



# From survival to self-expression: Colouring experiences of Kayayei in Kumasi - Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformative potential of art as a means of empowerment and self-expression for Kayayei (head porters) in Kumasi. Kayayei are often street females who are pushed into the role of head-portering to make ends meet. They are confronted with harsh realities, lack essential support systems for healthy growth, and endure a relentless struggle to survive each day. However, amidst these challenges, art emerges as a potent force for change. With Aesthetics of Care as the methodological approach, this research examines how art, specifically colouring, can offer a sense of belonging, security, and personal agency to children living in unstable environments. The kayayei express their thoughts and emotions through colouring, depicting family and home environments in representational and abstract forms. The colouring experience provides an outlet for self-expression and emotional healing, empowering them to transcend mere survival and embrace their innate creative potential. Through colouring exercises, they find a voice that speaks beyond their daily hardships. It is thus recommended that collaboration among local communities, governments, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) is vital for lasting impact. A partnership between educational institutions and social services to integrate community support presents a creative opportunity. It further calls for awareness campaigns and advocacy to highlight the empowering role of art for marginalized youth.

**Keywords:** *Kayayei, Colouring, Self-Expression, Emotional, Representation*

## INTRODUCTION

In the vibrant heart of Kumasi, where the city's pulse echoes through its crowded streets, unfolds the daily struggle of children who live and learn in open spaces they call home. Without stable families, schooling, or safe recreational activities, these children navigate lives marked by resilience and neglect. Some of these individuals who spend significant portions of their lives living and working on the streets as head porters are referred to as kayayei.<sup>1</sup> In Ghana, these individuals often migrate from the northern regions to urban centers such as Kumasi to pursue economic opportunities. Their migration is often

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<sup>1</sup> V. Kanwetuu, J. Wora, and G.B. Acheampong, "Coping with the challenges of head portage in Ghana: The case of female head porters (kayayei) in Kumasi," *Journal for Social Thought*, 7 no.1, (2023): 1–17. <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/jst/article/view/14099>

driven by a complex interplay of interconnected factors, which have long-term consequences on their development and well-being.

Many of these kayayei come from backgrounds plagued by extreme poverty, where families struggle to provide necessities like food, shelter, and clothing. This economic hardship is a primary driver for children leaving their homes and seeking opportunities, however limited, on the streets of urban centres (see Figure 1). Family breakdown, orphanhood, abandonment, and domestic abuse also contribute significantly to the growing number of children living on the streets. These adverse childhood experiences can lead to severe emotional distress and trauma, making the streets seem like a more viable option than their family homes.<sup>2</sup> According to Esteve and colleagues, the traditional extended family system, once a crucial safety net, is increasingly strained due to economic pressures and social changes, making it difficult for families to care for all their members.<sup>3</sup> This erosion of traditional support networks leaves many children without the protection and care they need, forcing them to seek their means of survival.

The stark differences in the levels of poverty between the north and south, coupled with a perceived lack of opportunities in rural areas, lead to significant migration of children to urban centers like Kumasi. This migration is often seen as a way to escape hardship but can expose children to new and different dangers. Kayayei often lack access to quality education and healthcare, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and vulnerability. Without these basic services, their life chances are severely limited, and their potential remains untapped. The lack of access to education also means that many children on the street do not develop literacy, which is a critical aspect of school readiness.

Many of these children engage in hazardous labour, particularly as kayayei, carrying heavy loads in crowded markets (see Figure 2), a role often filled by young girls. This work not only exposes them to physical and mental abuse but also to significant health risks and deprives them of their childhood.<sup>4</sup> The stress of this harsh environment can lead to decreased self-esteem and reduced ability to self-regulate their behaviour and feelings.<sup>5</sup> These issues are further complicated because they are denied the kinds of social interactions that help them develop pro-social behaviour, like empathy.

While many interventions in Ghana address their material and social needs, little attention is given to the transformative power of art. Art engagements like drawing and colouring offer vital means for self-expression, emotional healing, and social connection, helping children reclaim a sense of agency and belonging. This project explores how colouring exercises can empower and highlight the artistic potential of kayayei by bridging vulnerability with strength. Despite ongoing organizational efforts, their realities remain precarious—defined by instability, isolation, and limited creative opportunities—calling for more holistic, art-based approaches to their development.

The review discusses the impact of art activities on the development of individuals who engage in these activities and also reviews art as a catalyst for empowerment and healing. Other areas the article highlights are the journey of self-discovery through colouring experiences as methodology, how transformation unfolds, and the role of creative autonomy and uninhibited self-expression, drawn from unique perspectives and spontaneous voices.

