

## An Art Therapy Project: in Longhand

There was a radio programme for us children back in the 50s called 'Listen with Mother' which always started with "Well children. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin."

So, if you're sitting comfortably, then I'll begin ... taking you back to the very beginning of this project, to the way that the ideas developed.



*One of my first collaborative images from autumn 2022.  
Pleasing but unemotional.*

### Developing Ideas

Although I've introduced this project as one rather elegant, continuous idea, in practice it came together in stages (starting quietly, several months before I met Jean) and then exploded with a myriad of further options and excitements.

Turning the clock back to the autumn of 2022, I'd been watching a programme on Sky Arts and heard an artwork described as being:

"... created while the artist was living in Taiwan, and represents the connection between her and her brother while they were living on different continents ... "

And, as if by magic, a project-idea seemed to write itself:

'This project was created after I experienced multiple compression fractures in my spine. I wanted to represent (and study) the connection – strictly, the disconnection – between my life-before-fractures and my life-afterwards, in the hope that it would help me to overcome my sense of loss.

Thus, with digital photography (from my back-catalogue of 2021 and earlier) representing 'life-before' and the traditional style of cyanotype prints (from 2022, post-fractures) representing 'life-afterwards', I started making artworks like the ones you see both above and overleaf – through

the medium of digitally blending 'before' and 'after' in Photoshop – imagining them as a collaboration between my now-self and my past-selves.



*Another collaborative image from autumn 2022:  
One I describe as interesting but 'lacking emotional depth'.*

Overall, I found the process creative and technically interesting – there was plenty to learn (and enjoy) in discovering which digital images blended with the cyanotypes in a pleasing way, and which didn't! But unexpectedly, these collaborative images seemed to lack emotional depth. Moreover, they didn't create a body of work to fit any of my ideas for the project – they didn't seem to ask (or answer) any of the questions about connection and disconnection, or represent any aspect of the rollercoaster feelings of the year.



*Like alchemy?*

With the image on the previous page, for example, the intended theme was one of loss – the digital image comes from my series ‘Hearing the Voices’, developed on the anniversary of my mother’s death [ [HERE ...](#) ] And in the blended form I hoped that it would express my sadness at losing contact with my able-self. But, instead, the outcome was disorienting – more like alchemy with its ‘golden prettiness’.

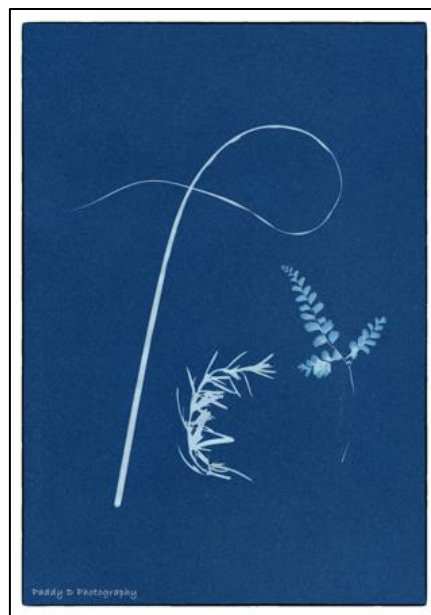
Emotionally, I began to feel confused – unable to explain the problem – then dissatisfied, then increasingly remote and detached. And, as a result, the work became lifeless, the feelings growing worse as more time elapsed since I’d created the cyanotype prints.

So that’s the point when I met Jean.

Suddenly, she injected life, energy and immediacy into this ‘decaying’ idea.

### Gaining Clarity

With hindsight I can see that the reason for my dissatisfaction lay with the style of cyanotypes I’d been using, i.e. the traditional ones which are controlled and formal in the manner of Anna Atkins, the 19<sup>th</sup> century botanist (where the print is uniformly covered in blue cyanotype solution from corner to corner, and presents a botanical subject). Yes, they represented ‘now’ in that I’d only started working on the process after I had the fractures. But those prints had been made in the spirit of scientific enquiry – learning about the process and technique – not with emotional engagement in mind! Technically, they fitted the brief of ‘new’ material that I could blend with the ‘old’, but they didn’t feel like a collaboration between different selves. And they certainly didn’t address the connections and/or disconnections between the two. At best, they were simply a pragmatic source of images that enabled me to get the ideas rolling!



