: 5).

Research in art and design involves multiple methods, primarily visual, originating from practice or adapted for practice-led research from other research paradigms (Nimkulrat 2007: 3). Research questions generally originate from within practice (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). The continuum of experience has to be approached in a way that is thoroughly interpretive (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). In practice-based research, the experience looks at experience and thereby produces new experience (Hannula, Suoranta & Vaden 2005: 44). The resulting artworks, as well as the creative process that went into it using the documentation created during the process, are contextualised with the relevant theories (Nimkulrat 2007: 4).

## **CHAPTER FOUR: CATHARSIS THROUGH ART: A DISCURSIVE INTERPRETATION**

This chapter presents a discursive interpretation of the researcher's art, situating the visual metaphors in her exhibition, *Crossing the Rubicon*. This chapter also integrates various aspects that coherently frame this study's argument while referring to other relevant artists and sources to validate the significance of this research. Thus, the chapter is a reflection on the researcher's own practice as both an art practitioner and researcher. A lived experience of intimate partner violence is a life-altering experience that shatters the victim's views of themselves and their world. Autoethnography makes provision for evaluating research, which reflects on pivotal lived experiences in a researcher's life (Cooper & Lilyea 2022: 197). The reflective narrative approach was employed proficiently, using an analytical and interpretive approach, to reflect on a multifaceted practice of an engaged aesthetic experience involving narrative accounts of a complex scenario crafted through metaphorical narration. These reflections were made in parallel with reviews of artworks by other artists who have engaged in similar therapeutic practices through their work, and are additionally supplemented by established literature. Autoethnographers and narrative researchers utilise narrative approaches to explore studies that build on narrative dialogue and self-study/autobiographical and memory work, and the construction of stories of their own experiences.

### **4.1 REFLECTION ON PAIN THROUGH PERFORMANCE**

My exhibition, *Crossing the Rubicon*, presented a painful experience from when I was in an intimate relationship with a partner that exhibited narcissistic traits. I explored catharsis through the expressive and performative artistic process of exorcism, releasing repressed and disturbing memories and emotions to achieve a sense of relief (Sintnicolaas 2018: 10). Art provided a safe space in which to revisit traumatic memories and to invoke difficult emotions. Resilience was a significant part of my journey as the process involved unearthing difficult events hidden in memory. This chapter reflects on this difficult journey. My goal for the work is to visually instigate past memories

and present them in a body of work that embodies a healing journey through art.

#### 4.1.1 Let the Die Be Cast

*Let the Die Be Cast* is a video installation compiled from snippets of video recordings I made while creating artwork with clay. The video recording was also part of the data collection process through practice-led methods, where as the practitioner/researcher documented my creative process (Nimkulrat 2007: 2). This artwork started when I created multiple torsos from cast mould created from my own body. The multiple torsos made from a single mould of my own body aimed to represent different expressions of intimate partner violence as informed by my own experience. I created thin, delicate layers of flat clay sheets for each torso, then cut and tore them into different pieces. I then pressed them into the mould, shaping them to the mould's contours. Once the pressed and formed clay was bone dry, I took it out to dry of the mould and pressed new clay into the mould, until multiple torsos were created. Each torso revealed different marks formed by the clay as it was pressed in. I left the marks as they were, not concealing them, so that each one maintained traces of how it was moulded. It would have been difficult to conceal the marks, as the forms were deliberately made thin and delicate. The forms were at their most fragile during the drying process. Some broke, and others cracked during this process. The forms were bisque, and during this firing, some remained unbroken, while others were further broken. Then, the forms were in their most solid state, retaining their full forms, cracks and brokenness.



Figure 4.1: Boitumelo Mohale, *Work in Progress: Torsos*, 2024.

The process of making the torsos (Figure 4.1) was metaphorical as their developmental process metaphorically mirrored different journeys of victims who experienced trauma from intimate partner violence. I refer to the torsos as survivors. I saw the moulding process as representing different contexts of abuse, each of which moulded different victims and unique experiences of abuse. The unique story of each mould could have been traced in its marks. I had to handle the torsos very delicately during their drying process, as they were quite fragile: some more delicate than others. This represented the unique traumas each victim had faced and the type of fragile handling different survivors needed after experiencing abuse. The firing process represented the difficult journeys of dealing with the abuse or finding healing, whereby some victims found healing, some found partial healing, while still broken. Others were completely shattered, either because they were too fragile or the heating process was too much for some of their cracks to handle.



**Figure 4.2:** Malina Sintnicolaas, *Manifest*, 2024.

Figure 4.2 depicts a ceramic sculptural form by Sintnicolaas (2018: 19), representing her transmutation of negative emotional energy into a ceramic

form. When describing the creative development of her work, the artist stated how working with ceramics mirrored the subject matter of emotional trauma, which she works with and finds difficult to control (Sintnicolaas 2018: 7). She states that ceramics can be an unpredictable medium when making art because it is an emotional material that remembers, cracks under stress and can explode in the firing process (Sintnicolaas 2018: 7). That ceramics is a medium that is strong and fragile at the same time, is also reiterated by Estrella (2019: 3). However, Sintnicolaas concludes that engagement with the medium is therapeutic (Sintnicolaas 2018: 7).



