

Musings on Art and Nature:

Finding a Deep Connection

by **Catherine Nash, M.F.A.**

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The older I get, the more I realize that almost everything that today fascinates, drives, inspires, and makes me wonder, did so also when I was a child and a very young woman. Fiercely independent, I was incredibly fortunate to have my inquisitive and creative self tolerated and even nurtured by my family. I daydreamed, read and painted. I grew up in a time when children were safe to roam freely through the woods and fields, to ride my bike and walk...up to a fifteen mile radius from home. I have always been at ease in complete solitude: spending hours observing the minutiae of teeming life below the grass or meditatively dreaming while on my back gazing through layers of green, green leaves into patches of blue, blue sky. And I have always drawn....



I have spent a lot of time with Navajo and Hopi friends, sharing space and time with those who never have been disconnected from nature...walking through canyons near Leupp; soaking in the shallow, muddy river after a sweat at the bottom of Canyon de Chelley; gathering edible wild foods and medicinal herbs together in Tucson; going to dances in Oraibi down within a sacred kiva at 2am; years of participating in sweat lodges twice a month in Montosa Canyon. There are no words. There is being. There is oneness.

I keep observational drawing/writing journals, recording striking natural scenes, personal ah-ha moments, notes to self, notations meant to reconnect me with a particular moment in time and place or an inspirational thought derived from nature. The following are tidbits of my writings from my sketchbooks:



“Amazing how I can intently focus on the eagle through the binoculars...for 20 minutes...with no movement on his part or mine except an occasional shift w/o mind...just waiting for his move – which came exacting and without warning, swooping to the lake surface. Powerfully he flaps away, fish in talons...a morning breakfast of the freshest sushi! If only I could be so intently focused in my meditation..... think of what I might miss!?”



"Circles and Ellipses and Ripples - a List

- the ancient redwood at the top of the hill, lives a meditation. Roots deep, crown stretching.
- jar of yellow earth in water, whose suspended pigments haven't settled even after 4 days -...(or now 13 days!)
- reflections on the lake so easily disturbed by the slightest flutter or breath.
- open blooms following the sun's movement with avid desire.
- parent ducks steadfastly training their young to fly, circling up away from the water until the young one maxes out and glides back down to the surface - numerous times per day.
- reflections emanate from the point of contact, ripples from a plunked stone do too.
- the hummingbird divebombs in a pendulum arc, back & forth.

"SPIRITUAL ASPIRATIONS:
 FIND AN INNER SYMMETRICAL REFLECTION
 - STILLNESS WITHIN. AS STILL AS THAT POOL
 AT THE BOTTOM OF THAT CAVERNOUS CAVE
 - REMEMBER? NOT A WHISPER OF A RIP-
 PLING WIND.
 HOLD THAT REFLECTION WHILST OUT IN
 THE ASYMMETRICAL WORLD...WHILE OUT
 IN THE WIND. SINCE SO FEW DO THAT, THE
 WORLD OF MANKIND IS OUT OF BALANCE.
 BUT NATURE DOES THAT INNATELY. CON-
 SCIOUSNESS REFLECTED EXACTLY, MIRROR-
 LIKE. HUMANS ARE SO DISTURBED, OUR AT-
 MOSPHERE (PHYSICAL, PSYCHIC, SPIRITUAL,
 MENTAL) IS OFF BALANCE."

"Within this gift of time, I can visualize the sort of ideal life pattern I am evolving to. Creative ideas are flowing and emerging - several veins or bodies of work actually. Sky windows; pine branch laced skies at twilight; subtle gradations at night and just before dawn; constellations; memory & dreams & time passage...Given free rein, I am learning and listening...._____fog from the Pacific is rolling in."



When I create, I work intuitively. Idea is paramount. Specific media are chosen for the work that best expresses that idea. Sometimes clay is the right tool, sometimes encaustic or sumi ink, sometimes handmade paper. Most often I combine media in a single work. I allow myself time to play, experiment, practice and gain an understanding of a new media that intrigues me. Over the years, I have worked to gain technical expertise in technique so that use of a particular media becomes fluid, harnessed and at my fingertips when needed. Ideally,

I want an expression of an idea to be unencumbered by struggles with technique, markmaking to be so authentic that emanates from my depths.

