

# AUTISTIC JOY

## ROBERTO PICCIAU AND VICTORIA GRAY IN CONVERSATION

### **Keywords**

neurodivergent art practice, consciousness, self-assessment, diagnosis, language, perception, mapping, artistic modalities, mental health, decision-making, psychedelics, surrender, collaboration, emotional regulation, spirituality, pareidolia

### **Artist bio**

*"I map infinitely intricate worlds of (autistic) consciousness..."*

As a multidisciplinary artist, Roberto Picciau uses drawing, video, embroidery, costume, sound, and performance to question the pathologization of processes of neurodivergent sensemaking, such as stimming, hyperfixation (monotropic attention tunnels), and echolalia. His work explores the metaphysical and relational processes of vibration, duration, and repetition as conditions of neurodivergent experience.

As a child he was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and moved from his birthplace of Sardinia to the UK. During this time his mother told him that his brain "fails to maintain (synaptic) bridges," which shaped his interest in invisible forms of neurodivergent communication and integration.

Solitude is essential to his practice, providing the space and rhythm needed to decompress sensory overwhelm. Each piece embodies a cumulative journey of returning moments, built over hundreds of sittings, representing a cognitive search for coherence.

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## **Summary**

In this conversation we discuss Roberto's practice at the intersection of neurodivergence and art. We discuss the impact of his autism diagnosis in early childhood, as well as his continued "self-assessment" of what it means for him to be autistic as an adult.

We explore how – through a multidisciplinary approach - Roberto's practice acknowledges the way in which neurodivergent sensemaking necessitates expansive, fluid, and flexible approaches to visual and linguistic communication, so as to honour the complexities of neurodivergent consciousness. Our dialogue emphasizes the interconnectedness of time, perception, and artistic expression, ultimately highlighting the richness and plurality of neurodivergent experience.

Our conversation tentatively touches upon complex and topical subjects, such as the influence of psychedelics on neural pathways, spirituality, and the importance, as an artist, of surrendering to the unknown.

## **Takeaways**

- Clinical diagnosis can trigger a lifelong journey of self-assessment and search for understanding
- Language around neurodivergence is constantly evolving and can be pathologizing
- Artistic practices can serve as a means to slow down time and process sensory overload
- Metaphors play a crucial role in articulating complex experiences
- The interconnectedness of different artistic modalities, and the need for such plurality, reflects the complexity of consciousness
- Time perception can vary greatly for neurodivergent individuals, often feeling simultaneously slow and fast
- Visual representations in art can communicate deep concepts about perception
- Art making can be a way to approach "unlearning"
- Surrendering to the unknown can lead to new insights, as well as being scary
- Collaboration among neurodivergent artists supports the creation of non-pathologizing neurodivergent languages

## **Interview**

**VICTORIA GRAY:** Hi Roberto, thanks for joining me to chat. I wanted to start by giving a short introduction, a bit of context for people listening, as to how we met and how we've been working together over the last few years.

I will do a disclaimer as well at the start. I have a cat who is slightly “spicy” today. I've tried to feed her so that she'd be a bit sleepy. But if you hear meowing or any crashes, we'll have to deal with a bit of cat business.

**ROBERTO PICCIAU:** I've got some dogs in the back. Equally, same consideration.

**VG:** Brilliant. I've got some treats beside me just in case as well to distract her. So, we'll see how we go.

So, I was looking back through my emails, and I couldn't work out whether it was 2022 or 2023 when you contacted me. Can you remember when that was?

**RP:** It will have been 2023.

**VG:** Yeah, okay. And as I recall, it was an Arts Council grant, I think you had some development money, is that right? Or was it a grant from an organization in Newcastle?

**RP:** Yeah, it was actually two grants that I applied for and yeah, luckily, I got both. So yeah, one was from the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and then the other one was . . . I have to try and remember it . . . the acronym is C.V.A.N.

**VG:** Yeah, Contemporary Visual Arts Network.

So, at the time, I wasn't actually working, or at least “officially.” I was recovering again from an autistic burnout. But I just knew that I really wanted to connect with you in some way.

I was really interested in the practice and also this connection with Newcastle, which is where I'm from. So, it felt like a really good sign. And I remember thinking, how can we

do this where we don't necessarily exchange money, which would in some ways professionalize or make it a kind of transactional thing.

So, we decided that instead, we would just have a mutual exchange, and that if you really wanted to “pay” me in some way, you could make me an artwork or give me an artwork.

Since then, we've had a dialogue getting on for a couple of years now, which is amazing. And we've talked about so many different topics. What I find really interesting is that you got in touch with me to talk about your art practice, and whilst we have talked about art, we've probably talked about that the least.

We've talked more about neurodivergence, philosophy, we've talked about psychedelics, neuroscience, mental health, what else? Spirituality, religion, consciousness. I mean, we've really gone deep into lots of different subjects. And I'm really grateful for that. So, thank you.

And it's nice to have the opportunity now to have this conversation because every time we chat, I think, “gosh, I wish we could have recorded that.” Not just for our development, but also for other people to hear. Because I think some of the things that you're working through in the practice and also thinking through in terms of philosophy is really beneficial to other people.

Does that sound like what we've been doing? Would you contradict any of that?

**RP:** Yeah, wow. Yeah. A brilliant introduction. The artwork is on the way. I have it here . . .

**VG:** That wasn't a hint!

**RP:** So much gratitude for, I guess, the willingness to have that conversation and for it to kind of, what's the word, branch out into so many different domains because it is all kind of interweaved and interconnected, which has completely branched out well beyond art and into so many areas.

