



The Australasian Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy

presents

An Interview with Elena Molinari

author of

Binocular Vision:

An Inquiry into Psychoanalytic Techniques and Field Therapy

Interview Conducted by

Yvette Willoughby Editor in Chief of the AJPP

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Yvette Willoughby: My name is Yvette Willoughby, and I am currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Australasian Journal of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, which is a journal that discusses and publishes material that's of a psychoanalytic nature, whether it be a paper, an essay, some research, or a book review, or a film review.

And we've only recently become an online journal and that's involved learning a lot of new things. But it's also given us new opportunities to do things like this – to interview someone and have something in a video format. So, it's been a bit of an exciting journey for us.

Today I'd like to introduce Elena Molinari, who is a psychoanalyst at the Italian Psychoanalytic Society and an International Psychoanalytic Association member.

She began her professional life working as a pediatrician, and she's worked as a private analyst with adults, children and adolescents. Currently, she teaches child neuropsychiatry for the postgraduate course in art therapy at (I'm hoping I'm pronouncing this properly) Vera Academia de Bella Art in Milan.

Before I introduce Elena and begin to talk about Elena's new book, I first need to just acknowledge the original caretakers of the land here in Australia. I'm on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I want to pay my deepest respect to their elders, past and present, and the children who will be the leaders of tomorrow.

So tonight (today for Elena) I'm wanting to talk to Elena about this book, which is her latest publication: *Binocular Vision. An Inquiry into Psychoanalytic Techniques and Field Therapy*.

I'm so grateful to have an opportunity to interview you, Elena. Before I begin, I just want to say there's something I feel like we need to acknowledge: That it's one thing to interview an author of a book, a writer, a book, and ask about the book and writing, but it's another thing to interview a psychoanalyst about themselves because traditionally, a psychoanalyst often perhaps doesn't self-disclose. But I feel like in your book, Elena, there's quite a bit of self-disclosure. Obviously, it's appropriate in the moments where you do so. This interview might wind up becoming a bit bifocal or even multifocal as I attempt on one hand to remain focused on the content of the book, but on the other hand, I'm sort of indulging some of my own curiosity about you, the author and analyst in this journey, and I hope I find an appropriate space between these two hands to illuminate the central message while learning more about you.

So, Elena, I understand you have had this journey from becoming a paediatrician and then a psychoanalyst who has a private practice and you're also teaching neuropsychiatry in the art therapy programme in Milan. In my imagination living in Milan means that you're surrounded by wonderful art, great food, and abundant, abundant beauty. Tell me, is this a source of inspiration for you? And maybe tell me a bit about what gave you the most motivation in to write this book.

Elena Molinari: I perhaps think that the inspiration I derive from Milan is a reflection of my own deep experience, a mix I think of various elements of sensation, some pleasant and some other not so much.

Writing serves a fundamental purpose of bringing order to the complex interplay between the analyst and the patient. A space we intellectually refer to as the traditional field. By documenting

these analytical events and people we encounter, we recreate, the childhood experience of emerging from the clouds, savouring the illusion of creating the world and then unearthing its most delightful expects.

Using a culinary metaphor, a book is, in my opinion, a fusion of dining in a Milan restaurant and the art of cooking.

My students and the numerous families I had the privilege to meet were the true essence of Milan, their presence and interaction adding a unique flavour to my experience.

Yvette Willoughby: I'm sure. Your books – they serve to translate and illuminate psychoanalytic ideas expressed by Bion, and later Baranger (I'm hoping I'm pronouncing it correctly) Civitarese and Ferro and others that talk about the fields in psychoanalysis.

Your work and your writing demonstrate to me a way of thinking that incorporates multiple focal points that develop within the relational space between the analyst and the analysand.

In the book's introduction, you suggest so eloquently that art can be therapeutic, and you clarify by saying it's not consolatory but therapeutic.

This book, I believe, explores this link with some really fine examples – many fine examples and your comment reminded me of something that, if you're familiar with John Berger, art critic and writer, in his last book "Confabulation" published back in 2016 he said, in examining the process of true translation, he suggests that this demands a return to the pre-verbal in art translation. Can you tell us a bit more about the therapeutic value of art?

Elena Molinari: Allow me to illustrate this with a clinical example at first:

A few years back, a young girl created a drawing that I shared with their parents, curious about their interpretation.

This artwork, a reflection of the relationship with me, was not about their judgement, but about the emotion it stirred in them. The drawing depicted the little girl in her parent's bed with the dominant feature of a large chandelier. The little girl, unable to capture the chandelier's perspective, drew it as a flat circle of candles.