*A cyanotype print, in the traditional style of the botanist, Anna Atkins*

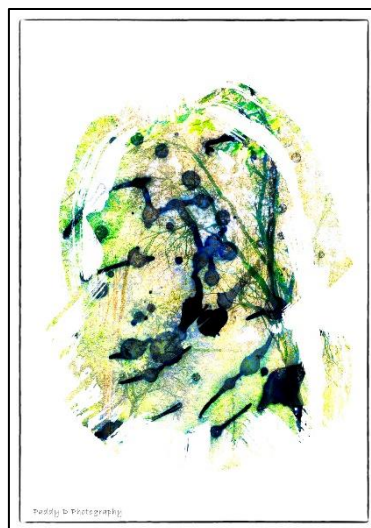
## More Ideas

Taking a leaf from Jean's book, and placing "a value on the [immediacy and] physicality of the (analogue) processes" I started to create a new body of work – a set of fresh cyanotype prints – which allowed me to make great progress after that inauspicious start. Crucially, I stepped away from the traditional style of Anna Atkins and instead, I worked freehand (in a similar style to the prints of Marianthi Lainas). Thus, I made the physicality of the process (the application of the cyanotype solution, the mark-making and evidence of my 'hand') into the subject of the prints.



*Two styles of cyanotype: Traditional (left) and Freehand (right)*

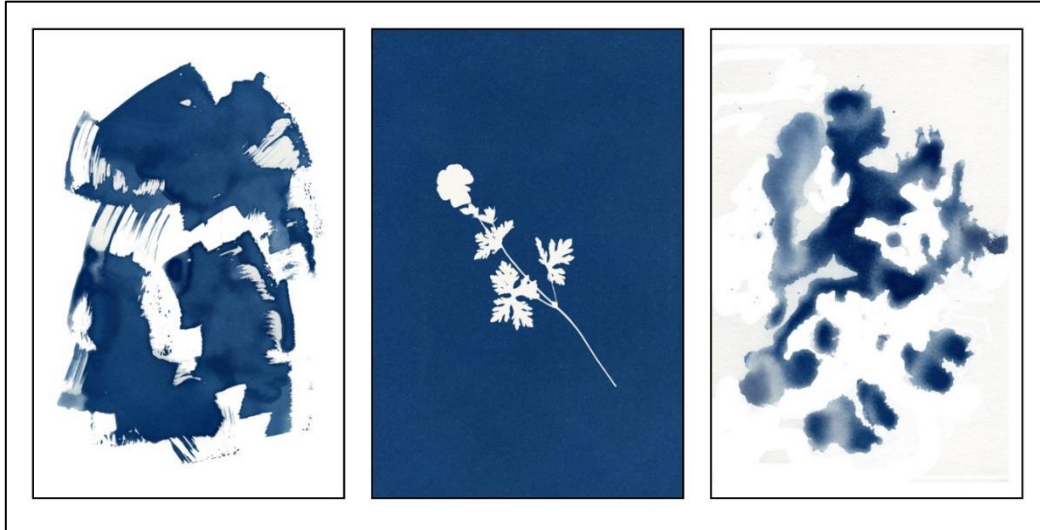
Then, I promptly exposed and washed the prints, then digitised them (as soon as they were dry), and immediately began blending them digitally with 'old' images from my back-catalogue, creating new, stimulating collaborative images. And, importantly, I did all this within a matter of hours of drying the prints. Thus, from its 'stale and lifeless' origins the project became fresh, vital and energetic, ringing with my excitement and childlike curiosity.



*Blending new, freehand cyanotypes with an 'old' digital image*

## About Freehand Prints

Looking at the traditional cyanotype flanked by freehand ones (below), it's easy to see the difference in the formality of the two styles but I doubt this triptych conveys the sheer delight – the joyousness – I felt whilst making the informal ones.



