

Experiencing Leisure Kits in Relation to Art Education:

A Research Creation Project

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## ABSTRACT

### **Experiencing Leisure Kits in Relation to Art Education: A Research Creation Project**

Cecilia Torres

Artistic leisure kits, such as paint by numbers, became a popular item in demand throughout the pandemic. As I was dealing with the anxiety of uncertainty and the overwhelming amount of information, I decided to investigate the popularity of leisure kits and their possible incorporation as a transitional strategy within an art classroom. People writing about these kits claimed they might fulfill the newly acquired leisure time that appeared due to the mandatory isolation, while simultaneously releasing tension and dissipating overthinking. Due to their increasing popularity, I wanted to find out what people experience when working with leisure kits, and if they might help lead to creativity. My research question was, does completing leisure kits provide any learning outcomes, and if so, what are those outcomes? Using research-creation methodology and heuristics, I discovered the potential of leisure kits for the increase of confidence and motivation, the experience of flow, and the decrease of art anxiety that support the creative process. I immersed myself in the process by completing three different types of kits to gather information through the discovery phases. In parallel, I interviewed the people who inspired me to explore this avenue, specifically, those who tried kits for similar reasons I did. The interviews allowed me to gather additional information about their thinking process through making, their potential learning experience, and the results achieved. Learning outcomes also emerged, such as problem-solving skills, motor skills, and the questioning of pre-conceived notions of art practice and the necessary skills to achieve them.

### **Territorial acknowledgement**

I would like to begin this thesis by acknowledging that I reside in Tiohtià:ke, also known as Montreal, the traditional and unceded territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation. I conducted this research on Epekwitk, also known as Prince Edward Island, the traditional and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq Nation, and the “birthplace” of the land currently known as Canada.

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## **Experiencing Leisure Kits in Relation to Art Education: A Research Creation Project**

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### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **Introduction**

I work in academic administration and a common question often arises when colleagues and superiors learn about my background in art education, rather than the expected Business or Administration experience. People often want to know how my education relates or supports a career in administration. I am always proud to answer by acknowledging the abilities with which art education provided me. Thanks to my education, I can troubleshoot issues by thinking creatively to reach personal artistic goals and overcome the obstacles that come with it. I was able to attain such skills through my educational demands and art practice training. Making has always been intertwined with my thinking process. Whether reviewing my daily tasks or dealing with an issue with my family, making has always been a key component to focus my thoughts and process my feelings. I could be making a card for someone, a scarf for myself, an art project or fixing something around the house; each activity would introduce me to a transformational zone where the task would enable me to shut the ‘extra noise’ and focus on my assignment.

Living through a pandemic has led me to use making to concentrate. The anxiety related to academics, reaching a balance with family, and a fruitful career along with the pressures to succeed seemed to have peaked while in isolation. To cope with the situation, I submerged myself in activities that required making something.



Directed by the connection of thinking through making, I stumbled upon an article relating the need for creation during the Great Depression in United States (Marshall, 2008). Similar to what many people are currently living, the Great Depression caused fear and anxiety due to unemployment and worries for the need of a steady income (Marshall, 2008). This combination can cause toxic and unproductive thoughts, increasing the chances of anxiety. The article focused on the successful marketing campaign of Procter & Gamble, which led thousands of people to begin carving soap to fill their newly available leisure time. Countless people explored the activity as part of the competition promoted by the soap company for monetary reasons, and they inadvertently discovered feelings of achievement. (Marshall, 2008).

It was inevitable for me to connect this article to the current pandemic and lockdown requests with which we now must accommodate. This led me to think of the importance of focused leisure during uncertain times. After sharing my own experience and methods of making to cope with anxiety, a few people close to me tried a similar approach. Several turned to leisure kits such as painting by numbers or mandala colouring books as a method to tackle their time during isolation. For the purpose of this thesis, I will refer to leisure kits specifically as art related kits that contain all materials needed to make the work, including the pre-determined outcome.

Many fine arts and art education communities do not consider leisure kits as a creative process nor a work of art due to the numerous constraints that must be followed, which discourages the user to break any rules. A commonly held point of view is that a work of art should contain a creative aspect, which defines the intention of the creator with a specific attitude or perspective (Barrett, 2008). This being said, leisure kits create a full set of constraints that discourage the user from expressing creativity and individuality as long as those constraints are

followed. Most of the kits are equipped with a set of materials and defined images to complete, leaving little to no space for choices. Yet, many people purchase and enjoy these kits. The popularity of such kits reached a historic high for a few companies due to the required home isolation during the pandemic (Brunner, 2020).

Their popularity has led me to question, what do people experience when working with these kits? Does completing the kits provide any learning outcomes, and if so, what are those outcomes? Through research-creation methodology, I explored leisure kits as a making process to understand the experience and implications of working with such kits. Using Heuristics (Moustakas, 2011), I immersed myself in the process by completing three different types of kits to gather information through the discovery phases. In parallel, I interviewed the people who inspired me to explore this avenue, specifically, those who tried kits for similar reasons I did. The interviews allowed me to gather additional information about their thinking process through making, their potential learning experience, and the results achieved.

### **Purpose**

Throughout my time teaching art in schools and community centres, I witnessed the atmosphere created when a participant focused in the creation process. It was a mix of community engagement ignited by collective concentration, exchanges, experience, and focus. The sporadic discussions, conversations, and ideas, as well as differing points of view and spontaneous subjects that develop throughout the experience of making, created a unique atmosphere. Either individually or in a group, the concentration or focus required when making seems to transform the state in which we live, practically slowing it down. It is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014), a well-known psychologist, refers to as a state of flow. There are specific conditions to follow in order to achieve such flow: goals are clear, feedback is

immediate, skills match the challenge, the level of concentration is deep, our problems are forgotten, the control of the activity is in our hands, self-consciousness disappears, we lose the sense of time, and the experience becomes worthy for the user (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The nine points that were just mentioned are common characteristics I experience when making something. The more fascinating the task, the more flow I seem to experience. For this research, I was interested in exploring the flow experience created by making and discovering if the results that can lead to creative practices.

As mentioned by Nithikul Nimkulrat (2012), a professor in the faculty of Design at OCAD University in Toronto, “through handling materials in practice, a form of tacit knowledge arises, providing a particular way of understanding the practice that is grounded in the hand-on practice itself” (p.3). Making requires taking decisions, considering points of view, considering a goal, and thinking about the steps and process to achieve it. It requires problem solving and critical thinking (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras & Brooks, 2004).

Leisure kits might potentially allow participants to explore all the flow criteria, similarly to what many fine art approaches do, minus the anxiety. From a young age, students have classroom experiences that caused them to connect art making with fear, possibly due to unachievable expectations and their perception regarding lack of skills (Metcalf and Smith-Shank, 2001). My interest in kits is based on the process as an opening for creative practice without the stress factor often found for young adults and adult students who do not consider themselves to be artist. This was exemplified when a group of researchers created a design computer program for non-artist with basic constraints not often needed for professionals (Benedetti et al., 2014). By simplifying the computer program to be user friendly for non-artists, the activity became less intimidating, turning out to be a success (2014). Both the researchers

and Csikszentmihalyi (2014) confirmed that having constraints within an activity is a quality often needed for participants who have negative connotations related to art (Benedetti et al., 2014). Such constraints help the activity to be achievable and successful.

I believe leisure kits might hold promise for art teachers because the emphasis is on full constraints within the process that will lead to an achievable result. There seems to be a connection with anxiety and making through fine art processes, such as painting, drawing or sculpture, due to the pressure, the expectations and the capacities needed to achieve a successful result (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). I believe it is important to expand the field of Art Education to reach a greater group of adult participants to share the insights and results achieved through art and making, using leisure kits as a starting point.

I agree with Csikszentmihalyi (2014) who suggests that education and instruction is not only to train future artists, but also to focus on the process rather than the outcome. Over time, I have had conversations with people about their approaches and need for making as well as the importance they attached to leisure kits. The kits seem to support the steps towards an activity most users thought they did not have the skills to achieve. I believe art education could investigate such constraints within an activity as a starting point for people who have anxiety when experiencing art making.

My goal for this research was to explore the process involved in leisure kits and immerse myself to discover if engaging with them can create flow experience. As explained by Csikszentmihalyi (2014), a few important characteristics to achieve this flow is to have clear instructions and knowledge of what to do within the activity at hand, to know how well they are doing, have feedback, and have an achievable goal. By keeping constraints, the user may

experience these positive aspects of flow, possibly opening the door to a new activity as a fresh avenue to explore and take risks for the next step of the creative process.

The increased popular use of leisure kits and tendency to buy and complete them during the pandemic (Brunner, 2020), would potentially open new avenues to incorporate such approaches when teaching art to adults who are not artists or adults who are afraid to engage with making art.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

This literature addresses three areas of concern: (1) the historical context of leisure kits, and reasons for their popularity (2) the anxiety related to art making, (3) background information about constricted activities and the position of selected art educators.

To introduce historical background of leisure activities and its relation to popularity, I introduce the article “Clean Cuts – Procter & Gamble’s Depression-Era Soap-Carving Contests” by Jennifer Jane Marshall (2008). Her text gives background information of previous needs for leisure and do-it-yourself kits along with the results given by such activities. The article, as mentioned previously, described the explosion of soap carving and other handicraft activities during the Great Depression. The historical background made the link between the uses of leisure activities during that time and the current Covid-19 pandemic. I also included Michelle Brunner’s (2020) article, “Looking for a Stress-Soothing Craft? Try an Old One: Paint by Numbers” which describes the popularity of paint-by-numbers as one of the leisure kits commonly used during the pandemic. This Washington Post article makes the connection to the task as one of the leading activities similar to soap carving in the 1920s and 30s. Lastly, I referred to “Vintage Paint-by-numbers Painting Make a Comeback” by Vanessa Silberman (2001), to demonstrate how the value of making can change over time and how paint-by-number kits are increasing in value as a collectible item.

To discuss the benefits of crafts within the classroom as a transition from leisure kits, I included Sinikka Hannele Pöllänen’s (2011) article “Beyond Craft and Art: A Pedagogical Model for Craft as Self-Expression.” This article provided context for the increase of innovative

activities including crafts within an art classroom and support the development creativity as a progression from leisure kits.

