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Art exhibits are opportunities for reflecting on social issues and can promote citizenship as individuals understand more about marginalized communities. Art making in response to the viewed arts allows for empathy and compassion to germinate and grow.

In this study, art exhibits and art making workshops were offered to increase understanding and support for people living with mental illness in Hong Kong. Twenty people living with mental illness who participated in a 10 week art therapy group created an art exhibit of images they wanted others to know about them. The exhibit was mounted in art galleries, shopping malls, performance venues and public transportation hubs. Viewers (n=350) selected a piece that was meaningful to them, wrote their thoughts, and posted one action they could undertake to support people living with mental illness. Additional viewers (n=135) were invited to view the exhibit in an art studio. These participants created art based on their own emotional response to the piece selected from the exhibit. They then completed reflective writing and joined in a discussion group on the workshop and ways to better support people living with mental illness.

Results suggest that art exhibits paired with reflection prompts deepened the viewing experience leading to new insights. Creating art promoted a wider perspective on people living with mental illness, challenged stereotypes and initiated dialogue on both personal actions and government policy recommendations. The research suggests promising and practical strategies for creating art exhibits and structuring viewing opportunities intended for stigma reduction and social change