**Figure 4.3:** Boitumelo Mohale, *Stills from the video installation, 2024.*

I continued to record the process of working the clay. The moments of wedging, flattening, and cleaning the clay were also recorded, which were therapeutic. Sholt & Gavron (2006: 67) discuss the intense, powerful tactile experience that clay work involves through touch and haptic engagement, as that it can facilitate healing and self-discovery. Sintnicolaas (2018: 7) also speaks of the malleability of clay in looking back at her own creative development and describing how clay can be rolled, wedged, thrown, compressed or stretched, and how these actions are cathartic, collaborative, and destructive. These actions also have an element of performance. In the video installation *Let the Die Be Cast*, I performed these acts, and they are likewise seen in the narrative of my story *Crossing the Rubicon* as acts of working through my pain. After creating the artworks, I destroyed some of them, as shown in the video. Destroying the artworks spoke to the destruction of a soul through violence in intimate partner violence, and the release of the



therapeutic journaling practice of emotional self-soothing by shifting the focus from depicting negative images to good images (Malchiodi 2013: 2). When developing this work, I wrote down in length what had happened in those events and tried to put them in chronological order, as a way to remember. The stories were visually represented by drawing on the tiles. The artworks on the dark side showed moments of fear, encounters with police, workplace responses, and violent scenes of assault and rape, and they depict some emotionally abusive moments that I had accepted as normal due to my naïve concept of a love affair. This is juxtaposed with much lighter life experiences, focusing on simple things I like, such as chocolates, and the happy, proud moments of my life.

#### **4.1.3 The 21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka)**

The series of the *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka)* was a spontaneous performance inspired by *Ndithunuke Ndizophola*, a performance by Mpako shown in Figure 3.9 and discussed in Chapter Three. In that performance, the artist deliberately evokes pain as a way to heal through the pain. The photographs of my performances were later developed by adding various objects and putting them into contexts to communicate different meanings metaphorically; the blue and red with cleaning objects and the ball, were put into Series 1, I was then immersed in aloe plants in Series 2, and finally developed in fibreglass in Series 3.

In the series 1 performance, I utilised an exercise ball to perform an exorcism of revisiting the painful memories of my experience of violence with my perpetrator. The gym ball was chosen as a tool for transformation, as it is used to shape, correct and transform people's bodies. In the performance, I took the ball and imagined it as both my abuser and my perpetrator. I began by hitting, kicking, and throwing the ball, expressing feelings of anger, frustration, and pain onto it. The more I kept going at it, the more I started to feel those emotions as if I was relieving the traumatic memories. My mind was flooded with memories of those events as I continued to perform.

*Lala Ngoxolo Nomontoza 2021*, Figure 4.4 is a digitally rendered image by Nombeko Mpako where she performs a pregnancy that she had lost (Mpako 2021: 75). In this performance, the artist uses an additional object as part of her performance, a shell which she wears to make the pregnant stomach. As the artist states, when she performed this piece, she got overwhelmed by deep sorrow and spontaneously took a prostrate position and lay on the floor facing down and exerting weight on her artificial pregnant stomach. When she did this, the shell unexpectedly broke, evoking a feeling of release (Mpako 2021: 75). There are elements of spontaneity and unexpectedness that can provoke unexpected emotions of release when using additional objects in performances. The artist shares that she felt that the shell had started dripping, which added an additional level of unexpected release, as this was equivalent to the bleeding involved when one loses a baby. When this happened, the artist became still, as if she were in a trance. During her performances, she was photographed and sometimes recorded, and she only realised what she had done during the performance when she viewed the photographs or videos subsequently (Mpako 2021: 75)

As I performed the exercise with the exercise ball, the performance was captured in photographs. When I was done, I wrote in my visual diary about the feelings which were still very fresh in my mind. The performance of this work represented a cleansing and purging of my soul from those traumatic memories towards healing (Mpako 2021: 24). In my final image, which I further developed, I placed the performance in context with cleaning objects that represented cleaning up, taking agency, and letting go of the dirt/pain. These artworks convey intentional actions and symbols of working towards healing. In her own words, the shell “actually broke, invoking a release feeling”, a catharsis (Mpako 2024). In this work, Mpako is invoking the pain and shame she has been carrying for years towards closure.



**Figure 4.5:** Nombeko Mpako, *Lala Ngoxolo Nomontoza*, 2021.

In *Lala Ngoxolo Nomontoza*, Mpako (2021) makes use of *The Vigil* artwork shown in Figure 3.2 to create a large cross, which she says symbolises death, as the vigil is a process conducted the night before the burial of a loved one. In her explanation of her creation process, Mpako highlights:

When I create artwork, I usually just start with a scribble or a still-life and get carried away by adding forms until I feel I am done. It is only after the work is done that I think of the title. I usually don't know what work will be until I am satisfied with what I see (Mpako 2021: 38).



**Figure 4.6:** Boitumelo Mohale, *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series2* 2024.

Kea Kolomaka, which translates to “I am cleaning” in Sepedi language, implies intention, a decision made, and a cleaning activity put into action. The first performance inspired the second series, and the shift from blue and red to black and white photographs represented the transformation into purification and peace. The red colour in the first series represented the juxtaposition of intense emotions of pain and love, while the blue spoke to the desire for, or aspiration towards, freedom. In *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series 2* 2024, I portrayed myself running away from the experience and towards purification. I was always surrounded by aloe vera plants in every shot. This performance evoked emotions related to the difficult and scary journey of getting away from the abuse. The photographs captured moments of fear, of looking back, and of fighting to get away from the situation (Figure 4.6).



**Figure 4.7:** Boitumelo Mohale, *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series 3* 2024.

The process of escape from abuse often involves being scared, not finding help, or continued stalking by the abuser. Because the aloe plant is used for several ailments, including weaning children from breastfeeding and cleansing, the symbol of aloe vera represents working towards purification by purging these emotions.

The third series (Figure 4.7) represents the transformation of pain into peace, and this was extended into a fabric-like rendering of the performance of purging in fibreglass, producing images enhanced with lighting. I can relate this process to becoming a bride, assuming a new self, and looking towards a new journey. The use of fibreglass was to convey whiteness, which represents newness, and the artwork depicts a veil-like, transparent form similar to that worn by brides on their wedding day. For me, this represented, first, getting married to a new life and a new journey, where the ball was now transformed from blue to white, and the light expressed the hope that “there is light at the end of the tunnel”.

