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Regaining Quality of Life Painting Pet Portraits

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Regaining Quality of Life Painting Pet Portraits

Abstract

Tina Primer, an artist based in Illinois, provided the cover art for the Spring 2023 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Wriggly" is an 11" x 14" painting made from acrylic on stretched canvas. After a debilitating stroke, Tina began using art as therapy. When the strength in her dominant hand did not return, painting pet portraits provided the motivation to do things differently. Tina's playful use of color and attention to detail capture each pet's unique personality. Discovering a new way to paint improved Tina's quality of life.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, painting, pet portraits, stroke, Tina Primer

Credentials Display

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In the United States, a stroke occurs every 40 s (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Depending on the location of the brain injury, the effects of a stroke may limit function, independence, and quality of life. Each hemisphere of the human brain has a unique set of abilities. For example, the left hemisphere specializes in language and problem-solving, whereas the right hemisphere specializes in attention and facial recognition (Gazzaniga, 2000). The left hemisphere controls motor movements on the right side of the body and vice versa. The brain is wired to move muscles, problem-solve, and recognize facial features even without conscious awareness.

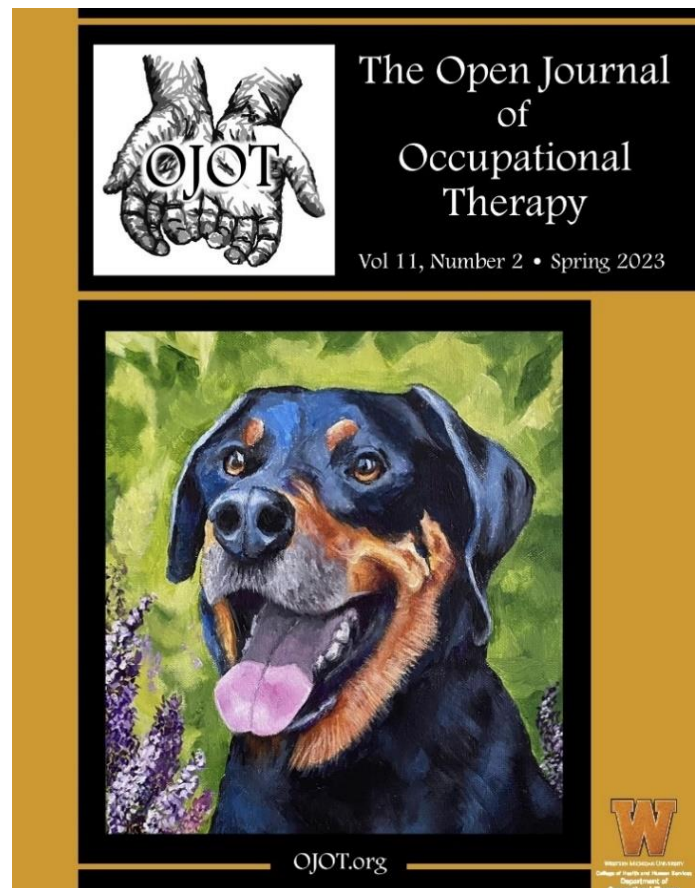
Brain injury, such as stroke, creates disconnects in the brain's wiring. Learning (or relearning) a skill creates new pathways in the brain. According to Edwards (2012), it does not matter how your brain is wired. Getting in touch with your "right brain" will help you see things differently. After a debilitating stroke, artist Tina Primer learned to see things differently. She spent years training her non-dominant hand to paint. As a result, Tina's motor skills improved, as did her quality of life.

Tina Primer, an artist based in Illinois, provided the cover art for the Spring 2023 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Wriggly" is an 11" x 14" painting made from acrylic on stretched canvas (see Figure 1). After a debilitating stroke, Tina began using art as therapy. When the strength in her dominant hand did not return, painting pet portraits provided the motivation to do things differently. Tina's playful use of color and attention to detail capture each pet's unique personality. Discovering a new way to paint improved Tina's quality of life.

Tina Primer was born and raised in New York. Her father was a math teacher at the local high school. Tina's mother was a nursery schoolteacher who grew up in a strict German family and had a strong work ethic. "Mom was also an artist," said Tina. "She buried herself in art, watercolors, sculpting, acrylics, and stained glass." Like her mom, Tina also enjoyed art. In the 10th grade, she enrolled in her first art class. "The reason I signed up for an art class is because I chose to drop out of math," she said. "My father did not like that idea, but he finally came around." It was not long before Tina started turning out some amazing drawings. During her first year of college, Tina majored in fine art at the State University of New York (SUNY) art program. Tina was in the painting division and had her own studio. After a year of courses at SUNY, she enrolled at Parson's School of Design to study illustration. Tina's first illustration job was with the New York Times. "This was very encouraging," she said. Tina went on to illustrate featured stories at New Yorker Magazine, and covers for Simon and Schuster's book club. Tina enjoyed the diversity of topics throughout her career.

