

**AESTHETICS, AUTHENTICITY, AND BELONGING**

**THE ROLES OF PERSONAL IDENTITY  
AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY  
IN ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT AND PRACTICE**

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## **Abstract**

Many of us seek to conduct our lives and work in a way that fulfils the personal need of following a path that is true to us. At the same time, we still have a need to engage with others and to belong among those who matter to us. For those involved in the practice of art, the connection between identity and work can be particularly strong, and for students of art, creating a balance between searching for one's own authenticity and the influences of others can at times be challenging. This thesis looks at notions of personal identity and social connections in terms of aesthetic sensibility. The roles that teachers and mentors can play are explored, as is the idea of a personal aesthetic: how it begins in childhood and then develops with exposure and practice. Ways of responding to art and articulating those responses are looked at also.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Identity, Art education, Personal authenticity, Aesthetic sensibility, Post-secondary visual art education, Social contexts of artists, Teacher-student relations in the arts

*To Robert and Vladan and Miro*

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## Introduction

For better and for worse, the idea that artistic practice is connected to a kind of personal self-discovery or self-realization seems to pervade the beliefs of many. For better, I think, because the possibilities for growth, and renewal offered by involvement in the arts are indeed real; they are also often limitless. And at times, for worse, I think, because the intricate connection between an individual's sense of self and their artistic practice can sometimes create significant stumbling blocks. In our modern way of thinking, we value autonomy and the idea that everyone has his or her own unique path, and the arts certainly provide a means for this, perhaps more so than many other endeavours. Yet art is also an opportunity to forget oneself, to slip into the reality of other perspectives, and to develop one's sense of sympathy and understanding for other ways of being. We can lose ourselves in creative or aesthetic experience, and be very close to something within, and at the same time expand horizons beyond the immediacies and practicalities of one particular life.

There is something to the idea that for those who pursue the arts, what they do is integrally linked with who they are, and that what one is about often guides the work. This is certainly true with many other endeavours and vocations as well, but because the arts are so connected with self-expression, the personal connection to what a work of art communicates, and especially the way in which it communicates, is very strong. It is not for nothing, then, that Charles Taylor, in his work on the conflicts within the modern

identity, proposes that we have come to see human lives in analogy with artistic work in that each of us seeks a way of being original, striving to follow a path that is uniquely ours.<sup>1</sup> The idea that we can, or should, lead our lives according to an inner voice has become deeply ingrained in our view of life and our psychology; it is a social ideal we have developed in Western society for almost two centuries. Taylor proposes that despite allegations of self-interest, placing value on personal authenticity can be a powerful moral ideal when viewed as being true to and honest with oneself.

If we are, then, to attribute artistic associations to questions of identity, I think it is worthwhile to look into that part of us that plays an inevitable role in our experience of the world, and particularly of things artistic – a personal sense of aesthetic. Though indefinable, it affects who we are and how we view the world. It can play a role in the directions we take in life, how we think of ourselves, and also our relationships with others, at times determining whom we connect well with and who we don't. Of what value, then, is an individual's inclination to find certain things beautiful, or otherwise affecting, and what are the consequences of that affection?

The area I would like to explore involves the ground where personal authenticity and aesthetic sensibility come together. My thoughts often follow along the lines of artistic as well as personal development, and while much of the time my concern is with the lives and work of artists, I think there is something elemental about these ideas that affects us all. Aesthetic experience is a fairly basic part of life. The degree to which we are aware of this, whether consciously or otherwise, can determine the quality of our lives.

Yet while aesthetic experience is a given in our individual lives, it is also subject to various forces brought about by our culture, media, education systems, as well as by theories and trends. On a level much closer to home, we are influenced by our upbringing, the social circles we are a part of, and to a certain extent, by the company we keep. The notion of personal authenticity becomes particularly important here, in the face of so many possible directions in which to be moved, some of which can be more beneficial than others when it comes to finding what feels right for us.

For someone who studies or is otherwise engaged in art, the question of how a personal sense of aesthetic is related to an individual's identity also touches onto the idea of belonging. Where do my affections lie, and with whom does this bring me into contact? Who and what am I excluding? One can begin to see, then, how an artist's or art lover's sense of all this can be greatly affected by the attitudes of the art world around them. Yet, at the same time, these influences have their limits, for that inner artistic voice is often quite strong. It is the interplay between these inner and outer forces that perhaps fascinates me the most.

The first section of this work deals with ideas of aesthetics and identity from the point of view of the individual, while the latter sections look at the social relations around art and how art connects us to others. In the middle, there are some ruminations of my own around what feeds my own involvement in art and aesthetic experience.

## Aesthetics and Personal Identity

Where does one's personal sense of aesthetic come from, and how does it develop and evolve over time? How much of it is in us naturally by a kind of instinct, and how is that developed in childhood? Then, when we look further, what sorts of imprints (and erasures) are brought about by further experience and by actual artistic education and development, and what role do these play in characterizing who we are and the paths we take? Would my life be different if I had been raised in a different aesthetic environment, and been acculturated to like different things? These are all questions that of course cannot be answered. They can only be explored, and I feel that exploring them can lead us to know ourselves better.

Philosophers in aesthetics have long been occupied with the question of why art has the power over us that it does. Yet for an artist, a sense of aesthetic is something much more than a matter of taste and appreciation that comes into play at the receiving end of a completed work of art. A sense of aesthetic is the *food* of art, touching everything from personal motives on all matters, to the inspiration for a work, and the process of working on it and bringing it to resolution. It affects life outside the actual practice of art as well, for the choices we make – where to live, what interests to pursue, what we find in common with others, are often in part aesthetically affected. I would go so far as to say that along with our basic human needs like sustenance, shelter, loved ones, and a sense of purpose, the aesthetic can be a major driving force in life.

What we see around us, specifically, what is given to us by our culture and all the attitudes within it, carries significant weight of influence on the image we have of ourselves, both as a society and individually. Wendy Steiner states very directly that the work and efforts of artists, and those who keep the cultural world struggling forward have a significant effect on our identity. Specifically, she talks of how the artists of the day approach the now tricky question of beauty. While her argument has a strong feminist slant, the concerns addressed are universal, and I believe she is right not to underestimate the hugely confusing effect on us propagated by a cultural aesthetic that is strongly stated and at the same time riddled with so many doubts. It is true that the notion of beauty has of late been viewed with an overdose of scepticism, as something to be held at arm's length. I agree with Steiner that the effects of this have reached beyond the art world, and into to the core of many things in our lives. The spirit with which we then in turn approach and perceive art and other objects of contemplation in our environment must on some level be connected with how we view ourselves, and I believe it also affects how we live, whether or not we consider ourselves artists. Not only do artists create the works of art that we read or view, Steiner says, they also create "the very world we inhabit and our being in it."<sup>2</sup>

To return to the question of where our sense of aesthetic comes from and how it changes over time, it seems worthwhile to go to the beginning. How does what we experience aesthetically as children affect what we surround ourselves with the rest of our lives? It feels here that we have to begin by walking on the well-travelled and familiar ground of the nature-nurture issue. As Wendy Steiner succinctly puts it:

Are we *taught* to identify certain traits – in people, nature, art – as beautiful, or do we come into the world wired to admire? If the

response to beauty is learned, then how should we react to the fact of this acculturation?<sup>3</sup>

She then raises the question of whether or not we have any choice in the matter of embracing beauty or holding it at bay; in other words, just how integrated is our sense of aesthetic into our genetic makeup? Ellen Dissanayake's response to the first question would be that our desire for art and for beauty is an evolved human need, with roots far back in our developmental evolution. Pointing out that humans the world over make and use the arts, she argues that our desire for culture and the arts needs to be considered as a biological evolutionary adaptation which has helped humans to stay connected to each other, and thereby, to survive. Paying homage to the Darwinian point of view, she posits that we have become genetically predisposed to be receptive to a cultural milieu. When we consider the role of aesthetics in who we are as people, her argument is very thought provoking in that she distinguishes between what we call "humanity" (our evolutionary and biological history as human beings), and "the humanities" (the cultural lore held in books, museums, recordings and so on), placing the primary sources of aesthetic life in the former. In other words, human life and people themselves are the real source of aesthetic life, rather than established canons of knowledge. While we encounter numerous affective aesthetic experiences in our lives that help to shape us, they do so because we have an inborn inclination to be receptive to them.<sup>4</sup>

I heartily agree with Dissanayake's general tenet that we look at art as something universal and core among human beings worldwide and across time. Yet I would also like to explore how the notion of aesthetic tendency plays itself out in individuals. While it seems essential that we consider both sides of the nature-nurture equation, there is something else that has to be borne in mind when it comes to considering the aesthetic

development of a particular individual. It has to do with Steiner's question as to how we react to the acculturation of what is considered beautiful. Although education, and art education in particular, may have the wonderful mandate to expand and refine our sense of what is beautiful or worthwhile, we cannot ignore that inasmuch as an individual has experienced life, he or she comes into a classroom with some kind of personal aesthetic in already in place, and that what they come with has, I believe, tremendous value in its own right. If, as Dissanayake argues, we have a core human nature that "evolved to *require* aesthetic and spiritual satisfactions,"<sup>5</sup> it makes sense that we would begin, consciously or otherwise, the search for these satisfactions early in life, long before any sort of formal education. Our heritage and upbringing, then, form a sort of foundation in our aesthetic orientation. While this foundation can be built on enormously, even to the point of being overtaken by what one encounters later in life, I find it worthwhile to consider the idea of formative years when it comes one's personal aesthetic motivation.

In doing this we have to remember that, like all the other things in the nurture part of the equation, aesthetics is of course only one variable that works in tandem with countless others. One may develop a love for something because it is connected to a meaningful and pleasant part of one's life, because, for example, it was a favourite uncle who introduced a love of a certain kind of architecture through his familiarity with a particular town. Sometimes it can even be the case that the social associations we have of a certain place, object, or particular kind of art are so strong that they completely colour our response to the aesthetic qualities. Many of us are familiar with how music, in particular, can work this way. If I hear a certain song, for example, while listening to it I might think more of a particular person and time of my life, than I do about the song

itself. I find this connection between things we find beautiful, and people who matter to us very intriguing, and it is one I will return to later.



When I first got my own room as a child, with furniture my father had built right there in the apartment bedroom using only a manual saw for cutting the wood and a minimum of other tools, one of the items was a large cupboard that housed toys in the bottom section, clothes in the upper one, and shelves for books in the middle and uppermost sections. These shelves were filled in good time with books my parents, particularly my mother, brought home for me. They were usually larger volumes, anthologies of folk or fairy tales: Fairy Tales from Andersen, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Animal Folk Tales, Modern Tales and Fables, Myths and Legends, Fairy Tales from Bohemia. There were also a couple of books of children's verse, poems mostly about nature and pastoral life, a life that was quite different from my own. Almost all of these, though they were written in English, were illustrated by Czech and Slovak artists, and printed in Czechoslovakia, the country from which we had immigrated two or three years previously. I remember how enthusiastic my mother was when she brought home the first of these books, pointing out where they had been printed. She also stated, in laudatory tones, how beautifully they were illustrated. They were fine books, no doubt, but when they were put on my bookshelf I was still very young, not yet at the age when I could enjoy or understand stories that went on for whole pages of text. Also, it was difficult for me to share their enthusiasm that the books were from Czechoslovakia; I had no real memories of the home country I had left when I was two. I did love looking at



the pictures in these books though, and I must have spent many hours paging through them. Again and again, as she brought more of these books home, my mother remarked that these pictures were beautiful, created by some of the most famous illustrators of our country.<sup>1</sup> She said this in a tone not only of admiration and nostalgia, but also, I sensed, with a strong hope of instilling in me an appreciation for them. I looked at the pictures with a kind of respect, a reverence even, and because I didn't know the stories that went with them (my parent's attempts to actually read them to me were sporadic, and when they did, I found it hard to follow everything), the images became a world in themselves. Though I suspected I didn't see exactly what my mother saw in them, or what she wanted me to see, I did sense something there – a kind of kinship with the culture from which I had come, but from which I was now separate. So there was almost a doubly enigmatic quality about these images that were already somewhat dreamlike. Intense hues of watercolour that bled away from confidently drawn lines of children's faces – very round and somehow very pure, and of flowers and trees. Patterned backgrounds that seemed to hold promise of layers and layers of other realms. Pastoral scenes with children playing traditional games, wearing traditional clothes, the girls often with scarves on their heads, folk traditions I would never be a part of. Castles atop hills, and churches in the background, their towering steeples integral to the landscape. Or, drawings thickly outlined in black of bold looking mythical water-men and nymphs, and of animals living inside houses, doing things that humans normally do. The ones done in this style were

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<sup>1</sup> In the seventies, Czechoslovakia really did have a significant repertoire of children's culture that included television programs and films, and especially books and stories. This may have been because under communist rule, traditional and children's art was one of the cultural forms that was approved of, funded, and promoted by the government. Yet I think it was more than that. The culture, with its rich folk traditions and history, and the physical presence of numerous castles in the landscape provided much ground for the imagination, especially when the distractions of foreign media and capitalism were not there.

more mischievous somehow. There were also melancholic clowns, and circus images that were solemn, containing no sugariness or pathos; they were just softly there, making me aware of a poignant side of life.

In addition to the books that my mother bought in our newly adopted country, there were others we received in the mail from my grandparents, people who I sensed were very important to me, but of whom I had no recollection. Though I always felt a certain guilt that I was unable to appreciate and absorb these books quite the way they were supposed to be, there was something about them all that made a definite imprint on my sensibilities; they became part of my visual repertoire. I spent more time with the pictures than I ever did with the stories. By the time I was old enough to understand them my parents had somehow given up on reading them to me, and when I was old enough to read them myself, I was held back by the daunting feeling of the reverence I was supposed to have for these tomes, which had never gone away. Somehow, they were perpetually too advanced for me. When I did read them as a young adult, (I took many of them with me when I moved out to university), or, when I make attempts now to read them to my children (yes, I still have them), I realize that they are written in a certain old-world tone of generations past, that is somehow heavy-handed, and perhaps difficult for a young child to appreciate.

Later, in early high school, I had an assignment for art class to make a copy of an Impressionist painting. I hadn't known of the Impressionists before then, and I got out books from the library on Monet and Renoir, and also Van Gogh, (no one told me that he wasn't actually an Impressionist.) I chose the painting 'Poppies' by Monet, with a mother and child descending a hillside filled with poppies, the mother holding an

umbrella, a town in the background. I was taken in, and also deceived, by the apparent simplicity of the painting. It was much more difficult than I imagined to copy it, giving me a new respect for the painting, and for the artist. He had captured something that was so much – the light, the mood of the piece, the feeling of space – with seemingly so little, making the paint come alive. I also did a copy on a piece of wood (this assignment had been to paint on something other than paper) of Van Gogh's picture of a cornfield with crows. The piece of wood, bent slightly out of shape, seemed fitting to this piece. Again, I was taken by the apparent simplicity of the image and the enormous effect he created with so little. There was a serenity about it, but also something more. An emptiness. I found some time afterward that this was the last painting he did before his suicide.

Years later, when I was nineteen and visiting my home country for the first time in seventeen years, I was in a part of the National Gallery in Prague, looking at a collection of modernist paintings. I was about to enter a room of Picasso's work, and feeling inside the tremour that one so young and interested in art feels when she knows she is about to be in contact with something very famous, I decided to calm myself first and catch my breath by lingering in the preceding chamber. There, I miraculously did manage to get distracted, because something captured my attention quite completely. It was a small painting of a girl dressed in white, standing in a field. The figure stood on the left of the picture, and her body inclined toward the right, toward the almost abstract looking field. In her hand she held something that looked like a sickle, and on the whole it was a pastoral image, I suppose, though it seemed to have other qualities and moods about it, mythical and dreamlike. She might easily have been a nymph of some sort. I am sorry to say that I do not remember the exact details of the image so much as I

remember the effect it had on me. I was enveloped by it, I felt included, somehow, by that artist even though I did not at the time know who it was. The imagery was somehow so familiar to me, as if it had been my own lore. The painting was by Marc Chagall, whose work I had not yet encountered until then, even after a year of art school and four months spent in France. I wondered why. It made sense, after all, that the work had that effect on me – the Eastern European consciousness, the story-like imagery, and the light touch of the paint. For a couple of years after that, I sought out his work and found out about him what I could. I was passionate about his paintings until after...well, ...until after I learned 'better' in art school.

I had grown up in a home that was always full of books, though the books seemed to be of two different categories. There were those that filled the bookshelf in the living room, not the bookshelf, actually, but the wall unit, as we called it – a somewhat grand series of shelves that fit together, housing not only books, but also small sculptures, ornaments, curios from travels, framed etchings, and, our stereo system. It was the distinctive feature of the living room, and the books and other things that were displayed here gave our home a particular feeling – meaningful and aesthetic things surrounded us. I say they were 'displayed' because it didn't so much matter that these books were read; it was that we had them that was important. Their physical presence completed the atmosphere of the room. Perhaps it was to fulfil my mother's sense of herself as a cultured person. The other books seemed to be the ones that *were* actually read – paperback novels, mostly detective stories, some romance ones, and in my father's case, various technical and how-to manuals. These were the ones that were piled up and overflowing in the nightstands of their bedroom, in the utilitarian bookshelf in the

hallway that lead to the back of the house. These were the books my parents talked about in a very different way than the other ones. They got lost in them despite themselves, and talked about them with a kind of relish that seemed to belong in the realm of the profane, not the sacred. The living room, however, was the place that seemed to serve the aesthetic, definitely not the functional or the profane, not the grittier, perhaps more banal aspects of our lives. The two needed, somehow, to be distinct from each other. I think my mother thought of herself as one well-read, and indeed she was, yet there was still a need for contact with some enigmatic, not quite explicable realm that is perhaps best described as one of culture, beauty, comfort. Prestige, perhaps.