To discuss the anxiety related to art and the background information for it, I worked with texts from Deborah Smith-Shank. In her article “Beyond This Point There Be Dragons: Pre-Service Elementary Teachers’ Stories of Art Education” (1993), she explains the importance of understanding the causes for the scars of art anxiety to avoid becoming what she refers to as dragon teachers. Smith-Shank also worked alongside Suesi Metcalf (2001) for the article “The Yellow Brick Road of Art Education”. The authors suggest approaches to use in a classroom setting, where students are often anxious when dealing with art as the subject. Both articles focus on the experiences of pre-service elementary teachers who struggle with art as a teaching subject due to their negative experiences as students themselves. Future generalist teachers often struggle when teaching art, so these articles supported the possibility of using leisure kits as an entry point of comfort for participants with art anxiety. An additional article by Danna Huxhold and Libba Willcox (2014), titled “Synthesizing Experiences in Arts Methods Courses” was included as an to discuss anxiety in pre-service teachers and the inclusion of an art curriculum.

As a way to introduce a positive outcome related to making and imitating within a classroom, I referred to Marshal and D’Adamo’s (2018) article, “Art Studio as Thinking Lab: Fostering Metacognition in Art Classrooms”. The text explains how metacognition can be present within art and making. Metacognition was examined as a thinking process that could be developed thorough leisure kits.

The following articles were used to explore different points related to constraints as a process to encourage creativity in connection to the potential use of leisure kits in art classrooms.

Judith Burton's (2009) article, "Creative Intelligence, Creative Practice: Lowenfeld Redux" discusses several aspects of Viktor Lowenfeld's legacy and what remains as key concepts. Lowenfeld believed strongly on the use of imagination and rejected imitation or telling the student what to do (Burton, 2009). As such, he was against the use of coloring books, since they provide a strong constraint for imagination. Irving L. King (1991) later dismantled Lowenfeld's position and recognized the credibility of colouring books and constraints that enable creation with his article "In Search of Lowenfeld's Proof That Coloring Books Are Harmful to Children". This relates to the leisure activity of colouring books in relation to the restriction they offer to the user and how constraints can help as a developmental stage for people who need support when starting a new activity. As a main entry on the needs of constraints and the achievement of flow experience, the works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) were researched in-depth and his work became the basis for my research. He introduced the importance of flow experience within the classroom as well as necessary constraints that can encourage it. His research provided me with theoretical foundation to the reasons behind the use of leisure kits within the classroom.

Finally, Minna Huotilainen et al's. (2018) article, "Why Our Brains Love Arts and Crafts: Implications of Creative Practices on Psychophysical Well-being", strengthened key aspects to introduce leisure kits in the classroom. They explain the importance of imitation and limitations for participants who have art anxiety. Both sources demonstrated the importance of constraints as a method to decrease art anxiety and introduce a new art activity through leisure kits.

In order to tackle additional doubts about the possible implications of copying or imitating a work of art or a pre-designed image, I included articles that support the need for copying and imitating as a necessary step to release art anxiety and create a new opening towards



an art activity. Catrinel Haught-Tromp's (2017) article "The Green Eggs and Ham Hypothesis: How Constraints Facilitate Creativity" sums up the support from its title, emphasising constraints that enable. I also added the article by Sio et al. (2015) titled "Fixation or Inspiration? A meta-analytic review of examples on design processes." This article focuses mostly on the use of examples as a means for inspiration in the beginning process of creation. In most cases, it is useful to give an example of possible outcomes when introducing a new idea. I was not able to find an example where kits were used in an art classroom, but there is research on the inclusion of a new digital system used for beginners in design. This example was mentioned earlier on the paper, and the research was used as a comparison to demonstrate the potential of leisure kits as a possible entry to a new art activity (Benedetti et al., 2014).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

My methodology for this paper is Research Creation, as described by Chapman & Sawchuk (2012). I referred to heuristics as a method of inquiry, outlined by Clark Moustakas (2011) in *Heuristic Research: design, methodology and applications*. Heuristics allowed me to explore the experience of leisure kits through my frames of reference as “a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meaning of important human experiences” (Moustakas, 2011, p.2).

Self-dialogue is critical when beginning a journey with heuristics (Moustakas, 2011). Following the six phases of heuristic research allowed me to discover leisure kits in a way in which I had not previously explored. My initial engagement started with buying leisure kits and making them to explore the experiences attached to them. The second step was immersion, where I plunged entirely in the world of leisure kits through making, literature and conversations with others working with such kits, along with every opportunity presented to understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2011). This step was followed by incubation, where I stepped away from the full immersion and let the thoughts simmer, which led me to the following step: illumination. Both steps seemed to work closely with each other, since incubation allowed ideas to settle, letting me make connections and leading me to possible new beginnings (Moustakas, 2011). The next was explication, where I formulated the discoveries I was able to make, to later finalize with creative synthesis.

In the following chapter, I give a detailed explanation of the steps involved within Heuristics in relation to my personal experience and exploration with leisure kits.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Process

My curiosity towards leisure kits, such as paint by numbers and diamond painting, began when learning about the growth of such activities during the pandemic. Restaurants, bars, cinemas, gyms, and any other areas that fulfill leisure time were not available as part of the mandatory isolation imposed by most governments around the world. This led people to have more free time, while isolated at home. Folks began to take on new hobbies or activities that would fill their days and reduce the anxiety related to constant world news (Brunner, 2020). Leisure kits, such as paint by numbers, exploded in popularity with increasing numbers of available items and sales in arts and crafts stores (Brunner, 2020). Similar to what was experienced during the Great Depression, leisure kits or ‘do-it-yourself-hobbies’ became extremely popular due to the newly available leisure time that appeared because of the Covid-19 pandemic (Marshall, 2008). During the Great Depression, soap carving was at the pinnacle of activities taken by people with free time, both to decrease the anxiety of not having a job, and to fulfill time with an activity with a purpose (Marshall, 2008). During that time, the company Procter & Gamble saw the potential of selling their soap as a material to create carvings, which the creator could submit to participate in one of their soap-carving contests (Marshall, 2008). Procter & Gamble’s marketing technique allowed for people to find a craft through soap carving. A similar technique was implemented in the 1950s, when World War II left many American women facing an abundance of leisure time, since they were no longer required in the workforce (Silberman, 2001). At the time, the Palmer Paint Company was looking for ways to sell their products, and so the paint by numbers kit emerged as a new hobby and successful method to expand sales of colored paint in small quantities (Brunner, 2020). Even recognized artist of the

time, Andy Warhol, implemented the kit as a theme and twist within his work with a series titled “Do It Yourself”, where he recreated the process of paint by numbers (Silberman, 2001). Both for soap carving and for paint by numbers, companies would include instructions as part of the do-it-yourself process (Marshall, 2008). The instructions given by Procter & Gamble to begin soap carving mentioned that “failure was a necessary step toward personal and artistic growth” (Marshall, 2008, p.68). This led me to wonder about the popularity of such activities and their possible implementation in the classroom as a learning process. How do I experience leisure kits? What, if any, are the learning outcomes? Unfortunately, I had little to no experience with already-made leisure kits.

### **Initial Engagement**

Considering heuristics (Moustakas, 2011) as the main approach for this thesis, I began with my initial engagement, where I discovered my intense interest in leisure kits. I wanted to find out what people experience when working with leisure kits (Moustakas, 2011). I was determined and extremely curious to know more how the process of experiencing an already-made kit that would lead to a distinct experience of artmaking from the traditional approach I learned in the Fine Arts. Can engaging with leisure kits lead to further creative development? My initial engagement developed even further when considering aspects of the making, such as the possible development of creativity through the engagement with leisure kits, and the potential learning outcomes that could be transferred to an art classroom. Therefore, I questioned further: What are the implications for future students or generalist teachers with art anxiety? What would be the most effective way to use leisure kits in the classroom? What is the experience of other users? What do they learn? What are their outcomes? As mentioned by Vanessa Silberman (2001) in her article “Vintage Paint-by-Number Paintings Make a Comeback”, painting by

numbers encouraged and enabled people to paint, when they might feel threatened by the techniques and standards related to painting. I then considered leisure kits as a potential bridge that could lead to an artistic learning experience. Over time, even leisure kits might be a collector's item, much like fine art, based on the "size, quality of artistry, rarity of the kit, presence of the vintage wooden frame, age of the painting, signature, and theme" (Silberman, 2001, p.52).

### Immersion

Once I was able to identify the motivation that led to my initial engagement, I proceeded with the immersion within leisure kits (Moustakas, 2011). According to Moustakas, the immersion phase intensifies the interest by consuming every aspect of everyday life to understand the subject in depth. In this case, I decided to focus on three specific leisure kits: paint by numbers, punch needle, and diamond painting. I planned to buy one kit of each technique.

### Figure 1

*Leisure Kits Purchased – Paint by Numbers, Diamond Painting, and Punch Needle.*



I went to a store that sold art supplies during the pandemic, where sanitary rules were strict and reinforced. Even though there was a limited number of people who were able to go in the store at one time, I decided to take my decision seriously and take my time to select the kits. I thought of the importance of the image I was choosing since there was a wide variety of choices due to the popularity of the activities. I considered the consequences of choosing an image I would not enjoy, since I might end up disliking the activity due to the lack of motivation. Keeping this in mind, I was automatically repelled by landscapes – a popular image within the options offered in paint by numbers. After much deliberation, I found a hidden box with the portrait of Frida Kahlo. Surprisingly enough, the kit did not have a brand or company showing on the box. The kit included 4 wooden brushes, acrylic paints, a stretched canvas, finishing varnish, a leveler for hanging, hooks for the wall, and the much-needed reference sheet, and it was around \$30.

