

CHAPTER 3: NATURE AND SELF



Tide Coming In, watercolour, 14 x 20. (fig.36)

With nature, as with the human sphere, the capacity to care, to experience sympathy, understanding, and sensitivity to the situation and fate of particular others, and to take responsibility for others is an index of our moral being. Special relationship with, care for, or empathy with particular aspects of nature as experience rather than with nature as abstraction are essential to provide a depth and type of concern that is not otherwise possible. Care and respect for particular animals, trees, and rivers that are known well, loved, and appropriately connected to the self are an important basis for acquiring a wider, more generalized concern (Plumwood, 1991, p.7).

ART AS MEDIUM: NATURE AS SOURCE

Art can play a leading role in guiding our society towards a regenerative intuitive vision of the life process. Our connectedness to nature is part of a holistic way of life (Grande, 1983, p. 93).

In front of me rests a finished painting. It is a small piece; transparent turquoise anemone tentacles enter into the image. The tentacles also crop to the sides, making the viewer feel, for a moment, part of an intimate experience. I am the voyeur, peaking in on a microscopic world that defines me as a visitor (see fig. 39). There is a flesh like egg sack near the centre that glows with the life of cadmium red. Its presence, along with the fishing hook juxtaposes the cool marine environment. I wonder. Why do I paint images from nature and how do I bring meaning to this process of painting? What does it do for me and for others who view my work? What is it about this subject that continually draws me in? Does my own painting process in some way inform my art teaching? Or am I divided between two distinctly separate worlds? In my journal I wrote,

The folds of the anemone flesh are similar to the slits and creases of previous mushroom paintings. A coarse fishing hook pierces the egg sack and has caught it as bait. Is it that our human existence depends upon the marine world, as does all terrestrial life on earth? Without the oceans, there would be no life. Our current global fishing crisis reminds us that we are an overpopulated species and are well into the process of depleting the oceans of all life forms. Have we in fact, caught ourselves as we over fish and consume the natural resources on this earth? We have baited the hooks with our

own short sighted actions. We are cannibals in our devouring of earth resources. We eat ourselves.

Art, both in the making and viewing of it, is an essential part of all facets of life. Artists can use art as a way to bring important issues to light. In fact, all educators, whether in the classroom, outside the classroom, or on canvas, can use art as a means for teaching others. Our engagement with art and nature “open[s] up deeper dimensions of reality” (Sloan, 1983, p.220). And it is the relationship between art and nature, that can reconnect humans with their environment enabling sustainability and survival as a species. Both art and nature share the process of creation. “Nature is the art of which we all are a part” (Grande, 1998, p.36).

NATURE AS EXPERIENTIAL TEACHER FOR THE ARTIST

When I paint images from nature, I become part of many processes: the observer, the participant, and the visionary. Our first moments in nature, whether by a lake, meadow or forest, can instill feelings of awe and wonder. When we “draw closer to Nature, we simultaneously draw closer to ourselves” (London, 2003, p.2). Time spent in the natural world enables us to become part of a larger process outside our own constructed experiences. We let go of control as we observe the forces of nature --wind in our faces, feet wet from an unexpected shoreline wave. We use all our senses as the complexity of nature, removes us from a linear sense of time and space. In nature, “we experience elusive mystery, the sanctity of the place and moment” (London, 2003, p.40).

This mystery is dependent on the initial phase of art making in nature: observation. Because we are removed from our usual sense of time, outside of classroom schedules and work deadlines, we become part of nature's rhythm: time based on changing weather patterns, seasons and the cycle of sunset and sunrise. When the artist engages with a subject in nature, they become immersed in a different type of time.



Alien Species, digital image. (fig.37)

Known as *kairos* in Hebrew, this sense of time is non-linear, encompassing creativity, loss of self and play. To really see into the life of something, we slow down and enter into a meditative state. The more we look into the life of the subject, the more we see and are able to make connections between differing species and ourselves. When we study nature we see, "infinite facets," "exquisite detail, the micro and macro interpenetrating patterns and the subtle and complex voices of Nature" (London, 2003, p.86).

