Students at the San Diego Expressive Arts Institute, immersed from the beginning in the theory of phenomenology are often curious about my continuing use of a technique they identify with archetypal interpretation in the Jungian model. This is a valuable question. In answer to my students, I acknowledge that the therapeutic tradition of Sand Play has become the dominant model for working with sand and miniatures. They quickly find this view has little utility for an artist/helper dedicated to following a non-interpretative path. Is there a model more helpful to expressive arts therapy? This article, drawn from lectures and practice in this method, is my answer.

In an alcove of my studio is a small world. A wall is lined with shelves, crowded with miniature people, animals and little toys of all kinds. On the floor are several boxes, wood and plastic, half-filled with sand, both damp and dry. These boxes are a kind of frame for working with sand and miniatures as installation art and diorama. It is an expressive art activity reminiscent of childhood. Since I think work with miniatures in the artistic tradition is important for the expressive arts therapist, I want to share some thoughts, experiences and observations of this form of art making. I recognize in my miniature work, the deep and ongoing artistic traditions of work with the earth, the hands, the small representations of a larger and sometimes too complex world.

History of Sand and Toys as a Therapy

I am attracted to the work with tiny toys and sand for personal reasons. I have memories of playing on my quilt with little toys when I was sick, and in the sandpile my Dad made in the backyard when I was five. A huge mound of clean sand, dry on top and moist underneath, was perfect for tunnels and cities. The warm sandy beaches of San Diego were great for castles with moats or writing messages in the sand or making patterns of shells, stones and seaweed. You could then sprinkle dry sand like confectioner's sugar over the top, letting the sand thread out from between thumb and forefinger, like a spout.

In spite of strong childhood associations, my first introduction to this way of working with clients was with Dr. Cecil Burney who held a training series on sand play therapy. His collection was beautiful to behold, lit and exquisite, like an art gallery.

With Dr. Burney I learned the Jungian way of working, of documenting the work and many interpretive materials. What interests me now about his approach was how reverent he seemed about the use of the materials and how artfully they were displayed. I kept that. Subsequently I researched sandplay therapy. It started with H.G. Wells describing the play of his two sons in Floor Games. He tells of how, with a box of assorted
spools, match boxes, a few toy soldiers and small animals, the two boys would spend entire afternoons creating various worlds. The play extended itself from one day to the next with the manufacture of buildings and empires. When Freudian child analyst Margaret Lowenfield read this, it inspired her. It was difficult to do analysis with children, they didn’t talk enough! Much later when she was working in a children’s clinic she brought in a “wonder box” of household findings and small toys. It was typical at that time to have a sand table for children, and she noticed how the children took the contents of the “wonder box” and played in the sand, creating various scenes. Her findings were published in World Technique. This, in turn, inspired Dr. Dora Kalff, Jungian child analyst. She studied the images that emerged in sandplay through consultations with Jungian analyst Erich Neumann and Zen master D.K. Suzuki. A new therapeutic approach for children developed. In 1980 Kalff wrote Sandplay: a Psychoterapeutic Approach to the Psyche. It reflects a highly interpretative way of working, where the meaning is in the mind of the therapist, although the interpretation is respectful and not immediate. It follows a developmental timeline. These concepts are potentially useful to the expressive arts therapists, but feel less juicy, less potent than staying phenomenological and working intermodally, the two main expressive arts notions that this article explores.

The Ground, the Sand, and the Earth

I choose a gray wooden box, with the bottom painted blue. I plunge my hands into the sand and begin pushing it around. Like thick paint or loose clay, the sand moves with my pushing and pulling. Both hands in it up to the midarm. Push and swoosh it around in the little box. My hands get used to the dry feel of the sand, it has some resistance to my actions. As I move the sand around, images come to my mind.

In this box, a mound begins to take shape, then dissolve, then come again. As the mound forms my mind wanders to the earthworks I am familiar with: the Tor at Glastonbury, various pyramids and tombs. It comes to a peak, it reminds me of a breast. I touch it, resting my palm on top. I breathe. That’s what I needed, this image of an earthy breast - some nourishment from the imaginal realm. I sweep the corners of the box with a small paint brush to clarify the edges of the central single mound/breast. Something has changed with the stirring of the sand. When my hands were working, my mind relaxed. Now what does this image say to me?