**VG:** Yeah, it's been really enriching. So, I've been, you know, using notes from all of our conversations as well as looking at your website. And you describe your practice as “neurodivergent sense making,” which I really love. So, I want to unpack this a little bit more, because we could take for granted what that means. It might mean something to you. It might mean something different to me.



I'm really interested in how [as a society] we have developed a kind of language and terminology around neurodivergence that we exchange between ourselves as artists, as well as in healthcare, and maybe in society more broadly, but that the terms actually have a very specific meaning for each person. So, I want to not take for granted what that means for you. So, let's unpack it some more. I guess by starting with your experience of diagnosis.

So, a little bit of your history, I think, would be really helpful. When were you diagnosed? What was it that led to the diagnosis? And how might this have impacted your formative years? So, I guess I'm thinking back to childhood if you're comfortable and willing to chat about that. If we started with setting the scene, if you like, and then we can move on.

**RP:** Yeah. So, from the age of three, well, really up until three, I was delayed verbally, which to my parents was a clear sign that was something different. Me and my family were living in Sardinia at the time, and I was actually diagnosed twice with the label of Asperger's Syndrome, once in each country. In Sardinia, I was diagnosed at three, sorry, no, it wasn't three, it was four. And then in England, it was nine years old. And there were numerous different assessments, I guess, both in Sardinia as well as in England, speech and language therapy sessions and...

Yeah, I remember ink blot tests as well. But what I've now, upon reflection, realized is that although the assessments eventually stopped and a diagnosis was reached, on another level, an insatiable "self-assessment journey" had been triggered, which has never really stopped.

**VG:** And with that kind of self-assessment, is there something about the diagnosis or something about your, let's say, your neurodivergent sense-making that is particularly interesting to you and that you're constantly needing to make sense of again and again and again?

For me, that would be things, I guess, broadly related to sound, but also to do with a sense of not having clarity with the edges or the way that my consciousness or my body ("so-called") merges and blends with everything else.

And I'm interested in that on lots of different levels in terms of maybe the psychological field where we might think about PTSD and other psychological diagnoses (for want of a better word), but also in the sense of a kind of anomalous experience or "other(ed)" forms of consciousness.

So that's been my kind of quest, if you like. My diagnosis was late, so I was asking these questions without the autism framing up until my diagnosis in my late 30s. So, for you, what is it that keeps you self-assessing?

**RP:** Yeah, what comes to mind for me is, I guess, the way that my consciousness, well, I guess my consciousness or perceptual experience, was defined for me at a young age and embedded within that was a pathologized way of describing my experience because, to me personally, my experience doesn't cry out pathology, but on the outside, from the formative years, it was only described in that language. And that's not to necessarily blame anybody or anything like that. It was the language that was given and so it is the language that I received.

And as time has gone on, and that language has developed across the board, really - socially, culturally, even within, you know, kind of medical fields and stuff that's even changing - there's this kind of relearning and an unlearning going on.

Part of that self-assessment that's happening, I guess, is just a reassessing and a re-understanding of what it means to make sense of the world as a neurodivergent person when there's no stability in the language and yeah, it's just in a constant state of flux.

And why some ideas kind of stick and some ideas are being asked to be let go of, even just purely the label of Asperger's Syndrome, which is now not a label that's even being used. Yeah, it's kind of always changing.

**VG:** This takes me back to your description of the practice of neurodivergent sense making. And I was wondering then, I liked what you said about unlearning. And "sense-making" makes me think about how - I might have to generalize here a little bit to get the point across - but in society, we often think that things need to make sense, whether that be in visual language, body language, linguistic language, so that it can have meaning, and so that that meaning can make sense to a broad public.

So that it can be transacted across lots of different bodies, and consciousnesses. And the more easily that can happen, the more easily we can, I guess, yes, make sense of the world. For it to be legible also seems to mean it has a certain value. We put so much value in things making sense or things having meaning.

And it seems to me that your practice is not only questioning language in terms of the diagnostic terminology, or the ways that it may have been pathologized, but the whole notion of language and sense making. Like what is sense? Is our sense different to another kind of sense making? Is one more valuable than the other?

**VG:** Is one more valuable in a capitalist society, for example? Does a neurodivergent way of making sense essentially go against that because it's not easily transacted across? It's a kind of spiky language that doesn't move smoothly across lots of different domains.

So, this sort of brings me to something, it's a remark that your Mum made - and I'm not sure if this is one of the things that made you question [consciousness], or you felt was pathologizing, or maybe it's something that actually you found really interesting as a child - but your Mum had explained to you that your brain "fails to make synaptic bridges."

It's such a brilliant sentence. I mean, it's like you could unpick that forever. It's really fascinating. So, I think that's probably impacted you. Maybe one of the examples, I think, of that early languaging of your experience, could be that sentence, that your brain "fails to make synaptic bridges." So, I was wondering how that specifically might have impacted the work that you made.

**RP:** Yeah, so that statement has continued to kind of ripple in my mind throughout life and even in my work and it kind of bubbles up in many different ways. But what I'm particularly interested in in that statement and how it's had an impact, is that it's given me... I struggle with how to word this but...

It seems to have impacted my perception of my own consciousness. And I describe it as being like in a kind of tailspin or a race against a perceived dissipating memory, which sounds very complex, but it basically feels to me, I sense that time is escaping, and data, information and memory is dissolving at every turn, and I don't know how quick or how slow it will be until it's all gone.

As I am making work, I'm starting to realize that the work is both an investigation [into perception] as well as a record of perception itself. It's something that is difficult to apply words to. There's definitely been a real sense of an impact upon my consciousness.

