Artists on the Couch: Trauma and Loss in the Lives of Twentieth Century Creatives

A Review of

*Art and Mourning: The Role of Creativity in Healing Trauma and Loss*

by Esther Dreifuss-Kattan

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In the last year of his life, Swiss-born artist Paul Klee (1879-1940) created 1,253 works of art, noting in his personal catalogue, “no day without a line” (Dreifuss-Kattan, p. 44). Terminally ill with the autoimmune disease scleroderma, Klee’s near constant drawing kept at bay awareness of his approaching death, if not time itself. He wrote in his diary, “The time element must be eliminated, yesterday and tomorrow simultaneous” (p. 59). Through art, Klee could “dissolve into whole creation,” and evade difficult feelings (p. 43). He also once shared, “I create in order not to cry, this is the last and first reason” (p. 41).

Like others, Klee used art to escape time, accessing a state of mind in which threatening emotions and memories safely gain expression. Yet what gives art this power? How do creative processes grant artists like Klee, if not all of us, the opportunity to transcend suffering, and even give it meaning? Psychoanalyst, art therapist, and artist Esther Dreifuss-Kattan uses psychoanalysis, and especially object relations theory, to address such questions in her provocative book *Art and Mourning: The Role of Creativity in Healing Trauma and Loss* (2016). Through fascinating biographies of twentieth century creatives,Dreifuss-Kattan details how mourning is embodied through the creative process and shapedby early life losses.

*Art and Mourning* is divided into an introduction and eight chapters. The first chapter is

devoted to Alberto Giacometti, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Louise Bourgeois, while each of the remaining chapters focuses on a single individual — Paul Klee, Dina Gottliebova Babbitt, Ferdinand Hodler, Eva Hess, Lucian Freud, René Magritte, and Albert Einstein. The book includes 37 well-produced black and white photos of art. Of these photos, 16 are reproduced in color in the center of the book.

As might be expected of a book rooted in psychoanalysis, the relationship with the maternal figure is central to Dreifuss-Kattan’s explanation of how art embodies mourning. She describes the origin of creative expression as beginning with the infant’s first encounters with maternal absence. This loss of what D. W. Winnicott (1965) called the “environment mother” initiates the drive to use symbols to modulate feelings and make sense of the infant’s incipient awareness of self and other. According to Dreifuss-Kattan, the rupture of the mother–infant bond lays the foundation for using creative practices later in life to manage anxiety surrounding loss and to express mourning. Dreifuss-Kattan writes, “As adults we seek to reconnect to this early transformative process, to remember the intensive affective experience of togetherness and separation, enjoying the familiar while experimenting with the new and imaginative” (p. 4).

Dreifuss-Kattan associates the mother–infant bond with the “oceanic feeling” Sigmund Freud discussed in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1994) — what Klee depicted as the “dissolve into whole creation.” She also compares Freud’s oceanic feeling with the perception of time identified by the Greek concept of *kairos* defined as “the timeless atmosphere of the creative encounter itself” (p. 17). *Kairos* is contrasted with *chronos* and the experience of time as objective and measurable, which those suffering loss or anticipating death often yearn to escape. Dreifuss-Kattan explains how creative processes become occasions for accessing *kairos*, not only to transcend ordinary time, but also to recreate the feeling of unity, if not fusion, of the mother-infant bond. Hence, *kairos* becomes both a reprieve from loss, trauma, and death, as well as a salve for the aloneness, anxiety, and fear these cause. She writes in *Art and Mourning*, “In the process of creating, the artist attains a sense of *kairos* time, a wish for time to stand still and a longing to fuse with the maternal, as a defense against the fear of death” (p. 32). This connection of *kairos* with early life becomes a bridge between first experiences with loss and the creative use of symbols in adulthood. Furthermore, Dreifuss-Kattan shows how the failure to mourn can impact the creative process, especially when loss is “entombed within the psyche” along with painful affects, which she writes, “allows the depressed artist to deny his or her loss, blocking the expression of strong emotions like grief, guilt, or aggression, and results in an inability to create genuine artistic expression” (p. 3). These discussions of what some might refer to as *complicated grief* (Schupp, 2003), suggest the influence traumatic loss can have on artists’ lives and art when *kairos* cannot be attained.