It connects me to other artist traditions that work directly with the earth. I recall Navajo sand paintings from the desert of the Southwest, the geographic neighbor to my own Anza-Borrego. Sand paintings are part of a “sing,” a ritual ceremony for healing or restoring balance. After the ground is prepared, the artist or “singer” creates an exact replica of an intricate design with cornmeal, pollen, herbs and ground stone. Angular depictions of thunderbolts, birds, animals and gods are undertaken slowly, the various colors flowing from the funnel between the thumb and forefinger. The completion of the design takes several hours. The afflicted person will sit in the middle of the design while the singer sings the exact right songs from the memorized repertory. After the sing, it is destroyed.

I’ve watched Tibetan monks create elaborate mandalas of colored sands and crushed semiprecious and precious stone, flowers, rice, herbs and pollen. These circular and symmetrical mandalas can take days or even weeks to complete and can be huge. The ones I’ve seen in San Diego were at least 10’ x 10’, and built on stairstep ledges. While they create the designs with the symbols of their culture by hand, various colored buddhas, lotus flowers, dorjes and stylized clouds, the monks are meditating, to bless the world. When the beautiful artwork is complete, it is destroyed. Impermanence is part of the tradition.

In the oldest tradition of sand painting, Australian Aboriginals make abstract designs right on the land with earth of various textures and colors. Similar to the designs they paint on their bodies, with dots, dashes, wiggly lines and concentric circles, these land paintings look very modern. They are messages from and about the Dreaming, or the “world behind the world” of Aboriginal thought. They, too, have religious or ceremonial purpose.

The Japanese Bonsai tradition, some 600 years old, also uses sand and a small black lacquer tray to create works of impermanence and
meditation called a “profound and tranquil world.” The artist creates contemplative scenes reflecting nature and the seasons, using nine grades of white sand, from powder fine to gravelly coarse, and small rocks. With feathers and small brooms, the various textures are the white and gray palette to create clouds, mist, fog, flying geese and distant mountains. The hours it takes to complete these “stone-trays” are valued as much for the mood they create as for the aesthetic beauty of the finished scene.

Working with the sand alone relaxes and inspires me. Sitting on the floor with my breast/mound of sand, I feel connected to the artists who use sand or earth to create something, a frame for helping, for healing or for contemplation. I also notice how it connects me to the ancient and modern tradition of land art, terraforming, the creation of an environment in miniature.

In my studio, people create landscapes, alternative worlds with mounds, valleys, pools, and streams. There can be central forms, four cornered designs, everything coming into the foreground, everything pushed to the back, a left- or right-sided orientation to the design. Recently a tense and upset woman wrote “I hate you” in the sand, smoothing it out and writing it again and again. After a few minutes, she moved on to something else, more open, more available. Working with the sand for even a few minutes can change the mood.

Miniatures and Installation Art

When my sand shape feels “just-right,” my attention is drawn to the shelves of miniatures. The extensive collection is an important resource in my studio. The top shelf has bigger objects and dolls of all kinds and construction; a straw guitar player from Russia and porcelain Kuan Yin of the Thousand Arms. The next shelf has multi-colored men, women, and kings, fighters of all description, knights, spacemen, soldiers and Indians, dancers of the world and ordinary looking families with Grandmas and babies, too. Below that, is a shelf of animals, jungle and forest, farmyard and pets, both fierce and friendly, with some family groupings. The large rubber rat stands out, but there is a soft little llama covered in real fur and a wood-carved otter. Other shelves hold buildings, houses, trees, cars, trains and planes. Bridges, rocks, bones, wood and stones are in little trays with lots of shells. The collection also includes found objects, abstract and decontextualized like the heavy metal spring, the size of my palm, and bits of broken glass. These little things, little toys and people and bits of stuff, invite the imagination. What wants to come to me?

As my hands and eyes go hunting and gathering, items come to me. First, a tiger, carved of heavy jasper. Then a small ceramic girl with a basket of flowers and a chicken. I arrange them, improvising with the shape of the sand and the toys. The scene emerges. I am reminded of the tradition of dioramas and assemblage, both components of the fine arts tradition.