**VG:** You might have been aware, you might not have been aware, but in the last few sentences, there's a few metaphors there that you've used or descriptive terms that kind of make me think about water. So, you've said *ripple*, you said *bubbles up*, and then you said *dissolving*. And I'm just paying attention to that because I'm thinking about this sense of fluidity or things escaping, things running away from, things in passage.

And yeah, this is not necessarily something to go into now, but it's maybe something to think about for yourself. If it's difficult to put into words, I suppose the way that you've

actually language some of this is not necessarily through words, but through the different modalities of the work.

**VG:** It also made me think about this sense of data escaping because of this synaptic gap or leap that some of that data has to make in your brain, or at least in the way that your Mum had described it. There's also the sense of time dilation that a lot of autistic people experience, that sense of losing time or not being able to bridge time between the start of one hour and the next, the sense [or experience] of the duration is lost.

And as I work with artists who make time-based work, that seems to be one of the reasons that maybe they got pulled into that modality, is that there's this fascination with experiencing time or trying to experience time so that it isn't literally like a sand timer, that it's falling away from them, that they lose a grasp of it.

And you know, it's kind of a beautiful image and it's also potentially a nice experience to have, where we lose track of time. We come away from clock time, from capitalist time, but there can also be something quite scary about that. So maybe that's something that we can just bear in mind as we move on a little bit now and talk about the different modes that you make work in, because it's really impressive actually.

One of the things I was really drawn to when I saw your work was that you do lots of different kinds of things and you do all of them really well. So, it's really hard for me to work out - which one did you start with? which one did you move on to? - but you do drawing, embroidery, video works, costumes, sound, performance, writing . . .

So yeah, I wanted to just check in a little bit with the different modes of work. I'm interested to know, which one did you start with, if any? And was there a reason for moving on and looking at another form of work?

So, did you perhaps start with drawing, and then lead out of necessity to other mediums? Would you consider any of them your primary language? I work in lots of different mediums too, but I always think performance is my primary language, if you like. It would be great to hear how your practice has become so interdisciplinary to the point where it's quite hard to pin it down, isn't it?



*Figure 1: Roberto Picciau, performance with embroidered clothing and art works*

**RP:** Yeah, so I guess the thing that I've noticed is that all of the modalities that I use involve the process of slowing down time. Drawing was the first modality. And the reason I say this is because I'm aware that as a toddler, drawing was the only activity which stopped me from screaming.

So clearly, it was a reliable method of decompressing and processing an overload of sensory information, which continues to be the case. So, in drawing, I focus on a single point in space and actively define time in a physical sense. And in a fundamental way, it's like being an autonomous agent in the universe.

So, time slows down and very similarly where the modality then started to shift into stop motion animation, again, there was a slowing down of time and going into the microsecond, making minuscule adjustments, capturing, repeating. And suddenly this sort of back and forth is also echoed in embroidery as well. It's kind of, again, a slowing down of time.

And when I think about other things as well, like costuming, that's making costumes and performance, it's always about some sort of vehicle for slowing down time. It's a form of meditation and the repetition, the constant reworking into these different activities. If it's embroidery, then it's a never-ending process. And that's why I've always

described my work as being infinitely intricate. Yeah, and now, you know, following many of our conversations, I'm realizing that I can make that definition more succinct, it's a "mapping of infinitely intricate worlds of autistic consciousness."

**VG:** Yeah, I love that sentence; "mapping of infinitely intricate worlds of autistic consciousness." There's something that kind of stood out then when you were talking about slowing down time. And I wondered if this is true for you, but I get a sense, from my own experience of performing, let's say, and also from watching performances where there's maybe a long duration, or an indeterminate duration, and we're invited to sit with the work or give time to the work, there's this weird sense that time both slows down and also speeds up.

So, for me, there's a sense of perhaps stillness and bracing of time or bracketing off of a period of time, which has a really calm, spacious quality. But then actually what's going on inside of my brain, body, cells, synapses, it sort of speeds up as well because of the infinitely interconnectedness of what's happening in the performance. I often have this sense of, I don't know, say it's kind of split time as if there's fast and slow time [happening simultaneously]. I think there's a spectrum, but it's definitely a blurring or a complicating of time.

And I think that's probably true of, maybe it's something to do with, I guess, anxiety if we want to use the more pathologizing term, but sometimes with anxiety and dissociation and different experiences like that, time becomes a little bit slippery so that, you know, time has that sense of becoming heavy and kind of drags, but then also the senses are really alive, really awake, and we're taking in and processing a lot of information.

Maybe that's a misconception as well about autistic, neurodivergent people that we are slow to process things. I think that it's more that we are processing infinitely more information per second, than perhaps other brains. And that might explain the perception that it's taking us longer, but it's not actually, it's relative to what's actually being processed.

So that's a fairly long-winded way of saying there's sort of an infinite kind of quickness of time in that slowness, somehow. I don't know if you resonate with that or if that sounds not like what you experience?

**RP:** I think you've described that really eloquently and very accurately. And I remember referring to you about these two images of a neural pathway in the brain and how, if we think of them as trees, I'm thinking of a bonsai tree or something like that, and the description that went with it was that the neurotypical brain, whatever that is, had a lot less branches coming off it after a certain point in development. It was almost as if that

tree had been pruned to some basic tree structures and very strong structures. Then looking at a neurodivergent brain, particularly an autistic brain, and noticing that over time, that development, although it was the same period of time, the pruning hadn't occurred.

