



# Unpack your troubles

Kirstie Newton met expressive artist Katheryn Trenshaw in Totnes Photographs by Jim Wileman

It's a well-worn stereotype that all Americans have a therapist to unlock their deepest angst, at vast expense. So it's perhaps surprising that Katheryn Trenshaw, a native of Michigan now living in Totnes, turned to her love of art in search of emotional freedom.

Over the past 15 years, Katheryn has honed her craft, what might be called "expressive art", or "art therapy"; her courses, including this month's Shadow Dancing, use creative arts to allow participants to face and accept their demons, and work with the creative energies unleashed. In addition, she has produced an impressive body of work, including painting and sculpture, with large scale projects inspired by her own life experiences.

Katheryn has been rendered sceptical by her own experience of the conventional therapy route. "You can talk until you're blue in the face in a psycho-



analytical setting, and not get anywhere, or get bogged down," she says. "Everyone needs to face their stuff to be normal again. You can access that in the most beautiful way, through creative expression: writing, drawing, painting, movement. It's very effective."

The title Shadow Dancing was drawn from the Jungian concept of the "shadow bag", into which we stuff the aspects of our lives that we would rather disown. "Sadness, anger - they don't go

away. Instead, you carry this bag around on your back, and as you get older, the more you shove in there, the bag gets heavier. The course aims to find out what's in your bag, and how to pull it out and give it expression.

"The outcome of the art is not as important as the process of making and expressing. It might not be great art - it depends on the person. But it's not an excuse for bad art, either. I hope my own craft is sound, and some clients have discovered a talent, and they have gone away and opened their own artistic practices."

Groups of no more than 12 people will be based at a bed and breakfast by the River Dart, which offers its own inspiration as well as being close enough to both the sea and the moors for day trips. The course culminates in a powerful ritual.

Be prepared for the emotional upheaval that sharing such heavy secrets could trigger. "It's a visceral, real experience," Katheryn explains. "It's not a workshop for someone who is fresh to personal growth work. It's more an opportunity for those people who are hungry to go deeper. You need to be self-responsible - it's not an on-going support group, so you might need a supportive friend or partner to hold onto afterwards."

Equally, don't be scared that you are about to unlock your darkest, most painful secrets. "If it's old and ready to come, it will. You don't tend to unlock more than you can handle, and it's not about diving in and pulling out something that is still fresh and pink. It's constantly a choice."

Happy customers include Lorna Davis, general manager of the Danone Corporation. "Katheryn uses colour and depth to convey the joy, the pain and the range of the experience of being human," she says. "When you see her work, you can see through it to the artist herself, and can sense a woman who has loved and experienced much in her life. You can also see through her work to see yourself - your own pain, journey and triumphs. Owning a piece of Katheryn's work is like owning a mirror for the human race."

Katheryn studied French and psychology at university. "I was talked out of art; my parents thought it was impractical, and I quite enjoyed the academic world, too. It delayed the artistic process, but couldn't stop the river from flowing. In the end, I got the best of both worlds - working as an art therapist gives me intellectual and creative stimulation together."

Her first large-scale project was "Breaking the Silence," a series of 100 masks inspired by the darkest of subjects: child sexual abuse, based on her own experience. "I was working on it with my therapist, and it became a project. I decided it would be more interesting to share it. Survivors would know they weren't alone, and other people would understand it. It became really obvious to me, and I started doing lectures and workshops."

Launched in 1990, "Breaking the Silence" toured the USA and Europe over a 10-year period. "My initial vision was that it would tour galleries and museums in Michigan for a year. But it's a very powerful work. It was important for my beginning as an artist, and I think that doing it made me very strong. Now, I tend to gravitate towards subjects that are taboo." Hence another exhibit was planned entirely around death, again drawing on Katheryn's personal experience of bereavement. "We are all going to die. How can you not do something about it?" she asks.

Katheryn's work ranges from liquid acrylic paintings in vivid colours, to free-standing sculptures inspired by the standing stones and circles on Dartmoor. "When you experience a piece of art, you should feel something of the presence of the person who made it. When I work in my studio, I'm not just making something pretty. It conveys a prayer, a feeling."

Those who enjoy a short course with Katheryn can join the on-going Ravenheart group, which she intends to develop into a mobile international centre for expressive arts in the South West.

Katheryn is at pains to stress that her work is not so alternative. "I don't think it's particularly New Age or hard core. As a culture, we are hungry to be more whole in ourselves. Who doesn't want to feel comfortable in their mind and body? This provides the tools that make that completely accessible. I want it to be a bridge between the two worlds of mainstream and a juicy radiance."

#### KATHERYN TRENshaw'S EVENTS:

**Affirming the Female Body - Passionate Presence Retreat, June 16 - 21 (women only).**

**Shadow Dancing, June 30 - July 2 (men and women).**

**July 7 - 9: Katheryn is one of the key artists taking part in Quest: the Natural Health Show at Newton Abbot.**

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