Years ago. I visited a new place on Haida Gwaii. I recorded my initial sensory experiences as I absorbed the surroundings, becoming part of the landscape:

I think what amazes me the most at Gray Bay (in addition to the nasty black flies) is the variety in pattern found both in the ocean and forest life. And then to discover that the patterns share such similarities. The repeated pattern on the cedar bough shares a commonality with the pattern of the tiny snail tracks on the beach, or the clam tailings, or even the rhythmic pattern of the sunlight reflecting on the sand ripples. The exquisite “fairy slipper orchid” shares a floral pattern not unlike the piece of wine coloured kelp. This flower-like kelp I am holding shelters many crabs when I pick it up. The bold shape of the round leaf reminds me of hibiscus flowers from California. The more you look, the more you see the connection between land and sea. The tidal pools teem with life, showing countless colours in the different varieties of sea grass and kelp. I remember the rich colours of the produce lined up at stalls in a farmer’s market and again, I see a connection to the pattern and colour in the tidal pool. Where is the line between plant and animal or between land and sea?. The wholeness of these things gives one a feeling of unity, a pulling together of species and experiences. Presently, I am working on a painting of a large turquoise sea anemone in acrylic. The sea anemone, to me, epitomizes the quintessential marine existence. It stays fixed to one place yet it is in constant movement, sharing the rhythm of the water. It is a shelter for some and a place of demise for others. To look into a sea anemone brings on many feelings for me: I see a species completely foreign to me, alien in its existence. It is unknowable and mysterious, and yet full of beauty. To look into the core is to search for its origin even though I remain the observer.

After writing this intimate narrative, I began to write about the relationship between myself and a ‘foreign’ species --the anemone. The anemone metaphor became a way for me to access a part of nature I otherwise could not. Metaphors illustrate multiple meanings leading to a more complete concept of an idea. Their ambiguously attractive nature makes them popular in art because they project an identity onto an object to create similarities that did not previously exist (Marshall, 2004).

After careful observation and experiencing a feeling of awe for the complexity and beauty in the tidal life, I developed a relationship with the 'other' erasing the line between self and nature. I became the anemone, sharing consciousness with the life around me.

PRIMARY ENCOUNTERS

Once, while visiting the west coast on Haida Gwaii, I sat at the side of the rising tide looking into a deep pool of spiraling kelp. My eyes pulled my thoughts into its scintillating expanse. I observed, I felt emotion, and I connected with the kelp. Then I wrote out this visual experience in prose:

Liquid skin

*Liquid skin unfolding,
Opening into the tidal surge,
Slipping and twisting over limbs
Catching the iridescence in the rising sun
I am hypnotized by the sliding layers
Shifting, pulling, releasing
Yet holding fast to the basalt
Cemented against storm and wind.
I am kelp
I can hold on forever.*

When artists have "primary encounters with the world" they can share "what they know" and see (London, 2003, p. 40). My own experience of transformative intimacy can be

shared through my art. This careful observation and relationship with nature is evident in the meticulous and meditative renderings of the life forms I see.

Observing nature involves both a sensory and an imaginative act. We are a part of nature, not separate from it as past anthropomorphic environmental movements have suggested. Even deep ecology cannot fully explain the connection between humans and their surroundings. Ecofeminism embraces the important relationship between people and nature by drawing parallels between a mother and child (Plumwood, 1991). Nature is part of our life, and we can care for and love nature in the same way do with each other. "Nature appears to be beautiful to us because we too are Nature, and what we take to be beautiful is only like meeting like" (London, 2003, p. 31). Both deep ecologists and ecofeminists share this idea: that we are a part of nature and we are equal although different. Deep ecology emphasizes the expansion of self into something bigger as does ecofeminism. However, ecofeminism develops this concept into a caring and loving relationship with nature. Although both environmental movements are ontologically separate, each highlights many important aspects of current eco-thinking (King, 1991).

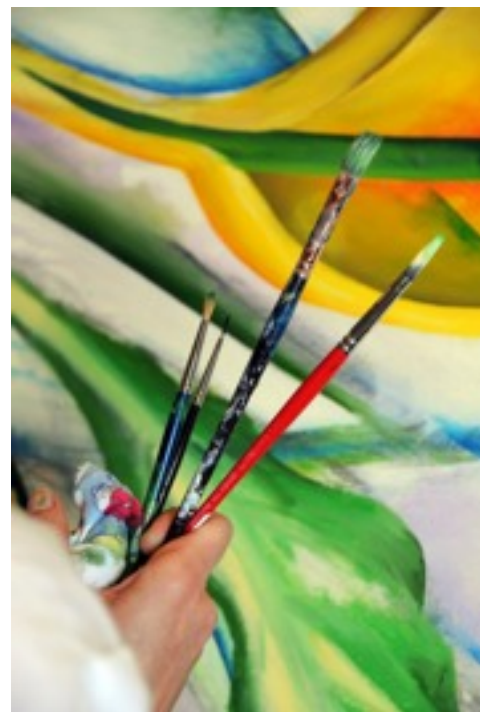
RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