So, there's a lot more channels into which, yeah, I guess whenever they're activated, there's a lot more places for it to travel to, therefore a lot more information to process. And that really, really struck a chord for me. And it just, it felt accurate. It felt like it made sense.

And I like the way that you kind of connected it to time. There's a slowing down, but there's also a speeding up. Because I've certainly experienced that.

**VG:** Yeah. Nice as well to bring in this image of the tree. I'm thinking about the tree branches, but also the root network and how that literally maps onto what you talked about before, which is the sense of the work being a kind of mapping process. And maybe there are some brains for whom the journey within the brain takes the fastest route. So, like on Google, you could say like, avoid this or, you know, literally get me there the quickest way by the major road systems.

And my experience is that I go down all of the country lanes, the small kind of back lanes, everything, to get to an idea. It's quite a laborious, long journey, circular sometimes. Maybe we could talk about that because mapping is something that I think comes up in not only the work itself, but in how you've started to organize the work conceptually on your website.

Your website actually has a . . . it's an eye, it's your eye, isn't it? That's the image that we see when we go to your website. Can you just quickly say something about the eye because I'm thinking about the eye and I'm thinking about maps. I'm thinking about trees and these images are sort of speaking to one another. I feel like it must be connected.

**RP:** Yeah, so the eye is an image of my own eye. If you're very polite to the optician, you can ask to take a photograph or to take an image of your own eye after it's been scanned. But what I was fascinated by was the, I guess, it's an organic thing, isn't it, the eye? And it's probably the most recognizable symbol of perception that we could maybe use. Basically, it's of the inside of the eye, so it's within a circle and it almost had, well, it looked like a cell. But within that cell, there was obviously nerves in there and they branch off very much like a tree or a root of some kind.

And what I liked about it was that there was a connection point between . . . well, I've put in the different modalities of practice as sort of points on that nerve, on that branch,

because they do sort of sprout off from each other and they do connect and reconnect and diverge and converge.

So yeah, that's the image.

**VG:** Yeah, it's such a great image. Not only is it a strong image, but it's also a really great visual way of communicating something about the kind of work you make, but also the concepts behind the work. So, let's use the website actually. We'll put a link to the website on the transcript as well. But your website has kind of been like an exercise in mapping. So, one of the things we've worked on together has been how to organize the practice or the various practices that you have. We also wanted to create some pathways that your audiences could go down should they wish to. And what's really nice is that you haven't necessarily separated your workout into those modalities. So, you haven't said, here are all the drawings, here are all the performances, here is the embroidery, because of course they're all kind of imbricated in one another.

So, you've used this term "Pathways" and you've separated them out into four categories. So, there's Clustering, Juncturing, Surfacing and Performing. So yes, I guess performing is one that you've named maybe more explicitly, but I'm interested because performing might not be "performances." There could also be other things in there, I imagine. The ones that you've fleshed out the most so far are Clustering, Juncturing and Surfacing. I'd like to talk a little bit about those three.

Let's start with Clustering. Let's elaborate on it a bit if you can. I want to think about what that means for you in the context of making work. So, I know you've made a body of work called 'Constellation of Circles.' That was a series of works. So maybe you could use 'Constellation of Circles' to explain a little bit about how Clustering became the name of that Pathway.





*Figure 2: Roberto Picciau, Constellation of Circles (detail)*

**RP:** Yeah. So, the process of Clustering actually seemed like it came up from nowhere. And it's interesting that you mentioned or made me aware of using water and particularly bubbling as something because before Clustering came about as a process - again, it was during a time of stress, there was an upcoming event and maybe others would, if they were feeling anxious or stressed or something, might pick up a piece of paper and start doodling in some way - that's pretty much what occurred here.

Clustering is a process of using a ballpoint pen and just, I guess, impressing into a piece of paper, just repeatedly doing these little circles and tightly bringing them together, clustering them together, and just building upon that. And these tiny little circles would vary in size and in tone depending on, I guess, the application of pressure and how many times I rotate the ball point onto the surface of the paper.

And there was kind of like a growth that happened with those tightly clustered circles over onto a piece of paper. And that would just grow and grow and grow until what I can only describe as like an entity emerges and there reaches that point where I'm going, this seems to exist on its own now and I should leave it.

And that's usually the point where I stop.

**VG:** Yeah, because they kind of make me think about cells and how cells reproduce in the body. You know, cells, however many trillion cells we have, are always kind of dying and replenishing. Like as we speak, I don't know how many cells will have done that process. I imagine for you it's like "when to stop"? Because these are like potentially infinite processes, you could keep going and going, especially because it seems to be having such a regulating effect.

I mean, what you said before, that drawing was the only thing that would stop you from screaming. Like, I guess as an adult you might mean that as in literally screaming verbally, but also this kind of screaming inside. Sometimes I feel like my body is screaming. You know, the cells are screaming because it's overwhelmed or it's frustrated because it can't language how it feels.

So yeah, how, how the hell do you stop? I mean is there a feeling? I think I can kind of understand that. I think it's a stupid question really, because if I was asked that question, I'd just be like, "well, it just feels right. It just feels good."



*Figure 3: Roberto Picciau, Constellation of Circles (detail)*

**RP:** It certainly isn't a stupid question. Well, I hope it's not a stupid question, because it is a question I ask myself every time I'm making one of these pieces of work. When do I

put the pen down? And I don't think that the feeling that it is simply done is, is bold enough, pronounced enough, to be definitive for me.

Because these drawings are created over a series of sittings, hundreds of sittings, maybe. It's literally squeezed within any period of time that I have. It's good to hear that the emotional regulation part of it is recognised because these sittings are usually squeezed in between daily life in some way, shape or form.

