

The Art of Treading

by Janet Selby

First of all, I'd like to introduce myself as a visual artist, not a verbal artist, so in order to show you where I'm coming from, I'd rather let the art speak. But I can help with a montage of quotes which outline where my impulses have come from.

I'll start with a quote from myself - my artist statement which appears on the wall of the Gallery behind my trees, some of which you can see here today:-

Small Clay Trees

These are depicting the spirit of the bush - the dancing angophora trees, the whispering casuarinas and the play of light through their branches.



This body of work represents the experience of peace that permeates the whole environment and joins us all together in a deep inner stillness. Contemplating the elements between the heavens and the earth, we find they are interconnected. The trees help create the clouds. The clouds nourish the trees. And they all nourish our selves.

These little models are illustrations of this notion of togetherness. Our selves and our environment are as one.

Dancing Angophoras, ceramic, 2007

I want to talk about the art that has come from treading in the bush. My confidence as an artist was confirmed when I discovered this poem by John Anderson, an Australian poet who died in 1994, and reprinted in a previous Mind Moon Circle (Spring 2006):-

*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: page 51, *the forest set out like the night*, John Anderson (1948–1997) Black Pepper Press 1997

Especially relevant to my art is sauntering in the bush, with a notion called *aimlessness* (*Apranihita* in sanskrit). When I am in the bush, I don't go 'bushwalking' as such, rather I tread the bush with an open mind and heart. This notion is talked about by Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh:-

***Aimlessness** means you don't put anything in front of you as an object of your pursuit. What you are looking for is already there, not outside of you. You are already what you want to become. You are wonderful just like that. Don't try to be something else, someone else [somewhere else]. You don't have to go to the future in order to get what you want. Everything you are looking for, it is right here, in the here and the now. Your enlightenment is right here.*

From teisho 'Throwing Away' by Thich Nhat Hanh off the website: www.mindfulnessbell.org/articles/throwing_away

And as Henry David Thoreau talks of in his essay *Walking*:-

... the walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, ... but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day.

*Above all, we cannot afford **not** to live in the present. He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past.*

*There is something suggested by it not in Plato nor the New Testament. It is a newer testament — the Gospel according to **this moment**. He has not fallen astern; he has got up early, and kept up early, and to be where he is, is to be in season, in the foremost rank of time. It is an expression of the health and soundness of Nature, a brag for all the world — healthiness as of a spring burst forth — a new fountain of the Muses to celebrate this last instant of time.*

Now, the reason I need to show my trees and my art to the public is that I want to share my expressions and thereby, perhaps, enable people to expand their experience. But the way it is shown must not be too domineering in opinion or ego, rather I would want to convey the atmosphere I experience, and the deep beauty and grace which can mostly be hidden behind our thoughts and expectations.

Japanese poet Ryokan wrote:-

*The water of the valley stream never shouts at the tainted world
"Purify yourself." but naturally, as it is, shows how it is done.*

This is from an old book of mine by Grace Cook, *Sun Men of the Americas*:-

The following extract from Touch the Earth illustrates how even among 'modern' Indians this deeply ingrained reverence for the earth remains: 'We don't chop down trees. We use only dead wood, but the white people plough up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't, I am sore. Don't hurt me." But they chop it down and cut it up . . . Everywhere the white man has touched it is sore.

Quote from Sun-Men of the Americas, Grace Cook, White Eagle Publishing 19xx, page 49.

Sauntering with Aboriginal elder Dulumunmun – Uncle Max, has helped me tread more respectfully. When I tread the earth, on a sojourn, each step is healing me, and I am healing each step. Up at Kodoji, our Ancient Ground Temple at Gorricks Run, we sometimes sing the *Song of Kodoji*:-

Ancient Ground Ancient Ground, you will look after it. Eh, my children.

Ancient Ground Ancient Ground, it will look after you. Eh, my children.

Thich Nhat Hanh is discussing the *Diamond Sutra* here:-

In order to protect the human being, you have to protect elements that are not human, because these elements are our ancestors, and if you destroy them there is no way we can be here. That is why discrimination between man and nature is a wrong view. You have to see you as nature, one with nature.

[We need to] thrown away the notion of self, [and] the notion of man - human being. This is not too difficult. When we look into the human being, we see human ancestors, we see animal ancestors, we see vegetable ancestors, we see mineral ancestors. We see that the human is made of non-human elements. We see that we are at the same time a rock, a river, a cloud, a [possum], [some wattle]. And if we take away all the non-human elements, the human being is no longer there. With liberation from that notion, we become less proud, less arrogant as a species. We have to respect and protect other species in order for us to have a chance. That is why we said the Diamond Sutra is the oldest text on deep ecology.

Deep ecology means not being separate from the one who treads.

Around me, when I am in the bush, and not in the bush, I am aware of deep *metta*, unconditional loving kindness, nourishing all things, indiscriminately like the rain. I like to walk in the rain.

This is what should be done

By one who is skilled in goodness,

And who knows the path of peace:

*Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.*

***Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!***

*Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.*

All these quotes relate to my impulse to express myself, my experiences and observations. Here's a quote from an influential book *The Book of Changes, I Ching*:-

Hexagram #22, "Pi" - Fire illuminating the Mountain - grace, elegance, beauty, inner worth that shines.

*The most perfect grace consists not in external ornamentation but in allowing the **original material** to stand forth, beautified by being given form.*

From *I Ching*, trans. Willhelm, Penguin Arkana, p 495

What is this 'original material'?

There was a Radio National programme on Sunday 2 December 2007 called *Artworks*, in which the British sculptor Antony Gormley was interviewed. Antony Gormley has '*used the human image in sculpture through an investigation of the body as a place of memory and transformation, using his own body as subject, tool and material.*' (Wikipedia.com)

His art has its seed in childhood, when he was forced every day for half an hour to have a lie down, upstairs in his tiny bedroom. With his eyes closed he felt claustrophobic at first, until after a few years, there emerged a "*vast and undefinable extension of space*".

He was taught as a young man growing up in western society, that all knowledge comes from outside "*things*" - books, teachers, and cultures. Then he met Goenka, a Vipassana teacher, and learnt that a "*philosophy of mindfulness could arise out of the experience of being embodied*". In this body, this space exists. In India in the late 1960's, he realised he had a major life choice – whether to "*give [his] life to Buddhism or fulfil a passionate interest in art*". He chose the latter, and had to "*start all over again*".

But for me, the two are not separate. I have no choice. Perhaps I can be defined as 'Buddhist,' or 'Artist', but it is not my aspiration to be either. I just do what I have to do. The impulse has no name, or definition. This is the *original material*. I am not separate from the original material.

I do agree however with his view that:-

Art is a place which can respond to our situation, which inculcates a form of responsibility. Aesthetics and ethics are linked, creating a meditative space for the viewer as a sovereign space. Given the opportunity to think, feel and be, the viewer is transformed.



Annandale, 16 December 2007

Radio National programme *Artworks*, 2 December 2007

I'd like to finish by exploring one of my pieces entitled '*Wind in the Casuarinas*'. In it, I depict the wind blowing over a lake, where the sound through the casuarinas is evoked – 'Shhhh. . .' Then I realised *Wind over Lake* is an image from the *I Ching*, so I looked it up, and came up with hexagram # 61 *Chung Fu*, Inner Truth.

*The wind blows over the lake and stirs the surface of the water.
Thus visible effects of the invisible manifest themselves.
The open centre [of the hexagram] indicates a heart free of prejudices, and therefore open to the truth.*

Janet Selby

Wind in Casuarinas, ceramic 2007 From a talk given at Sydney Zen Centre,