The portrait caught my attention, since it was not one of her self-portrait pieces, but a beautified version of her paintings. Much to my surprise, her iconic unibrow was removed. Her art increased in popularity over the past years, and much of her work was appropriated by marketers. I had been reading extensively about her work and life during the pandemic, questioning this exploitation of her personal life. Her artwork was relegated to the background compared to her illness and personal fashion choices. I received a book as a gift titled *Frida Kahlo – Making Her Self Up* (Wilcox & Henestrosa, 2018), which exposes her personal items that had been kept purposefully hidden by her husband, Diego Rivera, to preserve privacy. These items varied from her corsets, make-up, medicine, and clothing. They were at the forefront of the book, which provided pictures of the objects, as if they were sold for an auction. This made me wonder if other artists were also exposed in such a way. Do we know what type of medicine

Warhol took? Are there books about it? That information was kept within the media for privacy, and now the government seized the objects and made them readily available for galleries to expose. I took the box with a tone of sarcasm and decided to work with it. I considered how paint by numbers allows for unlimited reproductions of an image. The work of Frida Kahlo was taking the same tone to my eyes, where the same art store where I was purchasing the kits also offered stickers, coloring books, wrapping paper and even magnets of her self-portraits. I was happy with my choice.

## Figure 2

*Materials Included in the Paint by Numbers Kit – Reference sheet, four brushes, acrylic paint, leveler, hooks, varnish, stretched canvas*



I moved ahead to choose my second leisure kit; diamond painting. This kit was an innovative approach to paint by numbers, where instead of paint, the kit had multicolored plastic diamonds that would have to be placed on specifically designated areas to achieve the reproduction of the image. Once again, landscapes were the main choice offered by this type of kit, although the occasional unicorn or multicolored cat was also available. I found a reproduction of Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer* by the same mysterious company I chose for the paint by numbers kit. This kit included a framed canvas, resin diamonds, jelly glue, a plastic pen, and tweezers. The price was slightly higher than the paint by numbers.

### Figure 3

*Materials Included in the Diamond Painting Kit – Tweezers, jelly glue, tray, plastic pen, stretched canvas, and resin diamonds*





Since I had chosen the portrait of Frida Kahlo, I thought it would be interesting to remain on a similar type of reproductions. I selected a famous artist whose portrait was the main aspect of his work. To me, it was far more appealing than a landscape or an animal, so I decided it would be my second leisure kit.

I headed to the textile isle of the store to select my punch needle kit. This was by far the most interesting kit I was going to work with, due to my passion for working with textiles. I had already painted, and I had never tried diamond painting, so I considered punch needle as my third option because it seemed to be an alternative in between; I had never tried it, but I was moderately familiar with the material. The punch needle kit did not seem to be as popular as paint by numbers or diamond painting, as there were only three images to choose from, and only one brand. None of them were related to a famous artist or painting, but rather animals and plants. I reminded myself once again I wanted to select an image I could feel motivated to finish, so I chose a plant. I have a strong bond with plants, and they surround me constantly around the house. Friends and family often refer to my house as a jungle. I thought choosing the image of a plant through textiles would reinforce both of my passions, as well as my motivation to complete the activity. The company who created this kit is called Graine Creative by PWI, and it worked in collaboration with textile artist Agnès Pironon. The kit included yarn, monk's cloth, a punch needle, and an embroidery hoop. The cost was \$30, same as the paint by numbers. This kit was particularly more environmentally friendly. The package, as well as the materials included within the kit, had a sustainable approach compared to the previous two kits. It also seems to have a more individually artistic approach, since it was created in collaboration with a French artist. In addition, the company was clearly marked within the packaging, whilst the other two kits seemed generic and did not indicate the creator company.

**Figure 4**

*Materials Included in the Punch Needle Kit – Embroidery hoop, punch needle, monk's cloth, and yarn*



I decided to begin my experience with leisure kits through paint by numbers. I had never worked with a kit before, but I decided to start with a technique I was already familiar with to avoid or delay any possible frustration. I must admit I was nervous. I was not sure if I would be able to achieve the result shown on the box. I was afraid of making a mistake and not be able to erase it. I was afraid I would not like the activity, and I would get bored after a few tries. I was afraid the materials and paint would be hard to work with because it came with the kit. My fears increased my lack of self-confidence as well as my awareness. I worked for five consecutive days and filmed myself through the process. I also kept journal logs to expand on details about my experience. Sometimes I would work for several hours, and sometimes just during my hour break at work. I worked for a public school, so the pandemic required for all administration and teaching staff to work remotely. This accommodated my switch to work with paint by numbers quite easily. While working, I noticed what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) calls a state of flow.

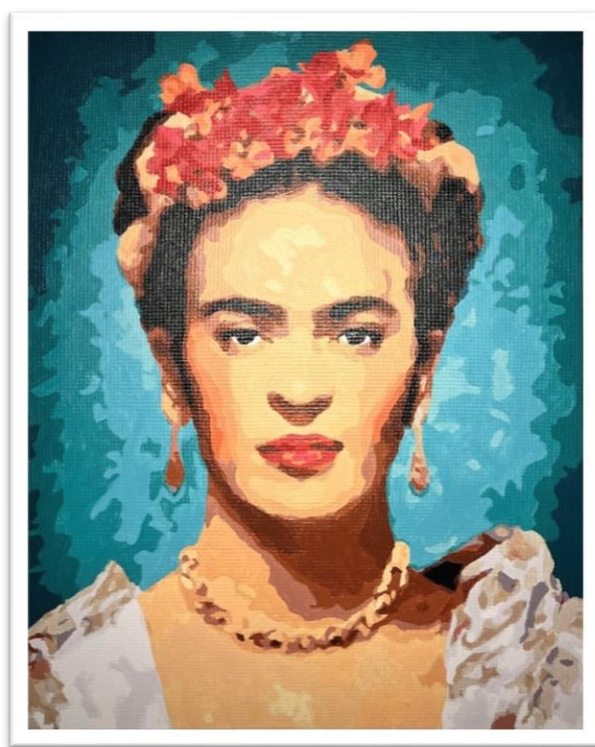
I had wondered if I would be able to experience such state working with paint by numbers, and to my surprise, I did. My goals were clear from the beginning because I knew what I had to do to each step along the way. The feedback was immediate, because I could see from time to time the advancement of the image and the progress I was making. My skills matched the challenge, because even though I was familiar with painting and brush strokes, the detail and attention required to complete the painting was a constant challenge. I concentrated deeply throughout the activity, leading me to forget about my problems of the day, as almost a form of meditation. The control of the activity was in my hands. My self-consciousness and my thoughts dissipated while focusing on the present moment. I was fully in control of the activity since I had read the instructions and I knew what would be expected of me each step along the way. The experience was worthy on its own because it would ignite micro-doses of self-confidence and achievement. Finally, I would absolutely lose track of time. That became one of my favourite parts of flow experience. I was deeply concentrated, and my day would pass by without me realizing it. I was happy to see that all the aspects to achieve flow as described by Csikszentmihalyi (2014) were present. During the pandemic, I found myself consumed by constant news, local and worldwide updates, fear, long term consequences, conspiracies, and new discoveries. As mentioned on Brunner's (2020) Washington Post article 'Looking for a stress-soothing craft? Try an old one: paint by numbers', this activity allowed for time to pass smoothly, giving me a mental break from the news, and served as an outlet that replaced my usual leisure activities during the pandemic. To my surprise, I looked forward to my time dedicated to paint by numbers. I felt one step closer to the understanding of the experience related to leisure kits and its implications.

I was excited to continue the immersion process with my next leisure kit. I decided to work with diamond painting. I had never worked with this approach, so my curiosity was already

present. I filmed my process, as I did with paint by numbers. Filming proved helpful, since I would mention any thoughts that would cross my mind throughout the process, rather than stopping the activity to take notes.

### Figure 5

*Finalized Paint by Numbers.* [Acrylic on canvas]. 16" x 20"



I began by reading the instructions carefully, as I did with the paint by numbers kit. I thought it was a crucial step of the process because it would represent the experience of someone who is approaching the activity for the first time. The instructions were clear and straight forward. I began with excitement and more confidence than with the paint by numbers. I had experienced the idea of a kit, and the amazing results, so my fears regarding expectations had disappeared. Time passed quickly, as it did with paint by numbers, but the feedback was not immediate. I would work for hours each day, just to realize I had completed only a small portion

of the work. The kit quickly became discouraging and transformed to a duty rather than a pleasurable task. As the days passed, I started to dread the feeling of completing the diamond painting. The task was so tedious and unrewarding that finding the motivation to complete it became increasingly more difficult. The task required for me to place each small diamond one at a time, often completing big sections of only one color. This represented a machine-like labour than leisure. I would find myself rushing through the task to complete it faster. My motivation was not the same anymore.

As mentioned earlier, to achieve the experience of flow, one of the requirements is for the skill to match the challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The repetitive motions were not challenging and did not require much proficiency besides the basic motor skills attached to the detailed labour. My thoughts began to wonder towards the hatred of the task and the mandatory completion of it. I had to complete it to see if a different level of achievement might unlock. Self-consciousness was certainly present throughout the activity, which contradicts with the requirements to achieve flow, and the activity also lost its worth (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Once I finished the diamond painting, I was proud of my success, but mostly for the completion of the torture rather than the pleasure of its process. My journal entries would repeat the dread attached to the activity on several occasions.

At the mid-point of the diamond painting, I had decided to start my third leisure kit, to dissipate the lack of motivation I was feeling. I was looking forward to the punch needle kit, since I had never worked with the technique, but I love working with thread, yarn, and fabric. I started the punch needle project the same way I did with the other two leisure kits. I read the instructions and filmed the process. I was surprised on the time required for punch needle in

comparison to diamond painting. I completed the punch needle project in two days, working only a few hours each day.

### Figure 6

*Finalized Punch Needle Kit. [Yarn on monk's cloth]. 9" x 10".*



I was extremely motivated by the technique and the material, as well as the result. As it happened with the paint by numbers kit, I was able to experience flow. All the aforementioned aspects encompassing flow were present. The process was much shorter since the technique allowed me to work faster. The experience left me wanting to continue working with punch needle. I loved the result, and it gave me a much-needed break from diamond painting. I figured alternating between techniques helped me gain new motivation for diamond painting, so I continued exploring punch needle to fully invest myself within the immersion phase.