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, “Transformative Action to Accelerate Results for Children in Street Situations in the Decade of Action (2020–2030),” 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/74256/file/Transformative-Action-June-2020>.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Esteve et al., “A Global Perspective on Household Size and Composition, 1970–2020,” *Genus* 80, no. 1 (2024): 2.

<sup>4</sup> Eva Jörgensen et al., “Access to Health and Rights of Children in Street Situations and Working Children: A Scoping Review,” *BMJ Paediatrics Open* 8, no. 1 (October 2024): e002870, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2024-002870>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J Galanakis et al., “A Literature Review on the Connection between Stress and Self-Esteem,” *Psychology* 7, no. 5 (2016): 687–94.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1 (a and b): Kayayei resting in the Kejetia market. Photo credit Edmond Agyei



Figure 2: Kayayei on the street at Kejetia, Kumasi, Ghana. Photo credit-Isaac Tweneboa

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The preschool period is a crucial stage for developing self-awareness and socialization. The experiences of kayayei during this time can have lasting effects on their cognitive and social-emotional skills, ultimately influencing their future success.<sup>6</sup> These children often miss opportunities to develop essential skills. Emotional expressivity is one such area, as they may struggle to verbalize their experiences or suppress their emotions as a survival strategy.<sup>7</sup> The chaotic nature of street life also hinders the development of focused attention, making it difficult for them to learn and concentrate. Research suggests that art therapy can enhance concentration and focus through selective attention, which could benefit these individuals.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Gary W Evans, "Childhood Poverty and Adult Psychological Well-Being," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 52 (2016): 14949–52.

<sup>7</sup> A. S. Masten and J. Obradović, "Competence and Resilience in Development," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1094, no. 1 (2006): 13–27.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea McGorrill, "Creative Attention: Exploring the Benefits of Art Therapy for Focus and Cognition in Children," *Art Therapy Today* 10, no. 2 (2023): 22–31.

Self-esteem and self-confidence are also significantly affected due to a lack of positive reinforcement, coupled with the abuse and exploitation they often face.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, patience is a challenge for kayayei, as their environment frequently demands immediate gratification or constant vigilance. Given these challenges, it is crucial to provide comprehensive support for kayayei, such as access to education, healthcare, and mental health services.<sup>10</sup> However, participating in group activities requiring taking turns can help cultivate patience.<sup>11</sup> As a non-verbal approach, art therapy is particularly well-suited for helping kayayei express their emotions and process their experiences.<sup>12</sup> Art therapy can help rebuild self-esteem by fostering self-awareness and providing opportunities for creative engagement.<sup>13</sup>

Art-based activities are alternative interventions that could provide a “safe space” for exploring emotions and experiences through creative expression.<sup>14</sup> They could also help improve cognitive and sensory-motor functions,<sup>15</sup> foster self-esteem and self-awareness,<sup>16</sup> and cultivate emotional resilience, enhance social skills, and reduce conflict.<sup>17</sup> Combining creative autonomy with therapeutic support can help kayayei overcome their traumas and develop the skills necessary for a more positive and productive future.<sup>18</sup>

Art serves as a transformative tool for kayayei, offering empowerment, self-expression, and emotional healing.<sup>19</sup> Through painting, drawing, and colouring, children articulate experiences, process emotions, and envision a future beyond their struggles.<sup>20</sup> It generally provides a vital means of communication for those unable to express themselves verbally, allowing them to document their emotions and connect with others.<sup>21</sup>

Art also plays a therapeutic role in processing trauma and building confidence. Free artistic expression enables children to explore emotions without fear of judgment.<sup>22</sup> Fostering resilience and encouraging them to confront challenges. Engaging in art enhances emotional well-being, relieves tension, and promotes a sense of personal agency, reinforcing a positive self-image.<sup>23</sup> Beyond emotional benefits, art workshops develop practical skills that enhance cognitive and creative abilities, crucial for problem-solving and innovation.<sup>24</sup> These workshops also foster community and belonging, providing companionship and positive role models.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, showcasing artwork through exhibitions challenges societal marginalization, raises awareness, and promotes social inclusion by highlighting children's talents and experiences.<sup>26</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The Aesthetics of Care is a methodological approach in research that emphasizes the relational and affective dimensions of creative work, particularly within art projects. It focuses on fostering meaningful human interactions and acknowledging the sensory qualities inherent in collaborative art-making

<sup>9</sup> M. Mannry and C. Eyber, *Psychosocial Concepts in Humanitarian Work with Children: A Review of the Concepts and Related Literature* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> L. Aptekar and D. Stoecklin, *Street Children and Homeless Youth: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children: A Fair Chance for Every Child*, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> C. Malchiodi, *Expressive Therapies* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> David Gussak, “Effects of Art Therapy with Prison Inmates: A Follow-up Study,” *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 33, no. 3 (2006): 188–98.