Many of the 'beautiful' books that were displayed in the living room I really did find beautiful. Many were about places, cities and countries around the world and particularly in Europe. Others were about art. At one time I had an aspiration to be a photographer and make books like that, with pictures that would take your breath away. Photographs with the light playing magic on a landscape or an exotic face, causing my imagination to take flight to a realm outside this one. The things in them were real; it is just that they were seen in a particular way that took you away from the real. National Geographic was, at times, a huge inspiration, not so much the magazines as the actual volumes they frequently published. The enchanting documentation of other cultures was for me transport enough into a different realm, earthy as it was.

Then, once, when, I was in a tree planting camp at the age of about twenty, I confided to someone I was fond of about this aspiration. He nodded, and looking away, said, as if glad to know the defining term, "Coffee table books." Perhaps his tone wasn't quite as flat as it appeared to me, but the words had the effect of a scathing remark, a

damnation of faint praise, a trivializing of something that until then, I had thought of as valuable and full of wonder. It wasn't the decorative function of such books on a mundane coffee table that I saw, it was where they took me that mattered, their promise of a kind of transcendence. I had thought of them as something that people would find moving, as I myself had been moved by them, both by their beauty as objects as well as by their meaning.

That, of course, was not to be the only time that something I had held dear and taken for granted was to be shown to me in a different, more mundane, light. At another time, about a year later, I was staying at my parents' house on a break between semesters at university on Vancouver Island, where I now lived. A friend was visiting, and he had another friend drop by one evening. This person looked the around the house in amazement, and commented on how every available space had been filled – not only filled, but considered with the greatest attention to detail. It was true. My mother was unable to resist bringing home whatever she found beautiful or appealing on her trips back home to the former Czechoslovakia, and also to other places. What constituted home for her was having things there from this other, original, home she had left behind physically, even though her heart and her roots were still there. Still very much there. She had brought as much as she could over from various trips back: lovingly hand-crafted pieces, some of which were from traditional folklore, others with a gently modern slant, but always speaking of a simpler life, a simpler time. A time when a century-old cast iron street lamp, hanging from the wall of a building of an even earlier era, cast its glow onto old stones of warm hues, stones that in their solidity were gentle and sheltering. Stones that had witnessed everything through the generations from the time of the great

plague, to the time of the automobile and now onward. I supposed one could call it a kind of nostalgia, but to me it felt more like a kind of mood, a magical atmosphere that you couldn't ever really count on, but that blessed you often enough in its various forms for you to remain captivated by it. There was a sweetness about it. Not a sugary sweetness, but more a sweetness of integrity, of wholeness. Of a whole heart, heavy with its joys as well as its sorrows, something trustworthy, stable, sheltering and tolerant.

That is how I felt it and that is what moved her. It was the physical relics of this kind of beauty, this kind of realm, which she would use to adorn the space we lived in. Small ceramic pieces that nestled in the hand when picked up, that indeed called out to be picked up. Natural unfinished clay, left intentionally so, reminiscent perhaps of the stone walls and small streets, hewn with the love someone felt for a place. Or tiny, brightly painted cups or jugs, primary colours against white, but with the red clay left unglazed at the base. Things that you would imagine in a pastoral household, humble, but rich with festivities, good food, and laughter. Drypoint and intaglio etchings with soft dark lines against clouds of subtle colour, in textured mats and simple cloth or wooden frames. I suppose there was a softness about all of it, no, more like a tenderness; it could be described as charming, but that might belittle it. It was more than that.

On this particular evening, however, when our amazed friend commented on all the 'stuff' that was placed so carefully in every space that would hold it, I saw it all through different eyes. I could all but sense from him a feeling akin to claustrophobia, an opinion of excessive fiddliness. The words knick-knacks and clutter were never voiced, but they hovered there in the background like a thick fog. This is a cultural difference, I thought. This is what I have known and how I was brought up. That every square inch in

a room is considered, that it is the details that make the whole. It is not something easily understood, perhaps, by one born into a vast expansive land like the one we are in, where the limits of space are not felt as something that provides closure, completeness, a place for a soul to find home. Not something to be felt by one who grew up with the idea that objects come and go and are of value mostly for their function.

It is difficult to keep one's image of something whole after someone esteemed has, inadvertently or otherwise, chipped away at it. At the time, I suppose, I was at that age when innocence is synonymous with held ideals, and with notions of beauty. These do not often last far into adulthood, unless we live a tremendously sheltered life. And these days, that can be dangerous.

My world grew, and eventually the particular aesthetic I had inherited became only a corner of the room that spoke to me of what was beautiful, of what was a good way to live. Though only a corner, it remained for a long time, the cornerstone. Education and life itself, and especially individuals who matter to us, have a way of making our sense of things stumble in a different direction. It is quite normal, after all, for changes in life to bring about changes in our tastes and ideas of what we find beautiful. I was to encounter several situations which hinted to me that the aesthetic I had held previously was too soft, too trite, that there was no significant place for it in the latter part of the twentieth century, not among 'contemporary' artists who wished to be taken seriously in the new world. The most significant of these situations, of course, was art school. Here, the pursuit of the kind of beauty that pulls at something inside you, the pursuit of beauty at all, in fact, seemed to be hopelessly passé. To be emotionally moved



by something implied weakness; to give a confident argument, a verbal defence, about a work's worth or lack of worth, was what implied strength. I had a lot to learn.

I learned, for example, that it is not enough - perhaps not even appropriate - to focus on honing a form so that it might stir something other than the cognitive faculties of a viewer. Or to concentrate on the ways a work can be seen with the senses, with the human yearning for something inside or beyond ourselves. The kind of "seeing" that was focused on was the cerebral and intellectual kind, the kind that talked of popular culture, of theory and media, of a contemporary world that saw the past as having relevance only in what could be appropriated or criticized from it. Something to be used, rather than something that is a part of what we are. Was I utterly disillusioned to long for, and to consider, things in terms of the eternal, not just the contemporary?

I was young, lacking in confidence, and no doubt overly sensitive to the influences around me. Yet, I still found ways to bring into my work what I knew and loved. I had no choice, really, since very few specific assignments were set out for us, and we had almost none that focussed on skill, where attention could be put to craft rather than just into subject matter. At times I was bolder about it than others, but mostly it was something that happened despite myself. Even after five years there, when I thought I had finally developed and adopted the acceptable ways, a participant in my critique detected from my final project that I had European immigrant parents who may just have been obsessive about detail. I didn't know if I should be embarrassed or pleased that he had seen into my work that way. The saying that you can take the frog out of the pond, but not the pond out of the frog, comes to mind.



## Natural Inclinations and Heritage

One of the first things Colin Lyas writes about in his treatise on aesthetics is a strong disagreement with anyone who states how others *should* respond to a work. I would say that the same is also true of the sense of aesthetic that goes *into* a work when it is made – the inspiration a student artist draws from and the aesthetic motives behind the work, particularly at the higher levels of education. While an education in art is also an aesthetic education, there has to be room for this to be a two-way street for the student, where new aesthetic awareness expands on, and brings out, what is already there in an individual, rather than imposing on it. Students should feel able to bring forth the aesthetic partialities they come with. Even when teaching at a primary level, I may be aware of my inclination as a teacher to discourage a certain seven year old from proceeding with his outflow of comic book drawings, yet I know that to tell him he shouldn't do them would be unwise. I can only endeavour to broaden his existing artistic repertoire, and to encourage him in the skills to do so. I should not hope to replace or even 'improve' it.

I am reminded here loosely of Wittgenstein, who, in his *Philosophical Investigations* writes of the difficulty, perhaps futility, of attempting to mould one's thoughts according to a convention - in his case, welding a series of disparate thoughts into a sequential whole - while still maintaining their integral nature. "My thoughts were soon crippled," he says, "if I tried to force them on in any single direction against their natural inclination."<sup>6</sup> I think of how often, in education, a primary goal seems to be that of teaching students how to think, this being considered an advancement on teaching them what to think. The natural inclination that Wittgenstein speaks of is in my mind the

most powerful foundation of thought or motive that can be. Being exposed to different modes of thought, and different practices, than one is accustomed to can be infinitely enriching, and this is indeed the purpose of an education in art. However, to neglect or discount the core of what is there – that natural inclination – seems to involve a kind of disrespect for the individual. These natural inclinations are closely linked to one's intuition, that elusive, yet powerful, guide which is very personal, and best left intact at all times.

In terms of sensitivity to things aesthetic - the preferences and the responses we tend to have, there is something to be said also for the relative alertness, and the intuitive innocence, with which we absorb things in childhood. What one takes in during these formative years builds a foundation of sorts that needs to be valued. The experiences, memories, and subconscious knowledge acquired in childhood – of these we can say, perhaps more than of other concepts and experiences, that the personal can be universally understood. It may be because childhood is experienced and absorbed much more through the senses and through feeling than through rational thought. Even as adults, our sympathy and concern for the experiences of children often strikes a more tender cord than for the experiences of other adults.

In Margaret Atwood's novel *Cat's Eye*, the main character Elaine Risley is a middle-aged painter about to have a retrospective exhibition of her work. In an interview with a newspaper journalist, she is asked what effects her generation – that of the seventies – had on her as an artist. Elaine then corrects the journalist, insisting that her generation is not that of the seventies, but of the forties. Her meaning is that her

childhood, her development as a person, is more fundamental and influential to her work than is her young adult life, when she developed as an artist.

The aesthetic sensibility one acquires in childhood is part of one's heritage; it deserves to be honoured and brought forth into the world. After all, it is the forms of art loved by people, and the way in which they perceive, that best characterize a culture. Most of the issues that form cultural groups and identities today – race, gender, ethnicity, heritage, even class – these began and were lived with in childhood, when the foundations for characterizing traits are formed. Honouring the particular uniqueness that one absorbs through childhood, and through their particular local culture, may also help to stave off some of the aesthetic homogenization we are now witnessing across cultures.

It is also worthwhile to consider what children are fed and exposed to aesthetically in a world that is increasingly governed by a market economy, media and technology, a homogenization of manufactured goods and architecture, and occasionally even the empty purloining of the aesthetic of other cultures for the sake of novelty. Though the role of education may be viewed as small in the face of all that is out there, it is nonetheless significant. Enriching children's lives from an early age by encouraging them to look for beauty in their environment, and to value it, goes a long way toward developing a closer connection with their surroundings. In addition, actively teaching children about art from a variety of contexts and periods, and encouraging their abilities to make and to create, will in turn lead to some confidence in their abilities to affect their environment and the things that are in it.

## **Possibilities in Art Education**

To take a few steps back from looking specifically at a personal sense of aesthetic and adopt for a moment a more general perspective, it must be conceded that the approach of honouring the 'natural' self, the individual sensibility, has led to much freedom and openness in art education over the past century. Charles Taylor reminds us, however, that the direction of catering to the inner self has not been without its difficulties. Though it is indeed a moral ideal to be upheld - that of being honest with and true to oneself - the danger comes from attempts to sever long-held social and other traditions in the name of individuality. In the case of the arts, these traditions have to do with history, community, and craft. What seems to be the challenge then, is creating a balance between the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and the traditions of art on one hand, and the encouragement of personal growth and freedom of expression on the other.

We live at a time when the arts, and arts education in particular, hold opportunities to explore our individual lives and what we find meaningful or perplexing about them. Around the middle of the twentieth century it became popular to view art and arts education as a means of therapy, and of self-discovery. From the ideas of art-making having to do with personal feelings and individuality that arose from the Romantic period, it is easy to understand how in an educational context that aimed to do away with traditional constrictures, creativity and the arts came to be nurtured and encouraged in everyone, whether or not students were seen to have the potential to become accomplished artists. This has had tremendously positive outcomes, though many would say that the open, relaxed, therapeutic view of art-making sacrificed the quality of the work being made, and that the skills of art, long held in great esteem, began

to fall by the wayside. A large topic of debate in arts education in the last few decades has been between the importance of skills, craft and knowledge on one side, and of freedom, self-expression, and personal development on the other. A careful exploration of the debate often reveals that both sides are extremely relevant and that when they work together, they compliment each other in ways that encourage growth and development on all levels. It seems unfortunate not to take full advantage of the opportunities that lie waiting not only for artistic and technical development but also for personal growth. The acquired skills and knowledge of the lore and history of art making provide a repertoire for students to work with, and create a ground onto which students can bring out their own aesthetic proclivity, yet this in itself is not enough. To offer freedom and a *laissez-faire* approach does not seem to encourage personal exploration either, for in order for a student to bring something of personal concern forth in their work, there has to be the promise of active and considerate response and feedback.

In my own experience of art school, neither of these two values – skills and craft, nor any kind of spiritual or emotive exploration - was openly encouraged. Ideas and novelty took precedence over proficiency with a medium, and as for the personal, well, that belonged elsewhere. Because we live in a pluralistic society where theoretical debate, the power of subcultures and political affiliations, and the claim of media and technology on our lives can govern the ground on which contemporary art is made, attempts to bring art back to what is sensed and lived personally have not often been taken seriously. I do, however, sense that this is changing, and it is a much-needed development.

It is through familiarity with a broad array of work from the past as well as the present, and also through the acquisition of actual skills – the techniques and craft of a medium as well as visual problem-solving and concepts – that students acquire a repertoire which then feeds their own authenticity. The more one knows, the more there is to choose from to find what suits best; the better one becomes in his or her abilities, the more those abilities become part of them, and serve as means for expression. It is here that teachers and instructors have an active role to play and certain objectives to fulfil. When it comes to more personal matters such as interests and modes of expression, their role is one of encouragement and openness, for it is the student who holds the source of knowledge.

### **That Which is Already There**

In examining the motives for expression that an artist, or indeed anyone, may have, Lyas talks about a desire to make something clear.<sup>7</sup> I like this way of looking at it, for it takes into account the way things already *are*, whether it pertains to the emotions within the individual, or to ideas about how he or she perceives an aspect of the world we live in. Something about this approach implies a closeness to life itself and to the lived present with the history it includes. There is the honesty of discovering, as opposed to an aim toward inventing, breaking barriers, or cleverness. With this perspective, we are reminded that art is something that is ‘in here,’ in all of us, rather than something ‘out there’ on a frontier. It does not mean that new perspectives are not sought, quite the contrary – art is often about finding new vantage points. Rather, it is a matter of emphasis; the novelty or new ground is not the primary goal. As Julia Cameron puts it, “Art is not about thinking something up. It is about the opposite – getting something

down;” it is about listening to what is there rather than reaching into a stratosphere beyond our grasp where we feel art may reside.<sup>8</sup> What counts is a coming back to ourselves and to the life that we live, through our art.

With regards to how the new perspectives can connect to what is already ‘in here’, I find Taylor’s description of what he calls the ‘subtler languages’ particularly fitting and eloquent. He begins by reminding us that in any sincere and meaningful endeavour, what is of personal concern to a particular individual is likely to be of concern also to others – perhaps even to the culture or humanity as a whole. Thus, the content, or the matter, of our concerns is not something that is randomly chosen, or chosen for the sake of novelty or individuality: on some level its importance is already established. Yet when it comes to the means of expression for whatever it is that one wants to address – to the *manner* in which the topic of concern is pursued – this is where each of us has to follow a unique path, each according to a personal resonance, or subtler language - a term Taylor borrows from Romantic poet Percy Shelley. Taylor explains that since the beginning of modernism, artists have no choice but to draw on themselves (as opposed to tradition or established norms) when it comes to the manner of one’s expression. We cannot get to what is being addressed other than through the artist’s, sensibility. I think it is here that an artist has to be as honest with him or herself as possible, for it unless it does come from what is already within, the work may likely have an air of contrivance. That sensibility cannot be invented, constructed, or borrowed. Over time it can evolve, be influenced and built upon, certainly, but still, the source is in the individual.

At the core of all this is what helps compel us to make as well as to appreciate art – that personal sense of aesthetic that is part of our makeup. While it is important to



respect the aesthetic sensibility a student has, we also have to remember that as teachers we have developed our own, and as such it can be a perspective through which, for better or worse, we view and perhaps judge the work of others. The aesthetic sensibility of an artist or that within a work is perhaps most difficult to talk about, because though it can be physically sensed, it is often indefinable. Yet this elusive nature is its primary quality. While we may not be able to put a finger on it, it is always there in some form, and an open awareness and sensitivity seems to be the most promising approach. With a view of aesthetic education as a means toward an honest, integral stance in the face of global issues, Stuart Richmond proposes it thus:

If there is one thread that runs through the making, understanding and appreciation of art, it is the forgotten and somewhat elusive notion of “aesthetic sensibility” by which I mean a non-rule-governed power of sensitive awareness and judgment. All the knowledge and skill acquired in art may count for little if this fundamental predisposition toward attentiveness, evaluation, and expressiveness is lacking. While much contemporary art eschews the aesthetic, in my view, it is the aesthetic element that makes encounters with visual art uniquely valuable.<sup>9</sup>

An aesthetic awareness opens our perception not only cognitively, but also emotionally, sensuously, and socially. As Richmond suggests, it is this particular sensitivity that gives art its poetic quality. Hong Kong artist Fang Xiang, in an interview with researcher Anna Kindler, relates that his success as an artist comes from a heightened perceptual awareness and sensitivity in seeing the potential beauty in everyday surroundings. I mention this particular example because it has been intriguingly documented, though many no doubt sense that this has long been normal and common among artists. Fang Xiang makes it clear that “this sensitivity is something that grows and develops over time, and that it needs to be nurtured.”<sup>10</sup> He speaks of transforming this heightened

awareness of the visible world into an “inner world”, and of the connection between art and everyday life.