Artistic responses to nature are a primary way not only of discovering and cultivating the emotions, but also of educating the emotions" (Sloan, 1983, p.221). Artistic creativity matures through intimate experiences in nature. Insight, far beyond common educational processes, results from observation, connection, and communion with

nature. Relating to nature is a gradual process. Having observed the surroundings and participated in a complete sensory response, the artist can then produce art that is about this experience in nature. Artistic responses to nature combine observational beauty with the imagination of the artist. Then viewer who is touched by the work also enters into this caring relationship, experiencing a sense of empathy toward nature that might encourage a desire to protect and nurture our fragile and biologically diverse ecosystems. On the day I visited Gray Bay, I wrote about this process of seeing. Observation and immersion into the subject gives the artist an opportunity to have a relationship with the landscape.

To really see well, you must ignore what others are doing around you, and eliminate all other distractions. Seeing fewer objects and less landscape allows the mind to see in more depth - a deeper perception, scrutinizing the magnificence of the single thing in front of you, and building a relationship with it. Only then can one truly honour and understand the essence of the spirit in all things.

When I paint, my thinking and movements slow down, making the process of painting part of a meditative visual experience in nature. The time I spend painting an image gives honour to the timeless feeling experienced in nature. As I slowly layer the paint onto the canvas to create subtle and realistic forms, I am imitating the process of creation. I am consciously working against our current technological, multi-visual and accelerated lifestyle. The objects we see around us --the rocks,



(fig. 38)

the plants and animals, have evolved over a millennia of time, adapting and morphing into a diverse and interdependent totality. A slowing down of seeing, feeling and responding, is the foundation for Insight-Imagination.

INSIGHT-IMAGINATION

“The function of insight is twofold: to remove blocks in our customary and fixed conception of things, and to gain new perception” (Sloan, 1983, p. 141). At the moment of insight, everything is possible. This is the moment of creation, a space of becoming. Every artist has experienced this at some point and can recall this phenomenological process. Insight occurs through sensory immersion, at the edge of the moment of inspiration, and before the moment is transposed into image or word. Even the simple and ordinary can provide this type of inspiration if we are open to it. Insight-Imagination is where real learning can and should occur when teaching children. Historically, society has held the “basic assumption that knowable reality is quantitative” and is “measurable, weighed” or “counted” (Sloan, 1983, p. 4). Insight-Imagination goes beyond quantifiable learning. It involves a cumulative experience of “wonder, feeling, dream and myth --the domain of our richest experience of life and meaning” (Sloan, 1983, p.68). Ancient cultures have always known the value of dream, myth and imagination, aspects of collective knowledge we can rediscover. It is in the dreams of visionaries that the greatest scientific discoveries have been made. Insight, ignited through experience in nature, perceived and understood through the medium of art, opens up multi-faceted and rhizometric thinking. “Imagination is the foundation of all thinking that is alive, creative and rational” (Sloan, 1983, p.65).

PLACE BASED ART EDUCATION

Artists who connect with nature and communicate the experience of awe and wonder in their artwork are teachers of insight and imagination, assisting society in developing a deeper awareness of the self and relationships to others. The same experiential methodology can be integrated into our educational systems for children, youth and adult learners. "It is the cultivation of the imagination which should be the chief aim in education" today (Warnock, 1976, p.9). The human imagination knows no limits and can expand thinking into endless possibilities. "An education of the imagination is a seeking of the wholeness in the individual and in the community" (Warnock, 1976, p.19). The arts are the vehicle for the imagination and provide a starting point for students in all disciplines to make connections to the larger world and to find new ways of solving old problems.

When a child begins to explore her world, she uses her most accessible means --the senses: taste, sight, touch, smell and hearing. Unlike the limited sensory experiences from the computer, where students rely on fixed 2D visual information that can be filtered through the lenses of the media, corporate and nationalist agendas, first hand sensory experiences are essential in learning. "And education conceived and pursued with no central place for the life of feeling [derived from the senses] can hardly be expected to be appealing to children, for whom feeling is the element in which they live" (Sloan, 1983, p. 220). There are places (both present and past) where humans co-exist sustainably with the natural world. The Haida, along with many other first nations, historically lived in harmony with their environment. One of the best known examples of

current sustainable living can be seen in the Australian aboriginal cultures. Today we live and learn in virtual realities and institutions far removed from the natural environment. Environmental art critic, John Grande connects art to nature by highlighting a variety of eco-artists around the world who create artwork that is sensitive to current environmental issues, emphasizing the need to restore traditional culture and place. Grande summarizes these concerns in the following quote:

We must decentralize, working towards healthy Micro-cultures as the best way to manage ecosystems. In shifting our economic focus away from a global perspective, we are supporting local economy, breaking our dependency on fossils fuels, reducing green house emissions and preserving culture and the environment (Grande, 1998, p.43).