Throughout the entire process, my mind and eyes would only relate to leisure kits. Even when I left for one week for vacation, I could not help myself and was constantly making connections with leisure kits. I could easily spot stores that would sell kits or people working with them. I even accidentally fell upon a conversation between two people discussing how they

have included paint by numbers as their newly acquired hobby, while comparing pictures of what they have achieved. I was constantly surrounded with comments, ideas and processes surrounding leisure kits. I also remembered my initial encounter with the idea of leisure kits while remembering a scene from the movie *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003), where Julia Roberts – an art history teacher in an all-female college from the 50s – challenges the idea of individuality using paint by number kits. In one of the scenes, she expresses her frustration with the newly gained popularity of paint by numbers, which can guide ‘everyone to be Van Gogh’, only to be shown later by her students that modified versions of the kits can hint individuality.

I decided to explore punch needle even further by combining the idea of two kits in one. I enjoyed paint by numbers, so I took the inspiration of Frida Kahlo’s portrait and made it using punch needle. The combination of both was exciting to me and allowed me to experience flow once again. In between the creation of this new combination, I would continue the process of diamond painting, which was far from being done. Continuing the same train of thought, I decided to explore paint by numbers even further. I realized that I focused so much on the use of colour and their position during my paint by numbers experience, I could probably recreate the painting on my own. I had left-over paint for all colours, so I decided to recreate the painting without following the constraint of the pre-assigned sections from the kit. My brush strokes would overlap the colors, permitting me to remove one of the strict aspects of the process. I was able to experience flow once again. The freedom I was able to achieve only by removing one constraint enabled me to express through brush strokes and colour combinations. The result ended up being remarkably similar to the original paint by number kit, but with a personalized touch expressed through the brush strokes. Thanks to the confidence I was able to gain through the constraints of the kit, I was able to push the experience even further.

I had enjoyed the experiment so much that I decided to continue exploring, but this time, by transforming the approach through the colours. I figured one aspect of paint by numbers should remain, and so I kept Frida Kahlo's portrait once again. For this new approach, I inverted the numbers and colours from what the kit had directed me to do originally. In other words, what used to be #1-Black, would now be #1-Red. I changed all colors and combined them with different numbers. The idea was already exciting to me, so I was looking forward to the result. I was not surprised to find out I absolutely enjoyed the process. It allowed me to incorporate a creative aspect beyond the strict instructions provided by the kit. Once again, removing only one of the constraints gave a personal approach to a process that seems to have been created to be completely impersonal. I was still able to experience flow and the result gave me the motivation to go even further. My next experiment involved changing the material and the colour combinations with which I was going to work. I removed the paint and changed it by markers instead. This approach would remove two of the constraints presented by the paint by numbers kit. The leisure kit came with a reference sheet with the numbers and shapes. I decided to use that sheet as my new canvas. This way, the image would remain the same, but the material and colour combinations would be different. The activity transformed into a guided colouring book. I selected the colours I wanted each number to represent, and then incorporated them using markers. I was impressed by the result. I was already full of confidence, since I knew the result would still look like Frida Kahlo, so it removed the anxiety of knowing if I would achieve something. This led me to think back on my original fears when I started the paint by numbers and how I was able to remove them one by one through the removal of constraints. The confidence I gained through the first steps allowed me to challenge myself further without keeping my fears at the forefront. Exploring and incorporating creativity was, by now, a



motivating experience that had been reinforced with self-confidence thanks to my previous experiments and their results.

### Figure 7

#### *Exploration of Paint by Numbers – Removing Constraints*



*Note.* Image on the left – Acrylic on canvas. 16” x 20”. 2021. Image on the middle – Permanent markers on paper. 11” x 17”. 2021. Image on the right – Acrylic on canvas. 16” x 20”. 2021.

At this point, I managed to complete the diamond painting. I thought of this as a leisure kit that would not lend itself to different approaches. I could use the image to create it through different materials, but I could not necessarily use the diamonds to create new things – and the motivation was not present either. The tedious and repetitive motion to glue each individual diamond removed any excitement left.

**Figure 8**

*Finalized Diamond Painting Kit. [resin diamonds on canvas] 16" x 20"*



*Note.* The diamond painting kit took me about 65hrs to complete it.

Instead, I used Klimt's image to create my own composition of patterns. I got inspiration from the patterns on Klimt's painting, created my own combination and made it using punch needle. This incorporated a new material, a new image, a new size, a different technique, yet kept the same colours. I thought removing one additional constraint at a time was helping my confidence and removing my fears. I wanted to see how far I could go without losing one original aspect of the leisure kit.

**Figure 9**

*Exploration of Punch Needle Inspired by Diamond Painting Kit.* [Embroidery thread on canvas]

23" x 32"



*Note.* This punch needle project took me 75hrs to complete. Almost as much as the diamond painting.

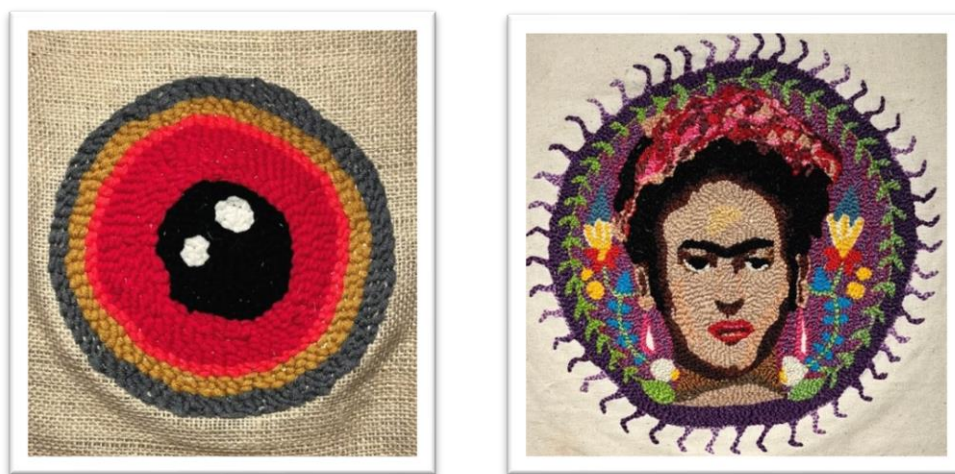
The punch needle proved to be more engaging than the diamond painting. Even though the motion is quite similar, adding a distinctive touch within the project gave me motivation to continue working through it. Flow was present once again. Working with a larger punch needle project helped me greatly. I learned about the importance of tension in relation to the string, the importance of direction in relation to the needle, and the importance of depth while punching.



These were aspects not mentioned on the instructions of punch needle, yet I was able to gain my experience and knowledge through exploration and practice. I realized I had unlocked a few learning outcomes when working with leisure kits.

## Figure 10

### *Further Exploration of Punch Needle*



*Note.* Image on the left – Yarn on burlap. 9” x 10”. 2021. It took me around 4hrs to complete it. Image on the right – Embroidery thread on canvas. 9” x 10”. 2021. It took me about 15hrs to complete it.

To expand within my immersive experience even further, I thought I should incorporate a few of my personal approaches when creating leisure kits. This would combine my personal preferred methods as well as the aspects I had learned through leisure kits. I had to think of what I like to work with that leisure kits did not allow me to explore. I realized I enjoy working on big surfaces, with big dimensions. I noted this aspect as one of the main constraints I wanted to give myself. I then selected an aspect of the leisure kits I enjoyed, so I kept Frida Kahlo’s portrait as the subject and composition. Next, I selected a second aspect I personally enjoyed and chose

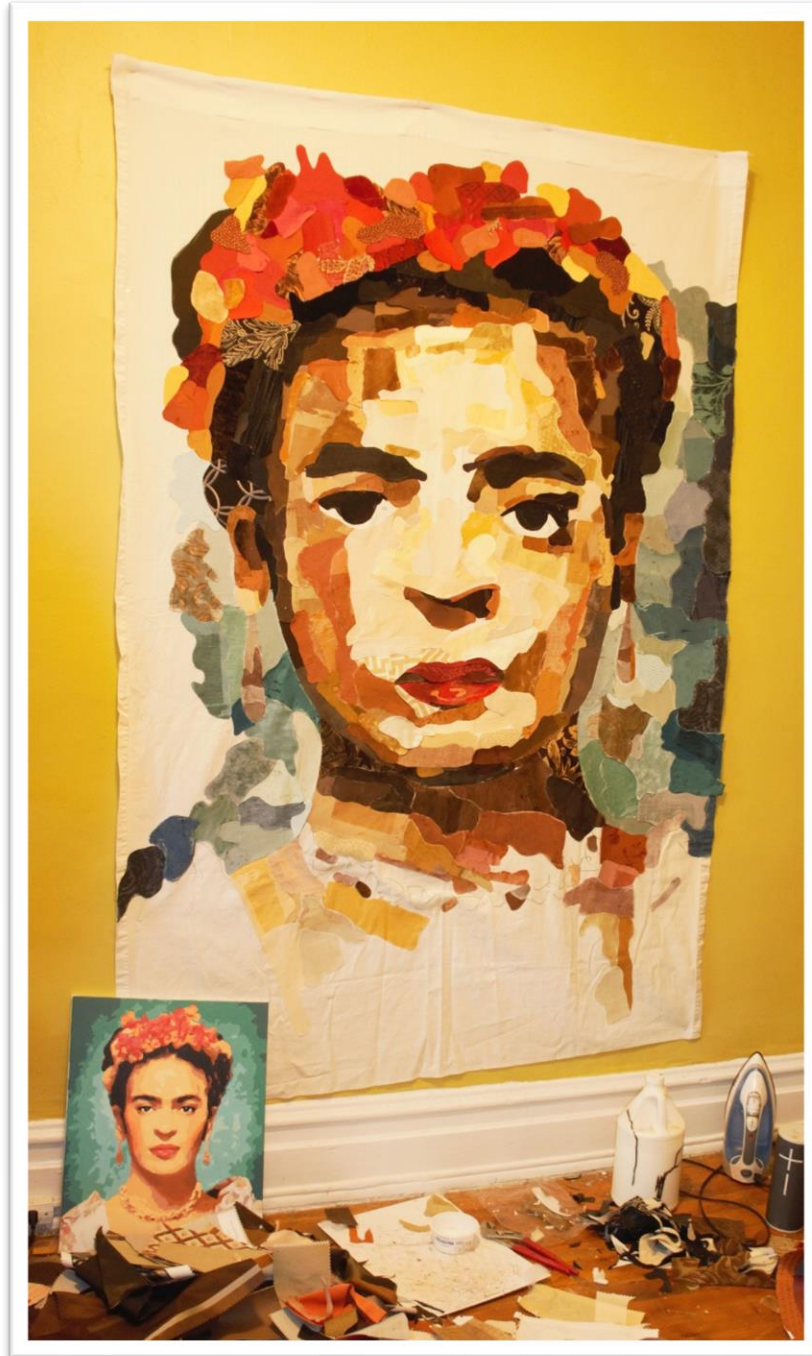
textile as the material. I figured I should include something I had never worked with, so I chose collage with fabric and embroidery. I consider this aspect important to keep the insecurity and possible fears related to a new experience. I wanted to remain out of my comfort zone, since the leisure kits taught me I can overcome my fears while achieving a successful result. Finally, I kept the colours as suggested by the original paint by numbers, to serve me as a guide through the process.