Young artists may feel significant pressure, as I did, to produce work that is relevant to the time in which they live. They are also likely to feel a need to create work that is original, which is unlike that of anyone else, yet this desire for originality goes deeper down, I think, than wanting one’s work to stand out from current trends. It connects closely to the ideal of authenticity described by Taylor, where the work somehow speaks of, or speaks to, a truer part of that person. This presents its own challenges, and often, one’s sense of aesthetic is a worthy guide. The acquisition of drawing and or the skills of another medium can give a student something immediate to dig into; yet with these no longer being the objective of many post-secondary art classes, the student is often in a position to face subject matter head-on. In an environment where personal matter or emotion is not encouraged, this can be a rather bleak endeavour. I find that rather unfortunate, as the self and one’s personal experience provide such rich fodder for any kind of art, but there has to be a safe atmosphere of openness and respect in order to allow the student artist to deal with it sincerely. No matter what, of course, one cannot *but* draw on personal points of view and experience in life, though if it has to be surreptitiously done, and couched in a kind of intellectual defence, it may start to feel that the source of the art is outside the artist. A certain amount of invention and intellectualizing may have to be done to come up with what the student hopes will pass as an ‘original’ work, when rich artistic sources are present and right there already. They require no defence, only exploration. If one has some amount of skill, or even just a sensitivity with materials, the encouragement to use and go into those inner sources and

natural aesthetic inclinations will, I believe, bring forth something more resonant and meaningful.

The idea of originality is somewhat multi-layered, and relates to that of authenticity. An original work can be viewed as something that is new, something unfamiliar and interesting to those who see it. The sense here implies a breaking away from established orders and from the common masses, a view that we have inherited from Romanticism and that has been further reinforced through modernism and especially in postmodernism, though a common view now is that originality is not entirely possible. An original work can also be seen as having its source, as mentioned before, in the truer part of an individual – again an idea stemming from the Romantic era. Yet there is also another meaning to the concept of originality, one that connects to the second and is somewhat opposite from the first. When we think of the original item or entity, we mean the one that was there from the beginning, the thing that is not constructed or created to represent something else. It is this meaning that interests me a great deal.

When we look closer at the meaning of the word authenticity, it connects to the meaning of originality, but it somehow has more integrity to it, and is associated more with human concerns than with objects. It is closer to 'genuine', - something that is not imitated, that has roots, a connection to a person or place, something that has a story behind it. Authenticity is connected with meaning - something that gives us a sense of wholeness and feeds us so that we can be strengthened and go on. It is a trust in the truth, even if that truth is unpleasant. It is as Lyas says, that the foremost motive for personal expression is to make something clear. At the outset it may not be known what that

something is exactly, but to go through the often tricky process of working it through and achieving that clarity can be equated with what A. Alvarez calls, “the dubious pleasure of getting the thing right.”<sup>11</sup>

In his ruminations on the practice of painting, Gerhard Richter talks of realizing what is there in the self, rather than constructing it, of letting things come, rather than attempting to create.<sup>12</sup> I like this idea of exploring, being true to, and bringing out what already *is*. It implies an honesty and a sincerity not only with the self and with the work, but also with the viewer. Nothing has been ‘invented’ in order to impress or appear clever; the central aim is not to critique or make a statement. What is primarily there is honest communication. This has been somewhat rare in many circles of contemporary art, yet it is so basic, and one would think, a central aim of art.

### **Mirroring, Rendering, Making Clear**

The approach of turning to what is already there within, making something clear, brings to mind the element of mirroring – the endeavour to render something that is seen, felt, or thought. Over the last century or more it has been accepted in the western world that art is not just about *mimesis* – imitation or representation of something that is known and recognizable. While historically artists focused on concrete things that were around them, or on biblical or allegorical subject matter, in the modern period we turned inward, to individual, personal perception and expression. The artist’s unique vision became what creativity was about. What this gave us can easily be interpreted as an exhilarating kind of freedom, yet it also presented us with many knots and tangles, all having to do with the idea of the self. It is easy to understand the temptation to get lost in what we feel is our unique way of seeing, to get quite self-absorbed even, shutting out concern with

our fellows, or conversely, to actively seek out their approval. We are familiar with the image, and perhaps with several real-life examples, of the artist who feels he is accountable to no one but himself. Taylor's cautionary note on the potential downfalls of the focus on individuality that is characteristic of our age comes to mind. But just as Taylor's emphasis is on the moral value behind the ideals of individuality and authenticity, I believe that in art, too, a personal inner world has its greatest meaning when it somehow connects with, or attempts to address and make sense of, the world we all share. Though we no longer only mirror with familiar techniques the physical matter that surrounds us, the endeavour to represent or render something of concern in our lives is still there. The effort to make something clear becomes a kind of communication that doesn't end with the self. If the goal is indeed to make something clear, then it would seem that obstacles such as self-criticism, defence, or even the promotion of one's self or work would obstruct a flow that is fed by that natural aesthetic inclination.

In her work on unblocking the flow of creativity, Julia Cameron also talks about the value of self knowledge and self discovery, while warding off the skeins of selfish absorption, self-doubt, or ego: "Get out of the way, let *it* work through *you*."<sup>13</sup> She also talks of the importance of a sense of safety, away from voices of criticism, both external and internal. While focusing very much on the value of individual needs, her work has a great generosity about it and throughout reminds us of the spiritual element of creative endeavours that can be accessible to everyone.

Unless one is working purely with technical rendering, there need be no fear that representation, or mirroring, in the arts is a matter of copying, for the focus is not on how closely the work resembles what has been represented, but on the manner in which the

mirroring has been done. Here we come again to the self-referentiality of manner that Taylor speaks of – that means of expression that is individual to us whether or not we try to make it so - and, to the individual aesthetic. That aesthetic, of course, is much more than a matter of sensuous or intellectual partiality; included therein is one's life experience, personal concerns, and psychology.

As artists, we are never certain of what a final result will look like, and as such, this aim of clarity (only as a direction, not an actual goal), guided intuitively by natural aesthetic inclination, is perhaps the most worthwhile path to take. Lyas mentions a wonderful example to illustrate that copying need not be a concern, and that often one doesn't know until the final stages of a work what it is exactly that is being mirrored or represented: the character in Virginia Woolf's novel, *To the Lighthouse*, manages in her painting to produce the one mark that successfully represents the vision she wished to portray. "Until she found her vision," Lyas says, "she had nothing to copy."<sup>14</sup>

Wendy Steiner hints that modernism has led us away from a belief in art as mirroring.<sup>15</sup> I do not venture to completely agree or disagree, for I think we cannot always tell from looking at contemporary art whether or not this is true. Certainly, mirroring and representation seem to characterize art much less now than in the past. What I am trying to say is that as part of the *process* of art, the *idea* of mirroring has value. Whether the subject matter is an elusive emotion, a physical sensation, a state of mind, a social conundrum or, something concrete and easily recognizable, the fact that we are addressing something in our lives connects the art to that life. Certainly, the art is done and appreciated for its own sake, in that it is somehow more special, more poetic and with a greater range of detail than might be experienced in ordinary life. But it is this

attention that has been paid to the art that in turn indexes back to ordinary life, giving it greater meaning.

Kant believed that a beautiful object has a purposive look to it, that something about it seems functional even though no function is readily apparent. In an age of what Taylor calls instrumental reason, where we tend to think that items and activities have value only in that they give us some sort of tangible return, we may need occasional reminding that doing something for its own sake, and for the seemingly elusive purpose of clarifying or affirming something about our lives, does actually have a function. There is also another way in which I can understand Kant's proposal that beauty has a purposive aspect. Making something about our experience lucid, authenticating something about our lives, these efforts have very valuable purpose.

Mirroring also has value in that as viewers we often seek to recognize something of ourselves, of our moods or experiences in art that we look at. I think, too, of the ways in which art can make our everyday lives fuller, just by our being reminded in our everyday experience of certain works we know. The way a landscape may remind us of the work of a certain painter, or how someone's position or angle of gesture will make us recall the work of a certain sculptor – these kinds of associations make our experience of life more remarkable, and more memorable.

### **The Emotions and how They Relate to Beauty**

Over the past decades there has been reluctance in certain contemporary art contexts to allow personal feelings to play a substantial role when responding to or making art. Though emotions in the abstract may be allowed, particularly in how they

relate to social or artistic *issues*, personal feelings that come from individual experience often have a more dubious place. Yet even when things are couched in the language of argument and intellectual judgment, underneath it all, the emotive element is a major driving force behind the arts. The motives that spur artists to engage with their work are often deeply personal and the process of working provides a channel for the emotions, offering assurance that there is a place for them to go. While there is always much to be said for restraint, subtlety and abstraction, it helps tremendously when a young artist feels that the expression of feeling is normal and natural in the process of making art.

When we look at the role that the arts have played over time, our experience of noteworthy works offers a kind of acknowledgement of certain emotional states that we recognize from our own lives or from the lives of others we know. Our connection with the work affirms something familiar and fundamental. After focusing her research on how emotion has been addressed and acknowledged in creative endeavours throughout time and the world over, Dissanayake observed that the way in which the arts “give a form to feeling”<sup>16</sup> must have had substantial survival value among our species in that they bring into focus what is felt and considered important. Looking at the role the arts have played for humanity over time, she says that the arts are “containers for, moulders of feeling.” They have engaged our deepest emotions because they are used to articulate vital concerns. Articulating, through various creative forms, the emotions that characterize our experience of living, validates and also authenticates those experiences, treating them as a worthwhile and real part of human life. I agree with Dissanayake that much postmodern art, with its emphasis on the relative, the ephemeral, and the clever, can no longer have the sensuous and emotional power over us it once did; it does not



sustain our attention in the same way. Yet, there are many contemporary artists who do hope for some kind of emotive connection with their viewers, fuelled by a desire to move others as they themselves are moved.<sup>17</sup>

While the arts have often been rooted in everyday life, the act of engaging in them involves something more extraordinary - though a reflection of the mundane, involvement in artistic work raises us out the everyday. Dissanayake calls this “making special” in that focus and care are given to something important, rendering it aesthetically engaging and emotionally satisfying. What we consider worth making special has changed considerably over time, particularly in the last half century, and many of us may have cause to wonder what it is about life, and art, that can endure and that continues to have meaning for us. As Dissanayake points out, throughout time art has had the role of helping us make sense of human existence, and that

In the past, things were made special because they were perennially important, while today we consider something (anything) momentarily important because it has been made flashingly if transiently special.<sup>18</sup>

To my mind this statement reflects not only the difficulties within the world of art but with the media-laden technocratic society we live in as a whole.

It also touches on the perplexity I experienced in art school when my desires were rather fundamental (or so I thought, in my naïve youth) – to work toward something beautiful and evocative that would communicate positively with others. Yet what I encountered was an obsession with “contemporary art” and with “social critique”, the latter of which also has huge ramifications on how art affects society and our relations with others. In pre-industrial and even pre-modern times, before we began to esteem individuality as much as we do now, art was very much a communal affair, bringing

people together, emphasizing what we have in common. Art still has the capacity to that of course, though perhaps to a lesser extent, and our expectations of it are very different now; the idea of focusing on shared commonalities is not its most lauded quality.

Anything that aims overtly to do so may smack dangerously of reinforcing a kind of status quo, of striving for outmoded ideals, of subscribing to a kind of grand narrative that the modern and postmodern age have (for some good reasons, admittedly) worked hard to do away with. Art strives not only to communicate within social groups, but also between them, and for many years in the West we have been familiar with the power of art to create social commentary, to raise awareness of injustice, even to create dissidence, often in very appropriate and necessary circumstances. Yet the holdover we experience today of the appeal of social commentary and dissidence for their own sake has perpetuated the idea of the artist being separate from society, of the visual arts as being too far 'out there' for many to enjoy, and that in effect art often distinguishes us from each other rather than communicating in a spirit of sharing. I still often find myself puzzled at all the time that is being put into art that communicates what seems to be very specific information to a relatively narrow audience. And again, we are left wondering what is it that is worth making special in our present lives and society.

To return to the emotions, that basic part of human life that *does* endure, and the hopeful tenet that they play a central role in the arts, if art is accessible to us and if we do give ourselves over to it, much of its power is that we recognize in it something about ourselves, about the state of being human, or about our culture. This place of recognition is where mirroring and the emotions come together. Emotions that have often been treated with suspicion in the last century are the positive ones, those that point in some

way to our vitality as human beings – pleasure, love, longing, joy. It is almost as if certain modes of feeling have been outmoded, even though they are as much a part of us now as they have been throughout human history.

While beauty certainly encompasses the affirmative emotions, it also encompasses many others such as bleakness, despair, loss, and grief, all of which are also a part of a fully lived life. Pleasure and a harmonious aesthetic may not characterize the art of our age, yet that does not mean, I think, that we have no need for the beautiful. It deserves to be said that there is also a kind of beauty, as well as emotional involvement, in austerity and in ascetic intensity, and these are what we recognize when the more complex or difficult aspects of life are mirrored to us. As Crispin Sartwell observes, “beauty, we might say, has an insane side...people are ill, and the world, putting it mildly, is impure.”<sup>19</sup> I think that this insane side goes a long way to characterize both life and art at the present time, making traditional ideals of beauty less viable to many. Though universal elements of the beautiful, such as harmony, proportion and unity will hopefully always be sought for, it is that personal sensibility, and the subtler languages, both of which often have an awkward and eccentric side, that give much current work its strength. Perhaps seeking to make art *emotionally satisfying*, to use Dissanayake’s term, rather than beautiful in the merely pleasurable sense is more appropriate in our age, as perhaps it has always been. Whether the experience is pleasing or painful, it is the fullness of, and openness to, the range of human emotion that gives art the power it can rightfully have.

This openness not only increases our experience of art - it also has profound ramifications on what we discover in ourselves and how we understand the lives of

others. I like Steiner's suggestion that beauty not be viewed as a property but as a communication – an interaction that occurs between the work and its viewer. In this way, the work and the viewer are both given credit, both seen as active agents, and are both empowered through the interaction. The viewer, in a willingness to be moved by the work, receives fully what the work has to offer, and is in turn enriched by his or her experience of it. The power of the work itself is acknowledged, and in this way it is as alive as the viewer. Yet this kind of interaction involves a certain willingness to let the work, and its beauty, have that power. According to Steiner, there have been many who have

vilified beauty as a siren or a whore. Since at one time or another though, everyone answers to “her” call, it would be well if we could recognize the meaning of our succumbing as a valuable response, an opportunity for self-revelation rather than a defeat.<sup>20</sup>

As with all the historical taboos of the seducing power of women, our better intelligence tells us that while the object of longing has the capacity to disorient us, the true stirring occurs not in the object but in ourselves. We are the ones who are moved, and though the work may have a certain kind of command over us, disorienting us unexpectedly, we are in turn empowered by a self-discovery that feeds our imaginations and our sense of who we are. The idea of succumbing, here, is viewed in an affirmative light, parallel with succumbing, for example, to love, physical desire, or a notion of truth that is held up to us, as if by a mirror.

In an exploration of ideas of beauty across cultures, Sartwell points out that the meaning of beauty in the English language is closely associated with longing and desire, and that this desire is indeed what makes us feel alive: “We not only want to be satisfied; we also want to want. Desire is not always primarily trained on its own satisfaction, but

also on its own intensification.”<sup>21</sup> To cease desiring, then, means to relinquish the world and life itself. The real pleasure, in art, as in life, is in being moved. Steiner eloquently proposes that, “finding something or someone beautiful entails becoming worthy of it – in effect, becoming beautiful, too – and recognizing oneself as such.”<sup>22</sup> I find that viewing the relationship between a person and the beheld work of art in this way can be extended to an analogy of the relationships we have with other people. I think this is rather fitting, for (in positive situations at least) the comparative respect, openness, equality, and interest with which we may relate to our fellow beings also brings us a richer experience of art.

### **Personal Likes and Dislikes**

The idea that we become worthy of a work inasmuch as we are moved by it and understand it, is indeed a noble ideal that renders true in many experiences of art. It also brings to light some of the difficulties of viewing art that may be perplexing, particularly in an educational context. In my years of introduction to the art of the postmodern era, there were many times when I contemplated a work, the appeal of which eluded me. Because a particular work was presented for our viewing, I assumed that it had some meaning and value, and as I did not grasp what that was, it was I who felt inept, clueless, and perhaps insensitive; I was certainly missing something. This experience is probably familiar to many, and may account in part for the aura of elitism that floats around the world of art.

In many ways, people who truly understand and are moved by a work are admirable, perhaps even enviable, to those who do not and we may tend to judge ourselves negatively in comparison. But to return to Steiner’s ideal, that feeling of

exchange could be open to everyone. I would venture to say that on some level, we *want* to like, want to be spoken to and moved by, to understand and be a part of something we sense may have beauty or power. The crux of all this is that very generally speaking, our likes and dislikes - and our aesthetic sensibility - play a rather fundamental role in our relationship with art, hence the cliché of knowing what one likes, even though one may not know much about art. Those feelings of partiality and affection are fundamentally *ours* somehow; they are a part of us, and as the aforementioned saying implies, they often play a much stronger (not larger but stronger) role in our experience of art than does our knowledge of it. Liking a work, understanding and being taken in by it is a kind of empowerment, which may be why the saying is often uttered with confidence. Among intellectual and educated art-goers, of course, the cliché is scoffed at because knowledge and partiality are seen to go together, and indeed they do. Knowledge of a body of work or of art in general expands and informs what we become fond of. To begin with, however, the basic importance of that fondness should not be overlooked.

Tolstoy believed that the power of art lies primarily in the pleasure it gives, and more recently we are reminded of this by writers like Steiner and Dissanayake, the latter of whom states that art should feel sensuously good, not just merely edifying. Many, fortunately, do not need to be reminded of this at all. Yet we know that art is about much more than giving us pleasure - knowledge of history, social awareness, intellectual involvement, the challenge of alternate perspectives, the appreciation of technical mastery, not to mention the labourious and often challenging process that artists engage in – all of these play an important role. Often, too, the pleasure we experience may be

mingled with less positive responses such as sadness, fear, shock, or frustration, yet if that basic emotional satisfaction isn't there, there seems to be little point to it all.