So yeah, these sittings might be 10 minutes, might be two hours, might be a couple of seconds or something, but building up over time, there is a felt sense of, "right, this form is now occupying a certain amount of space and presence and now I don't need to add anything more to it because it's speaking to me just purely by looking at it." There's enough there. So, at some point there is a feeling of "enough," that that now exists, it occupies.

It might simply be because I've run out of space on the paper or something like that. But usually there's a threshold point where it's like, right, okay. There's almost a ... maybe I'm tempted to say a two-way conversation between the positive space and then the negative space. So yeah, I'm not quite sure how to define it, but at some point, it seems to occupy a space. More recently, I've started to give myself a boundary in which I say, "right, after X number of sittings, that's when I stop and it's non-negotiable."

**VG:** I feel physical pain because it's like, yeah, I think we call them "generative constraints." I'm a big advocate for that because yeah, like, where do you draw a line? The Juncturing kind of relates to that because the Juncturing pathway is, I guess we could say, the second pathway on the website.

This [Juncturing] has to do with decision-making. I suppose it comes back a little bit to this thing of like, how do you decide, how do you make the decision that something has ended? How do you make the decision of what to do next? So, in Juncturing, you include works that correspond to "an intensive synaptic activation of the prefrontal cortex." I'll say that again, "an intensive synaptic activation of the prefrontal cortex."

And in this way, it's related to decision-making and your experience of decision-making as a neurodivergent person. We can talk about works that sit within that category, as well as talking a little bit about what decision-making is for you. Again, I'm drawn back to this idea of the maps and the pathways. It's like, which way to turn, when to stop, how much more information to consume, where is the limit of the senses?

There's a lot here around boundaries. Where do we place the boundary? Where do we end? Where does something else begin? Yeah, so can you say something about Juncturing in relation to decision-making?





Figure 4: Roberto Picciau, *Juncturing*

**RP:** Yeah, Juncturing is fundamentally about decision making and I've given this a lot of thought and have been able to, in a way, connect it to neurodivergence. So, indecisiveness is a type of, or can be a type of, paralysis. And I like the fact that you did refer back to these pathways in the brain, and it reminded me of the tree branch and all these channels that do get activated during contemplation of a decision to be made that starts to bring in multiple variables of hypothetical outcomes. And that can be particularly overwhelming.

So Juncturing was really a breaking down of decisions. And I describe it as [decisions in the sense of] both physically and philosophically. So, the reason I say philosophically is because I then started to consider decision-making in the world in general and what influences a person's decision-making. And this is why I kind of segue a little bit into maybe the spiritual, the religious. Religion and spirituality can become guideposts for making certain decisions.

And during this time, when I was doing Juncturing, there was an active breaking down of those guideposts. And I did that in a physical sense by breaking down religious texts, the paper itself, into a pulp, into fibres, and then reconstituting them. So basically, decimating the written word into a material that created a new piece of paper. It was a handmade piece of paper, very rugged. And the surface itself had its own terrain. And on

top of that was a new drawing. So, inscribing. Inscribing lines basically, and breaking it right down to a decision between: Do I draw horizontally? Do I draw vertically? Do I go left? Do I go right? Do I go up? Do I go down?

So, the decisions were really just as rudimentary as I could possibly make them and then trying to break down those decisions to the tiniest possible degree that I could. So, you know, if I'm going to turn left, am I going to turn left by a millimetre or two? And then just repeating that process over and over again. And the result, basically, the result was a labyrinth-like image by the end, which eventually did reconnect. You know, taking a few steps back and looking at it, it's overwhelming to look at, but yeah, it's cohesive because it all reconnects.



*Figure 5: Roberto Picciau, Juncturing (detail)*

**VG:** Yeah. Yeah, it's amazing because these labyrinths that you've, I don't want to say you've drawn them, but they've kind of manifested as a document of all those decisions - between right, left, how much right, how much left, up, down - in effect, all of those decisions, and you could say a decision is about clarity, making a clear decision of one thing or the other thing. But the image that we see is actually quite bewildering.

We all know and make an association between labyrinths and this metaphor of getting lost and losing a sense of direction. And I really like this kind of dual thing, that in

mapping or giving a record of really intricate decision-making processes, you've manifested an image of a labyrinth, which is something we actually associate with something more unclear, kind of no direction. You know, you could go left, you could go right, but maybe you're always going to come back to the same place. I love how that's happened almost organically. You didn't plan to draw a labyrinth and for it to mean something in that sense, but that was the result of this proposition that you gave yourself, which is to explore this process of decision-making.

**RP:** Yeah, it's it is interesting how it just all emerges.

**VG:** This links to the last pathway that we'll chat about, and this one is Surfacing. This one's about a perceptual process of observing a surface and then noticing the forms and shapes it is describing. A blurred edge between inferred and imagined. I think this is really beautiful because as I see it, what you're saying there is the material itself, the surface is itself describing.

It has a liveness, it has an agency. I guess it inverts the relationship that we might usually have to a surface where an artist will draw onto or paint onto, inscribe onto the surface. So, I like that the surface has some sort of a dynamic to it and that you're not projecting onto it, but it is speaking to you. So, this is the relational aspect. And again, you're doing this in a really micro way, and again you're bringing it right the way back to perception. So how is it that I'm perceiving the surface? And also, is it possible that the surface is perceiving me in some way? Like if we want to go there, we could go there with it. Maybe you could connect it to this notion of the blurred edge between the inferred and imagined in acts of perception.