What unfolded was a profound self-reflection facilitated by the drawing acting as a projective test. It led the parents to interpret their emotions, steered by the drawing and their relationship with their child.

The father, for instance, saw in the chandelier a crown of knives around the central point. The figure, reminiscent of a knife thrower show he had recently seen.

The mother, on the other hand, shared her feeling of guilt and anger for not being able to maintain her rightful place in the bed.

Art, in its unique way, delves into the depth of our souls unearthing the most profound and unspoken emotion. It strips us of the familiar comfort of our belief. Something touching us with the shapeliness of a knife.

Unlike other experiences, I think art never inflicts harm. It is a safe space to explore and understand our emotion. It may cut deep, but it never kills us.

Yvette Willoughby: I guess, like the Rorschach, it can tell us so much. Thank you.

In your previous book, “Field Theory in Child and Adolescent Psychoanalysis. Understanding and Reacting to Unexpected Developments” that was published in 2017 and now in this book, you refer to several concepts relating to the visual sense, paintings, performance, art, photography and beyond the idea of binocular vision.

I understand that Freud also had an interest in the visual aspects of the unconscious. This, with his recognition of the screen memory. And I discovered a while back that the philosopher Walter Benjamin actually had an idea that he put forward about an optical unconscious; the visual sense is shown to be very important in human development and also in the development of symptoms.

And in some of your examples in this book, the role of seeing and of being seen is almost central to the work which historically has been more associated with talking and hearing. I wondered if you could tell us a bit more about this – some of your thoughts about it?

Elena Molinari: Early in your previous question, you mentioned the art critic John Berger's book “Confabulation”. This book resonated with me deeply, and he shared his experience of being an orphan of loving. His parents shaped his life choices.

While at the beginning of life it is touch and smell that guide us to our contact with others, sight is the sensor that develops in the distance and preserves the hunger for contact within itself.

We cling to sight for various reasons when the object slips away at a not too early stage. In other words, if the beautiful and the good are the same at the beginning of life, we may cling to the beautiful to find again a little milk.

My passion for pictorial art is something that has to do with me and with my history. Thanks to many other experiences it has become something that has consolidated as a relational style with people I meet.

Yvette Willoughby: Fascinating. Thank you! That's very honest and open of you to share that too.

I want to skip to the seventh chapter in this book. It's sort of paradoxically titled “L'Origine Du Monde, At the End of the Analysis. Treating a Patient Obsessed with Pornography.” There's so much to be explored in this chapter regarding transference, countertransference, and the riddle that the erasure of the analysts might have allowed the development of what Bion has termed “O.”

This was achieved, if I'm correct, when Mr P no longer experienced himself as being 'looked at' from a distance – his earliest object relationship, but yet could perhaps begin to see the analyst from a different position after making her disappear.

The powerfully evocative painting by Gustav Courbet from 1866 somehow facilitated within you, the analyst, a transition whereby they discovered a need to be somewhat faceless or without a head, or to be with Mr P, or at least achieve invisible oneness. I noticed also in this chapter that the analyst is never I or me. And I wonder if this might say something about the experience of this really delicate, yet difficult experience of disappearing.

Elena Molinari: Whoever reads, grasps something that you don't know or even thought about, not enough. I think when like this, writing in the third person is very difficult for me, as for many women, because women's writing almost always starts from personal experience.

Then, before sharing an article with others, I often ask my husband, who doesn't do my job but is an emotionally and intellectually generous man, to read what I write and give me feedback. Very often, he reminds me how first-person writing brings psychoanalysis closer to a novel than a scientific exploration. He thinks that academic writing requires that you write in the third person.

Mr P's story dragged me into very intimate and sensitive areas. I was also afraid that making the hypothesis that an analysis had its best outcome in therapy interruption could expose me to severe judgement so I rewrote the entire article in the third person, even if it didn't convince me.

When I sent the file of the different chapter to Routledge, I sent to the editor the male version realising much later how dissonant it was from the rest of the book.

As you said, "No I, no me."

It is a track in the style of having suffered something, perhaps not knowing how to be fully involved in the harrowing experience of loss.

Suffering is undoubtedly the most primordial experience of object or loss in short. Perhaps Mr P and I ran away together. Him out of the analysis, I out of my ghosts.

A trace of this escape remained in the use of the third person, I think.

Yvette Willoughby: Thank you.

"The Artistic Encounter" (Isaacson, 2011) and Steve Jobs' Calligraphy course described in Chapter 2 are especially indelible as reading about them encourages one to imagine the experience.