Kant has been criticized by writers like Steiner and Dissanayake because he describes perception in terms of mental faculties, giving less emphasis to the emotional and sensuous aspects of beauty, and because his ideas of the sublime and of disinterestedness can be seen as viewing art from a distance. Yet I think Kant's ideas of aesthetic appreciation have something to offer when we consider the balance that he argued for, between feeling and imagination on one hand, and rational order on the other. His claim is that the fascination and pleasure we get in the aesthetic comes from the faculty of feeling working together with the faculties of reason and understanding. I agree that in aesthetic appreciation, while the pleasure we have is primarily in the freedom from restraint offered by the imagination, we take pleasure also in our own cognitive abilities when feeling and understanding interact with each other, in what Kant calls free play. Our cognitive faculties can also be a source of great emotional satisfaction, though, of course, it is important to remember that balance. While Kant endeavoured to argue against the restraining qualities of concepts in aesthetic judgement, more recent interpreters of his work have taken his meaning to be that while concepts may often be necessary in our understanding of art and of nature, they should remain indeterminate.<sup>23</sup> Either way, concepts can never be enough for aesthetic judgement or for artistic creation, neither of which can be reduced to any kind of proof or formula. Kant's suggestion is that we approach an object of aesthetic judgement and contemplation with what he calls disinterestedness – viewing it for its own sake and attending to its formal qualities, with no self-interest interceding.

We are all liable to be faced at one time or another with work which perplexes us, and which we cannot bring ourselves to like. It is interesting that, while the fondness we feel for something can be closely connected to who we are and how we think of ourselves, what is sometimes called for is that we put that self aside. Iris Murdoch wrote about the opportunities art gives us to see versions of reality and truth that lie outside our own perspectives, in an unselfish manner.<sup>24</sup> There will, then, be times when it may seem that a primary reason for an engagement with art is to edify. While Murdoch mentions the immediate reward of the enjoyment of beauty, this notion may be less convincing if one considers the art of recent decades. An approach I find helpful is to understand that we needn't feel that we have to *like* a work, or agree with what it is about, yet still make the attempt to respect, on a mental level at least, where it is coming from. In this case, the emotions and personal taste will not be swayed or affected as much, and the work may seem less meaningful to us personally. There will be a lesser connection, it is true, but a mental curiosity about various kinds of art still has much value. Fondness for, or connection with, a work can take time to develop; even if a work does not interest us initially, it can still stay with us in subtle ways. I would like to elaborate on the analogy mentioned earlier, where the experience of viewing art can be on the whole similar to the experience of interacting with people.

Over the course of our lives we come into contact with a large number of individuals. Some of these we maintain contact with for extended periods of time, not so much because of a conscious choice to do so, but because we encounter them often and they are a part of our lives – family, colleagues, community members, co-workers, and so on. Often our relationships with these people are not characterized merely by a personal



like or dislike of them – in general we do our best to be respectful in order to keep our lives, and theirs, relatively harmonious. We may make efforts to understand that they are different from us because of a different background or outlook on life. In many ways this kind of respect goes a long way in our experience of art also. In initial meetings with new people, we may not be concerned so much with whether or not we like them, but with simply making some attempt to know them, to figure them out, and perhaps to enjoy ourselves in their company. Over time, we may come to better understand and appreciate those with whom we may have been initially uncomfortable, and this is always satisfying. Conversely, those who seemed fascinating on first impression may become less so over time, and our relationship with them wanes. Then there will be a special few with whom we form a close bond, whose special qualities endure for us over time, and who cause us to reconnect with something inside ourselves, even if we are not in frequent contact with them. In our interactions with people, on the whole, we make attempts to get along, respect their perspective, and to understand, and the more we do this, the more we get out of these interactions, and the further we develop as human beings. The endeavour to understand another perspective, not only on a rational level, but also in terms of sensibility and subjective perspective, is what counts. It can be much the same in appreciating works of art. With all this in mind, I think it is nonetheless important that while we remain open-minded and respectful of work that may bewilder or frustrate us, we still hold as valid whatever honest emotional response we may have.

### **The Body, and all our Sensing Faculties**

It was a split-second decision, really. I was walking up Granville Street to catch my bus, when I saw a space in the busy traffic and ran across the street to the gallery on

the other side. I had heard that an exhibition of Gathie Falk's work was going up there. I don't get many opportunities to come to this part of town, so even though I was due at an appointment soon, I decided to see if the exhibit was open. It was. And there they were, the paintings, a body of work titled *Heavenly Bodies*, all along the theme of the heavens, sky, space, stars, and flight. They were all large vertical canvases, the size and dimensions such that they relate to your body when you stand in front of them. They occupy space as a person would occupy space: standing there, with a vertical presence. The first one I looked at had a mottled blue background with stars cut out of copper sheeting, attached to the canvas itself, but not flush – suspended just a little in front. Yes, I liked that one. But the next one was better. A low horizon, the picture mostly sky, and the horizon wasn't even land - it was clouds, and the sky a burnt orange space of gentle brushstrokes, fading in intensity toward the distance, the top of the canvas. The view from an airplane, from flight. I looked at the other paintings, looking for something to lock onto as I had locked onto that one with the low horizon. There were others that were similar, and also interesting, yes, and beautiful, but after circling round the modest, comfortably-sized gallery space, my feet planted themselves, as if of their own volition, firmly in front of the image with the infinite amber sky.

It doesn't happen always happen like this, but at times my eyes, my body, tell me themselves what it is they are drawn to.

Sometimes our aesthetic sensibility is something we have despite ourselves. I don't mean to say that it works against us; rather, that it is a physical, intuitive, almost involuntary response that can be trusted. It is often, perhaps most often, something that begins not in the cerebral and intellectual realms above, but in the visceral regions that

exist in the abdomen, the fingertips, the back of the throat, and in the place where our feet meet the ground. It is a sincere part of ourselves, as opposed to a cultural conditioning of how things ought to be; it is with us, physiologically first, and ideologically second.

There have been several points in my life, often after having lived through something intense, when it has occurred, and reoccurred, to me that on some fundamental levels, we cannot always help what we like, what we seem to respond positively toward, and conversely, what seems to us somehow incomplete or even aversive. Something more primal takes over. Certainly, our views may be expanded, enriched and altered by experience, guidance and exposure - these also add to what we sense biologically when we respond to something or make work of our own. In some contexts, however, the mistake can be made of implying that such and such particular things are of value, whereas those other things are not. Yet we know underneath that if the context, or the time and place were different, the reverse may be true.

From the perspective of connecting with something sincere within, of using all parts of oneself to gravitate toward something authentically pleasurable, or even to use a better term - emotionally satisfying, there are times when the points of view that subscribe to a particular school or context of art seem hopelessly mediated and artificial. This is not to say, however, that we do not need certain contexts and supportive networks, the subject of which I will address later. I also do not dispute the idea that we are in many ways products of our culture. It is largely a matter of how a certain art context feeds, supports, and encourages the individual, which determines how right it is for their artistic and aesthetic growth.

Our aesthetic experience is linked in intricate ways to our emotions. In the same way that we sometimes cannot help how we feel about something, despite knowing that our response is not as civil as we would like, our sensibilities and responses to things aesthetic are real and at times defy particular modes of refinement and discretion. They are a part of our general responses to our world, linked with the senses, perception, and feeling, often prior to a linkage with cognition. Since visual art is so physical in nature, any worthwhile response to it will involve the sensing, physical being of the viewer.

David Abram, who writes from a phenomenological perspective in the tradition of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, speaks of the body as “the very location of one’s awareness,” particularly when it comes to appearances and subjective experience.<sup>25</sup> In a discussion of humanity’s relationship with the natural world, Abram describes Husserl’s notion of the “intersubjective world of life” – that which is between objective matter and transcendental consciousness – as the world of “our immediately lived experience, *as we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it.*” It is our direct human experience, what we perceive and engage with, and is “always already there before we begin to reflect or philosophize.”<sup>26</sup> I like this idea of intersubjectivity, and believe that it applies also to our experience of art. When we respond to a work on a primal, sensing level first, and allow ourselves to inhabit that state for a time, we make room for a more personal and meaningful connection with a work. Staying in that space is also an experience in trusting and validating ourselves as sensing and creative beings, in being with an authentic part of ourselves.

As children, our experience of the world, and the development of our aesthetic awareness are primarily through the senses and through gut intuitions that require no

justification. These connect to what Lyas calls our “native capacities for joy,”<sup>27</sup> something he believes, as I do, that education should make every effort to validate and develop. Benedetto Croce proposed that the highest artistic expressions are rooted in the same soil as the humblest.<sup>28</sup> From these roots we can then go on to approach something cognitively, and to enjoy the more complex intellectual engagement it offers, retaining the Kantian ideal of balance with feeling and imagination.

In the end, we cannot but arrive at something with our own aesthetic spirit. Art has the capacity to involve so much of the personal and the subjective that there cannot be one correct mode of perception. It is valuable to have a go at a work with one’s own aesthetic sensibility and life experience before considering what is said by other voices. The work is much more likely to be meaningful and memorable if there a personal resonance with it. Steiner talks about being in sympathy with a work, and about how this is where the real pleasure is – in being moved by another, or the work of another; both work and viewer are active participants. Similarly, almost a century ago, Croce thought of the viewer as an active agent who, through not just the mind but through a whole array of faculties, becomes the entity that brings a work to life. In order to fully grasp a work, he says, we have to recreate the expression it embodies in ourselves.<sup>29</sup> In many ways, responding to a work is a creative act, and we can be taken on a journey that, like most journeys, cannot be fully explained for all its subjective subtleties.

What we experience through our bodies - how we use our hands and eyes, as well as how we perceive and respond to our physical surroundings – is also a fundament in the making of art. This may be considerably less so in the current age, when physically learned skills that reside in the hands and in the senses appear to be less necessary, and

less valued. Furthermore, in the last century, the subject matter of art has not dominantly been what we experience physically: the natural world, the human figure, even man-made environments and artifacts. It has been more about emotional and mental states, about ideas and statements.

Kant proposed that in many ways nature is a more purely aesthetic entity because concepts cannot apply to it easily. Yet, concepts in art are something we seem to have developed a greater need for in the past century. There are also the seemingly pressing inspirations to be found in popular culture, and technology always beckons in the form of new and exciting media. The possibilities of freedom and exploration are perhaps greater now than they ever have been, and in terms of the variety of forms that art can take there have certainly been many positives. Yet I wonder if the practice of art may be changing in ways that can strongly influence, and diminish, our relationship with the world around us. I also wonder about the implications for our society if artists no longer value skills that are learned in the body, and craft, which is a kind of celebration of what hands and eyes can do with physical matter, and which provides a basic human satisfaction. What are the implications for our humanity and our place in the world when we no longer respond to the natural world and the human form as intricately as we once did? What losses of potential, of aesthetic, and of vision (metaphoric and otherwise) occur when an understanding of basic artistic principles such as gesture, contour, proportion and negative space are no longer part of the education of young artists? Apart from the facts of our threatened environment, and our dwindling connection with nature, which we ourselves are a part of, there is also the aesthetic experience of nature to consider. There is something to Kant's idea that the natural world is one we can be in and contemplate

with relatively few concepts, and this unrestrained, more purely aesthetic experience (free beauty, as Kant called it) is also of great value. Yet, as some of Kant's critics have suggested, there is far more to it than the contemplation of form.

I am reminded here again of Abram, who suggests that in engaging with the forms of the natural world,

our senses are led into an inexhaustible depth that echoes that of our own flesh. The patterns on the stream's surface...or on the bark of an elm tree, or in a cluster of weeds, are all composed of repetitive figures that never exactly repeat themselves, of integrated shapes to which our senses may attune themselves even while the gradual drift and metamorphosis of those shapes draws our awareness in unexpected and unpredictable directions.<sup>30</sup>

He then goes on to contrast how the mass-produced objects we use, "draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*." Our sensing bodies continually search for new ways of being stimulated, and this explains the ever-growing need to construct new objects and forms of technology, at the detriment of our connection with our senses, as well as of the environment. Like Abram, poet Tim Lilburn observes that "the project to convert what is into product heaves forward almost everywhere."<sup>31</sup> Art making can unfortunately sometimes have this frenzy about it too, with the constant push to be inventive and original in our ever-changing society.

In considering (and often disputing) the views of critics of the modern age where relativism seems to have replaced morality, Taylor mentions Allan Bloom, who wrote of the predicament of young people with pessimism: "Their souls are like mirrors," he says, "not of nature, but of what is around."<sup>32</sup> While, as Taylor explains, all is certainly not lost with the abandonment of older orders and established morality, I think this quote of Bloom's is worth consideration no matter what the era. As humans we have always been

influenced and developed by the society we find ourselves in, yet in the current global economic age, our withering connections to place and to nature make us perhaps more apt to focus all connections to the culture and its products. I would like to retrieve an idea from the Romantic poets, and also from Shakespeare: that of the connection between the workings of human nature and those of the natural world. In a poetic, spiritual and sensorial existence, they echo each other. While this is an argument to be more fully developed elsewhere, my suggestion is that a path of personal authenticity - whether we are thinking of Taylor's proposition or a broader sense of that ideal - would be lacking in something crucial without interaction with, and consideration of our place in, the natural world.

Responding to what is around us, and within us, can begin simply with a slowed-down awareness. Both Abram and Lilburn speak of seeing as a reciprocal act. Not only are we perceiving - whether it is a deer, a mountain, or a landscape - we are also being perceived. Lilburn calls this "a seeing which is being touched by the world."<sup>33</sup> I find this idea immensely engaging in relation to seeing with an artist's eye, and to engaging with the forms around us. It also echoes what has been proposed by Steiner and Croce when it comes to art, where viewer and viewed are both active entities.

### **Using and Developing Aesthetic Sensibility**

With the virtual disappearance of conventions and expectations in the visual arts, and because our experience of the viewing and making of art cannot be governed by specific rules, aesthetic sensibility is often our strongest guide and tool. In many respects, it is all we have. Together with the practical characteristics of the materials we work with, faith in the value of our work, openness to new ways of trying things, and



persistence in actual execution of the work, a personal aesthetic can guide the way. Often, it characterizes a work more than the subject matter does. It informs the subtler language, the personal resonance that Charles Taylor speaks of - the *manner* of communication. As Margaret Atwood says in one of her poems, it is not the *what* that counts as much as the *how*.<sup>34</sup>

At the beginning I talked of the aesthetic sensibility we develop in childhood, and also of trusting the faculties that are already there in a given situation. Yet like anything we practice and value in our lives, whether it relies on the mental, physical or spiritual, there needs to be continuing engagement in order for it to stay alive. Aesthetic awareness and repertoire need to be fed and nurtured, enriched and expanded upon. An ongoing exposure to, and connection with, a variety of art both from our present culture and from other eras and cultures does a lot to develop and enrich who we are personally, artistically, and, as I will elaborate upon later, also socially.

Sartwell reminds us that longing and desire, particularly for something of beauty, keeps us alive. I think it is important to recognize the hunger for beauty and for things aesthetic as a kind of life force, having to do with the quality of the life we lead, with our well being, and with a sense of passion and purpose. That sense of purpose can, and perhaps should, go beyond the pursuit of pleasure or self-expression. An active aesthetic life, and a faith in the power of beauty in its various forms, leads us to further understanding of life and humanity beyond the contemplated object.

## **A Few Qualifying Considerations**

It may seem that I have argued for beauty as a necessary element in the connection between personal authenticity and aesthetic sensibility. While this can often be true, there are, of course, many who prefer aesthetic directions quite apart from the long-held classical ideal of beauty. Ideas of beauty have undergone significant changes in the past decades, and the notion of it as something that exudes harmony, proportion, balance, and pleasure may not be as commonly or as widely held as it once was. Indeed, in bleak, absurd or disorienting circumstances, the longing for another kind of beauty can sometimes stand in for its former self, when things like harmony, balance and innocent pleasure may appear as storybook illusions in comparison to the harder, lived reality. Even the contemporary art of the west, where lives are relatively stable and comfortable, it is not common to see much that is patently unified or classically beautiful, since that does not correspond to what we see in society and in the world today. In addition, the commercial media has done just about all it can in attempts to appropriate and co-opt all the normal ideals of beauty, leading us to mistrust the notion in many ways, to see it at times as little more than another grand narrative.

To return to Charles Taylor's idea of the subtler languages, where one individual creative voice no longer aims to speak for the wider whole in the same way as it did in pre-modern times, there is a certain kind of beauty and power to be found in ways of rendering that have their own awkwardness and eccentricity. At times, something other than traditional beauty seems appropriate. There are many individuals who feel a greater draw toward the discordant, the obscure, the absurd, the bleak and austere, toward darkness, irreverence, or even the bizarre. At times these avenues, these penchants,

provide a gateway toward a place where an unexpected kind of beauty can be found. And of course, though something may not be visually or otherwise beautiful in itself, there are other aspects of the beautiful that come through to us, such as the fluency of expression a work may have, or the way it captures the spirit of something for us, the ingenuity with which it has been carried out, or the artist's courage to address a particular topic. As long as we find and engage with something that feeds us aesthetically, and is emotionally satisfying, and do so with openness to various ways of seeing, some aspect of the beautiful will be there.



*Figure 1 Untitled. Pencil, acrylic, and thread on paper, 37x19 cm*



*Figure 2 Untitled. Pencil, tea and ink on paper, 14cmx17cm*

## **Some Thoughts around the Process of Working**

In the last couple of years I have been working on fairly small-scale pieces, mostly on water-colour paper, worked in various media that include drawing, collage, acrylic paint and tea stains. In the beginning, the pieces often had an incidental quality about them, as if they were something that could be picked up, looked at as a curious or intimate object of some sort, turned over, and then put down again. I thought of them more as objects than as images, something to be handled rather than merely viewed, and with no particularity of place for which they might be intended. Recently, though, the work seems to have a more definite intent about it, and the pieces almost ask to be placed somewhere, on a wall, in a frame perhaps, the most recent ones are even made with a particular place in mind.