**RP:** It's wonderful hearing how you describe these different modalities, these different processes that I'm using. And there's a link there, I think, between Juncturing and Surfacing. And the link is that, within Juncturing, there's a real attempt to be decisive and to make decisions. And that's why it's an activation of the prefrontal cortex, you know, if I'm thinking in a sort of neuroscience kind of way. There's something about not necessarily succumbing to the influences of even the terrain, the surface of the paper.

Whilst Surfacing flips that on its head, which is, rather than me inscribing, you know, being decisive and going, right, I'm going to draw something, instead, I'm going to look at the piece of paper and see what it's showing me. And simply illuminating that.

It reminds me of this phenomenon called pareidolia. I don't know if you've ever heard of it.

**VG:** No, I don't know that I have . . .

**RP:** So, it's described as a psychological phenomenon, but it's basically if you think about when you're looking at clouds or any sort of nebulous image, your mind detects meaningful images when there is supposedly no image there to be found.

If I'm thinking about ink blot tests, the whole purpose of that is to demonstrate that we see something that is familiar in some way, something figurative or something. Whilst in Surfacing, I'm surrendering that whole process and instead, just allowing the paper to show me what needs to be illuminated. And I just illuminate that. And it does have an aliveness to it because I'm noticing, for example, I might see a squiggle, I may see a shape, I may see a pattern only for a moment. So, it does require quite a bit of movement and capturing whatever I'm seeing there because it really does tend to shape shift in some way.

So, there's kind of two elements, which is surrendering to what is being shown to me and to illuminate that, but also at the same time, resisting the temptation to accentuate any figurative emergences that my mind is trying to impress upon me. . . “You must pull that out of that.” I say no, I'm just going to try to draw only what I see.

And that's why I do describe it as a bit of a blurred edge between inference and imagination because I'm like, right, okay, at what point is the paper showing me to draw that? And at what point is my mind showing me to draw that?





Figure 6: Roberto Picciau, *Surfacing*



**VG:** Yeah, yeah, it's like you're trying to resist the catalogue of images that the brain has maybe recognized over years of experience of seeing things, you know, making connections between this shape and this meaning. It's almost like you're trying to again, unlearn that language of signs that we are accustomed to, and really think deeply about what else is there to see? How can we recognize when the brain is pulling us into patterns of thought or symbolism that are familiar or habitual? This proposition of Surfacing is a really good demonstration of that.

Actually, I think you said that this is a “neurophysical process of scrutinizing attention itself.” And I think that works on the level of scrutinizing attention, but also intention. And how attention and intention inform perception. How is it that we are making meaning? What library of data are we drawing from? And is there a way that we can change that narrative, if you like, so we don't go back to pathways that are really strongly ingrained in our brains through our lived experience? Because in some cases, it might actually be beneficial for us to find new, not yet thought-perceived-known pathways, symbols and meanings.

I've been watching a lot of documentaries and reading a lot at the minute about psychedelics. I have an interest in psychedelics, as well as working on projects with a few artists who were making work on this research theme. There's something around using psychedelic substances, compounds, and the way that that effectively helps the brain get out of these deep grooves, such as in what clinicians call “treatment resistant depression” or anxiety.

There's something about the specific dosage and frequency of using Ayahuasca or mushrooms or Psilocybin, whatever it might be, that has the capacity to take the brain back a few steps, or a few lifetimes even in some cases, so that we have the potential to make new pathways, make new synaptic bridges to new forms of experience.

So, on the one hand, yeah, we need those pathways so we can function in the world. We need them practically, pragmatically, but they can also be a hindrance. And maybe that's what's so brilliant about art and this sense of not knowing. I think each time we attempt to make something, it's an attempt to make a new pathway or disturb a current pathway that we might have. I don't know if that makes sense or relates at all to what you're trying to do with the work, because it seems to me like that's quite strong. I mean, you mentioned unlearning before, I guess it relates to unlearning, doesn't it?

**RP:** Yeah, there's definitely a connection point there with the effects of psychedelic substances and also engaging in these processes which seem a little bit, I don't want to say abstract, but seem impulsive, and yet, seem to be describing some kind of lesson or something, something to be unpicked. And I totally resonate with that. And I'm aware of

psilocybin studies and the sort of psychotherapeutic journey within those studies, in that there is an exploration of a [therapeutic] question.

Trauma, this is my understanding, is that trauma has this ability to lock somebody into a certain neural pathway that can become very entrenched and very difficult to get out of. And then, kind of these substances seem to make those grooves a lot less strong or at least give a way to jump out of those trenches and into new pathways. Yeah, I guess that's why they're described as psychedelic, it's sort of mind expanding. And that makes a lot of sense.