#### **4.1.4 Arrived At the Rubicon**

*Arrived at the Rubicon* is the conclusion of my story of crossing the Rubicon. *Arriving at the Rubicon* symbolises the destination reached at the end of a contemplated journey. *Arriving at the Rubicon* is shown in a mandala, representing a destination of healing and catharsis. Mandalas are circular representations of a therapeutic process of centring and concentrated centredness found in religious, spiritual, or psychological practices (Jung 1973: 4). Mandalas are expressed through being drawn, painted, modelled, or performed, and their basic motif is the idea of a centre or of a kind of central point in the psyche, to which everything is manifested (Jung 1973: 73).

In an expressive way, Stephanie Smith has been using the sacred circular form of the mandala in her art as a self-reflective and meditative practice (Smith 2024). In her work, Smith creates art for the purpose of spiritual evolution (see figure 4.8). The artist shares that she has been utilising the art of mandala in

her practice for years and that, over time, she has developed a belief that process-based art can be a powerful tool for transformative personal growth.



Figure 4.8: Stephanie Smith, *Mandala surrounded by Mantra* 2013.

Donnalley (2022: 83) states that such practices are valuable for directing embodied knowledge and fostering a deeper sense of self-knowing. For Smith (2024), the process allows us to temporarily silence our external worlds and to focus on bringing energy inward. In Figure 4.8, the artist uses drawing and states that, in her practice, she uses any medium that suits her objectives at that moment (Smith 2024).



Figure 4.9: Boitumelo Mohale, *Arrived at the Rubicon*, 2024.

My Mandala is constructed in three layers. The overall mandala is formed from fragmented and broken ceramic pieces. The majority of the pieces of ceramics that form the mandala are fragmented parts of my own body that were formed and multiplied through mounds, added by other collected forms. The outside is made of parts of a fragmented body, with the space between them suggesting the initial forming of a circle towards the inside.

In the middle, a close-up of the mandala (Figure 4.10) shows the circular form reiterated through small circular forms arranged in a kind of belt that protects the centre. The centre is made from fragments of my broken body merging into each other, almost as if attempting to be reconstructed. This represents healing from all the external impacts on the inner self. As described by Jung, this can be considered healing through the act of consciously arranging the disordered multiplicity of conflicting and irreconcilable elements (Jung 1973: 4).



**Figure 4.10:** Boitumelo Mohale, *Arrived at the Rubicon (CLOSE-UP)*, 2024

The practice of creating a mandala was, in itself, therapeutic, as it involved a moment or moments of focus and reflection during the construction of the

circle, as well as a focus on one's objective of healing. The scattered, broken pieces symbolise my broken, humiliated, maimed, emotionally mutilated and damaged body that I was seeking to mend, and the mandala was the process of uniting everything. The title *Arrived at the Rubicon* follows the process of 'crossing', an active verb meaning working through and arriving at a point. This was evidently an attempt at self-healing, and, as Jung suggests, it does not spring from conscious reflection but an instinctive impulse (Jung 1973: 4).

## **4.2 THE CATHARSIS JOURNEY**

In my work, I explored catharsis by developing a body of work that told the story of my seeking healing through art, engaging with a past traumatic experience. I conceptualised this journey by looking at the story of Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon River, a boundary he knew he should not cross with an army (nationalgeography.org). By crossing the river, Caesar took a risky, irreversible decision to declare war, and, since victory is not guaranteed once war is declared, he played a game of chance for the chance of triumph (nationalgeography.org). On a catharsis journey, there is a risk of re-traumatisation and of not achieving satisfactory healing. To improve the chances of triumph, the process is framed through the narrative therapy approach, which encourages individuals to craft narratives that tell their problems within a therapeutic context, including crafting a solution story for the problem. This encourages working through a problem towards a defined, more desired positive outcome, and the possibility of living (DeKruyf 2008; Bryant 2020). Therefore, the exhibition told a story of working through trauma towards a personal cathartic outcome.

Nicholas Hlobo states that lately he has been exploring his materials with a renewed attempt to discover himself anew, which he thinks is evidence of evolution (Crewe-Brown 2018). He asserts that making artworks is his own form of therapy and catharsis. In *limpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela* (Figure 4.11), the artist combines rubber inner tubing, multicoloured ribbons, an animal skull, and pink theatre lights to create a massive, mythical bird that hovers in space (Crewe-Brown 2018). In this work, the artist takes his

own cathartic journey through life by re-stitching pieces and seemingly disjointed materials in order to create a whimsical odyssey based on a new, provocative and both visually and conceptually compelling language (Koseff & Diko 2009:67). The use of his materials and weaving processes reflects therapeutic processes (Lundstrom 2011:174). He states that in his work, he always tries to stay true to his personal stories (Crewe-Brown 2018).



**Figure 4.11:** Nicholas Hlobo, *limpundulu Zonke Ziyandilandela* 2011.

In Figure 4.12, artist Churchil Madikita consumes himself in performance, questioning his identity as an umXhosa man. The artist expresses pain towards personal expression of personal and social identity. The video shows how the tradition of initiation is force-fed into him as a Xhosa man and how he rejects it due to issues of mistreatment and deaths associated with this initiation process (Louw & Beukes 2020). The video showed a close-up of the artist ingesting large amounts of pap, or maize stiff porridge. Even after his body was sated, he continued to force-feed himself. The video presents a deadpan document of ritualised consumption and spillage. The artist states that he engages in performances that change him as a person and shape others' perceptions of the world.



Figure 4.12: Churchill Madikita, *Struggles of the Heart (I), (II), (III)* 2004.

Having gone through the therapeutic process, I have transformed myself by using art. I performed pain towards catharsis. I created artworks based on painful experiences as a cathartic process. Evoking pain through performance and art making helped me to release the pain, reflect on it, make sense of the experience, the pain and the trauma, find peace through cleansing the trauma of my soul and forgive myself in the process. Reflecting on these agonising moments allowed me to grieve and reach a cathartic state, hence, the exhibition also reflects on my happy moments after breaking up and moving on with my life.

### 4.3 THE ARTISTIC INTERVENTION

The exhibition *Obu bubomi bam 8 out of 8: I teach art* by Mpako 2021 influenced my conception of using art as a therapeutic tool to seek personal catharsis from a disturbing experience. I, therefore, revisited relevant quotations from the artist that she had used in the exhibition as a way to reflect on using art as a therapeutic tool.