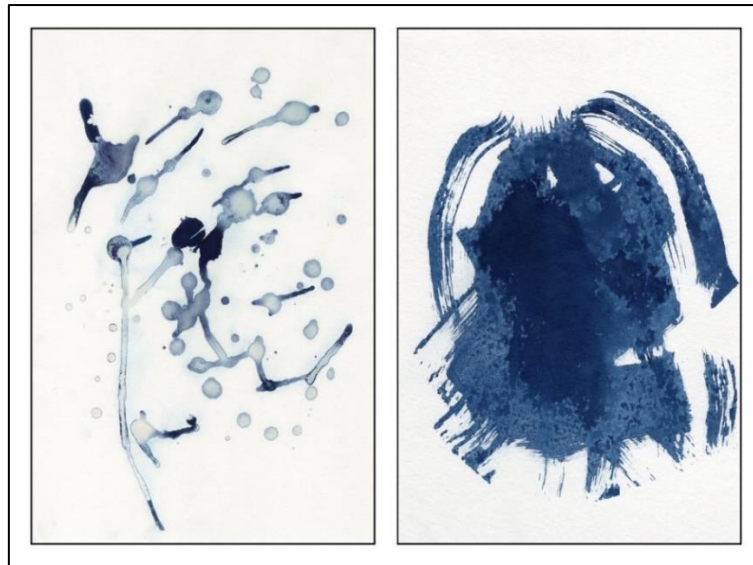
*Two Styles of Cyanotype*

When I talk about my photography in the 70s, I'll tell you that I loved the darkroom process (and that the camera simply provided material for me to work on). But that's only partly true. I loved making the prints, but I hated developing the film. Even after 40 years or more, I can still recall the nervous tension – my anxiety – trying to get the film loaded correctly onto the developing spool (all in total darkness!) And I think I've been hearing an echo of that tension whenever I've made traditional cyanotypes – triggered, I'm sure, by the recommendation to set up the print in subdued light.

In practice, the cyanotype process is probably far more tolerant of light than I give it credit – after all, my very first print sat outside in the Yorkshire sunlight for three hours before anything much happened. But nonetheless, some vestige remains of these old anxieties, and I'm always tentative when I'm making the traditional prints.

In contrast, I'm working in normal light on the freehand prints and that, I believe, helps me feel relaxed and experimental. Like a little kid – with no sense of urgency or anxiety – I playfully brush and drip the solution onto the paper, chasing the drops around and producing blots and blotches. I'm curious too, in a childlike way – not seeking accurate answers like the mature, septuagenarian I am – how will it look if I use a decorating brush or a foam brush? What will happen if I drip the two chemicals onto the paper and mix them in situ, rather than pre-mix them in the 'normal' way? What if I change the chemical balance? What if I dry the paper quickly with a hairdryer, or leave it on the table to dry overnight. What if I spray them with water, or add bleach? What if I blot them, like a Rorschach test?

What if, why and how ...



*Childlike freedom – drips, blots and blotches*

I can't begin to convey the depth of feeling I experience when I'm making these freehand prints – unashamed pleasure, without a trace of the self-conscious adult – and the way I can quickly re-engage with those feelings. So much so that I'm sitting here smiling as I write, remembering the absorption, involvement, and total relaxation – making them feels soothing, inexplicably luxurious and comforting. The process is creative; expressive; kinaesthetic; sensory; communicative; fully present, and in the moment; physically active, mentally absorbing – in fact everything one could wish from any form art-therapy. As Adrian Hill said (the artist who coined the phrase 'art therapy'), its value lay in "completely engrossing the mind (as well as the fingers) ... releasing the creative energy." And I was certain that these freehand cyanotypes would make the perfect contribution to the collaborative stages of the project.

There are also other benefits of making these freehand prints. As I've written before:

with each step every part of my persona was enriched, absorbed, engaged, fulfilled – in a 'state of flow' as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines it – and time simply disappeared! It's a hands-on, tactile craft – an analogue skill that proceeds appropriately at a comfortable, analogue pace.

So thank you Jean.

### Combining Cyanotypes: New and Old

Returning to the idea of making collaborative prints, I decided to start by exploring the effect of combining these new cyanotype prints with the earlier cyanotypes I'd created – mix the informal with the traditional ones. So, limiting myself to this pool of (digitised) cyanotypes, I blended them, again taking time to learn which combinations merged in a pleasing way, and which didn't! But with over 80 cyanotype prints to choose from, and more than 20 different blending modes in Photoshop, I quickly realised that there was an almost infinite number of combinations I could randomly select.

As a consequence, the resulting images are wildly different in appearance – with huge variations in colour, tone and complexity (ambiguity or simplicity) – which, in turn, explains the wildly different range of emotions I experienced when looking at them. And, as I glance at the gallery of images I made, it's clear that some are simply 'nice' – briefly interesting – whilst others are more significant, intriguing, engaging, reflecting and resonating with the rollercoaster of my mood changes over the year – the full emotional gamut from grey despair to cautious optimism (and the clear understanding it could be worse!)

And there are some – like the pair in the diptych below – which immediately transport me back to the time when I made them. Looking at them, reconnects me with the feelings I was experiencing – the way my mood engaged with, and responded to their different versions, as they appeared on the computer screen.