My interest in small work is partly practical - I do not have a large workspace where I can leave things unattended and safe from the hands of curious children. It also needs to be something I can work on for small periods of time, where I can sink into it when I find a moment without a lot of equipment set-up, also for the reason that I have young children and a full yet often unpredictable schedule. But even before this stage of my life, I became interested in making a series of smaller, incidental pieces, much in the way one might keep a journal – as a regular practice, making a series of smaller entries, each of which might record, and then recall, a certain moment or day, a particular situation or circumstance. I believe that for most artists their work serves this purpose anyway, of being a record of a certain time, a particular state of mind. For me it has also

been about the building of a collection of sorts, a collection that can expand as the many moments of work gradually accumulate and are put together.

In artistic endeavours one often deals with issues of keeping going, of working art into daily life, of building up a body of work and a repertoire of experience and ways of making. Quite simply, it is a matter of practice, of labour - putting one's hands to the work on a regular basis. We can think of working in this way, or of working another way – where one gets inspired, and then perhaps has a fit of carrying it out. Often, however, the latter becomes more possible and more lucrative only with the former, where practice is a familiar constant.

In addition, working on small pieces can be less threatening and less intimidating than working on a larger piece where one is likely to have higher expectations and perhaps be anxious due to a forbidding sense of commitment. Smaller pieces can have a wonderful incidental quality about them. It is easier to approach them freshly each time. Also, the idea of making a collection is a fascinating one. One starts with a little, then there is more, and over time there is a significant amount.

Making art as one would make entries into a journal brings up the issue not only of making art a part of everyday life, but of bringing one's life into the art. If the piece is small and can be completed within a short time, the state of mind or mood of that particular time will more likely find its way into the work. Allowing access to one's own authenticity, and allowing that, in turn to somehow be expressed in the work in a flowing and uncontrived manner is perhaps one of the most valuable things we could wish for, both for ourselves as artists, and for our students.

My work at this time involves no grand gesture, no sweeping statement, and at times I have wondered if what I do is enough. From a young age, I suppose I have taken pleasure in art making as a peaceful activity. Not peaceful as in placid, but as a time when my mind can let go of the generalities of life, and be in a kind of suspended, sacred space that connects to something inside.

The process of working has not always been like that, of course. There are times when frustration and even fear, akin to that of walking on a precipice, are the dominant emotions; every move is one of trial and error with the stakes high, and underneath it all is always the hope - and the doubt - that what I am making is of value. Often that is when the critical element of mind is present, drilled into me not only by my own self-doubt, but also by the principles of my education. The kind of dialogue where, while part of me is in the artistic, non-verbal and intuitive frame of mind, the other is constantly paying a nod to the potential viewer, exercising the future justification that will be necessary. Justification not only of my work, but also of myself, my way of thinking, being, and doing.

While criticism and discernment of one's work is necessary, I have learned that it is not the frame of mind with which to begin. Though the two states of mind - that of creative intuition and of criticism and judgement - have the ability to help and compliment each other, it is perhaps better if the latter stands back in order to give the former lots of breathing room. A colleague of mine put it quite well, I think, when she said that they are two stages of creation, and that the second should not intervene too soon, certainly not when the first is at work, being guided by something more organic, perhaps not altogether conscious, trying things out.<sup>35</sup>





Figure 2 Untitled. Pencil, tea, and thread on paper, 37x19 cm

There is something very satisfying and soul-fulfilling in being in a state of mind more eternal, more whole somehow, and outside of the regular everyday rush and requirements. Perhaps there is a deep calling in human nature to be lost in something, to feel an absence of time and to find a sense of flow. It is a process that does not involve anything you would call *thinking*. There are no decisions that need to be made in the regular way; the frontal lobe feels pleasantly dormant. At times it needs to begin with concerted effort, and with sustained concentration, but after a certain point there is a letting go, a trusting in what is. All of me is there, involved. It does not feel like a pursuit of anything, not even a pursuit of beauty. In writing about being in the wilderness, poet and philosopher Tim Lilburn talks about “a stance of being alert without anticipating anything.”<sup>36</sup> Involvement in the world of other living things and involvement in the making of art have some things in common. In the past, I had often wanted to create something of beauty, but really, the being lost is what is beautiful.



It is difficult to talk about form, if that is what you are working with. If the work is guided intuitively, by how it works spatially, with line or colour, or simply just the feel of the thing, there isn't a whole lot to say about it. There is not much to explain because ideally the work itself is all that one needs to turn to. It's alright if I'm with someone with whom I feel comfortable, and who has some feeling for the artistic elements of the piece, of the sensibility behind it. I suppose that part of why I feel this way is because my work is quiet, and because I tend to feel vulnerable when attention is on the work and I am in the room also. Even when, in my twenties, my work was much louder, I always

preferred it when people told me about what they thought of it after they had done the looking for themselves, without me present.

Writing, like the visual arts, is solitary work, and often when it is being absorbed by another, the author of the work is not in the same place. Margaret Atwood talks about how reading a writer's work is a little like reading their private letters – if the author walked in while you were reading them, you might feel that you are caught in the act, and in any case, you would stop reading and start talking.<sup>37</sup> I suppose I feel similarly about art. I don't want to be there to disturb you while you are looking, to make you feel that you have to say certain things or show approval. Your looking is almost as private as my making. And it is difficult I think, to talk and to absorb, to really look, at the same time, because you are using different states of mind and of being, for the two activities.

That said, I'm well aware that there are artists who talk easily about their work, who in fact love talking about it, whether or not it depends greatly on form. I've seen many do it admirably, especially those who just sound honest and open about it, not self-promotional. We are in a time when the visual arts are not always so much a practice of solitude and of bodily sensing and intuition. It has become an area that invites discussion, and I have to confess a liking for talking about the works of others myself. It is always better, however, after I have had a chance to absorb it for myself. And some art certainly lends itself well to discourse, some is in fact made in the hopes of promoting discussion.

When producing work that involves an idea or an issue, it is easy sometimes to think of more and more to say about it, or rather, around it. It helps you to feel that the work holds more weight, somehow. It is a little like putting together a cohesive

argument, with a sensorial accompaniment to it. And I suppose this certainly has merits too.

Yet sometimes I get caught up in the issue that, compared to the other arts like literature or music, visual art often can't seem to do it by itself in that it often needs some sort of explanation to go along with it to put it into context, to make it understandable. I find it heartening turning to writers, who can openly rely on their craft as the entire medium. Margaret Atwood used to counsel her students, "Respect the page. It's all you've got."<sup>38</sup> For myself, I try to keep the faith that the work should do the work. The art piece itself should be able to communicate most of what needs to be communicated.

Alvarez talks about craft as something that stays with you no matter what you do with it afterward.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps some of the reason why many former art students no longer continue making art once they are out of school is because of the social nature of criticism and argument – if there is a declaration of some sort behind the work, or if it addresses a particular issue, you need a set of interested people to make the work feel worthwhile. But when one works with form, with craft and skills, they seem to rely less on a statement. Or perhaps the statement is already inherently, though quietly, there.



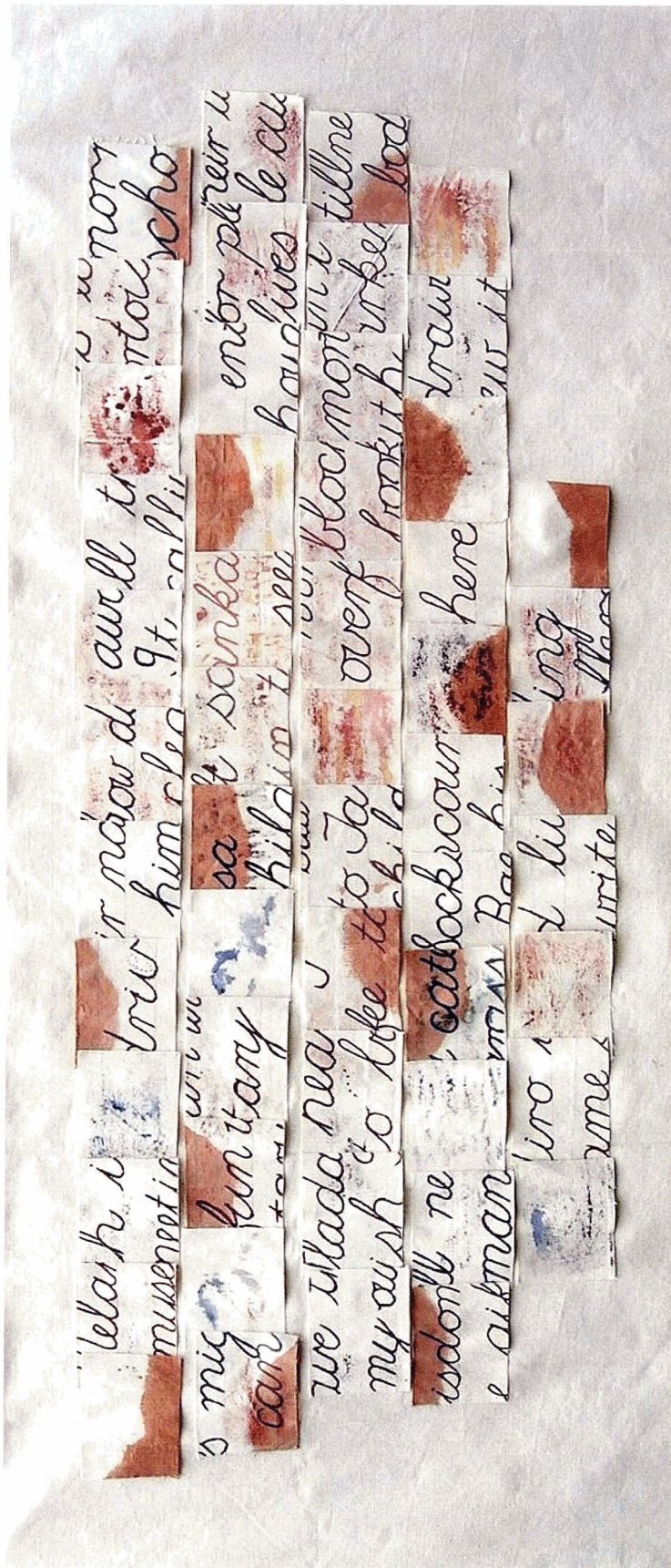


Figure 3 Untitled. Acrylic and tea on canvas, 1m86cmx89cm

I think of all the reasons that people have, for making art: their motives. There are so many different personal reasons that can spur one on, and these often evolve both with the eras of time, as well as with the stages of one's life. As a child, I remember the simple pleasure of depicting something in my own way, of making something that I thought was pleasing. The simple idea of *making* held endless fascination – bringing forth an object into the world that came from my own hands and thoughts. I suppose it was in the teenage years when the motives that would be with me a long time came to me – becoming deeply involved with something, making work of some worth, and being a part of something. There was an enigmatic need to belong among those whose life revolved around the arts. When I took art at university, all this was coupled with a desire to progress and to develop, and also a struggle to find a way of working that was my own, something sincere to me, but that I could feel comfortable presenting in that particular environment. Often the overlap between the two worlds - mine and theirs - was quite small, and at times it felt like forcing things a bit, like wrenching square pegs into round holes, a struggle to fit in. Looking back on that now, I wonder why I worried about it so much, but I suppose it was because I was young, and not very confident.

Then, for a time I was on my own, working at home or in my studio, having exhibitions. All of which can be a lonely experience if you have a kind of fear of the art world, and feel timid about presenting your work. It is ironic that the realm one deeply wants to be a part of can also be so daunting, even alienating. I now understand that during that time, making art was somewhat equated with finding a place in the world.

These days, when I do my work it cannot be the priority in my life, because my children have become that. Even so, the need to have a project of my own on the go is

constantly there, yet the energy that goes toward it now is quite different from before. My main motive is to gain a sort of space for myself, to reconnect with something that is hardly ever accessible in the rush of the day's routines, when I'm in constant communication with others, tending to their needs.

When I was in university, there were pressures from both within and without to make something strong – work that embodies something intense from within, yet to also make a strong visual statement, a strong case for something. When I left, my work became a lot quieter and gentler. When I work away in solitude now, I sometimes ask myself, is it alright to make work that gives me a sense of peace? Is it alright to simply lose myself in it and to let my mind go? Sometimes I fear that what I am making is too easy, for there is no argument or statement behind it. There is no desire to prove anything, just to find a sense of rightness of what works with the forms. This is how it is now, and in future it may change. Of all the motives that have been there for me over time, the most constant has been just to lose myself, to disappear into something, and to enter a state of mind where time doesn't matter, and a truer kind of consciousness comes through.

I think of the student experience in an art class, and how there can be such a large variety of orientations with regard to what draws them to art. The question of motive can be as personal, and as tender, as the question of aesthetic inclination.



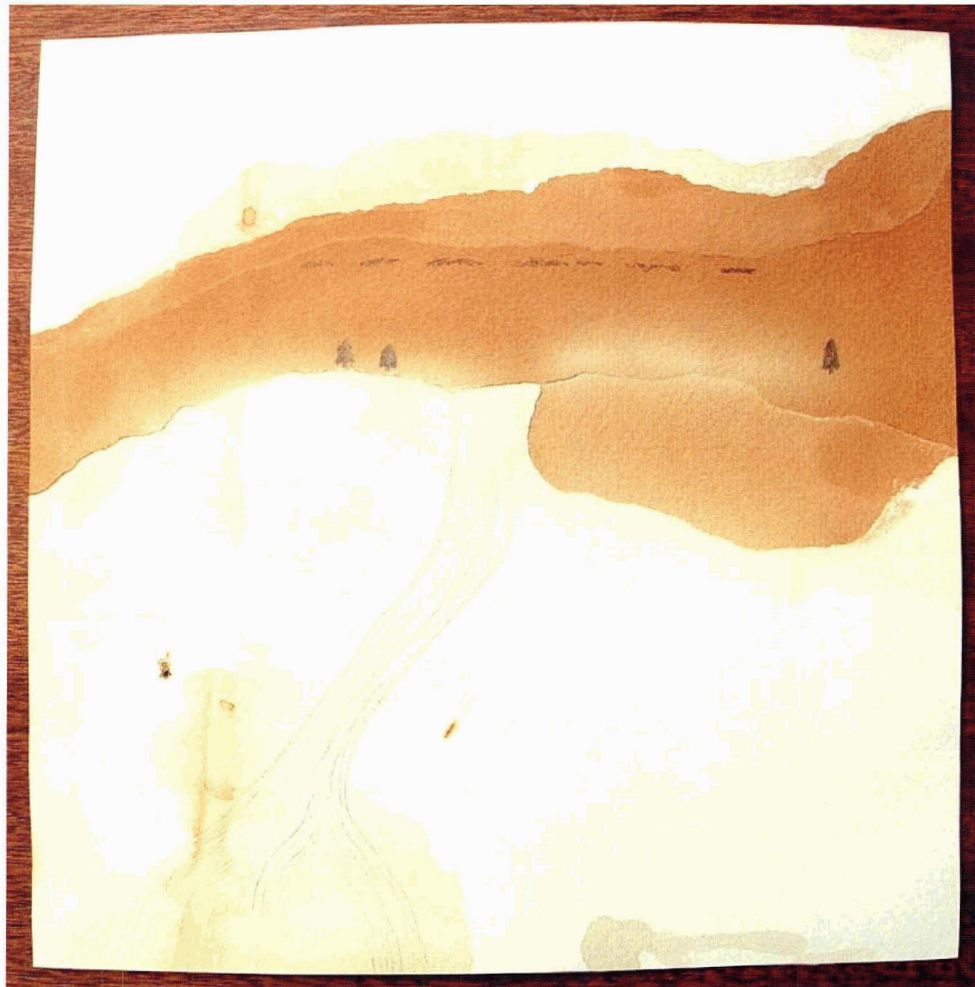


Figure 5 *Untitled. Pencil and tea on paper, 19x21cm*



In the 1987 Canadian film *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, one of the main characters is a curator who had aspirations in the past of being an artist, but had given up because her work wasn't met with good reviews. All she wanted, she says, was to make something truly beautiful. In a dreamlike, surreal scene, where she is showing her paintings to the protagonist of the film, the paintings are portrayed as blank white canvasses that emit bright light. They shine, but are empty of content. I found this particularly apt, as I think the desire to make something beautiful is perhaps fairly basic and common, yet what that beauty should look like is very difficult, even impossible, to define or describe, particularly in our present culture. Perhaps all we know is that it is somehow luminous or radiant, that it draws your attention and holds your eye the way a flame might hold it in the darkness. Beyond that, I am not certain we know much more.



An element that has run through much of my work of recent years is that of pattern, and patterning. It is how the spaces seem to ask to be filled up, with markings that build and build on each other. Perhaps part of the appeal of making pattern is the meditative quality of doing it. It is peaceful. It is repetitive, but the repetition is never the same. It is an irregular, organic kind of pattern, guided by my hand and the tone of things at the time. There is no preset design.

Since I was a child I have been fascinated with surfaces of homogenous, fractal patterns that I feel I can almost disappear into. The repeating geometric lines of brickwork, of stone paving, the grain of wood, the patterns in cloth – both in the print and in the weave itself. Fallen leaves, a wall covered with ivy, the texture of knitting, of

mesh, of some kinds of paper. A field of endless fertile dandelions. I've read stories where characters lose themselves in the patterns of their bedroom wallpaper, but those patterns I often find too regular; the repetitions too obvious, making my eyes hurt. The more random and irregular ones, like those we find in nature and in some architecture are gentler, more harmonious.