The issues raised by Grande and others, can be a subject for discourse in the classroom. However, establishing a caring relationship with nature is a suitable starting point, providing students with a sense of responsibility and a personal connection to their surroundings. This is the premise for Place Based Art Education.

SENSE OF PLACE

Place based art education “aims to counter the restless separation of people from the land and in their communities by grounding learning in local phenomena and students’ experiences” (Graham, 2007, p. 13). This may mean many different things for each

person. For some, meaning can be created by the child as she/he picks a special place and recreates it. For others, the place may be a link to the past --cultural traditions that seem to go back in time forever. When looking at the meaning of place, it is possible to enter into a discussion of the sacred, the spiritual or the symbolic. What makes this space special to the child? Are there unique objects associated with this place? Is there somewhere you can go to find peace and strength? Or is it a memory of a place that you keep alive using special objects, photos or sketches. Place influences what building materials people use, the type of food grown and gathered, and the art that is created. In art making, both subject and materials are often determined by the regional landscape.

Place is...temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth, it is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, and what will happen there" (Lippard, cited in Graham, 2007, p. 62).

There are many authors who have expanded on this notion of meaning and place. Suzi Gablik (1991) and Thomas Berry (1988) both acknowledged place based learning. Encouraging people to make connections with place by engaging in the environment (hiking, sketching outdoors) increases a sense of reverence or care. When students feels an emotional connection to an outdoor place, they are more likely to respect and protect it. In a sense, a relationship is being created between the self and the place. Many of our contemporary global issues have adverse side effects for regional

communities and the environment. Children are spending more time with computers becoming sedentary and working individually. Teachers have a responsibility to nurture a sense of place in students within a community (Graham, 2007).

On Haida Gwaii, a place where the sacredness of the land and sea are foremost in the minds of the elders, the need for place based art education is essential. To preserve traditional indigenous cultures, education should be adapted to regional and historical sensibilities of place.

How can teachers in the classroom re-instill this wonder and awe for nature using multi-disciplinary art education? “Human education is primarily the activation of the possibilities of the planet” and “in a sense, human education is part of the larger evolutionary process” (Berry, 1988, p.92). If nature is the source of all things, then creative expression in art can and should mirror the natural world around us (see appendix for additional curriculum ideas).

Both art making and writing are creative methods utilized by an artist. Visual journals combining written and pictorial ideas, are an effective tool for teaching students how to record and respond to observations from nature.

JOURNALING

Journaling has become a very popular teaching method in all disciplines. Journals provide a place for self expression and problem solving combining visual and written

information. As an artist, I frequently combine the painting process with journal writing. Sometimes my first visual ideas for a painting begin in the journal. At other times, the painting or sketching precedes a narrative describing my painting process and the meaning of the artwork. The full significance of a piece of art can sometimes be revealed long after the completion of the work. When I think about the process of journal writing in my life, I see it as a different art medium, the words become my brush describing a relationship to nature.

As I headed out westward towards Douglas park, I was blinded by the low setting sun. Such glory! Little fractals of highlighted bugs danced in front of me as they crossed the blinding golden rays skimming over the mountain. I closed my eyes as I headed into the brightness, only faint periferal objects could be identified at my side. I accepted the faith of it all and ran into the light, almost air born. I consciously looked up at the trees in the park, even though the evening shadow had set in and the coolness of the creek and forest made me feel like running faster. I studied the various patterns of bark, relishing in the perspective of the leaning shafts all reaching to one point in the sky.

For students, journaling is a practical method of information gathering. Journaling can be used many ways:

- recording of visual information and observations from nature
- narrative writing from place based experiences
- free thinking, playing and doodling (literal becomes abstract)
- collecting and scrap booking personal memorabilia and photos
- non-linear note taking in class
- recording of personal feelings, ideas, and dreams
- visual problem solving

- developing outlines for written and visual ideas
- open ended responses to personal experiences
- collaging, reorganizing, restructuring
- critical thinking
- art is sourced from all things

The journal bridges experiential learning in nature and the classroom/studio. All senses can be described in the journal and later reinterpreted for an expansive and interpretive development of an idea. Journals have a different purpose for each student and can be used by the teacher to promote student directed learning based on personal experiences from culture, gender and place (Sanders, 2008, pp. 8-14).

