

Research

Air Art Retreats: Creative Wellbeing at the Intersection of Art, Psychology, and Education

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Abstract: In recent decades, the growing prevalence of psychological stress, social fragmentation, and identity-related challenges has intensified the need for integrative approaches to wellbeing. This is particularly evident among individuals with migration experiences, for whom processes of adaptation often involve emotional instability and disruption of social belonging. The Air Art Retreats initiative presents an interdisciplinary model that combines artistic practice, psychological insight, and educational methodology within natural environments. This article situates the initiative within existing research in art therapy, environmental psychology, and experiential learning. It argues that creative engagement in nature fosters emotional regulation, cognitive activation, and social cohesion, while also supporting identity reconstruction. Through a synthesis of theory and practice, the article demonstrates how artistic processes can function as transformative tools for individual and collective wellbeing.

Keywords: Art therapy; Wellbeing; Creativity; Migration; Environmental psychology; Experiential learning

1. Introduction

The relationship between creativity and human wellbeing has increasingly become a subject of scholarly attention across multiple disciplines, including psychology, neuroscience, education, and public health. Contemporary research consistently demonstrates that engagement in artistic activities contributes to emotional regulation, stress reduction, and overall improvements in mental health (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). These findings are particularly relevant in the context of modern societies, where individuals are frequently exposed to chronic stressors, digital overstimulation, and reduced opportunities for meaningful social interaction.

Within this broader context, the Air Art Retreats initiative emerges as a practice-based response to these challenges. Rather than approaching wellbeing through a single disciplinary lens, the initiative integrates artistic creation, psychological reflection, and educational engagement into a unified experiential format. Participants are invited to engage in plein air painting within natural settings, where attention to light, colour, and spatial composition becomes a means of reconnecting with the present moment.

The emphasis on present-moment awareness aligns with mindfulness-based frameworks, which highlight the role of attention and perception in stabilizing psychological states (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). However, unlike traditional mindfulness practices that often rely on meditation, Air Art Retreats employ artistic practice as the primary medium through which awareness is cultivated. This distinction is significant since it allows participants to access reflective states indirectly through action rather than introspection alone.

2. Theoretical foundations: nature, creativity, and human cognition

The effectiveness of plein air artistic practice can be understood through several complementary theoretical frameworks. One of the most influential is the Attention Restoration Theory, which proposes that exposure to natural environments restores cognitive capacities that are depleted through sustained directed attention (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Urban environments demand constant cognitive control, whereas natural settings provide what Kaplan describes as “soft fascination,” allowing the mind to recover without effort. Simultaneously, the concept of flow developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi offers insight into the psychological mechanisms underlying deep creative engagement. Flow is characterized by intense concentration, a sense of control, and intrinsic motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Artistic practice, particularly in immersive environments, provides optimal conditions for entering this state.

From a neuroscientific perspective, creative activities have been shown to engage multiple brain networks associated with emotion, reward, and self-referential processing. Studies indicate that sustained artistic engagement can lead to measurable changes in brain structure and function, supporting the idea of neuroplasticity (Bolwerk et al., 2014). These findings suggest that creativity is not merely expressive but also transformative at a biological level.

2. Migration, identity, and the need for creative interventions

Migration represents a complex psychological and social process that extends far beyond physical relocation. Individuals undergoing migration frequently experience disruptions in identity, loss of social networks, and heightened levels of uncertainty. Research in cross-cultural psychology has consistently identified these factors as significant contributors to stress and reduced wellbeing (Bhugra, 2004).

The process of acculturation requires individuals to negotiate between multiple cultural frameworks, often leading to internal conflict and fragmentation of identity (Berry, 2005). Traditional verbal forms of support may not always be sufficient to address these challenges, particularly when emotional experiences are difficult to articulate.

In this context, creative practices offer an alternative mode of expression. As noted by Cathy Malchiodi, artistic processes enable individuals to externalize internal experiences through symbolic representation, facilitating emotional processing and integration (Malchiodi, 2012). This non-verbal dimension is especially valuable in intercultural settings, where language barriers and cultural differences may limit conventional communication.

The Air Art Retreats initiative initially focused on immigrant women, recognizing both the vulnerability and resilience of this group. By providing a supportive environment for creative expression, the retreats create conditions in which participants can explore and re-construct their sense of self.