<sup>14</sup> D. Gussak, *Art Therapy in Prisons and Other Correctional Settings* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Judith A. Rubin, *Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique* (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> C. Case and T. Dalley, *The Handbook of Art Therapy*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> C. Malchiodi, *Handbook of Art Therapy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Loughry and Eyber, *Psychosocial Concepts in Humanitarian Work with Children*.

<sup>19</sup> Gussak, *Art Therapy in Prisons and Other Correctional Settings*.

<sup>20</sup> Rubin, *Approaches to Art Therapy*.

<sup>21</sup> C. A. Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Case and Dalley, *The Handbook of Art Therapy*.

<sup>23</sup> D. Coholic, S. Loughheed, and J. Lebreton, “Using Arts-Based Methods with Children Who Have Experienced Trauma,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 26, no. 1 (2009): 1–11.

<sup>24</sup> E. W. Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2002).70.

<sup>25</sup> C. Hall and P. Thomson, *Creative Learning in Higher Education: International Perspectives and Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2017).112.

<sup>26</sup> S. McNiff, *Art-Based Research* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998).

processes.<sup>27</sup> In the context of art workshops with kayayei, using aesthetics of care as an art research approach is crucial for nurturing and empowering kayayei. This approach focuses on creating a safe environment where emotional support fosters self-expression through art.<sup>28</sup> It promotes social connection by building community and reducing isolation while aiding in skill development, such as fine motor skills and problem-solving abilities.<sup>29</sup> Through artistic expression, individuals can affirm their identities and experience healing from trauma, empowering them with a sense of accomplishment and control over their lives.<sup>30</sup> Art also stimulates cognitive development by encouraging critical thinking and imagination, which enhances overall learning experiences.<sup>31</sup> Aesthetics of care integrates these elements into a holistic framework that supports the well-being and development of vulnerable individuals, emphasizing their emotional, social, and cognitive growth.

Artistic workshops configured around the aesthetics of care principles provide insights into often overlooked aspects of kayayei's lives, such as their social interactions, emotional experiences, and creative expressions. These workshops are structured to support and empower participants, encouraging them to co-create artworks that reflect their experiences and aspirations. They serve as spaces for artistic expression and platforms for social interaction, learning, and personal growth.<sup>32</sup> By adopting an aesthetics of care approach in this workshop, researchers aimed to generate a deeper understanding of the social and ethical dimensions of kayayei's creative practices. This approach helped foster more respectful and supportive relationships among participants, enriching both the artistic outcomes and the developmental experiences of the individuals involved.<sup>33</sup>

## PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

### *A Journey of Self-Discovery: Colouring Experiences*

In education and child development, practical art sessions are vital avenues for nurturing creativity and self-expression among children. These sessions go beyond mere artistic instruction; they serve as dynamic platforms where young minds can explore, create, and discover themselves through the act of making. By embracing open-ended approaches devoid of rigid rules or predefined outcomes, these sessions empower children to unleash their innate creativity and engage deeply with their emotions and identities.

The initiative to embark on the project Colouring Experiences of Kayayei in Kumasi stems from a profound recognition of the transformative power of art in children's lives. It is not the first to have happened at the Safe-Child Advocacy of the Catholic Archdiocese in Kumasi, Ghana. Art students from Kumasi Technical University have held similar sessions with kayayei as participants. Practical art sessions not only equip young individuals with essential tools for creative expression but also cultivate environments where they can freely explore and develop their unique voices. This project, which rolled out as an art workshop, provided some kayayei in the Kumasi metropolis, specifically in Adum and Kejetia, with the tools and opportunities to engage in creative art activities at the Safe-Child Advocacy of the Catholic Archdiocese at Roman Hill, Kumasi. The Safe-Child Advocacy (SCA), founded in 2005 by the Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi, among other functions, supports vulnerable kayayei and young women.<sup>34</sup> (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

<sup>27</sup> J. Thompson, "Towards an Aesthetics of Care," in *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*, ed. A. Stuart Fisher and J. Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 36–48.

<sup>28</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> L. Hetland et al., *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Malchiodi, *Handbook of Art Therapy*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Hetland et al., *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*.

<sup>32</sup> Thilde Langevang et al., "Care in Creative Work: Exploring the Ethics and Aesthetics of Care through Arts-Based Methods," *Cultural Trends* 31, no. 5 (2022): 448–69.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, "Towards an Aesthetics of Care," 40; Langevang et al., "Care in Creative Work," 465.

<sup>34</sup> Safe-Child Advocacy Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi (SCA), "Safe-Child Advocacy Catholic Archdiocese of Kumasi," 2023, <https://safechildadvocacy.org/>.