#### 4.3.1 Revisiting Traumatic Memories

Therapy begins with revisiting moments of my life (Mpako 2021: 1).

I started by revisiting my traumatic memories and expressing them through art, writing and making sketches. In the narrative approach, therapy also begins

with revising “problem-saturated stories” as the first step to crafting new stories (Bryant 2020:11). When revisiting traumatic memories, I realised that the memories come in the mind in a flashy manner, and do not stick in the mind for long. Although I deliberately tried to remember these experiences, I learned early on to write as quickly as I could to capture them before they disappeared from my mind. I also had to accept that some memories would escape me. When I had a clear visual of the memory, I made quick sketches to capture the key details before the memory faded or blurred. If the memories had disappeared, it was not easy to bring them to the fore again at that moment. The memories were quite blurry most of the time.

I remembered more details when I went back to that specific memory I had already written about or sketched to capture the whole event. When I did this, the memories were not as flashy. In fact, they appeared slower and stuck in my mind. In those moments, I started feeling intense sensations in my mind and body, to the point where I became scared of going all the way with the memory or of holding onto it for too long. I realised at some point that I could not handle the intensity of the emotions and the possibility of further intensification. Therefore, I tried to regulate the emotion if it was going further than I was ready to go, by stopping and doing distracting doodling to divert attention from the emotions, or by waiting for the memory to go away. This process was emotionally exhausting, reiterating Pizarro’s finding that writing about traumatic events results in high levels of psychological arousal and negative emotions directly after writing (Pizarro 2004:6). I found that the laborious acts of writing while trying to retain a memory added to this. In comparison with sketching, a visual rendering of memory, the process of capturing an experience is faster than writing. This again can support why art for revising traumatic memories, even when illustrating disturbing events, results in higher satisfaction (Pizarro 2004: 10).

### **4.3.2 Performing Healing**

“The frames of this animation were performed and photographed when I was still in pain a day before the staples/stitches were removed” (Mpako 2021: 24).

“Although the pain was real, however, the impulsive thought of turning it into an artwork was my way of defeating it” (Mpako 2021: 24).

“Some of the moments I had to perform, and these are captured visually in this exhibition (Mpako 2021: 1).

Through art, I performed to evoke feelings and emotions from my past experiences, release them, and then capture them visually so I could reflect on them. Sintnicolaas (2020: 5) states that there are parts of our bodies that are emotionally charged when we experience or relieve trauma. This is reiterated by Estrella, who argues that the physical body is capable of storing memory (Estrella 2019: 1). It is noted that an activity of body awareness can trigger and trace these sensations in the body (Sintnicolaas (2020: 5). Performance as a means to invoke certain feelings is seen as a body awareness exercise, as it aims to trigger the sensations and memories in the body and through the body. When I was performing the *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka)*, I would get so absorbed in the performance that I would momentarily be mentally out of my physical surroundings, almost as if I were getting into character. This was also expressed by Mpako when she performed *Lala Ngoxolo Nomontoza* (Mpako 2021:75). Through artistic processes, these moments can be captured. The performances were captured through photography and writing about them in my visual diary after each performance, trying to capture the experience as fresh as it was in my mind. Writing about the performance added another layer of a healing function and enhanced my catharsis. Beyond providing a space to act out, release emotions and evoke memories and feelings, art locks the phenomenon in time onto a physical object (Sintnicolaas 2020: 9).

In *Mayenzeke Intando YakhoThixo Nkosi Yenyaniso*, Mpako (2021:55), she displays a stop-frame animation in the centre of a labyrinth that she exhibited. In the animation, the artist performs healing exorcism and purification scenes. The performance involves the artist’s use of her own wounded body. She shows staples from her surgery, flower petals and being covered in coconut milk as metaphors of delicacy and purification (Mpako 2021: 55). For the artist,

this performance of pain and healing signifies challenges toward victory through perseverance (Mpako 2021: 55).



**Figure 4.13: Nombeko Mpako, (STILLS FROM) *Mayenzeke Intando YakhoThixo Nkosi Yenyanyiso* 2021.**

The work speaks to her surgery. She discloses that the work symbolises her power over the disease. Through this expression, the artist was able to reflect on how this challenge and victory resonated with many other areas of her life, where she would find herself at breaking points yet still emerge victorious (Mpako 2021: 55).

#### **4.3.3 Mediums, Materials and Metaphors**

“The labyrinth represents the complicated yet fulfilling journey of my life, hence the intricate guided walk to the core where a stop frame of me performing an exorcism of pain is showing” (Mpako 2021: 53).

In my artistic endeavours, I explored catharsis in varied art mediums and processes. It is asserted that all forms of art are associated with well-being and benefits associated with aesthetic processing (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi 2019: 2). In my experience with different mediums, every medium afforded me different ways of aesthetic processing. Ceramics and photography were some of the most initially challenging mediums to work with. In ceramics, clay was an intricate and fragile medium to work with. The medium did not require a lot of concentration to work with, although it was a laborious process. It also involved delicate processes until it was fired. Because I was working with thin slabs, I had to be more careful with the forms until they were fired, as a result

of which the process itself was therapeutic and metaphorical. The texture and malleability of clay also felt nice in the hands to release tension. Performance triggered my emotions quite instantly and intensely. Although I struggled to get into it in the beginning, once we started and as I got into character and assumed it, getting into the moments with all my energy directed to the performing, the memories were evoked. Once the performance was captured, the process of choosing the photographs was based on looking at images that seemed to resonate most with the emotions that were being depicted. Recording the ceramic processes was frustrating but important, as I often got into the process of making and forgot that I was recording or forgot to record. However, assembling the video was a more creative process of selecting moments that would tell the narrative. Installing the mandala was more of a time of focus, like trying to solve a puzzle.