For inspiration, I make lists of things that intrigue me or make me wonder. Ideas can incubate within for a long time before they will emerge into a specific work. I will either envision a image complete and in its entirety in my mind before I start or just begin with a mark to be led by each subsequent action allowing the work to shift and evolve as it is being made. In both cases, I have learned to trust the inner muse, to act on an idea whether or not I truly understand the why of it. And I have, sometimes months or even years later, been struck by a deeper understanding of the implications behind a particular work or series without having had awareness of it while



Spiral (above)
encaustic painting, oil stick
21" h x 34" w

Bend (below)
Encaustic painting
21 1/2" X 29"

Nash studio (below left)



creating. That is when I really feel I am working from an authentic place. If I am truly creating from a deep place, an inner image will come into mind and I act on it. Genuinely in the creative mode, there are no words, there is just being and trusting.

I use elements of nature as symbolic, visual poetry: sprouting leaves to symbolize new growth; roots to evoke nurturing and nourishment and groundedness; light through branches to represent fleeting glimpses



Secret Sky (above)
 encaustic painting in a vintage wooden game board
 5.5”h x 9”w x 1.5”d closed
 5.5”h x 18”w x .75” open

of inner light; images of sky capture for me a sense of inner spaciousness; specific times of day express emotional states. But it did take me years to realize that viewers didn’t need to “get” my personal interpretations - that when a work leaves me it has a life of its own and reflects the viewer back to herself. It is part of the magic of art.

Simultaneously working on several projects, I’ll surround myself with sketches, notes, poetry, books and art media. I have shelves in my studio arranged with weathered, aged objects and special natural elements found while hiking, traveling or while perusing antique and flea markets: a visually stimulating, timeless still life of treasured oddities. I’ll juxtapose a palette of potential objects on my work table when I am creating. These may eventually become included in artist books series or larger sculptural works or installations. Their energy may inspire an emotive start to a painting.



New Growth w.detail (above)
 Encaustic, cast gampi, kozo and piña handmade papers,
 dead tree with root ball, dried mud and sand, mixed media.
 80”h X 33” diameter



This Too Shall Pass (left)
 Encaustic monotype with handwritten text on piña paper (made by Asao Shimura): Bundles of sumi ink painted and waxed handmade paper with lists of things taken from decades of journals. Quote by Henry David Thoreau: “You must live in the present, launch yourself on every wave, find your eternity in each moment.” Bound bundle of oak splintered by a tornado. Waxed “leaves” of handmade gampi paper, roots.
 7”X13”X4” opens to 18”L

I have studied Japanese aesthetics, art history and design. Time spent traveling and researching in Japan has deeply influenced my work. Painting there is understood as a way of life, both natural and uncontrived: the accidental and the evidence of hand is greatly revered in art. The poetic Japanese aesthetics of *wabi* and *sabi*, hold intense appeal to me and embody my aspirations in art. Although sometimes referred to today as the combined

term *wabi-sabi*, they each hold separate meanings. *Wabi* is simplicity, humbleness, “poverty”, rusticity, being in tune with nature. *Sabi* means a “bloom of time”, rust, weathering, patina: a tinge of melancholy evoked by the passage of time.

Although I am very affected by what happens in the social and political world of people around me, I think there are plenty of artists creating important artworks that express rage and frustration and political insight. In my own work, I honor my need to create art that reflects what I envision humankind to embody consciously: a higher, intimate connectedness with nature, the earth, the cosmos.

The act of Being in nature for me is a similar state as the act of Being while creating. Art making for me is a time of intuitive motion, a time of listening and acting.



Morning (above)
Encaustic painting
12" X 12"



Pond (left)
Encaustic painting
6" X 6"

Author's Note to the Reader -

On my shelf some favorite, inspirational books right at hand:

- *The Lost Language of Plants* by Stephen Harrod Buhner
- *The Door in the Sky: Coomaraswamy on Myth and Meaning*
- *Long Life Honey in the Heart* and *The Toe Bone and the Tooth* by Martin Prechtel
- *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard
- *The House by the Sea* by May Sarton
- *The Portable Thoreau* (edited by Carl Bode)
- *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* by Henry David Thoreau
- *Air and Dreams* and *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard
- *Wabi-Sabi: the Japanese Art of Impermanence* by Andrew Juniper
- *No Abode: the Record of Ippen* translated by Dennis Hirota