

A Drawing Lesson with Magritte

Janet Selby 2006

I have the class for one hour. We are all ceramics students, taking turns to give each other a drawing lesson. I begin with an overview to my approach to my studio ceramics work.

The theme for my art is the Australian bush, its qualities, influences and spirit – the spirit of place.

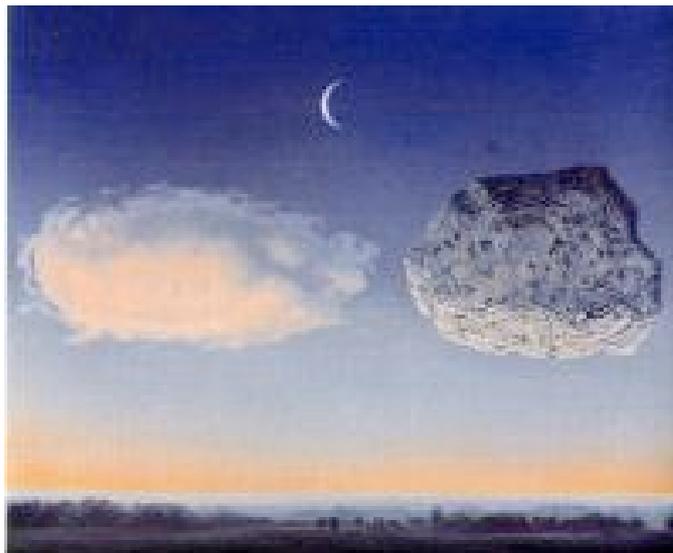
My objective is to make sculptures on a small scale to reflect intimacy of trees and their interconnectedness with other elements of the landscape, including ourselves.

This lesson focuses on one influential artist – Rene Magritte, a 20th century Belgian Surrealist painter, and how the incongruities of his images, when put together, highlight their intrinsic nature.



I show a painting from a book of his art *This is Not a Pipe*. This image has always stayed in my mind since I first saw it in high school. The apparent silliness of the statement occurring directly below an image of a pipe struck me as funny. Of course it's not a pipe – it's a picture, a book, a painting.

The incongruity exaggerates the notion of "pipe". Its real nature is its smell, taste, etc. which are not apparent in a printed image.



Another series of paintings depicts floating rocks. This odd placement makes our intelligent mind shocked. It can't be true. Rocks are heavy. *Exactly the point!* He makes you think about the nature of rocks, how heavy they are and how absurd to think they can float.

For our classroom exercise, I asked the students to take an object from the table – a selection of leaves, twigs, pods, bark, and feathers. I asked them

to take a few minutes to study the chosen object. Ask yourself "What is its essential nature? What are its characteristics, its tendencies? Why is it like it is?"

Now I asked the students to begin to draw it, perhaps exaggerating these qualities. As an example, I chose a leaf, a small green camphor laurel leaf. It was supple, pointy, fresh, small and green with orange veins. I drew the veins. They became more dominant, and began to look like branches on a tree.

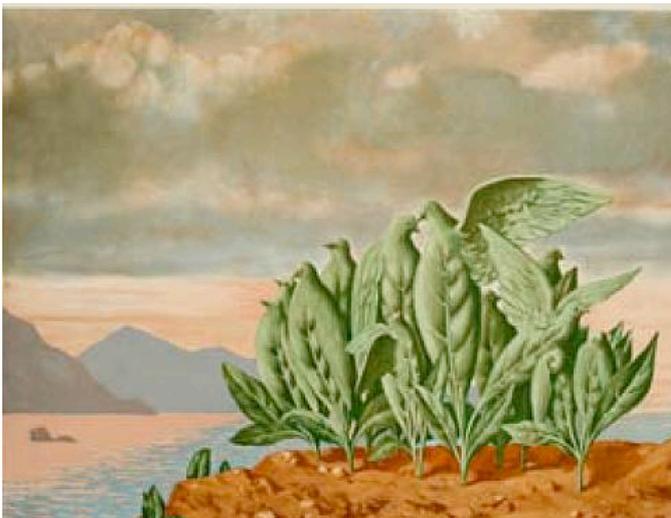
In the second part of our exercise I examined Magritte in more detail, and with more examples. These are some of his images:



- *A stone bird flies gracefully.*
- *Three trees on a table with clouds suspended in their branches.*
- *A bunch of leaves whose tips have become doves.*

Students of Zen koans will perhaps have an affinity with these images.

Now I ask the class to take the essential quality they have discovered through this detailed examination of their object, and devise its *opposite*.



A feather is essentially light. A stone is essentially heavy. *Opposites.*

A leaf is small in comparison to the entire tree. *Opposites.*

A curling piece of bark with perhaps an insect hiding inside - its opposite could be the opening of an exhibition.

In- and Ex-, *Opposites.*

My leaf has turned into a tree. It shows an inter-connectedness, that the leaf and tree are essentially the same, not separate.

Just as ice by nature is water, can a feather by nature be rock?

The students enjoyed the challenge and came up with some interesting ideas. Hopefully opening some approaches to the mysteries of art.

Commentary on the fifth precept by Dogen

Buddhas and Ancestral Teachers realise the empty sky and the great earth.
When they manifest the noble body, there is neither inside nor outside in emptiness.
When they manifest the Dharma body, there is not even a bit of earth on the ground.

Poetry by John Anderson, modern Australian poet:

I find my spirit in the woodlands
I am trying to make you see what I mean
I am trying to make myself visible
I am trying to make the woodlands visible
The undiscovered forest
I believe that if you would see me you would see me in the woodlands
That you would see the woodlands and yourselves in the woodlands
When we see the butterfly, the tortoise, the wombat's burrow we are looking at
ourselves
The butterfly sees itself, sees itself in us
As it sees itself in the sunlight, the rock and the blossom (which are in us)
The lizard sees itself in the tree and the tree sees itself in the stars, the stars see
themselves in us

All the worlds answer us as they answer each other
One place in the world sees itself in another
I first see myself in the furthest scatterings of Australasia. Where I see the furthest
order again become visible, through outlines again and again repeated, in a distance of
mauve, pale copper, of purple, in the furthest scatterings of the light

From: *the forest set out like the night*
by John Anderson (1948–1997)
Black Pepper Press