Something interesting happens when my hand makes patterns on the paper. What I start out with changes as I continue. The lines, or curves, or squares start out as such, but as it goes on, they either tighten up or loosen as my hand gets more accustomed to making those particular marks. In the end, the pattern takes on a life of its own; straight lines become curved, curves become S's, squares become rectangles, circles mutate into ovals, and so on. It is good to know that I cannot be machine-like in regularity or planning, and that it is better not to try to be.

Ellen Dissanayke talks the human need for elaboration, which distinguishes something as meaningful and important. Elaboration shows emphasis and deliberation, it provides satisfaction. Repetition is the simplest kind of elaboration; it is, in fact, its origin. She also observes that patterning and repetition give us a way of shaping time and space, of creating a kind of order that may not be there in ordinary life.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps that is what I have been doing. Building on things, trying to create a kind of order. To me, pattern and texture also provide a kind of richness. I don't necessarily intend it as elaboration, but it is like if you look at a stone wall from a distance, you see only the wall; if you look at it close up, you see the individual stones and the lines that are created in how they fit together. It is subtle, and gives you two ways of looking – from afar

where you see the thing or the shape as a whole, and then close up, where it becomes a field of rich texture.

I have also long been interested in the idea of text as pattern, and text as image. In the same way that music gives meaning and character to the words of a song, often the physical and visual format of a text adds meaning to its content. The form and pattern of the written words become the medium that informs the message. Yet I am also interested in how text itself can be the *content* of the form, as becomes the case when the text is not legible, or not legible enough to divulge what it is about. Sometimes, the pattern of the text is beautiful in itself, its literal content aside.

On a couple of projects recently I have framed off parts of my journal, small sections, perhaps just part of a word or of two words. Something that is enough for me to recall the meaning and circumstance, but not enough to reveal anything legible to a viewer. There is an intriguing element in that it is just a glimpse of something private, but what takes over is the form. For me, it is about bringing out, enhancing, bits of time – things that I have lived through, thoughts that I have had. Enlarging and reproducing the curved lettering in paint is peaceful and satisfying work. I have always loved cursive writing; the necessity of forming the letters properly turns the act of writing itself into a kind of craft, with personal meaning coming through. If I had lived during the middle ages I would have liked to be a scribe.

There is something else, too, that comes to mind when I think about doing work with the hand that allows the mind to go into a kind of contemplative, left-brain state. Throughout time, humans have been engaged in activities that involved work with the hands, whether it was work on the land or that of maintaining the ordinary necessities of

life around the home. Apart from general work and maintenance were activities where one's imagination became part of the process of work. I am thinking of things like woodwork, sewing, weaving, carving, pottery and so on – actual crafts, which, if done in reasonably comfortable conditions and with enough autonomy, provided a kind of space for one where the hands were occupied, but the mind was relatively free. Perhaps this, too, is a basic soulful need, to be occupied by something that offers a kind of engaged repose for the mind, but with the knowledge that things are being done, built upon.



Over the over the past few years I've been gradually overcoming a myth that I had become aware had been ingrained in my way of thinking, of viewing my life, of being an artist. We are not always aware of the assumptions, the philosophies we live with, and how they affect the quality of our day to day.

The seed of it was probably sewn in early adolescence, when I was made aware of a different way of thinking about time. I now had more responsibilities, at school and at home, and certain things were expected of me, things that had to be done by the end of the day. Before I had felt comparatively free, autonomous, whereas now time began to take on a different tone: it was strict and unforgiving. I could no longer just flow and dream through the day, things that needed to be done hung above me like a threatening cloud, and I resented it.



*Figure 6 Untitled. Tea, wax and pencil on paper, 25x19cm*

I wanted to keep in my own space, where my mind and imagination had room to be, room for creative endeavours. Where time didn't matter. Where it was expansive and moved like a flowing stream, not like the measured movements of the hands of the clock. This had a profound impact on the way I thought about the activities and things I did. I felt I had to become strict with myself, precise and inflexible, in order to live up to what was expected of me within the finite amount of time. And gradually, life became less enjoyable. I still remember that lovely feeling at the beginning of every school holiday, where openness stretched out before me, and the feeling of tightness, of betrayal almost, as it drew to a close, and I knew that my mind would have to shift gears, and confer again to a schedule.

Over time, and particularly through high school where it felt that my choice of subject areas was a first step in determining what I would do and who I would become, I formed in my mind a division between things rational, scientific and controlled, and things creative, uncategorized, and flowing. Because I was so interested in the arts, I wished to put myself firmly in the latter camp. Yet while I was attracted to a free and unrestrained way of thinking, I tended to take creative endeavours very seriously. Though I spurned the practical and rational, I recognized that many aspects of life, including my own ambitions, required that. There was also something about logic and order that appealed. I suppose it was elements of harmony and clarity I was looking for, even then.



*Figure 7 Untitled. Pencil, thread, and tea on paper, 25x19cm*

When I was in art school, things took a strange turn. It is interesting how the general atmosphere of a place, the implicit rules and norms that are unspoken, the assumptions behind the instructors' ways of thinking, and the kind of subculture propagated by the students themselves – all this can carry a lot more weight than what is actually taught. Myths themselves have a similar quality about them: they have subtle and insidious ways of working themselves in. They become part of your world view before you know it, and guide the way you live, the choices you make, the way you think about yourself and the things you do. My myth went something like this. If one wants to be a serious contemporary artist, one should not aim for a peaceful, orderly life. One cannot live in a way that is rational or organized, or that involves comfort and the ordinary sensuous pleasures most of us long for. One has to be outside of that – outside of the norm, outside anything that can be thought of as bourgeois or complacent, and find one's centre instead in the dark recesses outside the periphery of ordinary life. To subscribe to the orderliness, relative ease, and responsibility of regular life is to subscribe to convention, the mainstream, the status quo. Things have to be wilder, messy and unraveled. They also have to be paired down, either to the bold and startling, or to the sparse, the stark and the austere. I suppose it is kind of parallel to the unspoken but widely accepted idea that artists have to suffer for their art. As if life doesn't present enough challenges of its own.

But it is also more than that. Artists are known to see what most others do not, to see things about humanity, about our culture, as if from the outside. I've heard it said that the artist is like the canary in the coalmine, sensing the way things are going to go before everyone else does. Sensing danger. Feeling the absurdity and the folly of where



society is headed as an urgency - a pain that others do not seem to sense. This part of the myth has more truth to it, I think, than the rest. There are those who see all these disturbing things and make light of them, because they feel many things are inevitable, and that nothing can be done. They laugh at the folly. Although that may have its own wisdom, I find it difficult to take. There are many things I see that worry me, and that I think about constantly. Though in times past I felt I needed to push myself to confer with this part of what sometimes characterizes artists, I needn't have.

Over time, however, I have learned that feeling whole is much more important than previously thought, and that I needn't live my life with both feet outside of the normal ideal of content living that aims for peace and joy. (Such simple needs, so basic, yet more rare than one would hope.) That being outside of the basic things of life doesn't in fact help anything. In part, I think it has been my children who have taught me that. They live with the immediate, with a fascination for ordinary things, with a pursuit of joy that isn't even conscious.

There is nothing morally good about looking away from, and blinding ourselves to, the injustices and suffering that are out there. Yet we are of more help to others, and to ourselves, when our own lives have a kind of peace and integrity, a centred contentment. Even those who are suffering have the basic needs of gratification, peace in life, simple pleasures. We have those needs too, though they can be forgotten sometimes. Perhaps that is what makes us lose touch – with our own lives, as well as with the lives of those less fortunate, but perhaps more capable of being content, than we are. Pleasure through our senses, and a hankering for beauty, these are good things.

There is always the question, though, and it is a valid one, of what kind of place do beauty and harmony have, when outside our own privileged lives there is enormous destruction and brutality – of the environment, of entire cultures, of holistic and honest ways of life, of animal species other than our own. It is a difficult thing to answer, but perhaps it is not so difficult to discern between a desire for the kind beauty that offers solace in difficult times, or even pleasure in times of ease, and a desire for beauty as an evasion, a masking of unpleasant reality. Unfortunately beauty has often been blamed for the latter in recent years, which may in part explain the skepticism around it. What we need to do, I think, is remain aware of the value of the former.

Then there is the unpleasant possibility that beauty has become more difficult for us to see. Our lives are cluttered with pursuits, and our energy taken up, absorbed, by so many things, making it difficult to be still and quiet inside long enough to fully take something in. Beauty cannot be appreciated in a hurry. Fatigue takes away from the experience too. What we see around us doesn't always help much, either. Feelings of pleasure or longing, and their accompanying sense of vitality are often dulled by a variety of factors: the commercial media, the market economy, the insistence of technology, and the intellectualisation and politicisation of almost everything. A lot has become coloured by what Taylor calls instrumental thinking – when we think in terms of monetary or practical gain – what is in this for me? There are few images we see that are not trying to sell us something.

It is difficult to instil in our children a sense of beauty, and to teach them that certain things matter, when all around us they see in small but pervasive ways, the destruction of it, the negation of its integrity. There is so much that has become mitigated

by, as Lilburn puts it, “the project to convert what is into product.” Places that are beautiful, beautiful because they have been *left alone* and where trees grow, and birds and animals live, are being churned up to make way for construction. I live in a small suburban town where encroaching development is changing the landscape day by day. I’ll see a field, or a cluster of trees, or an old orchard, and I’ll be taking my breath at how lovely it is, when the thought comes to me, how long, before this, too, is destroyed?

The room where I am writing in is my favourite room in the house, mostly because of what we see from the window. It faces north, and in the distance are the soft peaks of the Golden Ears mountains. They change colour with the weather and the seasons and the way the light reflects on them. On smoggy days, particularly in the late summer and early fall, they are blanketed with a beige haze. All the tourist and municipal brochures boast about the natural beauty we have here, though I don’t know what the visitors think, when they come only to see the mountains smeared that way. But closer than the mountains, what I see outside is the trees, and my eyes go immediately to a stand of tall cottonwoods in the middle distance. With their height, they have a gangly, unassuming majesty about them and stand on a piece of farmland behind the row of houses across the street, surrounded by a few other smaller trees. Their audacious size makes them definitely seem like a new world tree.

A while ago, I learned that cottonwoods are considered a weed tree, because they sprout up of their own accord, grow easily, and grow fast. In that way they are like the alders around here, though the alders are more numerous. I found out about them being thought of as weeds when a friend of mine, who was living near a construction site at the time, woke up one morning and was shocked to see find huge bulldozers ploughing down

a huge row of cottonwoods lining a creek. In her concern and boldness, she went up to the workers and asked why they were taking them away, and that is when they told her they were weeds. She made an art piece about it, a series of small fold out cards with a close-up photograph of the heart-shaped leaves, with their pronounced delineated veins, another of the remainder of the boulevard of trees whose hours were numbered, and then another of the broken branches and upturned roots that had been piled up by the bulldozer.

I think cottonwood trees are the most beautiful weeds I have ever seen. I don't know how long the ones that I see from my window will stand, or the trees around them, for that matter. Around the corner, where that piece of land faces the street, is now a sign, saying, "For Sale, Development Property." I wish they thought differently, that they knew how much this is going to affect all of us living in the area, including the birds and the occasional deer who still use that area as a crossing. Perhaps they do know, but pretend not to, pretend that progress and development are inevitable. I disagree.

In the meantime, I'll see who I can talk to at city hall, and enjoy the trees while they are standing. They have a wisdom of their own.

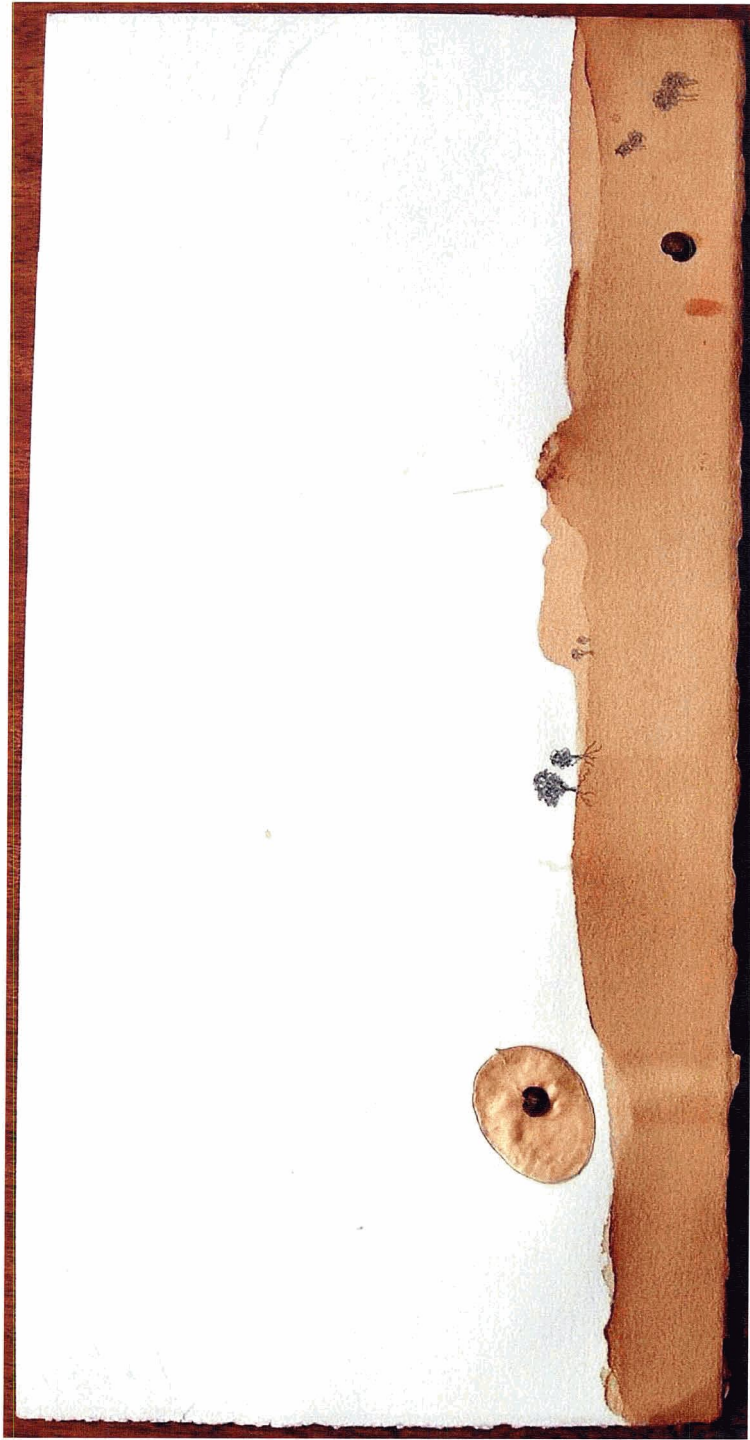


Figure 8 Untitled. Pencil, tea and seeds on paper, 37x19 cm



Figure 9 *Untitled. Pencil and tea on paper, 37x19 cm*

## A Hankering

“What do you long for?” the taller one asked.  
She was wispy and cloudlike, and resembled  
an angel, but that didn’t matter.

My eyes looked up to the sky and replied,  
I long for

wider days, with at least one part of each billowing out  
with colour, something rhythmic and flowing, something  
that comes to me gently  
and asks me to make no promises,  
only to give myself over to  
this good thing

that doesn’t need to tell me its name.

What do I long for?  
Warm sleep and still nights  
with days at least partly ungridded: away from  
“time to do this, and time to do that,” -  
thresholds that close what was open before,  
changing the light to either blind me or dull  
my senses.

Ushering the children in and out, when  
they would rather billow with the time,  
stand still with the sky  
and play with the morning,  
make their own world,  
just as I would.



*Figure 10 Untitled. Tea and thread on paper, 14x17cm*



## **Viewing Art with Others: Aesthetic Experience as a Means to Understanding**

In order to truly connect with a work of art, we essentially have to experience it in our own way, possibly even by ourselves. Yet talking about a work and our responses to it in sympathetic company can be immensely satisfying. We think of going to see a movie and then having lively or otherwise thought-provoking conversation about it afterward – how this experience somehow confirms a connection we have with intimates and acquaintances, as well as with a broader social culture. Through an expression of opinions, and efforts to articulate and clarify what has been perceived, individuals can share what was initially a solitary experience, and connections are formed between people as well as with the work itself.

There can also be times when the interchange is not always positive; there may be some awkwardness if a personal response is intense but disagreed with by a companion, as we are shown ways in which the other person is different from us – ways that were perhaps not so evident before. We learn more about each other, as well as about ourselves, from the ways we respond to artistic work, both in the nature of the response, and in its degree or strength. Our connection with a person may for a moment be diminished if they express indifference to a work we feel passionate about. Yet, if they have no initial opinion of it due to a lack of familiarity or uncertainty about how to approach it, and they appear interested in understanding and seeing what we see in it,

then a flow is facilitated between two individuals, to extend a relationship not only with the work, but also with each other.

Because of the subjective nature of looking at art, talking honestly about one's aesthetic response to a work can occasionally seem to border onto personal matters. It may also take a good deal of time: one can go deeper and deeper as understanding and appreciation of the work is enhanced. Such open discussion, then, may seem appropriate only in relatively intimate or informal settings, and not in more public situations. Yet even in a classroom, room can be made for more personal and eccentric comments from students if the teacher provides a safe and encouraging environment.

Our aesthetic responses are often linked to our emotions, and the degree to which someone talks candidly about how they feel about a piece of work may depend on if they are at ease in a social situation, and how comfortable they normally are talking about personal or subjective matters. The wonderful thing about talking about a work of art, however, is that one can engage in a conversation about human subjectivity and values, about ways of seeing and being, without talking directly about oneself. The work provides a kind of common ground and focal point for communication to take place - what Richmond calls "finding places of inter-subjective agreement."<sup>41</sup> The visual arts certainly present opportunities for dialogue of all kinds – philosophical, political, aesthetic, as well as personal. It is finding the right balance between these, and providing an atmosphere of respect and openness to all of them, that is important.