#### **4.3.4 Catharsis**

“I felt it is time for me to shed the baggage I have carried for years and forgive myself where necessary...” (Mpako 2021: 1).

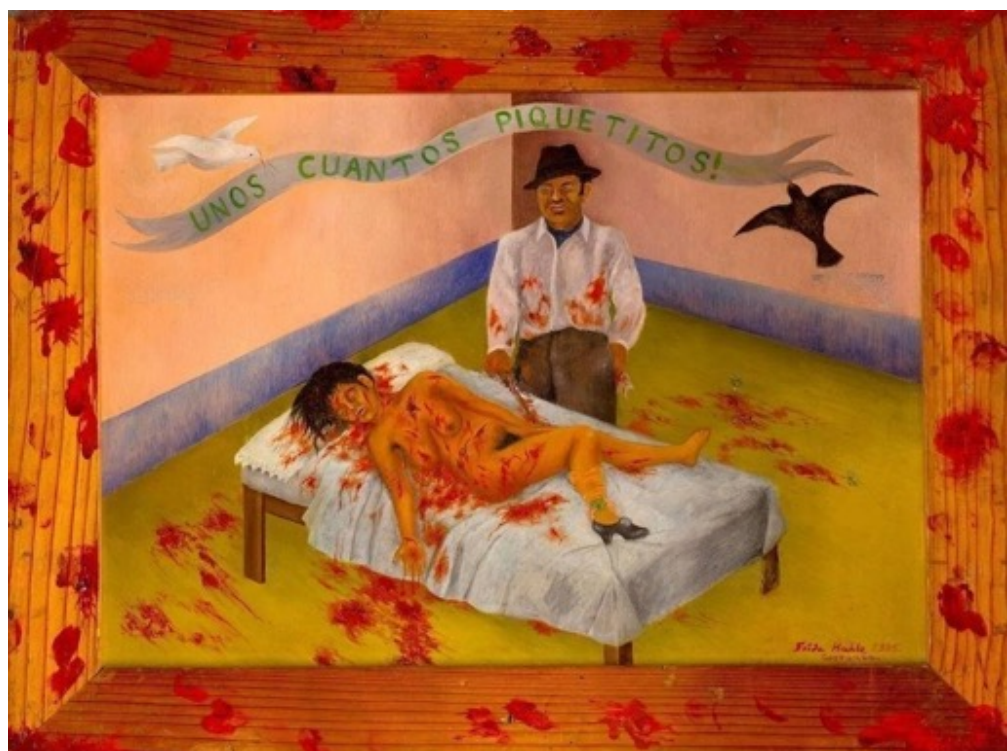
“I cried a lot when I was performing these art pieces, and I was not sure if these were tears of sorrow or joy, but sadness was always overwhelming” (Mpako 2021: 76).

When I was at the mandala, I felt that I had sufficiently dealt with these memories. I realised that most of the memories were no longer so triggering. Because I had engaged with this topic so much, I realised I could talk freely about my experience without feeling emotional or bad about myself. I had never felt comfortable talking about my experiences with intimate partner violence, as I had not wanted people to define me by the experience and feel sorry for me. Going through this process, however, I felt empowered and that I could now speak to others about abuse from the empowered stance of a survivor.

I was able to regulate my memories during this process of engaging with them. I only expressed those that I felt emotionally capable of dealing with at each stage and stopped myself where it became unbearably difficult. Lustosa,

Salles & de Souza (2022: 8) stated that artists make art according to their feelings, wishes, and knowledge and creativity. The aspiration of the artist is to reach a state of consciousness where they see the objectives they set out combined with the desired perception, reason and emotion (Lustosa, Salles & de Souza 2022: 8). With art, I could connect with my most vulnerable emotions and decide my own meaning while finding ways to self-soothe and regulate my emotions as I expressed them (Malchiodi 2013; Pizarro 2004).

Another relevant artist in this context is Frida Kahlo, who used her paintings as a way to communicate all her physical and emotional suffering from love, rejection and violence from her spouse (Dansinger 2016). *A Few Small Nips* (*Passionately in Love*), Figure 4.14, is a self-portrait that shows Frida Kahlo naked and bleeding in bed from numerous stab wounds while her perpetrator stands over her (Dansinger 2016).



**Figure 4.14:** Frida Kahlo, *A Few Small Nips: Passionately in Love* 1935.

In the work in Figure 4.14 the artist addresses issues of intimate partner violence that resonated with the emotional abuse she endured from her partner, Diego Rivera (Sert 2022). According to Sert (2022), the title was

inspired by a homicide where a man killed his wife in a drunken rage as a result of discovering her having been unfaithful, by stabbing her numerous times. In court, the man claimed that he had only given her wife a few small nips (Sert 2022). Kahlo expressed herself and dealt with her troubling life experiences through her paintings, even telling a sister that she felt murdered by life in this painting (Dansinger 2016).

#### **4.3.4 Extension to Society**

“While I think this work is about me, however, its meaning was also to caution women who are caught in domestic abuse and or violence that if you don’t run for help early enough, you will end up helpless or die either physically or emotionally” (Mpako 2021: 38).

The persistence of the issue of intimate partner violence is socially problematic. By sharing my story of intimate partner violence, I hope to encourage other victims to find expressions of their stories for their healing and self-empowerment. I also hope to facilitate a dialogue that fosters an understanding of the complex nature of abuse from an intimate partner, which can give those who have not gone through the experience themselves insight, so that their future responses are filled not only with empathy or stereotypes but with understanding towards victims and their situations.

Taking my misconceptions about abuse from an intimate partner in tandem with those of Douglas (2014: 2), who also expresses her beliefs about spousal abuse, there is a common misconception about where, how and to whom intimate partner violence happens. Douglas (2014: 2) notes that it was only in her mid-20s that she was suddenly overwhelmed by the realisation of the rate at which this form of abuse happened to young people in her community, a community which, until then, she had perceived as safe (Douglas 2014: 2). Douglas shares that from a cultural perspective, she was taught that this sort of violence only took place in developing countries and areas with cruel dictatorships, not in an advanced, democratic society, such as America (Douglas 2014: 2).