*Figure 3. Safe Child Advocacy Catholic Archdiocese Space, Kumasi.  
Photo credit-Isaac Tweneboaa*



Figure 4. Kayayei relaxing in the Safe Child Advocacy Catholic Archdiocese Space, Kumasi

Fine Art Research students who served as facilitators ensured that they neither imposed strict rules nor directed the participants' creative decisions. This helped maintain a balance between freedom and guidance, fostering an environment where creativity thrives without external interference. The facilitators encouraged a participant-led artistic exploration.<sup>35</sup> This non-interference encouraged these untrained participants to trust their instincts and make decisions independently.<sup>36</sup> Although the creative process was individualized, the facilitators encouraged collaborative interactions among the participants. This helps build a sense of community and mutual support, reinforcing the importance of social connections in the artistic process.

The project was realized in weekly sessions over a period of four months in 2024, involving 26 participants. These open-ended sessions encouraged autonomy and creativity by avoiding rigid instructions or predefined standards. This freedom unlocks the participant's creative potential and provides a safe space to explore their emotions and identities.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).38.

<sup>36</sup> G. Hesser, *Art Therapy: A Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1997).45.

<sup>37</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 89.

### ***The Colouring Pursuit***

The participants were provided with various materials, including cartridge paper, crayons, colour pencils, dry pastels, and watercolours, ensuring an engaging and enriching creative experience. This variety allowed experimentation with different media, encouraging exploration and innovation, essential for broadening their expressive capabilities.<sup>38</sup> They were encouraged to create artworks that reflected their thoughts and feelings freely. Some drew their families, others worked on whatever came to mind, and some cut out their designs and coloured them (see Figures 5 and 6).

The sessions prioritize freedom of expression, allowing participants to create deeply personal colour works depicting families, homes, flowers, and abstract forms, thereby communicating their emotions and aspirations in a non-verbal, therapeutic manner.<sup>39</sup> These sessions also minimize external supervisory interference, fostering authentic self-expression and helping them build confidence in their creative voices.<sup>40</sup> A striking aspect of their artworks is the frequent use of bright, vibrant colours, particularly red, yellow, and orange, symbolizing energy, excitement, and resilience.<sup>41</sup> Such hues often reflect optimism and hope, illustrating their desire to transcend the hardships of street life.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, their willingness to freely explore mediums demonstrated their curiosity and problem-solving abilities,<sup>43</sup> and encouraged autonomy. While individual exploration was emphasized, the freedom of expression and passing comments on the works of others without fear fostered a sense of community and shared experience. Such collective efforts strengthen social bonds and serve as a powerful tool for storytelling and healing, particularly for children facing marginalization and isolation.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Transformation Unfolds***

The art sessions had a profound impact on the participants, fostering personal growth, emotional healing, and creative expression. Initially, many of the participants exhibited hesitation and uncertainty, a reflection of their lived experiences on the streets, where relationships are often transactional, and trust is difficult to establish.<sup>45</sup> Their reluctance serves as a survival mechanism, probably shaped by past neglect, abuse, and broken promises, reinforcing a protective barrier against potential exploitation.<sup>46</sup> However, trust gradually developed, establishing rapport through the consistent presence of facilitators and the supportive, non-judgmental nature of the sessions, which is a crucial step in the healing process. Regular interactions and genuine care help dismantle initial apprehensions, encouraging the participants to engage more confidently in the art activities.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Malchiodi, *Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Malchiodi, *Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 105.

<sup>40</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 112.

<sup>41</sup> Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images* (Third edition. | London; New York: Routledge, 2021.: Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099857>.

<sup>42</sup> Claire Golomb, *The Participant's Creation of a Pictorial World* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 91.

<sup>43</sup> B. Wilson and M. Wilson, *Teaching Children to Draw: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1982).88.

<sup>44</sup> Hall and Thomson, *Creative Learning in Higher Education: International Perspectives and Approaches*.97.

<sup>45</sup> Lonnie Embleton et al., "Causes of Child and Youth Homelessness in Developed and Developing Countries: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *JAMA Pediatrics* 170, no. 5 (2016): 435–44.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis Aptekar and Daniel Stoecklin, *Kayayei and Homeless Youth: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Springer, 2014), 78

<sup>47</sup> R. Hart, *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care* (London: Routledge, 2014).108.