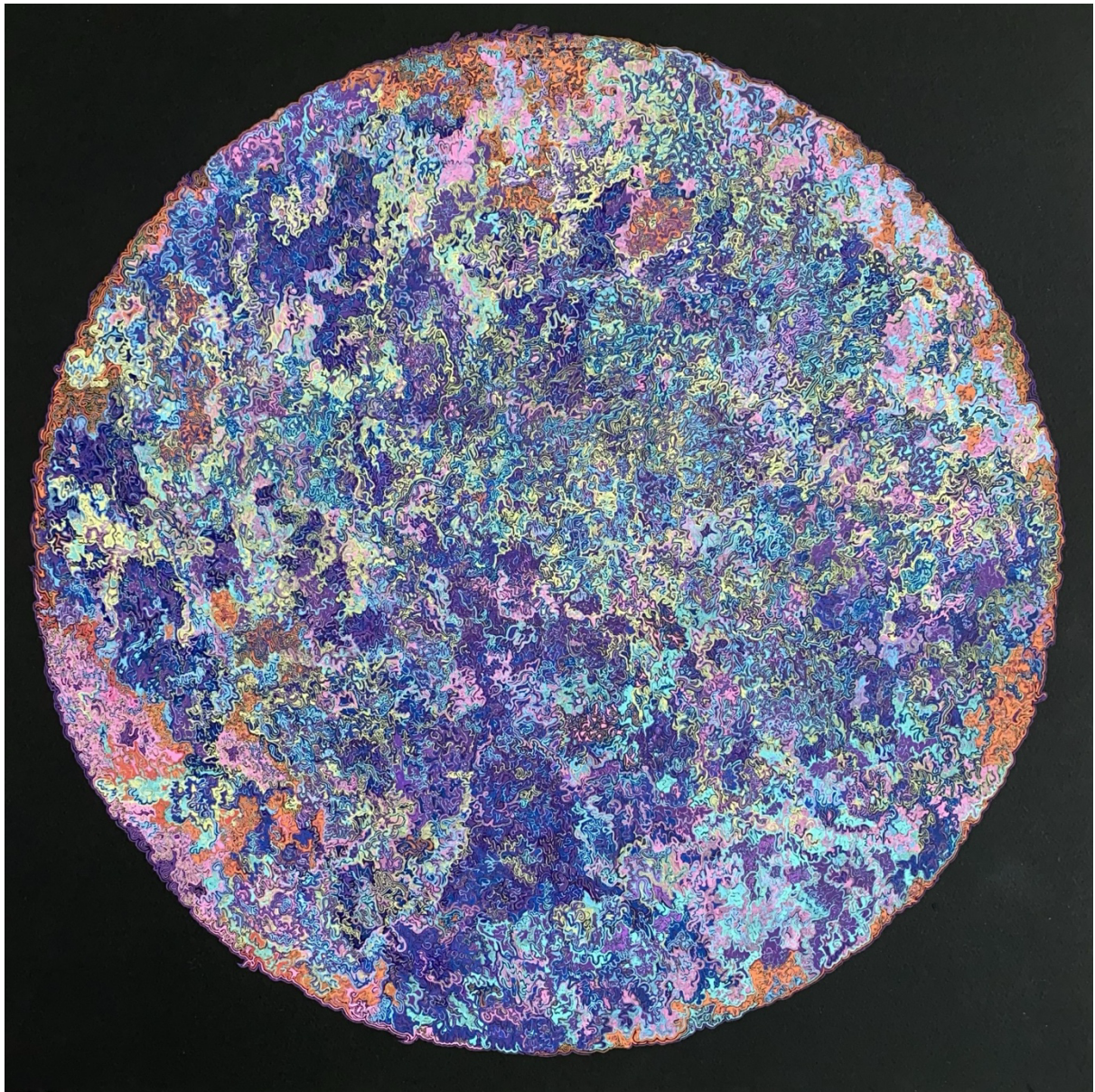
I definitely do see a connection between that and art making. You only need to go into an art gallery to all of a sudden start thinking a little bit differently about something because somebody else has approached a certain subject differently or is showing you something that's completely alien.

**VG:** That's really beautiful. I mean, I'm watching these programs about psychedelics from the perspective of somebody who has experienced trauma and has complex PTSD. We're not going to go into this [PTSD] in any great detail, it's just to say that it can be very difficult when you're caught in those grooves and kind of almost unconscious patterns of behaviour and nervous system response, to make new decisions or to respond to a situation differently.

And I am fascinated by psychedelics, but also terrified to try anything like that because I know how sensitive my system is. Interestingly for me, I think art practice, art making, especially performance, especially live performance, is probably the place, the edge point, the threshold that I can [safely] go to, which would probably closely mimic some of the ways in which psychedelics might work with the brain.

And for lots of different reasons, I haven't made any live performances for almost 10 years now. And I think that what I'm noticing now in my body and in my brain is that I've kind of come to a dead end in terms of talk therapy and other traditional forms of therapy when it comes to CPTSD.

I think my body needs performance as a way of getting back into that experience of a kind of altered state of consciousness in the liveness and in the relational moment. Always with a question in mind as well, similar to the therapeutic journey.



*Figure 7: Roberto Picciau, Surfacing*

**VG:** I guess this is a nice way to move on because we have never, ever, had a conversation when we haven't ended up somehow at spirituality in some way or another!

And there's lots of things I'm connecting here. So, when you were talking about Surfacing, you talked about this experience of surrendering to the surface, to what it is telling you. And I'm just thinking back to some of our conversations about radical acceptance and surrendering. We've used the term "God" in an expanded sense. We might talk about, the Universe, or Universal Energy. Some people have the notion of the Cosmic Christ.

There's lots of different ways we can think about God. [For me] It's this thing of surrendering to something higher, not even necessarily higher, because I think that gives this sense of the high, the low, and maybe I don't want to go there in terms of directionality.

At the very least it's the "getting out of our heads," getting out of our own way, and giving "it" over to something else. Trusting in that "something else" to make the decisions in ways that perhaps we wouldn't if we were using the ego and the controlling mind.

So, I think we've kind of gone there, haven't we, in our conversations, we've gone to that question of surrendering. Does that resonate with you as a record of what we've talked about?

**RP:** Yes, it definitely resonates. And I kind of want to add a little bit to the definition of God in some way. And I want to describe this as an acronym, which is Good Orderly Direction. For me, that just completely stripped away this idea of any symbol that's being given to you, because "good orderly direction" would look different to any person, however they choose to interpret that.