Figure 1

Cover Art for OJOT, Vol 11, No 2, Spring 2023.



Tina and her husband Phil opened a boutique studio where she did graphic design work and illustrations for brochures and annual reports. The studio remained in business for 10 years. In 2016, Tina started a new job at a paper supply boutique. Two months later, she had a stroke. “When the stroke occurred, I did not have a clear mind as to what was happening,” she said. On the day of the stroke, Tina went to sleep. When she woke up and tried to walk down the stairs, her right leg gave out. “My husband recognized the signs of a stroke and called an ambulance,” she said. “I had a stroke. It finally hit me when I could not walk.” Immediately after the stroke, all of Tina’s extremities were functional. “Over the next 4 weeks, I was a lot worse off,” said Tina. As the weeks went on, she became more debilitated. Tina believes she had a second stroke that caused her to lose function in the right side of her body. Thankfully, her ability to talk and communicate remained intact.

Tina’s stroke resulted in hemiparesis on the right side of her body. “I had no movement in my right arm or leg,” she said. “My right side was compromised, and I could no longer paint with my dominate hand.” Tina could move her right leg, but it was very weak. She continues using an ankle foot orthotic (AFO) to help her walk today. For 3 months following her stroke, Tina participated in inpatient rehabilitation 5 days a week for 6 hr each day. She continued receiving therapies for several years. “I worked with an occupational therapist named Elsie for 5 years,” said Tina. “She was wonderful.”

Therapy helped improve the overall function that remained on the right side of Tina’s body. When the strength in her affected arm did not return, Tina was devastated. She wanted to draw and paint again. “Prior to the stroke, I was painting feverishly,” she said. “I graduated from my 3-month initial therapy, and all I could draw was stick figure teddy bears.” Tina decided to train her non-dominant hand. Motor learning refers to the acquisition of skilled movement over time (Shumway-Cook & Woollacott, 2006). In occupational therapy practice, recovery of motor skills is often facilitated through using real objects and environments and opportunities to practice (Timmermans et al., 2010). At first, Tina’s sketches took a long time. Her pencil grasp was immature and felt awkward. “Holding the pencil in my left hand did not feel familiar, but I had to try,” she said. “I could not walk away from this.” Tina practiced drawing simple sketches. She progressed to drawing flowers with a felt-tipped colored pen. “I drew flowers for a long time,” she said. When Tina transitioned to acrylic paints, she began to struggle. “I could not paint anything,” she said. This experience triggered feelings of anxiety and depression. “I sat with that for a while and said to myself, I have to figure out how to teach my left hand to paint,” she said.

Tina was looking for subjects to paint and found inspiration in pet portraits. She felt the early paintings done with her non-dominant hand looked cartoonish. “You could see it was a cat on a blanket or a dog’s face,” she said. “It was embarrassing to look at.” Tina’s friends and family encouraged her to keep painting. “I thought if I could do this, I can do more,” she said. Tina was motivated to keep practicing. It took several years before she was satisfied with her paintings. Her next step was to paint something realistic. She began sketching images of dogs and cats from photographs. Tina used a tiny brush to fill in the outlines and add highlights. “I was too nervous to use a real brush,” she said. Tina practiced until she had a semi-realistic result. She asked many people if she could paint their pets. “JoJo” (see Figure 2) is a 12” x 12” painting made from acrylic paint on canvas. Her efforts resulted in a collection of 15 dog portraits. “JoJo would peer out the window for hours, patiently waiting for his mom to come home,” said Tina. A selection of paintings was exhibited at the Northwest Community Healthcare outpatient rehabilitation center. A plaque was placed underneath Tina’s paintings that read, “Be strong, have strength, and continue growing.”

After the exhibit, Tina's skills and confidence continued to grow. Several people from the hospital asked her to paint portraits of their pets. "I was very excited but also nervous," she said. This experience led to a new business venture focused on painting pet portraits. At first, Tina did not know how to market herself. "I got permission from the owner of the local diner to hang up a poster marketing my services," she said. Soon, Tina found her groove. She enjoys getting to know her customers and their pets. "Lucy" (see Figure 3) is a 12" x 12" painting made from acrylic paint on canvas. "Lucy is a sweet dog who was adopted by her owners, Judy and Gregg, during the COVID-19 pandemic," said Tina. "When both owners got COVID, Lucy was right there to aid in their recovery. She brought them their slippers and gave them plenty of kisses."