*Figure 5. Kayayei (participants) colouring their drawings and cut-outs at the Safe-Child Advocacy Space. Photo credit Rockson Genfi*



*Figure 6. Close-up of colour works by participants. Photo credit Rockson Genfi*

Their artworks became a powerful means of emotional expression, depicting families, homes, and loved ones (See Figure 6), underscoring their deep longing for connection and stability.<sup>48</sup> The use of vibrant colours, abstract figures, and expressive lines further reflects their emotional intensity, offering a cathartic medium for self-exploration and communication.<sup>49</sup> As participants worked, they built confidence, exhibiting the opportunity to flourish.<sup>50</sup> This artistic development highlights the cognitive and creative benefits of engaging with art, reinforcing its value as an educational and expressive tool.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, as their involvement deepened, noticeable positive changes in behaviour and attitudes emerged. Increased self-confidence, improved communication, and a greater willingness to express emotions all indicate the therapeutic benefits of art, fostering self-worth, emotional resilience, and essential social skills.<sup>52</sup>



Figure 7. Some participants showing their artworks. Photo credit Rockson Genfi

### ***The Role of Creative Autonomy***

Creative autonomy nurtures self-directed exploration and allows individuals to learn through experience rather than structured pedagogy. In such workshops, individuals gain the freedom to experiment, discover, and refine their artistic voices. The use of vibrant colours, unconventional techniques, and collaborative projects not only fosters innovation but also provides therapeutic outlets for emotional expression.<sup>53</sup> This aligns with the broader goals of informal education, which prioritize holistic development and adaptability.

<sup>48</sup> Coholic, Lougheed, and Lebreton, "Using Arts-Based Methods with Children Who Have Experienced Trauma."

<sup>49</sup> Golomb, *The Participant's Creation of a Pictorial World*, 91.

<sup>50</sup> Eisner, *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson and Wilson, *Teaching Children to Draw: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, 90.

<sup>52</sup> Malchiodi, *Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 108.

<sup>53</sup> Malchiodi, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, 98.

By offering individuals the opportunity to create without the pressure of formal evaluation, these workshops provide a safe space for self-discovery and empowerment. This reflects the core tenets of Ghana's informal education practices, which have long emphasized practical, experiential learning tailored to the needs and aspirations

### ***Uninhibited Self-Expression, Unique Perspectives and Spontaneous Voices***

One of the art workshop's foundational aspects is promoting uninhibited self-expression. The participants were not confined by professional artistic guidance or traditional expectations. This freedom allowed them to explore their emotions and thoughts without fear of judgment or external influence. The workshop aimed to liberate them from preconceived notions of what constitutes "good" art, creating an environment where creativity flows freely.<sup>54</sup> This aligns with the principles of self-taught art, where the artist's primary focus is often self-expression rather than adherence to formal artistic standards. In this context, the participants' artworks are valued for authenticity and raw emotion rather than technical proficiency or adherence to established norms.

The workshop encouraged authenticity and spontaneity in the creative process. The participants' art, often raw and unfiltered, reflected the uninhibited nature of their emotional expressions.<sup>55</sup> The emphasis is not on achieving a particular aesthetic outcome but on conveying emotion and experience through creation. As a result, their works were marked by an authentic and spontaneous quality, with no regard for conventional artistic expectations.

## **DISCUSSION**

Art created by kayayei during an art workshop provides a compelling insight into their emotional states, perspectives, and creative self-expression. These artworks, marked by their vibrant colours, freeform shapes, and spontaneous compositions, serve as powerful visual narratives of their experiences and emotions. By analysing specific examples from their works, it becomes evident how their techniques and use of colour contribute to emotional expression, uninhibited self-expression, unique perspectives, and spontaneous artistic voices. The participants' works are not merely artistic exercises but deeply personal and intuitive portrayals of their inner worlds.

One striking example of emotional expression is the artwork featuring a blue circular shape with an orange core, accompanied by green, jagged strokes (Artwork 2). The intensity of the blue suggests a sense of calm or introspection, while the bright orange at the centre may symbolize an emotional core—possibly a burning desire, frustration, or energy contained within. The jagged green strokes beneath could be interpreted as movement, turbulence, or even an abstract representation of struggle or resilience. According to Boyatzis and Varghese, children's use of colour reflects their emotional states, and this image exemplifies how expressive choices in colour and form can be deeply symbolic.<sup>56</sup>

Another image that demonstrates uninhibited self-expression is the abstract, multi-coloured composition where overlapping irregular shapes appear to merge (Artwork 9). The use of the colours pink, blue, yellow, and brown in large, freehand strokes suggest a spontaneous, unrestricted approach to art-making. There is little concern for symmetry or proportion, reinforcing the idea that the participant is expressing emotions rather than creating a structured, representational image. This piece stands out from the more organic, free-flowing works, as it introduces an element of structure while maintaining an expressive quality. The intersecting forms and carefully placed details hint at an emerging sense of intentionality, as though the artist is experimenting with balance and design while allowing room for personal expression. Malchiodi suggests that children in therapeutic or expressive contexts often work instinctively, allowing their subconscious thoughts to shape their creations. This artwork exemplifies this principle with its organic forms and overlapping colours, showcasing an unfiltered, immediate emotional expression.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Hesser, *Art Therapy: A Handbook*.45.