4. Art education and the development of perception

Artistic practice within the Air Art Retreats is not conceived as mere spontaneous self-expression, but as a cultivated perceptual discipline grounded in the traditions of art education. At its core lies the idea that learning to see is neither passive nor immediate, rather, it is a trained, culturally mediated, and cognitively complex process. The act of painting outdoors becomes an exercise in perceptual refinement, where attention is gradually reoriented from habitual recognition toward nuanced observation (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Participant engaged in plein air painting. Direct observation of the landscape encourages focused attention, perceptual refinement, and the development of visual awareness.

Exposure to historical artistic movements plays a crucial role in this transformation. Movements such as Impressionism, for instance, fundamentally challenged the primacy of representation by shifting the artistic focus toward the fleeting qualities of light, atmosphere, and sensory experience. In this context, perception is no longer understood as the accurate depiction of objects, but as an active and interpretive engagement with reality. The work of Claude Monet exemplifies this shift, demonstrating how vision can be reconfigured into a dynamic process shaped by time, environment, and subjective presence. From an educational perspective, this approach aligns with the view that the arts cultivate distinctive modes of thinking. Eisner (2002) argues that artistic engagement develops cognitive capacities that extend beyond the scope of conventional academic disciplines. These include the ability to attend to subtle variations, to remain open in situations of uncertainty, and to construct meaning in the absence of fixed solutions. Such forms of thinking are particularly relevant in contemporary contexts characterized by complexity and ambiguity (Eisner, 2002).

Perception in this framework is not treated as an isolated visual skill but as an embodied and relational process. Participants do not simply observe the landscape; they inhabit it through sensory, emotional, and material interaction. The brushstroke becomes both a mark and a form of inquiry, translating perception into action. This resonates with broader theories of embodied cognition, which suggest that thinking emerges through engagement with the physical world rather than abstract reasoning alone. Within the retreats, art historical knowledge is introduced not as a rigid canon but as a living resource that participants can actively engage with. References to artistic traditions serve as points of orientation rather than prescriptions, enabling individuals to situate their own practice within a continuum of cultural production. This dialogical relationship between past and present enriches the creative process, fostering both a sense of belonging and a capacity for innovation. The integration of art education into the retreat structure transforms painting from a technical activity into a mode of inquiry. It invites participants to reconsider how they see, how they interpret, and how they relate to the world around them. In doing so, it

expands the scope of artistic practice from the production of images to the cultivation of perception itself.

5. The psychological dimension of creative practice

The psychological framework underpinning the Air Art Retreats extends far beyond the general notion of wellbeing, engaging instead with more nuanced processes of emotional regulation, self-awareness, and identity integration. Within this context, creative practice functions not simply as a mode of expression, but as a structured yet open-ended psychological space in which individuals can encounter, process, and reconfigure their internal experiences within a safe environment. Unlike direct verbal reflection, which may at times feel confrontational or limiting, artistic activity allows for an indirect mode of engagement, where emotions can be explored through metaphor, gesture, and material interaction. This indirectness is particularly significant in relation to emotional regulation. Contemporary psychological research suggests that symbolic and non-verbal forms of expression can facilitate access to affective states that are otherwise difficult to articulate (Malchiodi, 2012). Through the act of painting, participants externalize internal experiences, transforming diffuse or overwhelming emotions into visible and tangible forms. This process creates a critical distance that enables reflection without detachment, allowing individuals to both experience and observe their emotions simultaneously. In this sense, creative practice operates as a mediating space between inner experience and conscious awareness.

The motivational dynamics of this process can be understood through Self-Determination Theory, which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The retreat environment is deliberately structured to support all three dimensions. Autonomy is fostered through the freedom to choose subject matter, pace, and style, enabling participants to retain a sense of agency over their creative process. Competence develops gradually through guided instruction and repeated engagement, allowing individuals to experience mastery and progression. Relatedness emerges within the shared creative environment, where participants work alongside others, witnessing and being witnessed in their process. This collective dimension is particularly important, as it transforms individual creativity into a relational experience, reinforcing a sense of belonging. At the same time the retreats also engage with deeper layers of cognition and embodiment. The theory of embodied cognition suggests that thinking is not confined to abstract mental processes but is fundamentally shaped by bodily interaction with the environment (Wilson, 2002). Therefore, painting, in this context, becomes a form of embodied thinking. The movement of the hand, the resistance of the brush against the canvas, and the shifting perception of colour and light all contribute to a dynamic feedback loop between perception and action. Cognition unfolds through doing, rather than preceding it.