*These images are the result of blending the two different styles of cyanotype print – the traditional and the freehand.*

This process of digitally blending traditional and freehand cyanotypes also led me to make two observations:

1. After the cyanotype printing process is completed, and the images are in Photoshop (i.e. when the collaboration phase begins) there's no further kinaesthetic activity involved. Instead, the activity becomes reactive. I alter the blending mode, which means that the image on the screen changes and, a split second later, I react – sometimes bursting with spontaneous emotion.
2. And that outcome – the level of emotion – largely depends on luck; the luck of combining the right cyanotype prints and using the right blending mode.

But, nonetheless, this phase of the project was always rewarding – particularly for my childlike playfulness and curiosity – even when the image I produced didn't resonate with emotional significance. And, once again, I was in a 'state of flow ... and time simply disappeared'.

## Combining New Cyanotypes with my Back-Catalogue

I'm not sure I can take much credit for the next phase of the project.

I simply extended the pool of images (so that I was combining the new, freehand cyanotype prints with digital images from my back-catalogue) and I reconnected with one of my earliest ideas – before I was inspired by Jean. This recognised that I'd taken up cyanotype printing since the fractures occurred, whereas my digital photography largely pre-dated them. So I hoped that luck would still be with me and that 'something interesting' might happen if I merged the two.

Later, this idea had become more concrete in that these collaboration images might allow me to explore before/after scenarios and feelings. And later still, I realised that the process of creating them might have some healing properties. But when I first returned to the idea of making this type of collaborative work (i.e. with images from my back catalogue) I did so without any preconceived ideas about the likely outcome or the way I'd feel. I simply started being playful, experimental – generally curious. And yes – 'something interesting' certainly did happen!!



*A Window on the Past*

I'd chosen the background image you can see in the image above (of sunset on Bamburgh Beach) as my basic motif because of its emotional significance – obviously, the couple on the shoreline isn't us, but it feels as if it could be – and when I blended it with a freehand cyanotype it felt like fireworks were exploding all around me. I've described the joyousness and excitement I experience when I'm making freehand prints, but nothing prepared me for the surge of emotion that I felt when I created this collaboration – it felt like I was looking through a very dirty window.

Looking out through a window on the past!

Later, I felt able to develop the basic idea more fully, extending it to represent the way in which we've been so absorbed by the events of last year that we can't see the future clearly, or connect back to the past – life, in both directions, is far out of reach. But as I created the triptych (below) – by altering the 'fogginess' (the clarity) of the couple on the beach – I felt something restorative start to happen. I had a glimmer of optimism that these collaborations might help me close those gaps, help me reach back to the past and begin to imagine a future.



*Windows on the Past*

### Feeling Fractured

By now, each idea seemed to spawn another idea, till my mind was overflowing, and I was curious to determine whether I could recreate them all (or, in fact, any of them) in a digital format, in a way that they matched the vision in my mind.

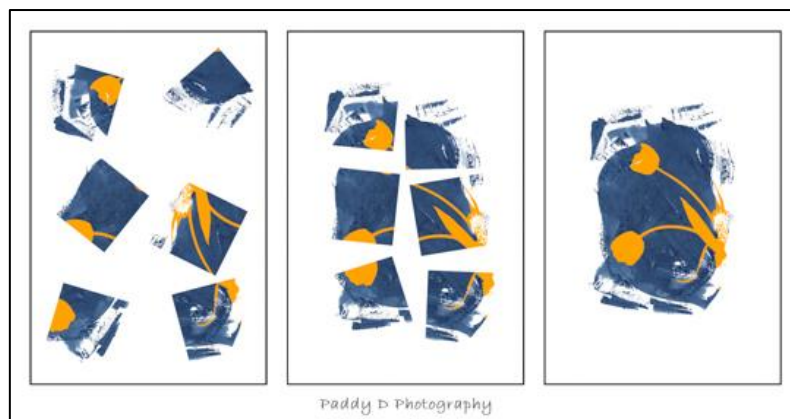
For example, the triptych below shows one idea that developed from the 'Window on the Past' and imagined the glass had been shattered – a visual metaphor for the way that my life feels broken, since the fractures. In another, I tore a print in half. Another takes David Hockney's work on Polaroid montages and deconstructs the idea, so that the smaller Polaroid images explode apart, instead of coming together in a cohesive way.



*Shattered*

The next idea became even more intimate – if such a thing could be possible in the midst of a very personal project – with another play on the Hockney montage, this time working directly with a cyanotype print.