It reminded me a little bit of Audrey Hepburn in the film Roman Holiday when Gregory Peck challenges her to put her hand inside the mouth of truth or Bocca Della Verita. In Audrey's case though, the truth would be revealed through her hand being bitten off. Whereas in the artist's experiment, it is somehow revealed through the other hand's interpretation of experiencing the sensorial aspects. And this gets translated, as you describe it, into a sign but not a symbol.

And this seems an important concept to connect with in working – particularly with children on the autism spectrum. I wonder if you can say something more about navigating the space with neurodiverse children or adolescents.

Elena Molinari: Yes, not neurotypical children can feel a sense of fear or even terror when faced with the world of objects that they struggle to relate to.

As the beautiful association with the mouth of truth suggests, an encounter with emotional thought can occur through hands, mouth, touch, and sensuality in general. Discovering together a chance of coming into contact in a very primitive way – a pre-symbolic way.

The mouth is, in this image that you propose – you offer us – is not made to say words but to offer a first form of sensorial containment, and cannot be answered that way, but seek a first encounter, a container at the level of sensation and proto-emotion.

We keep memories of these early stages of development. But making them operational is like free diving to great depths and giving up breathing, like returning to a prenatal state of fusion.

These attempts to regress are distressing because it puts us back into a situation of pain and not understanding. Giving sense and meaning is ultimately the only way to survive the possible annihilation impact of the real.

Yvette Willoughby: Thank you.

In Chapter 6, your colour field painting is a conceptual essay you have discussed, and you've linked Bion's Paris seminar with Rothko's last exhibition in Houston. You suggest Bion and Rothko assume that a work of art can only exist if an interlocutor is willing to meet it and feel the emotion. You quote Bion in the Paris seminar, suggesting that if an analyst did not consider himself an artist, he's in the wrong profession and Rothko's large life-size paintings might provide a visual representation of what Bion terms "the Ceasura".

I wonder if you have any other ideas or thoughts about how a psychotherapist and their patient might discover this blurry space towards a new kind of creativity.

Elena Molinari: Yes. So, the choice to paint on a large canvas was not just a matter of scale but was a deliberate decision to immerse the viewer in his artistic work. He believed that a smaller painting could potentially deal with the emotional and sensory experience that the art offers, thereby distancing us from the artistic intent.

Within these extensive campaigns, Rothko's departure from figuration is evident, replaced by an extensive background that interacts in various ways. The most captivating element is the line as a dark black or a colourful dialogue that both unites and divides.

This line, the painting's focal point, draws our eyes and often resonates with us the most. It builds the concept of Ceasura, adds a layer of intrigue, defining it as the intermediate point between the conscious and unconscious—sanity and insanity—the bond, the synapse, the union of the transitive and transitive modes.

Two distinct experiences can be imagined within the artistic space. The first is the obstructive experience, where theories, memories and ideas from mental barriers that underlie the emotional encounter with the artwork.

The second is the harmonious experience where the mind and the body—sleep and walking, consciousness and unconsciousness—coexist in a balanced state, allowing for a deeper connection with the art.

Your query about how to enter the artistic space and explore it creatively is not just intriguing but also holds significant value.

I firmly believe that it necessitates the collective, the collective contribution of our minds as the exploration of complexity often thrives on a group effort. This underscores the importance of shared understanding and appreciation of art, making each individual perspective a valuable part of the discourse.

More than how to enter, we can say something about what we experience when we happen to be there. Generally, we experience a sensation of dizziness, the experience of not understanding – of disturbing liquidity where what is mine and what is yours is barely distinguishable.

If this experience is also an experience of beauty, new nuances of ideas may be born within the thin line of contamination between minds.

Yvette Willoughby: It's intriguing! I'm also intrigued by the way you combine concepts that often reflect polarity, like masculine, feminine, inside, outside, conscious, and unconscious, with the metaphor of the binocular vision of the analyst's lens.

I really like your comment in the introduction. Referring to Byon offering the listener an aesthetic experience rather than purely theoretical, you say this needs to be dreamed and mentalised—becoming conscious and unconscious simultaneously.

I wonder if you can say something more about a stance of knowing, but at the same time not knowing.

Elena Molinari: Yes. An aesthetic experience passes through channels of predominantly emotional processing and therefore is not necessarily consciously symbolise-able and transforming into words and meaning.

Still, at the same time, it becomes a more memorable experience which leaves a trace of itself in the implicit memory. Beyond the concepts of all experience, a profound example of mutual transformation is a catalyst for change. This memorable experience not only expands the patient's capability but also enriches the therapist's understanding fostering a deep connection between them.