The word diorama comes from the Greek dia (through) and horama (to see). Its first large-scale use was in Paris in the 1820s. Louis Daguerre, stage designer and scene painter and his partner Charles Bouton, also a painter, designed large scenes in miniature, both interiors and landscapes with elaborate scrim painting and lighting effects to produce a 3-D vision for their audience. This was before both motion pictures and airplanes, so the audience was offered the impossible “view from above.” The dioramas recreated a world too big to actually see all at once and made it a personal experience. The diorama was so successful as an art form, that entire buildings were specially constructed to house the more elaborate works. Perhaps the last well-known or popular examples of miniature diorama occurred in the 1939 New York World's Fair. Photos in The Machine Age, an art history book, show long lines of people threading slowly into the “futuristic” shaped exhibit hall. Forty-five million people attended, and the dioramas Democrayt and Futurama were the most popular exhibits. It speaks to the power of such works that these utopian visions of the future remain firmly ensconced in the cultural consciousness of America.

There is a revival of interest in this art form. Artists are currently using the small scale diorama (both two and three dimensions) to explore and give form to their views and feelings. One such recent exhibit Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art) featured fourteen artists.
depicting real or imaginary environments. From sentimental to sardonic, this is an important
trend in the art world now.

My own diorama is finding its form in dia-
logue of the sand, gravity, the miniatures, and
my hands. The breast shape became hillocks.
Carefully swept clean, the blue-painted bottom
of the box becomes a river running through the
scene. The ceramic girl and her chicken, and the
heavy jasper tiger have been joined by a plastic
red crescent moon. The image is emergent, not
as a product of randomness but of play and
improvisation in the making of an oeuvre.
Remaining mindful of the deep artistic roots of
the work helps me view this image as installation
art. The scene feels exciting, scary, familiar
and strange. The emergence of the “Third” calms
and excites me. Is this my alternative world?

As I do with client/artists, I look at the scene
phenomenologically. First from above, looking
for the way the space is arranged or divided.
Things close to the edge can seem to spill over,
might be close to coming into or out of the scene.
Things close to the middle might seem to be
most important, but they could be a flashy dis-
traction, sleight of hand to protect the small off-
center thing which is fragile, or needs to wait a
moment to be discovered. Things can be connect-
ed in so many ways. Is the arrangement of
things geographic in nature, or is it a time line,
a story of transformation over time/space? The
egg in one corner and the spider in the other
might be the same image separated by time and
travel. But the connection need not be predicated
upon anything logical in the unlimited palette of the imagination. I decide this is true in
the installation I have done today. The chicken
and the tiger feel somehow parts of the same
thing. Maybe it’s the connection between preda-
tor and prey.

Some scenes can be funny, containing their
own jokes. Some things are both sad and funny
when the imagination brings them to life. But
nothing looks funny in this scene. The red cres-
cent moon now reminds me of the current U.S.
war in Iraq, not my first association at all. But
there it is. So the scene has a sad feel.

From the miniature world, a vast play space
often emerges. Within it the laws of physics and
nature are suspended. The individual pieces
recall the dimension of childhood. Although the
toy is, say, a monster, still it fits into your hand.
It is growling, but you make the sound.
Airplanes crash, but you are not hurt. This
opportunity to play and re-play the favorite or
feared scene is reminiscent of childhood play.
And the attitude of playing and improvisation is
crucial to the expressive arts experience.

Paolo Knill calls play the neighbor of dance,
both having in their root words the concept of
circularity. In dancing we step around and
about, repeating the figure but going nowhere in
particular. Playing is like that. No linear direc-
tion to playing. The “rules” in playing are made
up on the spot and abandoned whenever their
usefulness wanes. As play develops the imagina-
tion is given greater range. The constraints of
literal reality relax, and the unusual and
improbable become the essence of the thing.

In my practice with high-functioning adults,
it is often the small people and animals which
help recall the attitude of “just playing” into the
alternative experience of worlding that helps
shift our effective realities.

Once the oeuvre emerges, it is obvious that
much can be gained from the interaction of the
client/artist and the artwork through play alone,
right in the tray.