It comprised several stages: firstly, making a digital negative of my profile picture from Twitter (the tulip silhouette), printing it on a freehand cyanotype, and hand-painting it in a striking, complementary colour. Next, I cut the print into 6 rectangles and scattered them on the table-top, randomly changing the layout and the spacing. Then, I photographed the results and finally recreated the results more formally in Photoshop. And once again, something mysteriously restorative developed – a growing belief that it's within my power, my orbit, to effect some level of self-repair.



*Self-repair?*

### A Timely Conclusion

I've approached the end of my 'workings out' – this longhand review – where I've been reflecting and writing about the project to-date. So, I stopped to ask myself two basic questions, where had I got to, and what had I learnt? And, in answering them, I've realised that this isn't the midway point of the project but, instead, it's the final stage. Hence this section, intended as a second 'interlude', has turned into a valediction.

Overall, I believe that this review has helped me identify two distinctive phases within the project – firstly the hands-on phase (one of immediacy and playfulness) and secondly, a thoughtful, more considered phase.

The first phase was 'of the moment' and comprised the kinaesthetic activity of making freehand cyanotype prints. It was full of fun – enjoyable, relaxing, restorative – an ideal way of lowering stress and building a sense of achievement. Then the second phase was slower, more deliberate, taking the prints (products 'of the moment') and using them to gain new perspectives and understanding about myself and on my relationship with the world around me. It's helped me to clarify and/or adjust my thoughts and feelings and, in general, results in me feeling more in control. Specifically, it's showed me ways of connecting with, and expressing, the roller coaster of emotions of the last year. And

similarly, it's helped me address the problems attendant on losing touch with our past (and our past selves), and again given me methods to explore reconnection.



*Another 'Window on the Past'*

Thinking back a year ago, to the time when I was trying to resume my digital photography after the fractures, I think that my (largely unspoken) aim was about re-finding and/or redefining my sense of self; proving that my photography (post fracture) was as good as it always had been; confirming that neither my photography nor I would be defined by the wheelchair. But it was too soon – physically and emotionally – to place such a burden on my camera. I'd always relied on it to 'work its magic' and when it couldn't make the contribution I wanted (and needed), the outcome was disproportionate, dislocating.

Now, instead of expecting the camera to work its magic, I've learnt that creativity and curiosity can work the magic between them. And this, in turn, gives me permission to adopt a more relaxed definition of a project; whether the camera has any role in it and, if so, whether it's my Nikon digital camera or my Rolleiflex or Praktica film cameras, or even a Polaroid instant camera; whether it's a research project, the psychogeography of this locality; or a craft project; or 'chasing butterflies' – pursuing any other idea that piques my interest.



*A window on the world around me*

Now that I'm asking myself questions about the value of this art therapy project, the answers that are ringing round in my mind are considerable:

I've been able to explore, understand and start coming to peace with the rollercoaster of experiences and emotions of the last year.

I've represented the sense of my fractured self, and also the disconnection between my life-before-fractures and my life-afterwards, and been able to start a process of repair.

I'm sure I'll always display the physical and emotional fault-lines, the cracks, of this traumatic year but I believe that, over a period of time, I can put myself back together again – hopefully, with more success than Humpty Dumpty!

The project has also shown me the value of combining kinaesthetic activity with the creative and expressive opportunities of digital photography.



*Being experimental and playful – sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't!*

Now most significantly, is the understanding that this project (in its current form with an emphasis on art therapy) has run its course. It's opened the door for me on a way of life – a creative way of life – fuelled by curiosity and problem-solving, and started to repair my fractured sense of self. I know it's time to step away now, to move on from the intensity and introspection of this work as a project and to simply enjoy the things I've learnt – use them to grow, rebuild and flourish.

At the beginning I imagined I'd be developing a curated gallery of work for the website but it's clear that the value of this project has already been realised in the 'journey' – particularly in this writing which has helped me formulate my ideas, make them concrete and prevent them from staying

cloud-like – vague and nebulous. Instead, I understand that my time will be better employed in a forward-looking way that will improve my wellbeing and mental health i.e. by running with the myriad of ideas that now pique my curiosity.

I can start by getting the old Rolleiflex TLR out of the attic and putting a black and white film through it, maybe the Praktica SLR too. Then perhaps make some new freehand cyanotype prints and hand colouring them. Or even resume macrame, a very different hands-on activity – a skill untouched for over 50 years (and called knot-making in those days!)

Wow.

What an amazing set of takeaways. This project has certainly lived up to its name as being therapeutic.

And finally, thank you everyone who knowingly or unknowingly, helped me along the way.