Even though my self-confidence improved, I was still scared to start something I had never tried before. I was unsure about how to start, but I kept reminding myself I had similar fears when starting the leisure kits, and how each allowed me to achieve successful results.

After a few days of cutting and gluing shapes of fabric based on the colours suggested by the paint by numbers kit, I was able to fully complete the image. I decided to try and use my sewing machine as a new challenge. I embroidered using free motion, which was a technique I had never tried before. The experience was tough, but worth it. As many of the experiences I had when trying something new, there were obstacles leading me to a learning process. I would still learn something new each time. In this case, it was the importance the shape of the fabric gives to the piece, the tension of the sewing machine when working with it, the steady rhythm when sewing, the amount of glue needed to avoid lumping of the fabric, and ultimately, the importance of trusting the process and continue working regardless of how the piece was looking.

**Figure 11**

*Work in Progress – Exploring with fabric and embroidery on canvas*



*Note.* I took this image while working with upcycled fabrics. I included the completed paint by numbers as a size reference.

I noticed how hard it was for me to trust the process using leisure kits and experimenting with them. I was constantly attached to my fear of the result and my personal expectations. I often wanted to stop to avoid trying something that would ultimately give a bad result. I learned that there is no such a thing since the result leads to experience and learning.

**Figure 12**

*Exploration of Techniques Inspired by Paint by Numbers.* [Fabric and Embroidery on Canvas]

58" x 82"



*Note.* This was a big piece, over 4 feet width and over 6 feet length. It took about 85hrs to complete, from beginning to end.

By the time I completed the fabric collage, I was quite happy with the result. I also realized I had reached my limit exploiting the leisure kits I chose. I had completed three kits as per their instructions, and created seven alternative outcomes by removing constraints from the initial instructions. This roughly covered almost 400hrs of manual work dedicated to the exploration of leisure kits. According to Moustakas, this means I attained a level of excess of information that requires for me to remove myself from the question and enter the incubation phase (Moustakas, 2011). As part of the immersion process, I also interviewed three people who work with leisure kits. This allowed me to gain a different perspective than my own, to expand the results that leisure kits achieved within other people. I explain the interview process further on Chapter 5.

### **Incubation**

Throughout this phase, I removed myself from any aspects related to leisure kits, physically and mentally. It was not a straightforward process since I had worked to previously create every connection necessary to inform myself further about leisure kits. I avoided bringing up the subject within social situations or gave a superficial answer to avoid further development. I took long walks to bring myself to a different environment and state of mind. Even so, it seemed inevitable to create some connections or think of the process of creation I had just experienced. Constant ideas would appear, as well as new possible ways to use the leisure kits. I struggled detaching from the subject all together. I entered notes on my journal about the difficulty of removing a subject when it was engraved from working and questioning it every day. I figured I should try something else to let my mind and thoughts drift towards a different direction, so I decided to focus on my personal artistic practice. I would create something new every day, either sewing or using embroidery. By this point, I was close from the holiday season,



so I also made gifts for my family. These activities allowed me to forget about my initial questions related to leisure kits.

### **Illumination**

Throughout the incubation process, I realized it was almost impossible to completely remove the relationship I had created with leisure kits. However, I managed to view the process and experiences through different lenses. Throughout the immersion process, I realized I was fixated on finding numerous ways to incorporate leisure kits within a classroom setting. After taking a step back during the incubation process, I noticed instead I should focus on the learning experiences I was able to extract from my process of creation. This is what Moustakas defines as the phase of illumination (Moustakas, 2011). By detaching from the original question and main subject, I began to view the experience differently and discovered a separate perspective from the original one. In this case, I began to re-discover the learning experience and its results rather than the physical process and its alternatives. I was so focused on the actual methods that can be combined within leisure kits, I was not noticing the learning opportunities I had discovered. As well, I was breaking down my fears throughout the process.

### **Explication**

After reaching illumination, I was motivated to move to the explication phase, which allows to explore the discovery in depth and, in this case, document it within the writing process to complete this thesis (Moustakas, 2011).

## CHAPTER 5

### The Interviews

Knowing that my personal experience would be limited by my own interpretation of leisure kits, I decided to interview three people who have worked with leisure kits on their own. Having parallel opinions about leisure kits allowed me to explore the experience from perspectives other than my own.

I interviewed Alex, who works as an I.T Manager. I was particularly interested in his response to leisure kits since he does not consider himself someone with artistic talent. I had a similar interest when interviewing Nathalie, who works as an online tutor, and has tried several leisure kits, rather than just one. I also interviewed Matthew, who is currently working at an architecture firm and, according to him, feels comfortable with creativity and his manual work. The range of comfort towards leisure kits made each interviewee interesting candidates to offer a broad spectrum of experiences and backgrounds.

I interviewed Matthew and Nathalie about their experience with paint by numbers, since it was the first leisure kit they acquired; however, Nathalie continued working with different kits after her experience with paint by numbers. Alex was interviewed on drawing by numbers, seeing that it was the leisure kit he tried. This particular leisure kit guides the user on the darkness of the strokes and direction of the pencil within the image provided.

As a method to organize the information extracted from the interviews, I coded the data and three themes emerged: (1) learning outcomes, (2) flow experience, and (3) benefits. The themes were selected based on the feedback from the interviewees and what they felt the leisure kits gave them as principal experiences.

For the people I interviewed, the pandemic led them to explore leisure kits to occupy time that was otherwise used for activities outside their homes. Since the pandemic had reduced a variety of routine activities, the newly available time motivated them to try a leisure kit. As mentioned earlier in this thesis and confirmed by the interviews, the trend of leisure kits increased in popularity throughout the pandemic to occupy free time (Brunner, 2020).

### **Learning Outcomes**

The learning process can encompass the context of the activity, the task at hand, and the dynamic problem solving that happens when the participant needs to overcome and negotiate previous ideas, capabilities, and competences (Pöllänen, 2011). The interviews provided support for problem-solving and challenging preconceived notions related to art making and the capabilities required.

Matthew and Nathalie worked with paint by numbers and said they had little to no experience painting beforehand. It was their first leisure kit. Matthew had tried it briefly when he was young, but did not remember much of the experience. They both mentioned that paint by numbers gave them the necessary tools and steps to reach a sense of the painting as an achievable outcome. As it happens to people who are reluctant to work with new art materials, starting with something they are familiar with can be comforting and reassuring (Huxhold & Willcox, 2014). Alex had a similar impression with his sketch by numbers. He had little to no experience drawing, but felt encouraged and satisfied trying it since the tools and instructions were readily available to him. It was the first time and only time he tried a leisure kit.

Nathalie mentioned that paint by numbers served as a stepping-stone to new leisure kits. Seeing that her experience was so enriching, she increased the difficulty within paint by

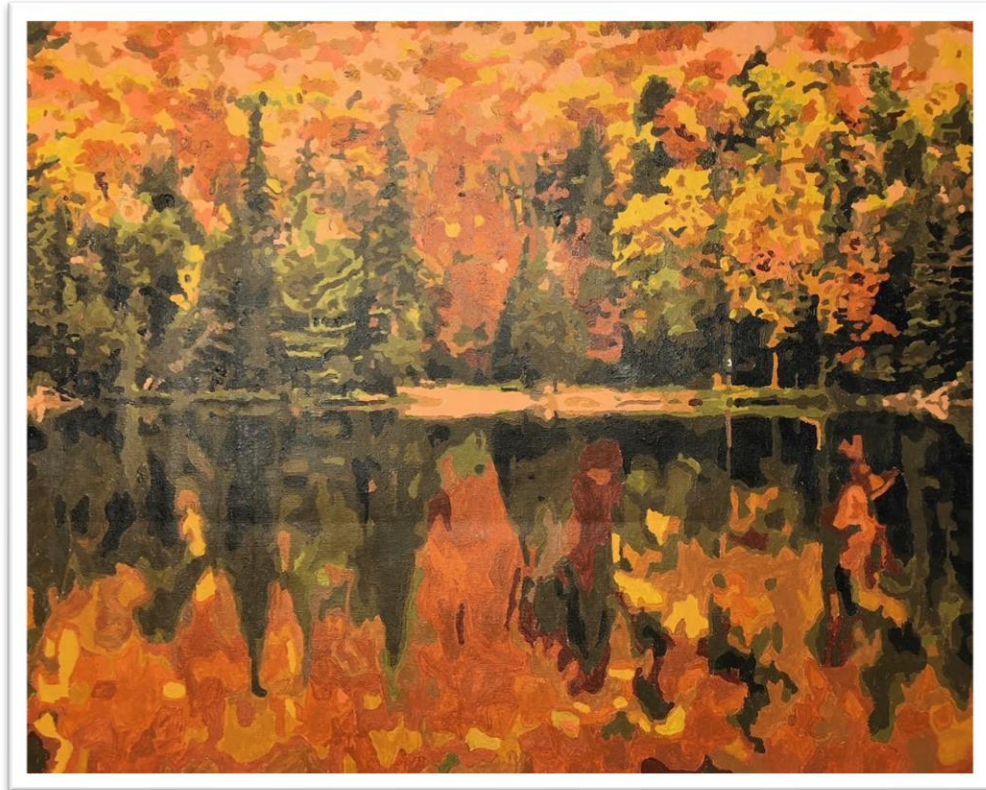
numbers, to continue with cross-stitch and knitting kits. Nathalie mentioned that paint by numbers “does what it says it is going to do, like you feel that you accomplished something [and] it gives you the choice to start small; the first one I did was much easier than the second and the third” (personal communication, October 5, 2021) therefore increasing difficulty according to the level of challenge, which gave her a sense of accomplishment along the way. She used to feel she needed to have a basic set of artistic skills to try leisure kits, but she was pleasantly surprised when finding out she was able to do things that were not within the scope of her interest and previous skills. Throughout the interview she would mention phrases such as, “this is not me”, “what?! Me?! Painting?! Are you crazy?!”, “honestly, I could not believe I was able to put in the time and effort to get to the final point” (Nathalie, personal communication, October 5, 2021).