Dreifuss-Kattan’s knowledge of psychoanalysis, her subjects’ biographies, and grief (one of her clinical specialties) are broad and deep. Nowhere does she falter in her grasp of the material. However, given the robust body of research on such topics as trauma, attachment loss, and grief, her thesis could have been strengthened by a multi-theoretic approach. Instead, *Art and Mourning* extends the psychoanalytic application of the idea of *kairos* to symbolic interpretation of the artwork itself when alternative theories and disciplines — such as neuroscience, attachment theory, or traumatology — might have steered her argument towards more plausible interpretations.

For example, Dreifuss-Kattan’s chapter on René Magritte (1898–1967) focuses on how he psychologically defended against his mother’s suicide in both life and art. She depicts

Magritte as using intellectualism, humor, and disembodiment to avoid traumatic memories of his mother’s death. To support her observations, she interprets his painting, *The Lovers*, in which a man and a woman are embraced in a kiss, each enshrouded in cloth so they cannot see the other. Dreifuss-Kattan writes, “The enshrouded couple cannot really see each other because of the secret standing between them, namely the defended trauma of the artist’s loss of his mother when he was an adolescent” (p. 152). While I accept Dreifuss-Kattan’s identification of Magritte’s use of defenses to ward off grief, and her suggestion that his defenses influence the symbolism found in his art, I felt her interpretation of the painting seemed highly speculative and did little to further her thesis. Similar comments are found throughout the book. About Lucian Freud: “We can speculate that for Lucian, these ‘rags’ [pictured in piles in some paintings] served as residues of security blankets, stained with memory traces of the past” (p. 137). About Eva Hesse: “Because she appeared to feel emotionally stronger, she allowed herself to sculpt emptiness in her new works, creating vessels with depth” (p. 116). For those who adhere to psychoanalytic theory, these assessments may seem plausible, especially given the biographical material Dreifuss-Kattan masterfully weaves with images of art to support her explanations. Yet I question whether such conclusions are necessary to underscore her intriguing explanation for why art can lead to an oceanic, timeless state that gives so much relief from loss and trauma. Are we to assume that all symbolic representation is an attempt to work through early losses? Or sometimes is a cigar just a cigar? A more modest application of psychoanalytic theory would have been more credible.

A similar example comes from the chapter on Dina Gottliebova Babbit (1923–2009), a

Jewish artist interned in Auschwitz and forced to paint portraits of Roma people for Dr. Josef Mengele, “The Angel of Death,” before he used them in his torturous experiments. *Art and Mourning* convincingly relays how this tragic connection between art and cruelty forever shadowed the artist and her creative potential. Yet here, too, Dreifuss-Kattan goes too far in her efforts to make the life of her subject conform to psychoanalytic theory. For Gottliebova Babbit she claims, “As perverse as it sounds, the ‘Angel of Death,’ the murderer of her Roma friends and her Jewish family, also became the missing father Dina never had, simultaneously her victimizer and her protector” (p. 72). Such dynamics might be more accurately explored with the concept of trauma bonding (Reid, Haskell, Dillahunt-Aspillaga, & Thor, 2013), for which such “perverse” connections to the father are not necessary.

*Art and Mourning* excels when it shares biographical material and theorizes about the relationship between loss, complicated grief, and the creative process. The book is also an engrossing and intimate read. Yet it requires a willingness to overlook criticisms that for years have been leveled against psychoanalysis — especially the tendency towards reductionism — along with a willingness to neglect the vast body of research that has superseded it. I thus recommend *Art and Mourning* primarily to psychoanalysts, although art therapists and clinicians working with grief may also find the book valuable.

Dreifuss-Kattan’s examinations of the impact of trauma, illness, and death on the lives of prominent creatives proves psychoanalysis still has the capacity to stir the imagination. Her thesis may even identify a universal quality in *kairos* as the potential of the creative process to transcend loss and trauma and even reach a feeling of unity. Yet her arguments seem less convincing when she interprets symbolic content found in art as representing attempts to work through early life losses.

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