<sup>55</sup> S. Guthrie, *Self-Taught Art: Discovering the Unknown Artist* ( New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2006).62.

<sup>56</sup> Chris J Boyatzis and Reenu Varghese, "Children's Emotional Associations with Colors," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 155, no. 1 (1994): 77–85.

<sup>57</sup> Malchiodi, *Handbook of Art Therapy*, 121.

Symbolic representation is evident in the image featuring a crescent moon with a rainbow-colored arc and an orange star (Artwork 6). The star and crescent are universal symbols, often associated with hope, faith, or aspirations. The choice to depict these symbols in bright, blended colours suggests a hopeful outlook, possibly an aspiration for a brighter future. In Lowenfeld's artistic development theory, children often use symbols to communicate their emotions and thoughts, even when their technical skills are still developing.<sup>58</sup> This image, with its use of recognizable yet uniquely interpreted symbols, illustrates how these "young artists" merge cultural or personal symbols with their intuitive, artistic instincts.

The uniqueness of perspective is also evident in the drawing where a bird appears to be releasing multi-coloured stars (Artwork 11). Unlike traditional representations of birds in flight, this artwork reimagines the creature as a source of vibrant energy, with the stars seemingly emanating from its beak. The golden-yellow hues for the bird's body convey warmth and positivity, while the stars, rendered in primary colours, suggest movement and vitality. This interpretation aligns with Eisen's theory that colours and symbols in children's art often reflect their unique worldview and emotional state.<sup>59</sup> The bird, typically a symbol of freedom, might represent a longing for liberation from hardship or a hopeful vision of escape from difficult circumstances.

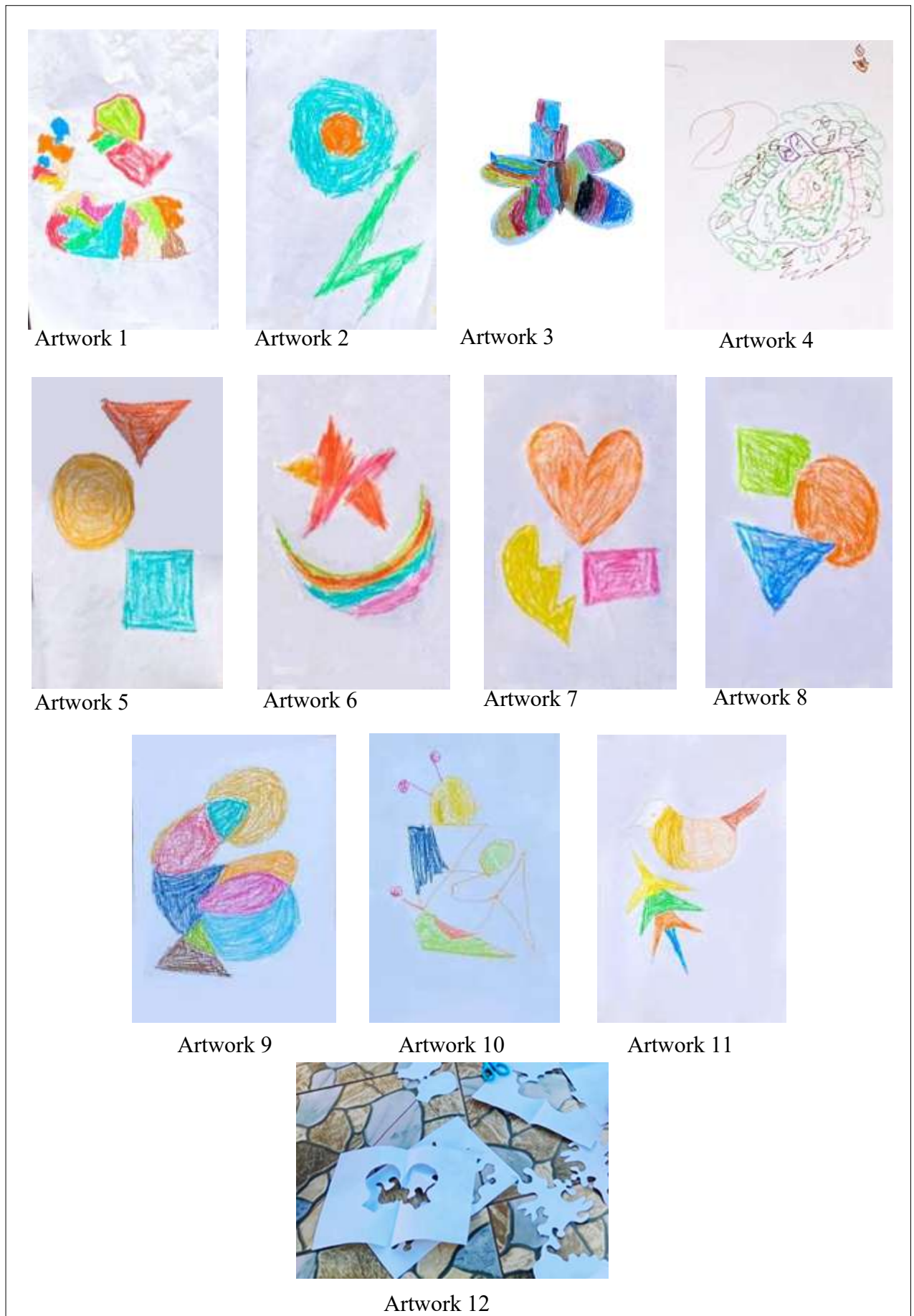
The absence of clear narratives or structured compositions in some of these works suggests a preference for visual storytelling through abstraction rather than representation. This approach aligns with stream-of-consciousness expression, wherein art becomes a direct extension of thought and emotion. The fourth artwork, in particular, exemplifies this idea, with its layered scribbles and fragmented imagery creating a sense of movement and psychology. The chaotic yet deliberate nature of the lines hint at an underlying inner turmoil or an attempt to make sense of one's environment, reinforcing the idea that for these kayayei, art functions as an immediate, visceral means of communication. In art therapy research, such free-form, rapid drawing is often linked to the processing of emotions in a non-verbal manner.<sup>60</sup> The child's choice to fill the page with entangled, energetic lines might indicate an attempt to externalize complex feelings that are difficult to articulate through words.