One of the common misconceptions that ignite art anxiety is that the knowledge needs to be already acquired and settled to succeed in the artistic task (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). Trying paint by numbers removed her fear of not knowing the task in advance and fulfilled the purpose for which she was aiming. As Smith-Shank (1993) confirmed, some people have negative experiences during their youth, which makes them reluctant to show their artwork, try new materials and discover different concepts. Such was the case with Nathalie, who remembered during her years in elementary school how other students commented on her lack of artistic skills, recommending she take other extra-curricular activities, such as poetry. Finally, she mentioned she had to activate her problem-solving skills, since she was missing materials to complete the paint by number and the cross-stitch kit she tried. She managed to create a style of her own and improvise with the materials she had to complete the task, “I had to be very creative! I changed completely the [design] and I added some sky [...]. The original was completely different from the one I did, but I had to do it, I had to find a solution” (Nathalie,

personal communication, October 5, 2021). Nathalie's situation demonstrated how unexpected changes can lead to problem-solving skills and perseverance.

**Figure 13**

*Nathalie's Paint by Number*



*Note.* Nathalie completed several paint by numbers. Figure 9 is part of a series depicting four seasons – Fall, Winter, Spring, Summer.

Matthew mentioned having a tough time with painting, due to the expectation attached to the result. It is often the case that we learn at an early age a right way and a wrong way of making art, which removes the pleasure of art making and replaces it with fear of failure (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). Working with paint by numbers removed that expectation,

allowing him to work stress-free. He said, “failure is removed from the equation with paint by numbers, since you know you will succeed if you follow the instructions” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021). He also added, “there is no fear related to paint by numbers. There is fear related to painting on a blank canvas. [Painting by numbers] removes the expectations. [...] You can’t really fail at it” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021). Risk-taking is one of the main sources for creativity, and many people suffer from anxiety when confronted with the ambiguity of options and making decisions (Smith-Shank, 1993). Paint by numbers removed Matthew’s fear of unfulfilled expectations and constantly confirmed he was doing things ‘the right way’:

I am very critical of myself, so before starting a painting, I would have to know already like the style I want to do or what I want to do, so I think that’s really what blocks me, you know, from doing my own stuff [...], definitely the paint by numbers takes that completely away. (personal communication, October 8, 2021)

He continued with a similar response as Nathalie’s where he said he would imagine himself gaining enough reassurance through paint by numbers to “try different things. Not necessarily paint by numbers, but maybe even painting just on a blank canvas” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021). Throughout the process of completing the painting by numbers, Matthew mentioned how his own understanding of the task evolved and even encouraged him to personalize it:

At the beginning I felt like I had no control, because I was guided by rules that could not be broken, [...] but the more I would work on the painting by numbers, the more I understood that I could have control, I could make it my own, so that feeling kind of

evolved through the process. [...] towards the end, I kind of wished I had done things differently my own way. (personal communication, October 8, 2021)

In this case, Matthew's reassurance while completing the painting by numbers provided him with enough comfort to move away from the constraints and, instead, motivated him to work on his own and explore creativity.

Matthew also mentioned the kit allowed him to review and pay attention to specific techniques when working with the materials included. He said, "I think doing the painting by numbers kind of did help me to, you know, how to turn the brush to do a certain thing" (personal communication, October 8, 2021). The experience of following specific constraints to achieve a particular result led Matthew to practice accuracy and the necessary movements for his brush strokes. He added, "The guidelines, the fact that you have to follow something, kind' gives you constraints, so it kind' keeps you on that box of focus, you know? [...] the fact that you have constraints, it kept me focused on painting" (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

He also mentioned how it could improve dexterity and, in the case of his grandmother who worked with colouring books, kept her brain active as well as her motor skills. In Matthew's case, his learning outcomes were related to technique, problem-solving skills and challenged pre-conceived notions of art making.

**Figure 14***Matthew's Paint by Number*

Alex's background was different from Nathalie's and Matthew's. He confessed his level of comfort with drawing or painting is not great. He did mention the kit he worked with did not provide detailed instructions, as he was expecting. He felt lost in terms of tracing techniques, although he learned the theory behind values and shading while drawing. According to Alex, the activity and lack of guidance within the instructions activated fear and stress. He said, "It certainly pushed my limits, [...] I was constantly feeling afraid or stressed out of messing it up [...] I didn't know what to expect, I didn't know how to produce certain effects [...] it was a bit stressful" (personal communication, October 23, 2021). Like Matthew's experience, the fear of not meeting the expectation was present, as it is often the case when tackling a new project without the appropriate guidance and support (Huxhold & Willcox, 2014). When comparing with the experience within an art classroom, however, he confirmed the importance of having clear learning outcomes and steps to achieve a specific result:



In art classes, no I don't think I was stressed. 'cuz I think I had a better idea of what the process was, kind from 'a to z' and, like, these were the steps that needed to complete in order to achieve it, while [the drawing by numbers] I...again, I knew the first step out of 10, while the rest I was really uncertain if they were going to go as planned basically, so I think that was the portion that was a little bit more.... less enjoyable. (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021)

He explained the instructions that came with the kit were clear, but did not provide details, such as the style of tracing that needed to be done to achieve a certain effect. The lack of guidance ignited fear in Alex's case. As it happens to many people who deal with art anxiety, much like Alex, they tend to believe art making requires talent they do not have, and these students often avoid taking steps on their own for fear of doing something wrong (Metfcalc & Smith-Shank, 2001). For Alex, the drawing kit ignited the common fears also explained by the other interviewees, "what if I mess it up, like, what if there is no way to come back" (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021). Self-doubt and insecurity were commonly present, demonstrating a popular response related to art anxiety (Smith-Shank, 1993). He also ended up challenging his preconceived notions of art making:

At the beginning it was a little bit overwhelming [...], each stage was very...scary to start it 'cuz again you don't know if you're doing the right thing or not until you're kind done with it to see what the end result was, but as I was going through each one of them, kind of started liking more and more the results so, by the time I would reach the end of each stage, I was quite pleased with the result...I think it was a nice enjoyable experience. (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021)

He did mention he could have profited from having better instructions to improve his technique:

Certainly, if I knew some better techniques, I would prefer to make it look a little bit better in my opinion, but I'm kind of very happy with the results that I got so far and, certainly it's better than I could do on my own without the kit. (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021)

### Figure 15

*Alex's Drawing by Numbers*



Even though the kit guided him to break barriers and push his limits, he felt additional guidance was needed to achieve personal results. This is a common misconception attached to the traditional art teaching methods where successful art making focuses on accuracy while

drawing (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). He still mentioned the gratification of having some guidance within the kit. It allowed him to “take it step by step instead of dealing with one big problem” (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021).

## **Flow Experience**

When referring to a state of flow or flow experience, I will reference Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (2014) study. There are specific conditions to follow to achieve the concept of flow; goals are clear, feedback is immediate, skills match the challenge, the level of concentration is deep, our problems are forgotten, the control of the activity is in our hands, self-consciousness disappears, we lose the sense of time, and the experience becomes worthy for the user (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Following these set of conditions, I asked the interviewees if their experience with their leisure kit of choice fulfilled the aforementioned requirements. It is important to mention that none of the interviewees were familiar with the theory of flow experience when the questions were asked.

Matthew and Nathalie agreed in all aspects, while Alex's sole disagreement was that he did not feel he was able to concentrate deeply. When discussing if the feedback is immediate, all three participants needed a clear definition of what 'immediate' meant. Considering 'immediate' as the time comprised within the task, they all agreed that within an hour or within the completion of a small area of the image, they would perceive immediate feedback, leading them to gain additional motivation to complete the task. Nathalie mentioned the feeling of accomplishment when she saw the first result. She said, “The first thing that caught my attention was when I finished a butterfly [...] and I was like ‘wow! I did this! It is actually a butterfly!’” (personal communication, October 5, 2021), which she later clarified it had motivated her to

continue. Also, regarding immediate feedback, Matthew mentioned that it was something that developed over time:

At the beginning I was a little bit scared [...] being the perfectionist that I am I was thinking ‘oh! Maybe it’s not going to work’ [...] after every session I had that fear, but after every session I would look back at the painting, I would step away a little bit and it looked good, so it wasn’t negative feedback.[...] Every time I would, lets say, stop the session or I would take a break I would always take the painting, and like, stretch my arms and see ‘oh! Ok, yeah, I’m doing alright. It looks good, it looks like something!’, you know? (personal communication, October 8, 2021)

These examples confirm another aspect of flow, which is to have clear feedback on how well we are doing throughout the task, which motivates the user to continue the activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Leisure kits provide clear steps and goals, so everyone always knew what to do next. As explained by Csikszentmihalyi (2014), one of the main characteristics present while enjoying an activity is the clarity of knowing what to do from one moment to the next. This was the case for all interviewees and one of the main characteristics provided by leisure kits in general. Everyone confirmed that their goals were clear, and they knew how to achieve them.

They all emphasised how surprised they were about time passing so fast, even before I was able to ask them the question. All three interviewees mentioned they would have a time allotted for the task, only to realize the time flew by. Csikszentmihalyi (2014) writes, “what you do dictates how you experience time instead of the watch telling you what time is like” (p.137). Everyone reported wanting to get in that mind set, where time would pass by effortlessly. Their

minds drifted to other thoughts along with the deep concentration required by the task, leading them to lose self-consciousness. This is what Csikszentmihalyi (2014) defines as *one-pointedness of mind*, where the task requires for us to remain focused, leaving any other thought disappear.