**Figure 4.15:** Gabrielle Goliath, *Faces of People who may or may not be Victims or Perpetrators of Domestic Violence* 2014.



**Figure 4.16:** Gabrielle Goliath, *Personal Accounts: Brenda* 2013.

In *Faces of War*, artist Gabrielle Goliath uses a series of 12 close-up portraits that she distorts by using only one side of the face and merging the half to create a complete face as a way to give identity and anonymity ([www.mg.co.za](http://www.mg.co.za)) as seen in figure 4:15 and figure 4:16. In this series, the artist aims to represent the culture of concealing intimate partner violence so that it is seen as an occurrence that happens behind closed doors. The silence about

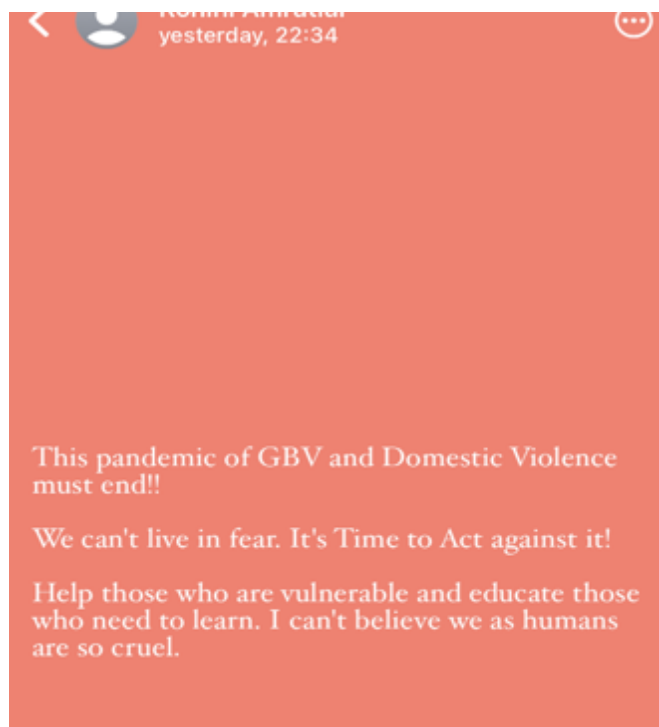
the issue and the lack of openness lead to various misconceptions about it and about how and to whom it happens (www.mg.co.za). She does this by portraying faces of people who may or may not be victims or perpetrators of domestic violence (Mail & Guardian 2014). By revealing and concealing the faces, Goliath explores the idea of visualising their facelessness (www.mg.co.za). In this body of work, the artist also includes recordings of women who courageously agreed to share their experience as victims of physical abuse; this was titled “Personal Accounts” (www.mg.co.za ).



**Figure 4.17:** *Lebo Thoka, Karabo Mokoena Description: 22 years old, stabbed by her ex-boyfriend 27 times, set on fire and discarded onto a dumpsite 2024.*

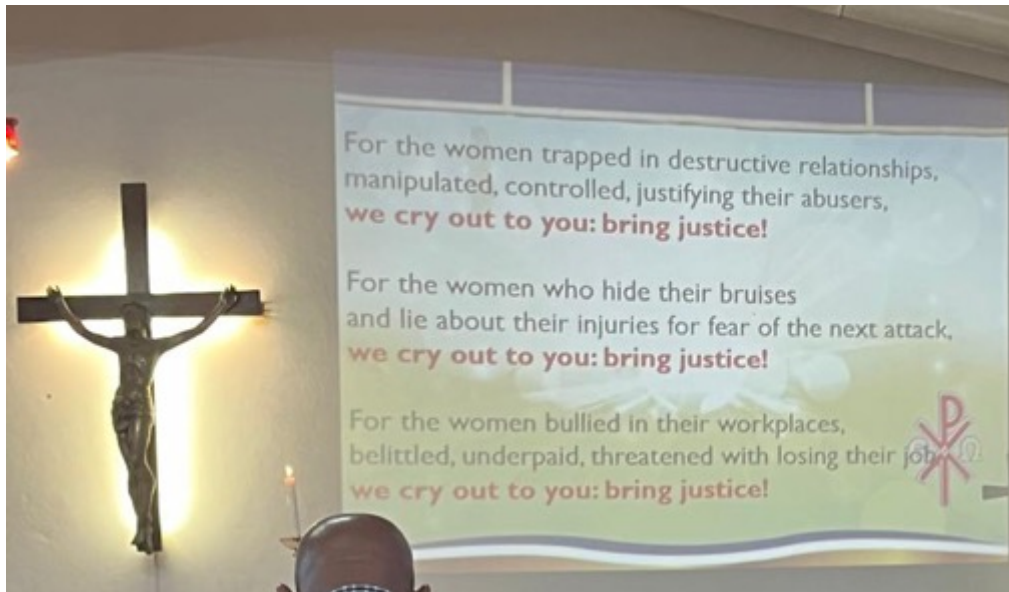
In a series of photographs, Lebo Thoka (Thoka 2017) presents self-portraits that address various stories of South African women across different economic backgrounds, ethnicities & races who have fallen victim to the scourge of femicide in South Africa. The body of work speaks to gender-based violence in relation to stories of femicide at the hands of men in South Africa. In this series, Thoka also looks at violence that takes place in intimate relationships.

She addresses this issue as a female who exists within an overtly violent society (Thoka 2017). The title of each artwork provides the name of the deceased woman, their age, and a description of the violence perpetrated on them. This body of work is inspired by Karabo Mokoena, a 22-year-old God-fearing young woman who was the victim of abuse at the hands of her partner. Karabo was brutally murdered, and her body was burned beyond recognition, then later found in a shallow grave (Thoka 2017). As I wrote this dissertation, I remembered a recent conversation with my 17-year-old neighbour, who was still in high school, and who had just been beaten by her boyfriend. Even after everyone had been urging her to leave her boyfriend, she continued to talk to me about still feeling attached to him because the guy had taken her virginity, that she still loved and missed him, and that she still felt the urge to talk to him.