## **Modes of Interpretation and Response**

Ellen Dissanayake observes that the idea of art as a vehicle for the basic human need of emotional satisfaction would, “to a postmodern sensibility sound overwrought and embarrassing. ‘Aesthetic emotion’,” she says, “has today been pretty much deconstructed out of existence.”<sup>42</sup> Her statement is a little strong, and certainly not always true, yet I have observed the phenomenon many times in academic visual art contexts, where critical argument is the decorous response to a work. It is also interesting to note that if one goes to a poetry reading or an opera, one finds that aesthetic emotion is alive and well among responders. What is it then about the visual arts, that seems to make an emotional response risky, and an intellectual one somehow safer? It may be that the actual content is seldom literal – it is not a medium where direct meaning is normally offered up. Interpretation varies a good deal between individual viewers, and meaning can be subtle or abstract, indirect and difficult to state clearly. Emotion is often either understated or unstated, yet it is still there - coming through in the artist’s aesthetic language. Perhaps due to this murkiness of what is signified, there is a tendency to turn to analysis, especially for those who are good at it. Theory has also helped to prop up the visual arts in the academic sphere, giving them more gravity and esteem. Yet, I wonder what it has done in terms of distancing people from art – from the work of other artists, and from their own work too.

My belief is that we cannot be deeply involved in the making of our own art without having had experiences of being moved either by the work of others, or, by some aspect of the world that is greater than ourselves. Often the two are linked, where a particular medium, such as painting or photography, or the arts as a whole become the

subject of fascination. A. Alvarez writes about finding one's own voice as a writer, which parallels in many ways, I think, to finding one's place as an artist. He suggests that it is "in some ways like the tricky business of becoming an adult...you do what all young people do: you try on other personalities for size, and you fall in love."

Fascination with the work of an artist goes a long way in informing and giving ground to one's aesthetic identity. This is possibly true at any time of life, but particularly so during an artist's developmental years of young adulthood: for many, the years of art school. In times past, the apprenticeship of an artist would include making copies of the works of a master, the ostensible purpose being the development of technical skill. Surely, however, it must have been much more than a matter of mechanical reproduction. Although it is seldom done now, I think the practice of looking so closely at the work of someone well practiced and trying to make as they made has the value of trying on the sensibility of the other artist, of trying on their way of seeing and manner of interpretation. One is also in an intimate contact with the work itself, which is something different from being involved in social discourse around the work. Individuality and originality fall away for a moment; one is enriched by paying homage to another, and by the effort to identify with them for a time.

The idea of love or of passion for a certain body of work seems to have had a dubious place in postmodern culture. In Christopher Butler's description of postmodernism, he speaks a definitive lack of reverence for many things, and particularly for what has gone before. A large part of the postmodern theorists' mandate is what he calls the resistance of grand narratives – tradition, history, religion and social order. In his words, a "great deal of postmodernist theory depends on the maintenance of a

sceptical attitude,<sup>43</sup> – the influence, in part, of thinkers like Lyotard and Derrida. When we think about the meaning of scepticism, that it involves a holding back due to detachment or distrust, it seems to me like an approach that may be useful when you have a great many opposing things to take into perspective, or when you have somehow been tricked or harmed in the past. When it comes to one's own involvement with the work of a particular artist, however, scepticism functions as a kind of shackle, holding a large part of us back. The postmodern approach has no doubt come in part from the fact that in a pluralistic society, there *is* so much to consider. Lambert Zuidervaart has observed that at the heart of postmodern aesthetics is a doubt that the arts can improve our lives and contribute to humanity.<sup>44</sup> The idea that art can bring us to a better future is not as prevalent as it was during modernism. It is true that the world and its social and economic workings are increasingly complex, and amongst that, a single work may at times appear to have little significance other than its monetary value or the publicity it engenders. Just as grand narratives and established norms no longer seem to have a solid foothold in our culture, giving way to individual voices and stories, it might be that while art no longer has the capacity to speak to whole societies, its place is now in individual lives. My idea is that this is where it matters most, and my hope is that in all levels of education, the notion of personal and interpersonal enrichment and understanding through the arts will always be valued.

Scepticism and the consideration of multiple truths and perspectives apply well to theory, to politics, and to argument, (each of which have their place in the visual arts), but can hinder our involvement with art and its meaning. Our contemporary culture is at times such that engagement in art can often take the stance of criticism - knowing about a

work so that one can be erudite when talking about it, not because one is sensitively involved with it. We have lost much of the innocence and directness around looking at art, perhaps even some of our ability to look at something disinterestedly, as was Kant's ideal. Perhaps that is not all bad, though it would be unfortunate if this trend were to strengthen. I think, however, that art itself, and the desire of artists and viewers to be personally and imaginatively involved, is strong enough to triumph over that.

### **Identifying with Others through their Work**

One of the wonderful things about being an artist while you are looking at the oeuvres of others is that you can imagine and appreciate what the artist went through in the process. Alvarez talks about the act of listening to another's voice while reading the work of a writer. He believes that listening is "an art in itself, borne out of the same obscure passion that animates every writer."<sup>45</sup> The challenge with the visual arts is that, especially in recent times, there is no common medium shared among artists, not to mention with everyone else, as language is in the field of literature. We all learn the subtleties of our language, and the craft of writing through our rudimentary years, and so for a writer the chances of his voice being heard in an intimate way, and by a larger audience, are perhaps greater. This may be one of the reasons why it has become increasingly tempting to use language – in written statements, explanations and discourse, or in text within the work - as part of the artistic message in a great number of contemporary works. We are, nonetheless, very visual beings and I don't think we need to lose faith in the ability of visual media to communicate what it needs to. Regarding the idea of listening to another voice, I wholly agree that the eagerness to listen, and to

look, come from the same place as the desire to make – this is often the source of inspiration.

Looking at and responding to art can sometimes be a social activity. While the art at a particular exhibition may not be accessible to everyone, the discussions are often more so. They clarify the artist's process and rationale; they feed our fascination for the artist's life, or pertain to issues, controversial and otherwise, that are of interest to many, even if the interest stems partly from frustration at being provoked by the art. In many cases, however, while the discourse may be lively and intriguing, it is possible to be more closely involved in the discussion than in the art itself; this can often be a positive experience, but not always. Though I use the postmodernist term with some hesitation - countless artists, galleries, and artist's circles have operated successfully outside it - there are many educational contexts where "the critical challenge of postmodern themes" causes those present to "worry about their language," as Butler states.<sup>46</sup> The nature of such criticism is that it often aims to demystify, ultimately viewing the work at some distance. In Butler's view, for the followers of Derrida, "language only seems to mark out clear differences between concepts; it actually only 'defers', or pushes away, its partners within the system for a while."<sup>47</sup>

It is, of course, possible to have a discussion about a body of work in a way that brings us closer to it and heightens our understanding, retaining the faith that a deeper meaning may indeed be there. Openness to phenomenological as well as critical responses, as well as to what may be happening in the work of art, goes a long way. Taylor puts forth that a modern work of art often communicates through what he calls a subtler language, a personal resonance or sensibility. This personal mode may admittedly

be difficult for everyone to understand, and it is easy to resign ourselves to the idea that we can understand the work only if our own sensibility resonates the same way.

However, I believe that it is in extending ourselves in an effort to come closer to sensing the author's personal resonance and see the work with some of its intended perspective, that the worthwhile experience of understanding takes place.

### **Talking about Art, or Choosing not to**

The two states of mind involved in the creative process – one flowing, intuitive, and nonverbal, the other involving criticism, explanation, and judgement – also both have a role to play in the appreciation of art. When we think of the nature of the two, however, they can appear as remarkably different modes that operate in opposing spheres. Criticism, theory and analysis are by nature verbal modes of communication that appear to invite response - either agreement or dispute - so that the conversation can continue. Awareness of the audience to these ideas and utterances is always there: the listeners are usually present or, in the case of writing, imagined. This kind of interchange therefore functions well in a kind of public or group situation, for the main purpose is communication between people. Even when it is written, critics often respond to each other in text; that is the nature of argument and philosophy. Thoughts need to be relatively orderly in order to be articulated lucidly, and are done so through the medium of words.

A more contemplative, embodied, intuitive response, resides within the individual, or, between the individual and the work, as opposed to between people. It often stems from, or goes deeper into, that particular individual, and is not hungry for an immediate response from others. Certainly, there may be a desire to turn to a companion



and share the experience, to see if they see the work as we do, but the interchange needn't override the presence of the work. Personal memories may play a role, as do the sensations that accompany them. We are on somewhat murkier ground: the senses and the emotions may be more involved and if we do articulate these, it may be at the risk of being misunderstood or not sympathized with. Either way, this mode is more subjective a response and though explanation will go a long way in clarifying it, justification and defense don't seem called for.

I do not wish to say that these two ways of responding to a work are entirely separate from each other. If I did that, I would be guilty of subscribing to the dualism that led to many of the disconnections we are now experiencing: modes of thought from the Western tradition like that of Descartes and others, leading to the splits between mind and body, form and content, subject and object. Indeed, in responding to art, the best often comes when the two states of mind can work together, each allowing the other some room. It is just that the social situation one finds oneself in may go a long way in determining the nature of the experience. For more personal and candid aesthetic response to come through, there needs to be a safe atmosphere of respect and openness, an understanding that every interpretation is worth something, that at times words will fail us, and that justification is optional.

Ted Cohen mentions this distinction between aesthetic opinions we are prepared to support from those for which we have no available reasons. Referring to Kant's idea of "judgements of taste", he suggests that it is the aesthetic judgements for which we have reasons that connect us to other possible judges; they have more of a 'public' character than do judgements ruled by feeling.<sup>48</sup> It is one of the main philosophical

difficulties that Kant addressed – how to make our subjective responses rational and thereby public and able to be shared with others, without losing the spontaneity of feeling brought about by the individual aesthetic experience. He believed in the aim of universality when it comes to judgements of beauty, while still validating individual subjectivity. In his view, applying concepts to an entity of beauty constrains the harmony of free play between the mental faculties, yet concepts are often necessary in order to properly describe the work of art.

Finding the right words to explain how we feel about something may at times be difficult, and I agree with Cohen that support or rationale is not always necessary. Yet wonderful conversations of a more flowing nature can still take place here. If we are in a social situation where we are unpressured, yet encouraged, to talk about our responses to things and to explore what a work brings out in us, we become better acquainted with the individuals whose company we are in, and also with ourselves.

Lyas comments on how personal remarks about a piece are not meant so much to judge or to qualify but are rather “attempts to engage with another. They invite replies.”<sup>49</sup> To find that others share our ideas and are interested in extending them is to find that we are not alone. He goes on to assert that a statement such as ‘I don’t like it’ need not be the end of a conversation; it can be the beginning, inviting, ‘What is it that you don’t like?’<sup>50</sup> Because aesthetic experiences can have considerable power over us, these conversations can bring people closer together, enabling them to know each other better. Yet the opposite can also occur - when something humanly fundamental about a work is disagreed upon, it can create a rift between individuals. We somehow sense that the

other person is different from us, and find things out about both them and ourselves that had eluded us before.

Lyas goes on to state that when looking closely at a work, and getting someone else to see what we see, we place ourselves at risk that they may in turn get us to see it their way. Being open to that holds significant implications, I think, for human relationships, and for education. Putting it all together, what we strive for in terms of our place in the world, and in our relationships with others, is to be open to other points of view, to weigh and consider them while still being true to our own stance. The most integrated balance we can aim for is to explore and have faith in our own point of view, while extending ourselves to accept and sympathize with the perspectives of others, constantly becoming enriched as we learn more.

It is as Mahatma Ghandi says in his oft-cited quote about welcoming the winds of all nations to come through his house and to blow there freely, but refusing to be blown off his feet by them. I interpret this refusal to be blown over not as a stubbornness or a refusal to budge, but as a calm and steadfast validation of one's own position – one's own authenticity – esteeming it as right for oneself, though no more or less worthy than the positions of others. Others can offer their knowledge and understanding, which we certainly need to consider, and when it comes to interpretation, sharing with others helps immensely. Yet we ultimately need to get there on our own.

## **Finding One's Place as an Artist: Aesthetic Experience as a Social Bond**

The making and practice of art involves a strange but fundamental kind of paradox. By its nature it is a solitary activity; while there are times when artists collaborate, usually we have to put the work together on our own, from the sapling stage through to its resolution. For the most part it is a solitary journey, where one's companions are the senses, one's life experience, skills and ideas, fear, boldness and whatever may be working below in the unconscious. Yet even though we often think of our work and our experience as autonomous, there are considerable social influences that guide us and come into play. In addition, while we can say that the greatest value of making art is in this process of working and struggling through things on one's own, the completed meaning of it all is often brought to life in a social or public context where it is shared.

The influences and the sharing can take many different forms: a critical discussion of the work of another artist, the inspiration or encouragement gained from a peer or mentor, the moral support and companionship of someone close to us, or the feedback given by those who view our work. Then, of course, there is the broader culture in which we conduct our lives. While essentially we need only ourselves to create a piece and bring it into the world, the value and the effect of what we receive from those around us is immense.

Over time, our aesthetic leanings say a lot about us, and these do not come about in isolation. Parents, teachers, peers, other artists past and present, and the society of the time play a large role in forming it. Rather than seeing ourselves as passive products of our nurture and culture, these influences can be seen in a powerful, active light. Taylor talks of the dialogical quality of human nature, suggesting that the “rich human languages of expression” we use, and which artists in particular work to hone, cannot be acquired on our own. While we may develop our own opinions and outlooks on many things through solitary reflection, when it comes to the larger issues that define who we are and that shape our lives, we find ourselves in constant dialogue with, or against, others whose opinions matter to us.<sup>51</sup> It becomes about how what we see in ourselves coincides with what others see in us, and, in the things that matter to us. Taylor proposes that this dialogue, internal or otherwise, occurs with our ‘significant others’, as G.H. Mead called them, a term that we now use for those with whom we have close allegiances. With regards to a person’s sense of their work, as well as of themselves, this idea of the internal dialogue is particularly interesting - it would be working against any sense of personal authenticity to deny the influences we have received, to think that we are utterly self-made.

In the context of art making, a significant other may even be someone we hardly know because the feedback they give us, whether encouraging or discouraging, can take a deeper effect than in many other contexts. I recall countless times in (and after) art school when, for better or worse, I had the voices of my teachers in my head while working in the studio. They were there still a few years later, though more subtly, and some of them did have to be actively worked against. These influences can be rather

powerful, particularly in the arts. The connections we have with others, then, play a worthy role in how we may perceive our work, and therefore, ourselves.

### **The Solitary Individual, Part of a Greater Whole**

The Romantic era brought about significant changes in society and thereby in the way we view our own lives: established certainties about the world could no longer be assumed and relied upon, subjective experience became the focus of creative work, and individuality became paramount. A. Alvarez states quite fervently how this period redefined our concept of the artist. It was now not enough to be a “just a great artist, but a great artist who has embarked on an inner journey and who makes his own rules as he goes.”<sup>52</sup> Originality became something that characterized not only the work, but the life of the artist as well, implying a distinct separation from the rest of his or her fellow human beings, and a concerted focus on the self. This idea of the artist is not only commonly held today, it is well esteemed. It also applies beyond life in the arts to an idealized view of any self-actualized person, the aspiration of many. It has entered “deep into modern consciousness,”<sup>53</sup> as Taylor says, though it is certainly new when we take the history of humanity into perspective, and other cultures into consideration. Alvarez associates the Romantic era with “self indulgence and mindlessness,” calling it a “violent explosion of emotion...destroying the classical belief in order, reason, symmetry, and calm and clearing the ground for the cult of personality,”<sup>54</sup> It also diverted focus away from the crafted work. While the effects he describes are certainly real, there is also another side to consider, one that is more helpful to us. Taylor’s mission is to redeem the moral value of our individual lives in a way that sees us as connected to a greater whole while finding the authenticity within ourselves. It brings to mind how Polonius in

Shakespeare's Hamlet was perhaps ahead of his time when he counselled his son, Laertes: "This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man."<sup>55</sup>

It is difficult for most of us in contemporary western culture to imagine living in a way where the creed of doing what is right for ourselves is not the main guideline. Yet Taylor reminds us of the extreme to which we sometimes come in our insistence on this. We tend to think that our lives would be greatly compromised if we lose the capacity to listen to our inner voice: "not only should I not fit my life to the demands of external conformity; I can't even find the model to live by outside myself. I can find it only within."<sup>56</sup> The implication here is that of exclusion, of separating oneself out. Even in the context of art education, where the concepts of originality, the individual path, and stepping outside established norms come largely into play, I think this *a priori* insistence on a solitary journey is problematic. Turning away from the influence of others, from what can be learned from the history of our field, and particularly from life outside a particular artistic circle can serve only to narrow our horizons, leaving a somewhat barren sphere from which to draw on in any creative pursuit.

The resistance to historical traditions that often characterizes postmodernism can give us the feeling that we are "orphaned in the present" as John Berger puts it (connections with the future are also tentative at best);<sup>57</sup> and the general scepticism that is part of much postmodern thought greatly hampers what might otherwise be a healthy, life-giving curiosity. I feel it is important to resist the apparent restraint imposed by aspects of our society, the techno-global media-laden market economy that leaves many with a feeling of inevitability, and to look outside our own paradigm to other aesthetic

areas, other cultures and eras, other ways of being and seeing. Learning about, and from, the huge repertoire of art, historical and recent, that is out there with an open mind offers many opportunities to enrich one's scope and expand the aesthetic imagination.

Especially during the younger years of an artist's life, when the mind is open and searching among all the possible paths to take, greater familiarity and a closer connection with possible influences can only enrich his or her passion for the arts.