All interviewees agreed that the leisure kits make the task accessible and less intimidating. Nathalie said, “They simplified the task enough to make it possible for me to finish. They made it possible for me to see the end-line” (personal communication, October 5, 2021). This is an important aspect to achieve flow. Achieving a balanced challenge allows for the user to remove anxiety and, instead, increase their level of confidence to continuously remain motivated within their activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Having a balanced challenge also lead to a sense of control, where it is the user who decides to increase or decrease the level of difficulty (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). As mentioned in the previous section, everyone pushed their limits when feeling comfortable enough, and gave their individualized touch to the paint by numbers. At the bare minimum, they all felt strong enough after completing the activity to take on harder, more difficult techniques or tasks related to painting or drawing, as in Alex’s case. That feeling of empowerment is often the result of flow and having a balance between control a challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In teaching terms, leisure kits seem to provide scaffolding in a box.

Nathalie even observed how she is commonly very self-conscious most of the time, and this aspect was reduced while she was working on painting by numbers. The deep concentration required to complete the kit made her forget about her pre-conceived notion of not being good at painting, “the thought of not being good did not pop up!” (Nathalie, personal communication, October 5, 2021). Deep concentration within an activity leads us to forget our sense of self and

any facades we present to the world daily (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). In contrast, Alex mentioned it was harder for him to concentrate deeply due to his cats getting constantly in the way. This becomes a problem in order to achieve flow, since the constant interruption prevents deep concentration. Everyone also mentioned the experience became worthy due to the constant improvement of the image and the achievement of it. Nathalie mentioned that painting was mostly for the experience and the satisfaction gained when reaching the outcome. In her own words, she said it is “the fun of creating something out of nothing and finding something that you can do that you had no idea you were able to do” (Nathalie, personal communication, October 5, 2021). Having constant feedback on their abilities and development of an image based on clear expectations gave the task a sense of personal worth and motivation (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Matthew had a similar feeling. He said, “I was looking for something to take my mind off things” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021). It is often the case people stop worrying about their surroundings and gain a sense of tranquility while in their state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Matthew confirmed that he managed to forget about his daily troubles while working with his paint by numbers kit. In Nathalie’s case, she got a high level of fulfilment from all areas comprising flow, which gave her extra motivation to continue working with different leisure kits.

## **Benefits**

Overall, the leisure kits served as a form of relaxation and disconnect from the rush of the world, as well as increased motivation and confidence.

The relationship with relaxation and disconnect were often linked to an alternative way to slow down and unwind. Nathalie described the activity as a form of meditation. The concentration required and the serenity of the task allowed her to slow down and concentrate on

the moment. She said, “Everyone was surprised that I was focusing so many hours on those things, and [my sister] said ‘hmm, it’s like meditating or praying for you’, and yeah! it’s the right word basically. It helped me be in my zone” (Nathalie, personal communication, October 5, 2021). Mathew mentioned a similar point of view when describing the task as a type of self-care:

I feel [paint by numbers] slows down your rhythm of life. Doing something like that kinda’ slows you down, and I think it is really important to slow down [...] it’s almost like a type of meditation without you even noticing it. (personal communication, October 8, 2021)

Matthew was looking for a way to relax while avoiding watching TV or being on social media. He added, “For many people right now, and I consider myself one of them, is....to relax is to lay down on the couch and watch social media, you know, but I think it is proven by now it is not relaxing, so I think painting by numbers could be a good alternative”. Matthew was looking for an activity that would get his mind off current events and popular culture, but he thought it could be an activity beyond health-related outcomes. “It doesn’t have to be about mental health whatsoever; I think it could just be to do something instead of being on the phone. Maybe you’ll end up learning other things” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021).

Alex was in search of a challenge to keep him occupied during the pandemic. He mentioned he took on several new tasks, such as learning car mechanics or building furniture, so drawing became a new challenge on the list. He mentioned, in his case, challenging himself kept him motivated and active. In comparison to Matthew and Nathalie, Alex said he would find the activity more relaxing if shared within a group. He said, “Having a group experience would certainly make it easier [...], the mind would be mostly focused on the conversation I would say,

while the hand would be, you know, automatically drawing” (personal communication, October 23, 2021). In Alex’s case, sharing the experience within a classroom or a group might lead to socially relaxing environment.

Stimulation and motivation were two other benefits mentioned by all interviewees. Regarding the chosen images, Nathalie mentioned that choosing an image she liked made it more appealing as part of the experience, “I love the fall season [...] working on the colours of fall was very soothing for me for some reason” (personal communication, October 5, 2021). Alex also mentioned that having an image he could identify with gave him an extra level of motivation:

Having something that you can relate to, I don’t know, makes it a little bit more interesting to get to the activity and draw it to see how it is going to look [...], it made me reflect a little bit more. (personal communication, October 23, 2021)

Mathew mentioned the main reason that motivated him to finish the piece so quickly was to see the final product, “when I started, it wasn’t looking like much, you know, so I kind of wanted to finish it so see how it looked, and if it looked nice, as if I did a good job, you know?” (personal communication, October 8, 2021). Nathalie mentioned that leisure kits could be used as motivation, for the first or second lesson for “people like me, who feel reluctant to do art” (personal communication, October 5, 2021), as guidance, starting from paint by numbers, “as step by step basically, and the numbers being one of the steps” (personal communication, October 5, 2021).

Confidence was also one of the benefits that were mentioned by all interviewees. Overall, the constraints provided by the leisure kits served as a safety net and guidance that provided a



good steppingstone providing strength to take on new challenges (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Once the process would advance, their confidence increased. Nathalie mentioned she gained confidence and a sense of comfort working with new materials. She also said that making a painting entirely on her own would be “too much of a jump” (Nathalie, personal communication, October 5, 2021), so the paint by numbers served as a transition to gain confidence and guidance. Nathalie mentioned how it is often not within her character to take on activities without being fully confident of the task but working with leisure kits gave her a different perspective of achievement. In her case, the confidence she gained created new avenues for exploration and new challenges within art activities. Nathalie said, “It will trigger other activities, like it would encourage me to start something new artistically, which I don’t believe I am very artistic, I don’t believe that I am [...] I am not particularly good at painting” (personal communication, October 5, 2021).

Matthew described a similar experience as Nathalie with paint by numbers, which gave him a positive outlook to continue working with kits. He said he would imagine himself gaining enough confidence through paint by numbers to “try different thing, not necessarily paint by numbers, but maybe even painting just on a blank canvas” (Matthew, personal communication, October 8, 2021). The boost of confidence he gained gave him the motivation he felt he needed to move ahead with additional painting challenges. As previously mentioned, this is also a common response when successfully achieving a feeling of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Alex also mentioned his increase of confidence as the task advanced. He said, even though he was hesitant and scared while working on his drawing, he would get a boost of confidence once he would take a break and see what he accomplished. “Initially I don’t think that my skills were anywhere near what was required for this, but with a bit of practice I had the

feeling I improved a little bit and even gained some confidence in drawing” (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021). He also added how it would be beneficial in a classroom to learn through the steps and gain confidence to move forward, “learn something in the process, [students] will boost their own confidence by doing this, and at the same time it’s going to be a fun experience” (Alex, personal communication, October 23, 2021). Matthew agreed with the idea of a classroom experience, “It’s a fun activity, so definitely doing a paint by number -or a kit- anything artistic I think I would love it [in a classroom]” (personal communication, October 8, 2021).

In all cases, the challenge was clear, but it was not hard enough to stop them from continuing the task. On the contrary, overcoming a task that was perceived challenging gave them additional motivation and confidence to complete the task. Additionally, the activity served as an alternative to slow down and focus, leading to a feeling of relaxation.

After completing and reviewing the interviews, I was glad to find out how their responses perfectly aligned with the potential to introduce leisure kits as a transitional task to provide flow, decrease negative preconceived notions of art making, and increase motivation as well as confidence. In the following chapter, I will gather my personal experience with leisure kits along with the information I collected through the interview process to extract, enhance, and compare results.

## CHAPTER 6

### The Results

I have gathered information from my research on leisure kits and the experience of working with them. Starting from my personal experience, I immersed myself within the task and thoughts surrounding leisure kits. I continued my exploration using the approaches and techniques from three different leisure kits, and removing certain constraints gradually, as offered originally by the kit. In addition, I interviewed three people who were willing to share their personal experience working with leisure kits. After gathering and comparing all the information I was able to collect, I discovered and confirmed a few points related to the experience of working with artistic leisure kits.

As per my personal understanding, I was relieved to confirm it was quite similar to the people who I interviewed. I feared I might have a dissimilar experience due to my personal background in art education. I wanted to know if my experience might be biased, but I was able to confirm through the interviews and the literature I gathered, that my personal understanding of leisure kits was quite like what I have heard from the interviews and articles.

Flow experience was present for the people I interviewed, as well as myself, leading me to believe there is potential to introduce an activity within a classroom that ignites flow. Leisure kits might act as a transitional tool for those people who might feel intimidated by artistic activities. Reaching the experience of flow within an activity in a classroom presents an ideal scenario for students, since the experience of flow is positive, leading to motivation and confidence. People who experience flow like it so much that they try to recreate it as often as possible, igniting motivation to continue the activity in questions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

The fear of failing or expectations appeared in all cases, so my personal background in arts did not prevent the feelings of doubt or anxiety when starting a new task. As explained by the author Deborah Smith-Shank (1993), bad experiences in the art room can leave behind a feeling of anxiety when dealing with art teachers who fail to motivate, fail to support, or create unattainable expectations. Many generalist teachers avoid teaching art or merging it with other subjects, due to their firsthand experiences while exploring art and creativity at an early age (Smith-Shank, 1993). Through use of artistic leisure kits, such as paint by numbers or punch needle, the anxiety seems to dissipate and encourage confidence in its place. Based on my personal experience and the interviews conducted, the leisure kit user remains with a feeling of confidence, and the motivation to continue moving forward to harder challenges. Accomplishing a task successfully increases individuality and self-confidence, leading to an improved self-image (Pöllänen, 2011).