**Figure 4.18: Screenshot of a Status Message 2024.**

At that time, I spoke to her about my experience, showed her my catalogue, and tried to help her understand the potential outcomes of continuing with the relationship. This shows the various factors involved, such as age, which a victim may not immediately perceive the weight of their experience, which may even lead to femicide in the case of my young neighbour.



**Figure 4.19:** *One of the images of Prayer sent to me by my supervisor (Professor Mpako) 2024.*

In Figure 4.18, I took a screenshot recently that someone posted about domestic violence on their WhatsApp status, and Figure 4.19 shows a picture of a church-led prayer about domestic and gender based violence. These images show how people in society are continually active in trying to combat the issue of domestic violence in their different communities.

In 2021, after seeing Professor Mpako's exhibition at the Unisa Gallery, I approached her, told her I was inspired by the exhibition, especially the labyrinth installation with various images portraying pain, and bought her catalogue. She was not my supervisor at the time. I felt strongly that reading her catalogue would have been of great value, and I was correct. Hence, when I felt I was not progressing with my former supervisor, I did everything in my power to change to her supervision. Although this process of changing supervisors was difficult, I feel I made the right decision. This is because it felt easier to write about and express my personal experience with her, as her approach was caring, not judging, even though it was not an easy process, mostly due to the limited time. She kept telling me, "You can do this, Babes, just concentrate and just do it". She also told me I was not the first nor the last victim, and she sent me the prayer from her church service. Thus, this prayer

portrays the fact that people in society, and in different ways, use their voices in their personal capacities and spaces to address the issue of domestic violence. Beyond the image, the prayer continued, "For the beaten girls and the battered women, blamed and bruised by angry men, we cry out to you: bring Justice". "For victims of rape who are killed or take their own lives, and for the rape survivors who live with its scars, we cry out to you: bring Justice".

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The aim of this study was to explore my personal catharsis of an intimate partner's violence through art. As a past lived experience, memory was seen as the point of reference experience to access the experience (Estrella 2019: 1). In this study, I aimed to inquire into how an engaged art making practice could facilitate a personal catharsis or a cathartic experience. My findings were that art can facilitate personal catharsis in many different ways and offers different pathways for victims to explore catharsis in a way that relates to their personal objectives. As Lustosa, Salles & de Souza (2022: 8) note, artists make art according to their personal wishes and aspirations, and satisfaction is reached when they perceive that their aspired objectives have met with perception, reason and emotion. I found that in their personal aspirations, artists also have an interpersonal objective that situates their personal experiences within the broader social context.

I analysed and interpreted my journey of seeking catharsis from a traumatic experience of intimate partner violence through art. Reflections were conducted through reflexive analysis and the interpretation of the practice through autoethnographic and reflective narrative approaches. In this section, I reflect back on how, through performative and expressive art expressions, I evoked painful memories of my past experience of facing abuse from an intimate partner as a way of remembering the pain and exorcising it towards catharsis. The research process involved a dynamic aesthetic experience of developing artworks that looked into my lived experience and examining the phenomenon as a researcher/practitioner looking into my own practice (Cooper & Lilyea 2022: 197).

### **5.1 TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

In this study, I used art as a way to engage with my traumatic experience of violence from an intimate partner. In my art practice, I used art to revisit my traumatic memories by creating artworks that visually expressed my traumatic memories and my journey of personal catharsis. I engaged in visual expressions and performances to evoke past memories and capture them

visually. I used mediums and methods of drawing, photography, videography, and installations to capture and represent my journey and memories. As I performed and visually illustrated my memories, thoughts and feelings, I engaged as both a practitioner and researcher and used various methods to document the creative journey, including the artworks themselves, and engaging in back-and-forth reflexivity between expression, performance and representations with documentation, criticality and research methods.

The experience of intimate partner violence is traumatic and painful. My experience involved acts of rape on several occasions. It also involved emotional abuse and physical assault. In one of the abusive episodes, my assault was so bad that I thought I was going to die. When reporting the abuse, I was confronted with struggles and pervasiveness from security at our residential place, police at the police station, the community and the workplace. This occurrence retraumatized me and made me realise that I had to help myself, as shared by artist Nombeko Mpako in her artwork *Please Help* (Figure 3.1). I realised if this had to happen to me again, I would have no one to help me and would have to go through getting out again on my own. However, this made me swear to myself that, although I understand that for some victims it is difficult to leave, I would offer help as best I could, just to empower them to seek help and not feel that no one would help them. I depicted these moments in my artworks, specifically in my work '*Having it Both Ways*'. The whole process of revisiting these memories was emotional.

Themes of reliance are stated as essential in recovery from the traumatic experience, as the aftermath is also filled with ups and downs (Anderson, Renner & Danis 2012: 1279). Victims who are able to find voices to work through their experiences and even share their experiences are brave, as processing the trauma is also not a clear path. In tandem with the experiences of other artists, I demonstrated how I found my voice in art. Intimate partner violence not only negatively affects the victims but affects their families, communities and societies, while the situation is filled with misconceptions. It is of great importance that dialogue about the experience continues. It demonstrates how various people and communities continue to find ways

within their own spaces to continue the dialogue. Many artists, those who are victims themselves, such as Mpako and Estrella, and those who feel compelled but are not victims themselves, such as Goliath and Thoka, continue to shed light on the issue, plead to find ways to combat it and to caution others.