On average, Tina completes two to three pet portraits per week. She likes to start early and paints around 5 hours each day. "I turn on my music and hear nothing else throughout the day," she said. "When I'm in my studio, nothing bothers me." Tina's pet portraits occur in stages. She paints the eyes first to bring the painting to life. Next, she paints the nose to put the eyes in perspective. She starts painting from top to bottom (ears to paw) to frame the face. The final stage is to add fine detail, such as highlight in the eyes or the snout of the nose. Her playful use of color and attention to detail capture each pet's unique personality. "Sweetie" (see Figure 4) is a 12" x 12" painting made from acrylic paint on canvas. "Sweet. That is exactly what this girl is," said Tina. "She is a miniature pincher that will melt your heart with her beautiful, loving eyes." Tina sends her customers regular updates. "I let them choose the color of the background," she said. On occasion, Tina's customers have asked her to change the direction of their pets' eyes or to add a smile to their faces (see online gallery). As a personal touch, Tina includes a continuation of the painting on the 1.5-inch edge of the canvas.

Tina has enjoyed using her talents to give back. "After being discharged from inpatient rehabilitation, the first thing I did was volunteer for the stroke support group," she said. Tina was recruited by an ambassador from the hospital. In this role, she facilitated therapies and activities with group

Figure 2
"JoJo" by Tina Primer



Figure 3
"Lucy" by Tina Primer



members, including dance, art therapy, acupuncture, and group exercise. “The support group had a newsletter, but it was not laid out well, so I designed a new one,” she said. Tina learned to type and use the computer mouse with her left hand. “It took me forever, but the final product was well received. When the support group disbanded, Tina started teaching painting classes to the local elderly and youth. She did research on the benefits of art with these populations. Teaching was a lot of work but also very inspiring. “It was something I could do despite my limitations,” she said.

Recently, Tina made an interesting connection with a former artist featured in the Winter 2020 issue of OJOT. The artist, Lynn Hall, is a member of the Kalamazoo Log Cabin Quilters Guild. Tina reached out to Guild President Kim Longstroth to inquire about purchasing a quilt. “Kim told me she could not conduct sales due to the Guild’s non-profit status,” said Tina. “We texted back and forth for a while, then said our goodbyes. I was disappointed.” Tina wondered if Kim had a pet. “I thought, if Kim was a quilter, and I painted pet portraits, maybe we could barter?” she said. “I presented my idea to Kim, and she said yes!” “Cici” (see Figure 5) is a 12” x 18” painting made from acrylic paint on canvas. Kim worked with Tina to design the quilt. “She let me pick the fabric squares and the design of the quilt. It was very special.”

Tina’s social participation has decreased in recent years because of her physical limitations. “My stroke is affecting me now more than it ever has,” she said. “My right side is weaker, and the left side is not as strong as it used to be,” she said. Tina uses a wheelchair as her primary means of mobility. “My body gives out faster than it used to,” she said. “Phil is my caregiver, and he does an awesome job!” Tina stopped teaching art classes because she no longer had the strength to transport her art supplies. “It was hard to let go of my role as an art teacher,” she said. Tina volunteers as a part-time simulated patient for a local occupational therapy program. This opportunity

Figure 4
“Sweetie” by Tina Primer



“I thought, if Kim was a quilter, and I painted pet portraits, maybe we could barter?” she said. “I presented my idea to Kim, and she said yes!”

Figure 5
“Cici” by Tina Primer



allows her to share firsthand experiences as a patient. She wants students to understand the importance of developing a therapeutic relationship with the patient. “It’s important to not just be clinical, but also personal as well,” she said. In addition, Tina wants students to recognize how mental health affects performance. Over the years, Tina has built similar connections with her own customers. “They talk about their lives with me,” she said. “They have stories to tell. They confide in me,” she said.

After experiencing a stroke, Tina Primer learned to paint differently. It took her several years to train the motor movements in her non-dominant hand. As a result, her painting style has changed tremendously. “Pre-stroke, my paintings were huge and highly detailed. Now I paint pet portraits!” said Tina with enthusiasm. “If I was unable to paint, that would be devastating. The fact that I can do *something* makes me very happy.” Tina says fear of failure, or not being able to do what she used to do, held her back. “Discovering a new style of painting was a breakthrough for me,” she said. Although she mourns the loss of her previous level of artistic skill, Tina remains thankful. “It is such a joy that I can still call myself an artist!”

View more of Tina Primer’s artwork in the OJOT gallery:

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/42/

Visit Tina Primer Pet Portraits on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/petportraitsbytinaprimer>

To inquire about a pet portrait, Contact Tina:

Phone: (847) 814-2443

Email: tina.primer@gmail.com

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