It is my belief that with the proper guidance, leisure kits could serve as a useful tool to motivate students and relieve their anxiety about art making. I agree with researcher in teacher-education, Sinikka Hannele Pöllänen (2011), when she writes, “Learning refers to identity-forming activities, thus it cannot happen in a classroom merely by following a strictly predefined and traditionally organized course” (p.122). The implementation of leisure kits as a transitional learning experience would challenge the traditionally organized classroom as a bridge towards self-expression, creativity, and individuality. My personal experience, along with those I interviewed suggest the need for further challenges after completing a leisure kit. Natalie moved on to other leisure kits to encounter newer, more complex tasks. Matthew and Alex also mentioned their intention to continue with a more challenging approach. My personal experience flourished once I was able to move away slowly from the constraints once I had enough

confidence to do so, each time increasing the challenge through new personally guided instructions.

The art teacher's role is to move students away from cookie-cutter works and, instead, use the classroom to promote individuality and creativity (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2018). Offering leisure kits in a setting promoting creativity might seem counterintuitive or contradictory at first sight; however, I am arguing that leisure kits as a transitional tool would remove fear and promote confidence, which would also encourage a smooth transition towards creativity and individuality. Constrictive activities, such as coloring books, were historically rejected. Viktor Lowenfeld was one of the pioneers who rejected coloring books for children, since he believed it prevented creativity, flexibility, skills, and discipline (King, 1991). These claims were abandoned over time due to the bias and lack of information that led Lowenfeld's assumptions (King, 1991). Much like coloring books, leisure kits offer constraints to guide the user towards a specific goal. If presented in a classroom, the visual result would be similar, if not the same. Art teachers often strive to offer a sense of individuality to their students, and they fear reaching similar results that do not encourage creativity. At the same time, art teachers often struggle with students who claim to not be good at art and have a challenging time gaining confidence to move away from their comfort zone (Smith-Shank, 1993).

It is hard to convince students that art is not threatening once they have negative perceptions related to art making (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). As mentioned earlier in this thesis, generalist teachers also fear teaching arts due to their own personal struggles and negative experiences when dealing with art projects (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001). Given that leisure kits have the potential to develop the confidence needed to move ahead within more challenging projects, it would be a useful tool to break pre-conceived notions of what it means to create art.

Metcalf and Smith-Shank both advocate for the support and strength of the individual skills of each student, regardless of their strength. They mentioned, “It is sad to think that so many of our students think that it is the goal of the teacher of art to ensure that all student’s works look alike” (Metcalf & Smith-Shank, 2001, p.50). Considering this is often the students’ perspective, leisure kits would allow for an achievable, expected result, and turn the idea up-side down by moving students from a place of comfort and confidence, rather than from negative notions and art anxiety. Students need to feel comfortable, safe, and supported when exploring or exposing new and personal approaches (Marshall & D’Adamo, 2018; Benedetti, Winnemöller, Corsini, & Scorpigno, 2014). Leisure kits have the potential to promote a sense of safety and might lead students to explore further avenues with less reluctance.

Researchers have found that craft activities can provide therapeutic effects and can support creative leisure (Minna Huotilainen et al’s., 2018). The research I conducted reaffirmed such theories. The interviewees and my experience confirmed the feelings of flow while working with leisure kits as one of the experiences that can be related to the therapeutic effects. The research conducted by Minna Huotilainen et al’s. (2018) validated how leisure art activities can encourage focus through the repetition of movements, tempo, and the connection with the materials (2018). I got a similar response from the interviewees and myself when working with leisure kits. The repetitive motions or personal system created to complete the task led us to focus intensely on the activity, leaving other thoughts or worries behind. Exceptionally, my experience with diamond painting demonstrated the need for challenge to remain motivated. The excessive repetition and tempo required to complete the lengthy task proved to decrease motivation rather than increasing it.

The same research by Huotilainen et al's. (2018), reviewed the importance of imitating and mirroring work to encourage learning. Mirroring becomes an essential step of creation, to later build on a more individual process of experimentation (Huotilainen et al's., 2018). Their research specifies, "in learning a manual skill, simulating or mimicking the actions of the teacher is essential, as body-based knowledge often has an implicit or tacit quality" (Huotilainen et al's., 2018, p.8). An additional study suggested the same conclusion. The study conducted by Sio, Kotovsky & Cagan (2015) demonstrated that having clear and specific examples can lead to innovation and creativity, benefiting on quality over quantity. Leisure kits could serve as a teacher and as an example through guidance, becoming less intimidating and, still, a resource for imitation. Considering that failing is part of the process of creation and innovation, having a safe space and tools to provide the process of failing and dealing with the emotions that relate to failing is key within a creative process (Huotilainen et al's., 2018). Leisure kits create a sense of safety through the steps and guidance provided by the kit and expose students to try new challenges through the gradual removal of constraints. Leisure kits could improve students to switch from a *fixed mindset* to a *growth mindset* as described by Carol Dweck in Huotilainen et al's article (2018). *Fixed mindset* describes failure as a sign of perpetual incapacity to function and achieve a task, while *growth mindset* relates failure to a challenge that can be conquered (Huotilainen et al's., 2018). Considering the interviews as well as my own experience, flow appears thanks to a successful balance of challenge that is hard enough to continue working, but not too easy for it to become boring and unmotivating (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). This connects directly with the definition of *growth mindset*, where the use of leisure kits promotes the surpassing of challenges through the exploration of a new task and technique. My research agrees with Huotilainen et al's research (2018), since their study confirms that "novice

practitioners would need to apply conscious effort and engage in less demanding tasks to be able to reach flow and to avoid the anxiety and frustration that may rise from overwhelming challenges” (p.11). The interviewees did not feel comfortable when working with artistic approaches, but felt less anxious when using leisure kits as a novice tool to transition from a less demanding task, to potentially a more challenging one.

There is often a debate that arises whenever discussing examples, copying or imitation<sup>2</sup> within an art classroom. The concept of recreating or imitating someone else’s artwork has been discredited over time, since it removes creativity and individuality (Burton, 2009). A study was conducted with college students that argues the idea of constraints that enable creativity (Haught-Tromp, 2017). The study indicated that constraints give better results to develop creative intelligence, where having a controlled environment led students to come out with original ideas (Haught-Tromp, 2017). It is often the case, as it was also confirmed through the interviews I conducted, that having a blank canvas without a guide or suggestion can become a daunting and anxious activity for people (Haught-Tromp, 2017; Benedetti, Winnemöller, Corsini, & Scorpigno, 2014). With the guidance of leisure kits, users become acquainted with the process and increase confidence to take on harder challenges.

As mentioned by Huotilainen et al’s article (2018), overcoming challenges and failing are necessary steps within the creative process, so the development of metacognition<sup>1</sup> through leisure kits would allow for students to learn from their mistakes and move ahead based on the

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<sup>1</sup> The process of evaluating the creation by taking a step back and evaluating what has been creating, why and how to move on from it to achieve a specific result. The analyzing of what has been done and how (Marshall & D’Adamo, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Pariser, D. (1984). Two Methods of Teaching Drawing Skills. *Readings in Canadian Art Education*, University of British Columbia, WEDGE publishing, pps.143-159.



thinking process around it (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2018). Through the development of metacognition, the novice artists can demystify creativity. The article added, "In doing so, it gives apprehensive art students the wisdom to manage challenges and disappointments, and the strategies they can use to move forward" (Marshall & D'Adamo, 2018, p.10). In other words, leisure kits could potentially provide a safe learning environment that could increase metacognition, which in response would allow to overcome the fears and anxiety related to failure, leading to the creative process.

### **Conclusion**

I was glad and pleasantly surprised to have found answers to my questions. I discovered that people can experience flow while working with leisure kits, as well as a basic level of anxiety, which disappears gradually as the activity begins to take shape. This leads to motivation and confidence, which allows for the completion of the activity and awakens the need for additional challenges. A few learning outcomes also stood out from the activity, such as the questioning and challenge of pre-conceived notions of art activities and building artmaking skills. Motor skills and handling of the materials were additional learning outcomes mentioned, along with problem solving skills. I was able to experience this result from my own experimentation using the leisure kits and removing constraints gradually; however, from the interviews I conducted, I only heard the desire to explore the activity further while removing constraints and increasing the challenge. This thesis demonstrates the potential to explore further the use of leisure kits within a classroom as a starting point to develop motivation, confidence, and creativity. Using constraints that enable, students could replace their feelings of anxiety with the necessary confidence to move ahead with challenges often related to the process of creation. This thesis therefore indicates that flow can appear with leisure kits, and creativity could

possibly emerge by removing the constraints of the leisure kits. Moving forward, it would be interesting to explore the response of art students and their point of view as exploration of the practice and their perspective on it.

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## Appendix

### *Ethics Approval*



#### CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

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Name of Applicant: Cecilia Torres

Department: Faculty of Fine Arts\Art Education

Agency: N/A

Title of Project: The Effects and Experience of Leisure Kits in Relation  
to Art Education: A Research Creation Project

Certification Number: 30015260

Valid From: June 30, 2021 To: June 29, 2022

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont".

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Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Review: Do you wish to have your name published for the thesis? Would an alias work best?
- Why did you get a paint by numbers kit in the first place?
- Where did you get it and why there?
- Was there a reason you chose the image you chose?
- How would you describe your experience?
- Did you think or would you think on continuing working with paint by numbers leisure kit?
- Do you feel the experience you had with paint by numbers leisure kit motivates you to continue? Why?
- Did you ever feel like going further than what has been asked for the kit? (personalize the drawing somehow?)
- Did you ever take an art class? When? (elementary, secondary, private?) What do you remember about that class?
- When working with paint by numbers, would you consider the following:
  - Your goals are clear? (one knows at every moment what one wants to do)
  - You get immediate feedback? (you know at every moment how well you're doing)
  - The skills match the challenge? (the opportunities for action in the environment are in balance with the person's ability to act).
  - Do you concentrate deeply? (attention is focused on the task at hand)
  - Did you manage to forget about your problems while working with your paint by numbers?
  - Did you feel like control was possible? (in principle, success is in one's hands)
  - Would you say you stopped being self-conscious? (one has a sense of transcending the limits of one's ego).
  - Did it happen to you that you lost track of time?
  - Was the experience worth having just for its own sake? (Meaning, the purpose was to do that, and nothing else... rather than doing it to make money or as mandatory work, for example.)
- Would you recommend to other people to try a paint by numbers? Why? Who?
- Would you try other types of leisure kits?
- Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share about your experience with leisure kits.
- Do you image the use of leisure kits in a classroom? If so, how?