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<sup>58</sup> Viktor Lowenfeld and W. Lambert Brittain, *Creative and Mental Growth*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987).

<sup>59</sup> David Eisen, "Symbols and Emotions in Children's Art: A Developmental Perspective," *Journal of Creative Behavior* 35, no. 2 (2001): 89–97.

<sup>60</sup> D. Gussak, *Art on Trial: Art Therapy in Capital Murder Cases* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).



*Figure 8. Some works created by participants during the colouring workshop sessions at the Safe-Child Catholic Archdiocese. 2024*

Beyond drawings, the use of paper-cutting techniques, as seen in the cut-out heart and abstract shapes (Artwork 12), adds another dimension to the artistic expression. Cut-out art requires a different kind of engagement, as it involves planning, physical manipulation of materials, and an awareness of form. The heart shape, a universally recognized symbol of love and emotion, suggests a deliberate effort to communicate themes of connection or longing. Case and Dalley note that working with tactile materials like paper can provide a sense of control and empowerment, particularly for children who experience instability in their daily lives<sup>61</sup>. The act of cutting out these shapes, especially the heart motif, might symbolize an attempt to reconstruct or reclaim aspects of their emotional world.

Another cut-out form is the artwork that features a large, multi-coloured abstract structure with petal-like extensions (Artwork 3). This work further reinforces the theme of creative spontaneity, demonstrating advanced creative problem-solving and resourcefulness. The segmentation of bold colours across the folded structure suggests a deliberate attempt to create contrast and symmetry, perhaps reflecting a more profound desire for order and stability in an uncertain reality. The combination of bright, contrasting colours across the different sections of the structure indicates a playful, unrestricted approach to design. This aligns with Malchiodi's observation that when children are free to explore different materials, they often produce work rich in meaning and personal expression<sup>62</sup>. The three-dimensional aspect of the piece highlights the participant's capacity for innovation and an inherent ability to transform everyday materials into something expressive and meaningful.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the butterfly-like form carries symbolic weight, traditionally representing freedom, transformation, and resilience, themes that are especially poignant in the context of kayayei's lived experiences.

These artworks illustrate how technique, colour, and form converge to produce deeply expressive and uniquely personal artistic statements. The unrestrained approach to composition, the intuitive use of colour, and the immediacy of execution collectively serve as a profound testament that these works are not mere drawings but embodied expressions of lived experiences and psychological landscapes. The participants' works are distinguished by their spontaneity, emotional intensity, and symbolic richness, offering alternative visual narratives that challenge conventional artistic discourse. Ultimately, these creations reinforce the idea that art is not a privilege of the trained or the elite but a fundamental human impulse—a means of making sense of the world, asserting one's presence, and crafting personal meaning amid uncertainty. As research in art therapy and child psychology suggests, such creative outlets are invaluable for children in vulnerable situations, giving them a voice that might otherwise remain unheard.<sup>64</sup> The significance of these pieces extends beyond the workshop setting, offering valuable insights into the emotional landscapes of these young artists and reinforcing the importance of supporting creative expression as a means of empowerment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several key recommendations can be made to improve and sustain art-based initiatives for kayayei. These recommendations aim to create lasting and transformative effects on marginalized youth by fostering creative expression, emotional healing, and social inclusion. First, sustaining and expanding colouring activities is essential to reach a broader population of kayayei. This requires continuous support for existing initiatives while establishing new programs in other urban areas where kayayei are concentrated. These initiatives can be expanded through collaborations with local communities, governmental bodies, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to ensure long-term accessibility and impact. Additionally, collaborating with educational institutions and social services can integrate community support systems into the formal educational structure, providing the less privileged with academic learning and creative expression. The social services embedded within these programs offer psychological and emotional support, helping children navigate trauma and the hardships of street life.