REFLECTIONS

All things are in a perpetual state of becoming. Learning is an unfinished process in which both teacher and student share. Teaching is not about imprinting students with facts on life. A good teacher is someone who is willing to enter into a place of discovery and vulnerability with the student. True relationship building can be developed through a connection to nature. By spending time in nature and developing knowledge through sensory experiences, both teacher and student can partake in the process of insight-imagination --a higher form of learning that is expansive, holistic, and rooted in emotion. A relationship with and in nature involving care, responsibility and empathy are the same attributes in a good teacher. We are on the cusp of the great global changes and must rethink how we interact with the land and with each other. It is only natural for us to

re-imagine traditional pedagogical practices to include reverence for and responsibility to the land around us. Local communities are a place for developing such relationships, inform by the land, and responsible to the earth. Art is the medium and nature can be the source for progressive learning.



Today's Catch, acrylic. 12 x 16. (fig.39)



Angelshell, acrylic, 16 x 24. (fig.40)



Liquid Skin, acrylic, 24 x 36. (fig.41)

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Appendix

Learning to develop curriculum that is nature sourced and experiential in its approach can inject new energy and meaningful learning into the classroom.

The BC Art curriculum highlights four categories of learning in the arts. These are: perceiving, responding, creating and communicating. The philosophy behind Insight-Imagination, Place Based Learning and Journaling, relate directly to these categories:

Perceiving - exploring the world through the senses.

Responding - observing, reflecting, describing, analyzing, interpreting, writing, discussing and evaluating.

Creating/Communicating - making and displaying art as a means of personal, cultural, emotional and social expression.

Below are a list of suggested topics for classroom ideas:

1. Outdoor Community Art Projects

Outdoor community art projects are collaborative assignments informed by regional themes and interdisciplinary education stemming from nature. By studying environmental artists such as Andy Goldsworthy and Nils Udo, we can teach children how to create art that is connected to the environment. This type of art making that is informed by and integrated into nature, questions current societal values and moves rhizomatically from conventional art practices.

2. Independent Exercises in Nature

Any opportunity to work in nature, whether in a small community garden or a local woodland park, can provide valuable and direct engagement with the environment. Teachers can bring objects from nature into the classroom either as a source for study or as a medium for creating the art itself. Impermanent and process art making methods can teach lessons (for example, a Japanese garden or illustrating pond studies) opening up new ways of observation and developing a deeper understanding of the connections between science and art. Producing art from memory after an outdoor experience will stimulate imagination and creativity. Here are a few examples of simple outdoor exercises:

- Sketching and writing in a journal using the five senses.
- Making imprints from textures in nature using modeling clay or paper and crayons.
- Collecting objects in the environment and making abstract art forms using the elements and principles of design in an intuitive non-permanent manner (Goldsworthy). Creations may be photographed and expanded upon in the classroom. A discussion on impermanence in relation to historical art can result from this exercise.
- Gathering traditional materials used in Indigenous art/craft making such as cedar strips, river clay, cedar and stones; then learning how to make traditional products (cedar baskets, bentwood boxes, clay pots). A discussion about craft, art and tool making as art can become an interesting extension exercise.

3. The Importance of Art Materials

Studying connections relating to global issues such as fossil fuels and politics can be a springboard for artistic responses emphasizing art as a ‘voice for society’, a place where the artist becomes the activist, advocating for social change. A young artist from Ontario recently created a body of art sourced by natural pigments found within a 100-mile radius. This “hundred mile *art* diet” showed viewers how the process of art-making can be a sustainable practice in itself. Art is the vehicle for the message and art is the message (www.100mileART.com). Paint, brushes, modeling clay, glues and varnishes are just a few of the many art materials available today. How are these product made and where do they come from? Thinking about sustainable materials and methods in art making expands upon traditional art making practises.

4. The Changing Landscape

When student explore place, they may discover that all is not sacred. Opportunities to see human interference in the environment can be a teachable moment. Students can find examples of human presence by studying contemporary landscape changes (i.e. urban sprawl, forest clear cuts or invasive species). Opportunities for discussion around the environment, personal responsibility and conservation can become excellent extension activities involving hands on solutions for change and restoration. Art can be a means of documentation and response throughout the process. What did places used to look like and how they have changed in a few generations? Perceptions around land and land use are extremely important.