But yeah, there's definitely an overlap between spirituality and giving up the, I guess the will, giving up one's will to something, even just something other to myself. I can give up my will to the surface of a piece of paper. I'm reminded of this image, again, another image that sort of emerged, of a glass jar, and the glass jar has the label of "Religion" on it. And then that glass jar is encapsulated by another glass jar, which says "Spirituality" on it. And then there's an even bigger glass jar, which encapsulates both of them together, which says "Consciousness."

And I found that really interesting and it kind of mimicked my journey a little bit, in that I've been in each of those domains.

**VG:** Something that connects spirituality, and in some ways takes us back to the psychedelics, is people who've had Near-Death Experience (NDE) or other kinds of anomalous experience that can't be explained in terms of consciousness being produced by the human brain, but rather that the brain itself is more like a radio that is receiving and then filtering consciousness.

It sort of brings me back a little bit to what you were talking about with the Pathways. I don't want to make a definition of God, but one of the things I found quite helpful when I was trying to grapple with this notion of God and all of the kind of negative connotations that that has, is the phrase: "God is the knot where all of the connections tie."

And so, all pathways, all neurological matter, it all connects. Which is to say that we are all connected, that there is a bridge between my brain and your brain and my nervous system and your nervous system, all co-regulating. I also remember being told at some point, the best answer to all of my questions around anxiety and fear is “God.” My mind has been warped trying to understand that!

If I'm in a situation that I can't make sense of, I actively try not to make sense, and sometimes I say, “Give it to God.” Which is to say, give it to a different force, a different energy. Maybe I can't work this out for myself. In fact, that's what they say when they work with people therapeutically with psychedelics, that it's about getting out of your own way and that the unconscious mind fixes the glitch.

So, we want to kind of get out of the ego. And I think that's probably how I understand God in that sense.

**RP:** Well, just as you were speaking, I was nodding and smiling the whole way because so much of what you're saying resonates with my own experiences and how it's so simple. Just let go of whatever that I'm holding onto that I'm trying to figure out, which is simultaneously causing me pain and overwhelming confusion. I just need to let it go to something that I cannot even fathom.

You know, I cannot say that there is a God, definitely. But for some reason, when I just go, “I'll give it to God” in the same way as you've said, and I'm pretty sure you're the one who shared that with me initially. When I do just say, “I'll just give it to God. I'll just let it go. I'll just give it to . . . just give it away,” it's felt viscerally. And yeah, maybe this is where the work seems to connect to surrender. It's another activity where I can let go of whatever I'm holding onto and just surrender to the process. And the thing that I've found whenever I do that, is that it's just infinitely unfolding.

**VG:** Yeah. Yeah. Which is terrifying. I mean, I'm saying all this, and it all sounds very simple, doesn't it? But I don't want to romanticize surrender because I think it's always within a certain context of a little bit of scaffolding and control. But I also think that learning, learning to do that, learning to kind of enter into the not-knowing is really essential. But I'm probably the worst person at that in daily life. I'm getting better, but I think as a consequence of neurodivergence, PTSD, anxiety, et cetera, et cetera, control has been a big part of my life. I think art is the place where I can let go a little bit. I remember being told that I should get drunk to make artwork, to let go a little bit. We'll see!



**VG:** Now I want to think a little bit about the future for you, and what that might be in terms of work, what you're working on now. You might not have an answer to this, but there might be something that you're working on or a question that's in your mind, something that's kind of got you in its grip?

**RP:** I am currently working on developing a project which is involving a lot more relationships and that is actually with other people! You know, following our conversations I have realized how important it is to have a dialogue, an ongoing dialogue which is zooming into something in particular. Perhaps I'm a bit late to the party to realize that two minds are better than one! And I want to explore that now.

I'm in conversations with some other neurodivergent artists and we're going to explore what it means to build language. I use the word "language" in the broadest of senses. And again, involving surrender, but within that surrender is a little bit of learning. I need to be a student in order to learn: how do other people understand language? Are there any models that we can share as neurodivergent people where we can actually reach a place where we're not propping up a pathologized language, a pathologized framing of our experience? Are there new ways of understanding ourselves and our own perception of the world?

**VG:** For some reason, I felt quite emotional when you were saying all of that. There's something about what you said about being a student. Opening up to working with other people, for some people, can be quite daunting, can't it? I don't want to fall into stereotypes around neurodivergent people and lack of social skills and social anxiety and so on, but there is something about relationships with others that can be tricky. Not because we don't want to have relationships with other people, but because our ways of being might not sync up or our languages might not translate across.

And so, when you said that spending time with other people will entail you being a student, I think when you say student you're saying student of a peer. We're not talking about a student of a religion and we're not talking about a student of philosophy. We're students of and with each other.

So yeah, I'm really thrilled to hear that you're going to be working with people. I hope I can get in on that somehow! Be one of those people! It's amazing, for example, with us, how in the space of two years, we actually have created a bit of a language amongst ourselves, and that language includes, you know, the Pathways, the Clustering, the Juncturing. We're using it quite specifically.

So, thank you for letting me be a student of your practice and also your lived experience because it's given me so much.

So . . . unless there is anything else you want to say, we could say “enough!” I think that's what you say when you've been creating something, and you step back and decide that it's finished.

We could step back from the conversation and say, “yes, that feels right . . .”

**RP:** Yeah. I just want to say thank you, Victoria, for inviting me to have this conversation, this interview.

I feel like it has taken a form, and it has space, and it is now an entity that has emerged and, you know, will have a life of its own.

Yeah. That's my hope.

Thank you, Victoria.