It is important to note that client/artists in
my practice don’t universally engage in “the dia-
logue of play” with their oeuvre. Often, creating
and viewing the image is enough. But it might
lead to a desire for amplification and intermodal
transfer.

Intermodal Transfers and
Amplification

It is in the use of phenomenological working
and intermodal transfer that the tradition of
Expressive Arts therapy diverges most radically
from existing therapeutic approaches working
with miniatures. By regarding our scene as an
artwork, we open the door to amplifying the
image through another medium in dozens of
ways. Instead of relying on pre-determined
meanings, we look phenomenologically and go
toward the mystery.

The pleasure and sense of attachment that
the client/artist has for his or her final design is
rarely casual. One woman actually climbed into her tray!

Others may want to "record" the work by photographing it, or mapping it out or painting the scene.

When I help a client/artist transfer the figures out of the little scene and onto the big studio, things happen. When placed on the studio floor in the form of a scarf, what was a tiny dot in the sand now becomes a passageway into the underworld, or a secret world.

One can write the story, the beginning, middle, end. The "first, and then and finally." Figures can be named, a biography invented or allowed to be divulged. Stories unfold as one recounts exactly what is seen in the tray. One can pretend to be on the scale of the tray and take a walk in there. What is that like?

I ask the client to give the tray a title, name the various figures and decide which hold the most interest for them. A figure or grouping can be "blown up" to life size by the client. Like the woman with the flamenco dancer, who she feared. When asked "If you were the flamenco dancer, how would it be?" she began to cry. Taking cues from the figure, I ask "she is dancing, can you do that? What does the dance tell you?" She danced weakly at first, but when the members of her group danced for her, she got stronger and joined the dance with a vibrant "Ole!" We stomped and clapped until she said "I want to reclaim that part." She was warm and red and glowing.

We can create a short drama based on the figures: what is the action? The dialogue? If in a group perhaps the others can enact the scene. Perhaps the egg in the tray contains something important or special, but this will not be revealed unless it is asked. Perhaps the tiny bottle holds an elixir which brings the maker closer to their source of inspiration, so the stopper must be taken off and the make-believe liquid quaffed. When we are on the right trail, there is a sense of adventure, of playfulness, of suspense; something is going to happen, and we don't know if we will like it or not!

Some scenes hold so much import that an individual works with them in various ways over the period of a year. Sometimes the tray isn't important, and small toys go outside or on a "story board." Sometimes just the sand is what important.

As with all intermodal work, the associations and possibilities for further work are idiosyncratic to the individual and the time. I look back into my tray.

The red moon makes me sad and a little uneasy. I think of the bloody moon of Old Testament prophecies, about the end of time. I fear our Christian President. When anyone claims to have God on their side, I get uneasy. The little ceramic girl with her yellow pigtails reminds me of my childhood's farmland values. I turn her over and notice, "Made in occupied Japan." She comes from another wartime. She survived. The jasper tiger seems like Blake's tyger, burning bright. He brings the existential questions. The Red Crescent is to the Middle East what the Red Cross is to the US. Is that a helpful hint? There are countless avenues to explore. Following the complex imaginal threads of my simple diorama, my mind returns once again to the original question of this article. What are the techniques and uses for miniatures which are compatible with expressive arts work?

The Future in Miniature

My philosophical understanding of miniature work as an art-making resource for the studio has changed since my first training in 1978 with Dr. Burney. To grasp the miniature diorama and sand play as a part of the deep artistic tradition is to rediscover a useful tool for the artist-helper. To state simply, "This is art," instead of "This is therapy," unlocked many doors for me. This is the noticing of the thinker.

The hands and eyes also have their noticings. Miniature work reconnects me with the innate human skills of play and art making. Many traditions and forms can inform the work, as we have seen above. And there are more.

The sand tray itself is such a small accessible frame, it can present a task less terrifying than the big empty floor, the white empty paper, or the blank page.

Now, after making a few sketches, I feel ready to take apart my diorama, placing the miniatures back onto the alcove shelves. The
image continues to work in my mind and heart. In this expressive arts way of continuing the dialogue, I feel grateful for the image, the medium and the small world from which some understanding is again beginning to emerge.

References

www.aldrichart.org/pastexhibitions