The romantic image of the solitary artist was much furthered during modernism, when artists were making relatively drastic departures in their work from long-held traditions, and were seen to be unique visionaries. This view seems to still be widely held about the lives and motives of artists, yet not only is it implausible as a reality (particularly today when there is little in terms of practiced tradition from which to depart), we do ourselves a disservice to disaffiliate from others and to shut out their voices and influences. For there is also a much more personally immediate reason for artists to be open to others: most of us will want to know that we can communicate with others through our work, and through our artistic interests in general. There is also the verity that we hope for some form of recognition, even if it is just a matter of sharing with others and receiving acknowledgement. The questions that are opened up here, then, are these: why would there be a need to disregard or break away from certain conventions and expectations that may surround us, and in which cases is it a good idea to do so? Beyond that, assuming we do not want to live in isolation, how do we recognize the voices we *want* to pay heed to in hope that they will benefit us?



Taylor describes how the kind of individualism that holds personal authenticity as a moral ideal carries with it the need we have of others. As he points out, until about two hundred years ago, people didn't concern themselves with issues of identity and recognition because an established hierarchical social system took care of it for them. What is particular about our age is "not the need for recognition, but the conditions in which this can fail."<sup>58</sup> We live with the belief that we deserve recognition on some level, and that people can be harmed if it is denied them. He mentions the "perennial human hunger to be respected and seen as good by the people who surround us"<sup>59</sup> – something we are all familiar with, whether or not it is conscious. We are thus drawn to each other in part by a need for recognition, and the relationships we engage in play a large role in our sense of who we are.

I have always felt that being commended for artistic work is different from being commended for other accomplishments. The praise we receive for creative endeavours hits closer to the heart somehow. It is more than skilled or well thought out execution that qualifies the work; for want of a better term, it has something to do with the spirit of that person, something behind what we ordinarily see. For this reason, the relationships and feedback that grow around artistic work can have rather profound ramifications. Tremendous psychological factors are involved here, pertaining to an artist's faith in their work, which is connected by significant threads to their faith in themselves. These point not only to the direction of the work, but also to the artist's commitment to the work, and the degree to which it is continued. How serious will the artist continue to be, and how confident will they be in putting their work out there? Anna Kindler suggests that not enough research has been done on the influence the 'art world', and the role that it plays

in the education of an artist.<sup>60</sup> In her interviews with several Hong Kong artists, she finds that social factors were significant in determining the strength of the artists' commitment. One artist openly stated that it was in part through the recognition she received from the art world that she knew that her work was important, leading her to the decision to make art full time.



Though artists often work alone and with much autonomy, they operate within a realm where the meaning of what they do is influenced, and at times even prescribed, by others in their field. Several thinkers of the past few decades have outlined how artists function within, and owe much to, the cultural field in which they practice. Pierre Bourdieu posits that any study of a cultural or artistic work should not look only at the work itself, nor only at the interpretations and contextual information around it; it should look at both at the same time.<sup>61</sup> Arthur Danto and George Dickie also see the world of art as a social institution, the authorities of which Dickie describes as “the people who keep the machinery of the artworld working and thereby provide for its continuing existence.”<sup>62</sup> (I once heard an artist admirably refer to them as the “art gods”: though we need them, they are not to be taken too seriously.)

In terms of how one's own aesthetic relates to, or is swayed by, surrounding others, Howard Becker observes that particular art worlds, through joint understanding and conventions, decide what is art and what isn't. An art world develops an aesthetic which, when well-argued, gives artists a means to gage themselves and guides the

production of their work. Becker observes, (and this phenomenon is one I often experienced), that

Among the things they keep in mind in making the innumerable small decisions that cumulatively shape the work is whether or and how those decisions might be defended.<sup>63</sup>

Artistic and aesthetic decisions, then, can be more than a matter of personal creative direction. A sense of one's place and belonging in a chosen artistic realm, and a desire for advancement therein, also come into play. Individual motives and goals – why one is making art and what one wishes to accomplish - will vary widely here.

The aesthetic of a particular art world can give some parameters for the artist to work with, which can in itself be a welcome creative challenge, and when done successfully, gives the artist a sense of accomplishment. This is often particularly true in an art school, which comprises its own art world, and where one is being evaluated. Despite the liberal and open-ended character of the field or art, I think that most students will want some delineation and understanding of the aesthetic landscape they are working within, and of its limits. Achieving well within these parameters not only gives a sense of achievement, it also offers a sense of belonging. This will be particularly meaningful if the aesthetic that has been (often wordlessly, subtly) laid out fits well with one's own, or at least provides a welcome challenge or new and meaningful direction. A supportive art world can offer a sense of home.

In other situations, however, it can be difficult. There is a perceptible difference between an environment that provides validation, encouragement, and the right kinds of challenges, and one where an individual doesn't feel safe to be honest about his or her

feelings, perceptions and preferred artistic directions. The effects of a situation like the latter one can work very subtly and insidiously, where the student may feel nothing more than a vague sense of tension or oppression that is constantly there. Because many students in art school are in the formative years of their adulthood, and because their chosen field is concerned so much with self-expression, connections between art and the self, and the social politics that exist around that, all have significant effects. Those who find it a confusing or a less than fulfilling experience may either stick through the program, though in a way that comprises their own sense of authenticity, content themselves with being outside of what is normally endorsed, or give up altogether.

As Becker argues, a coherent and defensible aesthetic within an art world helps to stabilize values, and provides a basis for evaluation. The effects of this on any particular individual in an educational art world will vary, depending on how comfortable or adept he or she is at working within that aesthetic. Becker also claims that the value attributed to art works can only exist to the degree that there is consensus regarding the aesthetic. Taylor also says something similar, that for everyone to be recognized, there have to be equal standards of recognition. How this can manifest itself in education, particularly in the arts, is problematic, and there is of course no easy answer. It just points to the idea that aesthetics are not something that can be evaluated or quantitatively judged, and that it would be wrong to judge someone's ability according to his or her aesthetic. It is also no doubt why evaluation in these contexts is based more on the commitment and the sincerity of intent brought to the work, though these things themselves are also difficult to judge well.

The aesthetic of a particular art world, of its members, stems not only from the personal tastes and affections of its members, but also from their assumptions, philosophies and approaches to life. Though these may remain unspoken, their influence and effect on students or members of that art world plays an active role. Once an aesthetic has sought to be justified, it has concepts applied to it, and can no longer be quite as disinterested as suggested by the Kantian ideal. This is also why many such art worlds, particularly today and within the postmodern field, can easily become something with which to affiliate and identify oneself along dimensions that are social, not just artistic. The effects of this on an individual's identity can be considerable. Lambert Zuidervaart describes a major difference between a typifying portrait of an artist working in the modern period, and one working during postmodernism: while the former is solitary, practicing in relative freedom and considered a visionary, the latter is "socially constructed and context-oriented," in other words, frequently aware of and concerned about their place in the world, dubious as it may be.<sup>64</sup> In his explanation of postmodernism, Christopher Butler states that the issue of identity has become politically charged in this period. He describes how the "postmodern self" (what a term!) is

very differently conceived from the self at the centre of liberal humanist thought, which is supposed to be capable of being autonomous, rational, and centred, and somehow free of any *particular* cultural, ethnic, or gendered characteristics.<sup>65</sup>

With social and political causes abounding, and with a high awareness of minority groups, there can be a tendency to ally one's sense of self to these. It is not that the causes and fights for recognition are not worthwhile, it is just that, as Butler goes on to point out, there can be a tendency to criticize rather than to settle for anything centred or positive.

I far prefer Charles' Taylor's way of looking at how an individual human being relates to, and finds a place among, other members of society. Individual agency and autonomy is taken into far greater account, as is individual responsibility, and the picture as a whole is viewed in a positive light - as a powerful moral ideal. The human need for recognition is acknowledged, as is the desire to live according to an inner voice. Furthermore, we are not seen as separate from others or from societal issues because our individual concerns, when honestly and intuitively expressed, connect us also to the larger concerns affecting society as a whole.

### **Inner and Outer Voices**

Our sense of who we are and our own connection with our work is subject to some sort of effect from the responses of others to our work. Additionally, the kind of discussions about art that we attend, the opinions we encounter of what constitutes good or pertinent art, or of what constitutes good approaches to making art – these often serve to open up, or to limit, the directions that an art student is likely to take. This is why an art education context can play a much more profound role than may be evident at first glance. Certainly, there are many bold and confident individuals who have stable convictions about how their art making will go, who are not much swayed by what is around them, or, who do well as single-minded solitaires, though I think these are more rare than common. Most art students will be eager to learn and thereby take into consideration much of what they see and hear, and may be (perhaps unconsciously) influenced by it.

I have talked with many artists who say that they have come to where they are either by taking to heart what they have learned in art school, or, by purposely unlearning

it in order to find an approach that is more true to who they are. This is why, I think, the notion of authenticity is so important in the context of art education – one of the biggest questions will always remain this: how can students be spurred on to learn what is significant in the contemporary art world, while also following and building on what is already there within them?

While what we do in our art practice is linked with who we are, this is not to say that we do not often step outside ourselves in the process of working, bringing in views that are not typically our own. Many times, however, the work can be connected to tender and sensitive parts of our character that involve a certain amount of risk just to be brought up. Julia Cameron likens the making of art to divulging a family secret, in that the artist will go into recesses that have until then been left unexposed. A former professor of mine jokingly said that when students show their work to be critiqued, not only is it for them like their underwear is hanging up there for everyone to see, it is displayed there inside out.



In many situations, art education can encourage a discovery of the self as well as the development of artistic abilities. The languages of personal resonance that Taylor speaks of give us means to explore our intuitions through art. He demonstrates that while the manner in which we engage in our pursuits may be subjectively chosen, an integral intuitive connection with the self will also connect us to what he calls significant horizons – the larger concerns such as our place in society and in the natural world. Imagine a context where the teacher encourages students to develop their authenticity, providing a

safe, open environment that allows them to be who they are with all their experiences and aesthetic leanings, in an atmosphere of respect. There would likely be a connection fostered among the students, providing a community that offers encouragement and a sense of support. Also, because once they reach early adulthood, many will have a story that pertains to their heritage or to a meaningful human concern that affects us all, and students can gain understanding of these larger concerns through the perspective of their peers. In a situation like this they are not left on their own to come up with something new and 'original'. Instead, they are encouraged to bring forth, to bring to their work, what is *already* within them – who they are, what informs their lives, all in a supportive environment. In this way, not only does each student's life and their sense of aesthetic become validated and develop further, a variety of other ways of life, backgrounds and beliefs pertaining to larger concerns are also brought forth and made meaningful.

Perhaps a helpful and more positive approach that has come out of postmodern thought is that in the resistance of a grand narrative, we have come to be aware of multiple ways of looking at things. This is not to say that a search for some sort of underlying truth is not worthwhile. It is just that instead of one truth or grand narrative we now have individual stories – many voices – each with some version of truth to offer. (Correspondingly, it should be said that there can be more than one inner voice – in different situations, or even conflicting ones regarding the same situation; this is human nature.) Once individual voices are valued, we begin to see the possibility of the personal being universal. Though it is just a possibility, I think it is one worth having some faith in. In looking beyond the constrictures of theory, feminist writer Toril Moi explains how she values “the ambition of the universal.” What matters most, she says, certainly more



than theory or dogma, is people's everyday experience of their culture and social situations – the “complex layers of lived experience, of ideologies and practices, that make us what we are.”<sup>66</sup>



There is always a balance to be struck, between being true to oneself in the artistic direction taken, and feeling that one is an active member of society, in communication with others, and also open to what is out there. I would like to return to the previously mentioned question of which ideas and conventions we might do well to disregard or walk away from, and which ones to welcome because we sense that they are important, or in hope that we will benefit from them.

In his explanation of the resistance of grand narratives, Taylor mentions Rousseau's idea that dependence on others can drown out the voice of nature within, causing us to lose dependence on ourselves.<sup>67</sup> Yet we do still desire the support and the good opinions of others, though in contemporary times those others are perhaps more individually selected. It may be safe to say then, that any entity that drowns out or otherwise negates that inner voice is to be viewed with suspicion. Something that is suspected as a less than benign authority would obviously fall into this category, yet the not so obvious ones may take on other guises. Trends, political groups, educational mandates, even some forms of theory – all of these present situations to which individuals can ally their sense of identity and belonging, perhaps at the compromise of other unique voices, deeper within.

Yet even the authentic or inner self needs other voices; it cannot exist and grow in a vacuum. I would venture to say that the kinds of voices most helpful to an individual are those that do not seek to *direct* an individual's path, but to guide, nourish and feed it. We need to be able to turn down what is suggested or offered without fear of offending. Voices that nurture, providing some kind of care and understanding, provide much more than those that lay out rules, exhibit authority, or insist on distinct versions of right and wrong. One who leads, teaches or mentors well will offer suggestions, give ideas, provide some perspective, and give strength. They will focus on what *is* (through their own perspective of course), and on what could be, rather than on what should be. The place where the individual's inner voice comes from is acknowledged and validated.

I am talking here, of course, of ideal situations – we all have duties and obligations and there are many times when certain requirements simply have to be met. However, I do think that this is too ideal a description for a social context of artists or art students, and relationships that can exist between teacher and student. It is true that the world of art beyond art school may be a tough and competitive, and that learning to hold one's own ground in the face of criticism is an important lesson for artists, indeed for anyone. Yet, if a student is given valuable tools and support in these earlier stages of learning, I believe they will acquire strengths that will ultimately take them much further.

Finding a supportive social circle for one's work can be much easier said than done, and it is true that some may need it more than others. The study and the teaching of art, like much of our aesthetic experience, is a wholly *human* endeavour that cannot be categorised, and that affects each person individually. For these reasons, I believe that instructors in any context of arts education have a responsibility beyond the teaching of

the skills, concepts and knowledge required for their medium. Their influence on the social atmosphere of a classroom is important too, insofar as they encourage respect, support, positive feedback and helpful criticism.

It is worthwhile to actually teach students how to critique the work of their peers, and encourage an awareness of, and respect for, individual senses of aesthetic. A critique offers opportunities for insight and growth, both for the students whose work is on display, as well as for those looking on; encouraging them to participate fully and to respond to a work in an intelligent and respectful manner will go a long way. Ideally, students can be allowed time to view the piece ahead of time on their own, since one often responds most honestly when in their own space with it. It is also valuable practice in looking at work closely, and not feeling the need to articulate something about it right away. Then, after having had time to absorb, students may feel more confident in voicing their thoughts about the work. Certain guidelines for feedback could be laid out so that the student whose art is on display feels supported, yet taken seriously. Stating the positive aspects of the piece first, then pointing out possibilities for improvement or further exploration in a thoughtful and informed manner would make for constructive discussion in which the student artist feels involved, not just the object of criticism or praise. Sharing and validating the work of peers, learning how to discern rather than just criticise, these provide valuable life-long skills that can aid a young artist in his or her own work down the line.

Educational settings can be of tremendous help in instilling the faith that having people around who support and are interested in one's work is not only possible, but

important. And beyond that, we have to keep at the work, and our faith in the work and our aesthetic directions, on our own.

### **Finding Meaning in the Work of Others; Finding Others Who Find Meaning in Our Work**

Taylor's idea of the dialogical nature of the human mind can be applied to more than the issue of identity. Our impulse to create is in many ways like our impulse to talk, in that we want to communicate with others. We voice our thoughts and opinions not so much because we want to assert them, but out of a desire to share them, with the hope of creating an ongoing flow of exchange that will then extend both our thoughts and ourselves. The making of art is not all that different – on some level, we want to know that the work will reach those who at least loosely understand it in the way it was intended. In terms of communication as well as identity, the notion of the dialogical emphasizes the importance of communities of practice and of discourse in the arts. By this I do not mean that everyone pats each other on the back; challenges always need to be present. Yet while we need the recognition and validation, a certain integrity needs to be maintained. Though one may feel very connected to their work, it is important to remember that it is one's efforts and the work itself that merit the recognition, not one's character. Much can certainly be gained from the support of others, yet an artist's perspective of his or her own work should be as honest and as direct as possible.

As life goes on and as we get older, we come to know ourselves better; a certain confidence may be built up and we come know what works well for us and what doesn't. The need for recognition may then diminish, as may the force behind the influences of other ideas and perspectives. Finding a certain niche and a place of stability is something

many of us aim for, for the contentment it brings. While the flow between inner and outer voices may be lessened to some degree, keeping that flow going, maintaining an interchange between our own ideas and those of others will keep us strong.

## Conclusion

The general question I began with was how an art student, or artist, can find his or her way through the various aesthetic, critical, and political leanings in order to find a place in terms of their own authenticity, fulfillment in their work, a need for recognition, and a sense of mastery. I felt I had to begin with what one already has and how one grows as an individual, and work from there to the various influences and developments that work their way in, informing aesthetic and artistic life, informing life in general and who we become. The role of education in the arts is significant, and though the personal influences therein work subtly, their effect is strong. Many times I have felt that I am contradicting myself, but then that is perhaps the nature something as elusive as a personal aesthetic sensibility, which changes and grows as we do. There is no one particular way to describe it, no single argument to put forth.

When we put it all together, how art spurs us to explore what is inside as well as to look at the perceptions of others, how it gives us means for self-expression and also for expansion by looking outside ourselves, how it provides avenues to refine our sympathies to the sensibilities and predicaments of others, we can see how the arts have the potential to bring out the best of us as human beings. The search for a balance between being true to oneself and following an honest, individual path, yet still feeling connected to, and fed by, the social forces around us, is ongoing.

The influences of the commercial media and the technocratic economy often lead us to mistrust our own experience and to distance us from our senses, playing with our emotions and steering us away, in many respects, from a sense of our own authenticity. Our involvement in the arts, when done with a view of sincerity and openness, can lead us closer to it.

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## Notes

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