## **5.2 CATHARSIS THROUGH ART**

In various areas of this research, the use of art as catharsis has been demonstrated. Art provides pathways for different victims who experience violence from an intimate partner to find or craft their own personal catharsis, create dialogue and share their experiences with others. Revisiting traumatic memories and evoking difficult emotions can be a re-traumatising experience. I used various methods of regulating my emotions, such as doodling or random sketching to distract myself or distress after writing about memories, trying to capture them or after performances that were used to evoke traumatic emotions. Through ceramics, sensations would be instantly imprinted from the body into the material, and the material would retain its shape. This happened when I used my body as a mould to cast from. Performance would invoke intense feelings and memories, while drawing involved longer engagement with disturbing images, but the process of drawing was also therapeutic.

Art is a therapeutic tool that allows victims of trauma to confront traumatic memories and emotions in a safe way, where they can express the areas of their experience that they aim to deal with. I engaged with repressed memories and emotions and captured them visually through art. I was able to document the creative process and the aesthetic experience that occurred during it. My study focused more on traumatic memory and invoking painful emotions. In the process, I realised that I would feel sensations throughout my body, especially when writing about painful memories and during performances.

Beyond my own cathartic objectives, art affords many victims different ways of catharsis and healing (Pizarro 2004: 5). In therapeutic contexts, therapists utilise artistic methods to gain insights into the victim's thoughts and non-verbal

communication (Pizarro 2004: 5; Dekryf 2008: 449). Aesthetic experiences are proposed as able to provide insights about inner conscious and unconscious materials. Artists use art to explore personal struggles and stories and to turn their abstract emotions into physical forms. They use art as therapy, treating it as a ritual to confront and communicate issues they face in their lives and to connect their experiences to broader contexts by sharing their work.

### **5.3 KEY INSIGHTS**

In relation to the main research question that speaks to how personal catharsis of a traumatic experience of intimate partner violence can be explored through art? These findings are established:

Crafting a personal experience within the narrative approach was beneficial in providing the researcher with greater intentionality in setting observational objectives. Rather than engaging in artmaking without a clear destination or narrative, narrative therapy provided a way to place intentionality in the journey and artmaking objectives.

Multiple art media were used to explore cathartic expressions. Different media offered different kinds of expressions and processes. For example, I found assembling the videos and developing the context around performance, as with the first series of *21 Stations of Purgation (Kea Kolomaka): Series1 2024*, where cleaning objects were added to the performance. Performing was mind-consuming and yielded gradual yet intense affective responses and stimulations. While utilising the ceramics medium, on the other hand, provided a more metaphorical and relaxed way of dealing with a traumatic subject, through the manipulation process. Assembling the mandala required more intellectual engagement, planning and focus.

The physical expression of emotions and the artworks provide another layer of catharsis. The art-making process is a creative endeavour that provides invaluable insights into the self, the world, and the practice of making, meanwhile, the artworks, through reflection and beauty, offer another layer of

seeing the experience physically and evoke euphoric feelings. Insights addressing the sub-question of how artmaking can be utilised as a therapeutic tool to process the difficult and complex trauma of intimate partner violence are realised.

When revisiting memories of a traumatic experience, they shift and are unstable. They are blurry, and they are fragmented, echoing the widespread research that traumatic memories are characterised by fragmentation (Van der Kolk, Hopper & Osterman 2001: 14). Other findings echoed in research are that traumatic memories are also presented in fading imagery. Therefore, when trying to revisit and capture traumatic memory through art, one must find a way to capture the memory as quickly as possible to retain it. I found that quick sketching was most useful. However, as proposed in therapeutic journaling, images don't capture all aspects, and some visuals are more complex so that writing supplements the expression of the memories. Traumatic memories are, however, a bit clearer when one goes back after some time and mental rest, to focus on that one event and try to get details of the events. In this process, though, the memories feel almost like they are pouring, while the sensations and feelings are more intense and overwhelming than the images themselves.

Traumatic memory is found to have many layers and elements, were art offers numerous therapeutic forms. Additionally, as seen in performance, art can consume a person, thus creating artwork is a relaxing and recreational practice where individuals can get carried away and consumed in the making. Therefore, when using art to work through trauma, it is important that individuals have a specific objective in mind so that they are able to get to a specific outcome that they can trace and reflect back on.

Other finding reflect the question of how can exploring personal catharsis of a personal experience of intimate partner violence reflect the larger societal issues of domestic violence and gender based violence?

Intimate partner violence is demonstrated to not only be an issue that affects the individuals involved, but rather a larger society. Through the practice of art and thinking about it within multimodal methods of autoethnography and narrative therapies, one is able to craft a narrative that connect their personal experiences to broader context. Through my research, I have learned how within the art practice as well as within the artistic research design, artists are encouraged to develop a broader objective from their personal concerns.

Although one may have a specific objective, during the art process, victims come across other insights and experiences that are unexpected, which they can reflect on and either consider as additional outcomes or restructure their objectives to accommodate them. Finally, engaging extensively with the topic of intimate partner violence, I learned that violence within intimate relationships takes place in many different ways and at very high rates. As demonstrated in the literature review, most programs predominantly focus on cisgender male and female experiences of abuse, within heterosexual relationship. There remains a big gap still that considers other sexual orientations and relationships.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study recommends that more studies that promote creative and accessible ways for victims to deal with their experiences be explored. Art is a creative process in which the creative space can be activated anywhere: a bedroom, a studio or in the yard, and creative materials can be anything, like the body, materials found or any available art materials. Art processes can include performing, dancing, installations or writing. Although not important with personal expressions, art requires some level of skill in order to express what is in the mind effectively. Artists have an advanced understanding of art materials and processes. In therapy, victims develop art under guided instruction. For those who are not artists or do not have access to guidance and find other creative ways to work through their experiences, I recommend they find ways, where possible, to share their interventions. There is a stated

dearth in that regard. I also recommend that the experiences of men, gay partners and other various experiences be further explored.

Currently sufficient theories and methodologies have been developed for researchers to find a number of critical ways to position such issues, however, more perspectives are required. The currently developing research inquiries need to be supported within this topic, especially in relation to imperical demonstrations of how are assists victims of trauma as an alternative method. Also in terms of victim/tsurvivor and trauma focused intervention studies of intimate partner violence.

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