Reflecting on the whole experience I am reminded of the universal journey of birth. Here, mother and child are first one and then become two. Both undergoing a transformative experience. After this, they tend to re-establish an intense conscious and unconscious bond between them, leading them to be one, but on the other level of experience.

As humans, we all have the potential for multiple births because, as Anna Arendt suggests, man is not made to die, but to be born many times.

Yvette Willoughby: I find myself thinking a lot about what you reflect on about Bion's ideas of the beta elements—that accretions of stimuli fit for evacuation and projection are the building blocks of experience—and, furthermore, Ferro's positing around balpha elements, perhaps existing in the transforming proto-container.

You suggested, and it seems evident in your case example of baby Anna, that a fluidity and level of reciprocity occurring between the mother and infant. That an infant may indeed be required to contain their mother's anxieties, and in these circumstances at times the infant can still develop their own container function.

In your vignette, the mother's proto-container was able to intersect with her infant's in what seemed to resemble a type of dance between the two. Can you tell us something more about this? As it seems to be something so very important to understand while it lies at the basis of so much we experience in our work with patients.

Elena Molinari: Yes, Baby Anna and her and her mother can begin to meet in this primitive area of the mind, and all patients, even the most serious ones, have within them a potential for life and a desire to meet the other.

What can we be?

The aim of a therapist is to facilitate this type of meeting. It remains faithful. Take an act of faith to the thought that actions are speaking actions and not predominantly attacks of the bone. That projective identification has primarily a communicative value. Be kind to yourself if you happen to participate in an enactment as little as possible. If we can think that these beta elements, which are primitive sensations and emotions, can have something vital, then we can use them constructively.

Yvette Willoughby: When you were able to present for us here in 2023 last year, November, you presented Chapter Three: One Child, Two Parents, A Psychoanalyst. In Other Words, a Group.

What was reinforced for me was the sensitivity and care that you offered to your child patient Adella and Adella's parents, seeing how Adella was bringing their symptoms through her behaviours. After learning a little more about their lives, you associated your experiences of them with images of Egon Schiele's drawings where his hands are central to the image. Which brings to you the understanding about Adella's use of her hands to make her feeling bring feelings of pleasure and make that predominate a dynamic that's also played out by her father, while confronting the painful effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and him clinging to Eros is met with disgust in his wife, the mother.

My overall sense of the work this work is that your hands were holding them all. Your hands are holding them all and you say, "I ask myself what my own hands must do or not do and become aware of the need to not fall into a trap of caregiving".

I think this is an important thing for us to think about, and I wondered if you could expand a little on this thought as I'm conscious that in the Australian context, many child therapists are also holding the parents, which also holds some risks I think.

Elena Molinari: Parents often perceive therapists as people who know more than them or are more capable in the relationship. This places the therapist in an idealised place and, at the same time, exposes them to the risk that normal ambivalence will grow and become an obstacle in therapy, up to and including possible interruption.

One way to counter this risk is for the therapist to adopt the role of an orchestra director. This involves maintaining a keen awareness of commitment but recognising that the collective therapeutic experience is not solid they're doing. In the therapy of this family, which took place through the process of dual and group settings, I was able to offer an experience of containment of the specific anxiety of each member of this small group.

The images of Schiele's painting that rose in my mind mainly remained private but served as a trailer for the transformation of a nightmare into daydreaming.

Yvette Willoughby: It's a beautiful way to put it. Is there anything more you feel you'd like to say about this book and that my questions haven't provided an opportunity to discuss more?

Elena Molinari: I can say that I am grateful to the publisher who asked me if I had a proposal for a possible book and allowed me to find the common thread that runs through my research. Sometimes, we only realise in hindsight that despite taking different paths, we continue to return to a point, a trigger for unsolved aspects of our experience.

All the people I talk about have helped me see them better. They gave me the possibility of seeing binocularly. Which does not mean, as in the experience of the body, seeing clearly and in perfect focus. But rather catching shards and emotions through within the dust of emotion we are constantly immersed in.

I have to thank you, Yvette, who read the book in such a deep way. All that you were discussing with me in the seminars and now taking the time to listen to me, thank you very much.

Yvette Willoughby: Oh well, the pleasure's mine and I really highly recommend your book. I think it's so beautifully put together, and you're an artist, Elena. The way you write is artful, and you're also – the way you think is, to me, is the thinking of an artist, and I think you've really been able to explain concepts that I have perhaps struggled a little bit to understand. I think you've made it much more clear for me with your examples and candid discussions of your work.

Thank you so much for your time, and I hope that we see each other again sometime soon.

Elena Molinari

Thank you to you and bye. Bye, bye.