Furthermore, the temporal dimension of creative practice plays a crucial role in its psychological impact. The sustained attention required for painting encourages a slowing down of cognitive processes, counteracting the fragmented attention patterns characteristic of contemporary digital life. This temporal shift supports deeper forms of concentration and presence, closely related to the psychological state of flow described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Within this state, self-consciousness diminishes, and individuals become fully immersed in the activity, leading to enhanced intrinsic satisfaction and psychological integration. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Importantly, the retreats also create conditions for what may be described as narrative reconstruction. Through repeated engagement in creative activity, participants begin to re-interpret their experiences and identities, not necessarily through explicit storytelling, but through evolving visual expressions. This process aligns with broader psychological theories that emphasize the role of meaning-making in wellbeing. Art, in this sense, becomes a medium through which individuals can reorganize their internal narratives, integrating past experiences with present perception. In sum, the psychological dimension of creative practice within Air Art Retreats is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, cognitive, motivational, and relational processes. By combining structure with openness, individual reflection with collective experience, and perception with action, the retreats establish a complex psychological ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, creativity is not an isolated skill but a mode of being one that supports resilience, self-understanding, and the ongoing negotiation of identity.

6. Structure and methodology of the retreat

The retreats are conducted in natural environments selected for their aesthetic and sensory qualities. Participants work outdoors, engaging directly with their surroundings (**Figure 2**). This direct engagement contrasts with studio-based practices, where observation is often mediated through photographs or memory.

The methodological approach is intentionally flexible. Some participants prefer structured instruction, while others gravitate toward intuitive exploration. By accommodating both approaches, the retreats create an inclusive environment that respects individual differences in learning styles. This dual approach reflects principles of constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active participation in knowledge creation (Vygotsky, 1978; Kolb, 1984). Learning is not transmitted but constructed through interaction with the environment and others.



Figure 2. Landscape paintings produced during the Air Art Retreats and presented in an outdoor exhibition setting. The public display of participants' artworks encourages reflection, social interaction, and a sense of creative achievement.

7. Cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes

The outcomes observed in Air Art Retreats align with extensive empirical findings on the neurobiological benefits of creativity. Beyond general academic success (Catterall, 2009), specific research on adults demonstrates that visual art production enhances functional connectivity in the brain's default mode network, significantly increasing psychological resilience (Bolwerk et al., 2014). Furthermore, long-term artistic engagement has been shown to yield measurable improvements in memory and attention among older adults (Mahendran et al., 2018). These cognitive gains are amplified by the 'soft fascination' of natural environments, which facilitates stress recovery and replenishes depleted attentional resources (Ulrich et al., 1991).

Socially, the retreats foster a sense of belonging and community. Group creative activities have been shown to strengthen social bonds and promote cooperative behaviour (Tarr et al., 2014). For individuals with migration experiences, this sense of belonging is particularly significant, as it counteracts feelings of isolation. Participants frequently report increased self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (Bandura, 1997) as the belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes. This shift in self-perception is a critical component of resilience and long-term wellbeing.

8. Sustainability and broader impact

In addition to its psychological and educational dimensions, the initiative incorporates principles of environmental and cultural sustainability. Engagement with local landscapes encourages appreciation of natural and cultural heritage, aligning with frameworks promoted by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2013).

Sustainable practices, including the use of local materials and environmentally conscious logistics, reflect broader efforts to integrate ecological awareness into cultural activities (Sterling, 2001). By promoting offline, nature-based experiences, the retreats also address the growing impact of digital saturation on mental health.

9. Conclusions

Air Art Retreats represent a holistic model of creative wellbeing that integrates artistic practice, psychological insight, and educational methodology. By situating creative activity within natural environments and social contexts, the initiative offers a powerful framework for addressing contemporary challenges related to stress, identity, and social disconnection.

The interdisciplinary nature of the model allows it to function across multiple domains, including mental health, education, and cultural engagement. As such, it holds significant potential for further development and research, particularly in exploring the long-term impact of creative interventions on wellbeing.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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