<sup>61</sup> Case and Dalley, *The Handbook of Art Therapy*, 82.

<sup>62</sup> Malchiodi, *Handbook of Art Therapy*, 130.

<sup>63</sup> Rhoda Kellogg, *Analyzing Children's Art* (Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1969).59.

<sup>64</sup> Gussak, *Art on Trial: Art Therapy in Capital Murder Cases*, 143.

Training facilitators will help improve these projects' success by arming them with the tools to balance artistic freedom with subtle guidance. Facilitators should be trained to encourage creativity while ensuring the emotional safety and well-being of the children, fostering an environment where self-expression is liberating and therapeutic. Moreover, follow-up programs and continuous engagement should be prioritized to prevent art interventions from being short-lived. Ongoing workshops, mentorship programs, exhibitions, and community events can offer sustained support, allowing children to develop their artistic skills over time while reinforcing their sense of belonging and self-worth. In addition to direct program support, awareness campaigns and policy advocacy should be launched to highlight the significance of art in empowering marginalized youth. Engaging policymakers to integrate art programs into broader social support systems can secure funding and institutional recognition, ensuring that such initiatives become an integral part of efforts to support vulnerable populations. Finally, while art programs provide an important avenue for self-expression and growth, addressing the systemic issues contributing to child homelessness is vital. Efforts must be made to reduce poverty, improve family stability, enhance access to education and healthcare, and create better socio-economic opportunities. A holistic approach that combines creative empowerment with structural reforms can offer kayayei a genuine pathway toward a more stable and fulfilling future. By implementing these recommendations, communities can build a more inclusive and supportive environment for kayayei, helping them transition from mere survival to self-expression. The transformative power of art can serve as both a healing tool and a foundation for a more hopeful and empowered future.

## **CONCLUSION**

Kayayei find themselves in harsh situations that lower their self-esteem and their ability to self-express, thus affecting their emotional well-being. While many interventions in Ghana have sought to address their material and social needs, the transformation of their emotions through art has been largely overlooked. Drawing and colouring, among other art activities, have helped individuals regain a sense of belonging through self-expression, emotional healing, and social connection.

The art workshop provided a transformative pathway for some kayayei in Adum and Kejetia in Kumasi, Ghana, helping them move beyond the limitations of street life and serving as a tool for empowerment, self-expression, and emotional healing, enabling them to reimagine their identities and possible futures. More than a means of artistic engagement, the workshop fostered a sense of belonging. It challenged their sense of marginalization, offering healing and empowering them to be positively vocal through artistic expression.

Among various artistic activities, the colouring experiences stood out as a powerful medium for self-expression. They equipped the kayayei with the means to explore their creativity, process emotions, and build a sense of connection and community. By prioritizing autonomy, freedom of expression, and collaboration, the creative sessions became more than just an escape; they became a transformative experience. They offered them the ability to transcend the constraints of their environment and envision new possibilities for their lives. The visible transformation in their confidence and outlook underscores the profound impact of art on healing, self-discovery, and personal growth.

Structured art sessions play a crucial role in transformation, providing a safe space where individuals gradually overcome distrust and nurture their creativity. These experiences did not only foster self-expression in the workshop but also cultivated resilience and hope, providing the kayayei with a safe space beyond their current hardships. Activities such as colouring and painting, thus, served as therapeutic outlets and supported skill development, enabling them to articulate personal narratives. The experiences of kayayei in Kumasi reinforce the idea that art is a powerful vehicle for healing, self-esteem building, and challenging societal prejudices.

Given the undeniable impact of these initiatives, sustaining and expanding such programs remains essential to ensuring that kayayei receive the necessary support to thrive. Beyond direct intervention, this also calls for a broader shift in societal perceptions that recognizes kayayei's inherent creativity and potential. By nurturing their artistic abilities, communities can provide a pathway to empowerment, helping them transition from mere survival to a future shaped by self-expression, dignity, and possibility.

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