

Some thinking on Attending

"Works of art do not mimic external reality – they are an inner experience. A mirror's immaculate reflection has nothing to do with the inner storm." ¹

The gallery space as a place of contemplation is not a new idea. However, in our post-pandemic world, it may be relevant to suggest that this is a time to reflect, consider, look again, and attend to what we see with care. It is time to be slow. According to Eulalia Bosch in 'The Pleasure of Beholding', learning to look means assembling "one's archive of concepts and images out of this inherited set." It means finding "a solid footing, a base from which we venture down new paths of dialogue and find new spaces for contemplation".²

The idea of an exhibition providing the space for self-reflection and contemplation is to consider the world carefully and with nuance. What is it to look, to really look? What is it to pose questions to oneself, to consider, to really consider propositions, to think deeply in solitude?

In one sense, 'spirituality' today is found in the art museum. However, if there is a 'spiritual' realm, how can we define it? A common understanding of spiritual practices might be one where we deepen our relationship with the 'something' more beyond ourselves. Before Marx, people might have used the word 'God' in this context. But a definition of 'Spirituality' today may also be a state of being in touch with yourself and seeing yourself as part of the whole of human existence.

Art has been shy to acknowledge its embrace of forms and functions once reserved for things holy. The legacy of the Enlightenment is that only rational, secular knowledge counts as truth today. In contrast, the kind of truth claimed by religion has no public purchase, only a personal one. Museums, not only art museums but also museums of history and natural science, were for much of their past devoted to that first, secular form of truth, discovered through rigorous study and exhibited in systematic ways. It seems more and more, in this age of immersive installations and monumentally scaled sculptures, that that scientifically inspired age is passing. Today's spirit of the times now aspires to a different form of truth – something vaguer but more comforting for aesthetes still unmoored by the death of God. ³

Building on a materialist approach, Post Structuralism has argued that artists can point to spaces where we might re-configure our language and material thinking to make again a world other than it is. Art, in this way, is a material poetry, metaphorically exploring fissures in the structure of language.

Whether we call it spiritual or not, art opens us up to ideas we have previously not thought about. But art, like many other things, requires a commitment for value to be realised. Art is not magic; it requires thoughtful consideration by the viewer. It sometimes requires the viewer to relax and suspend their typical concerns. Art asks the viewer to both think and dream.

What happens in/at that moment when Mike Parr looks in the mirror before he commits a mark in developing a self-portrait? The artist has made thousands of drawings and prints over 30 years. Parr's practice has a physical and conceptual terrain in the land of language. Parr gives us much more than mimicry presented in the mirror's reflection - the mirror does not reflect the real inner storm.

According to Michael Young, the process of perception for Parr is indistinguishable from that of remembering, and the struggle is in reconciling the workings of memory, sight and thought. Parr describes these self-portraits as "an attempt to know the unknowable." ⁴

Emma Fielden asks us to consider studied meditations on the nature of infinity, the universe, and our human place in it. Just as we may feel compelled to lean forward and focus more intensely when a speaker's voice is exceptionally soft, Emma Fielden's work calls us to look closely with her precision and fixation on minute details.

The beauty Fielden craves is found in phenomena like the deferred drama of two black holes on a collision course. In her work, *The Veil (After Rene Magritte's The Lovers)*, Fielden presents a very tiny number approaching zero. The painting by Magritte depicts the inability to unveil the true nature of our most intimate companions. Touching, very nearly perhaps, but the two figures never truly connect.

After selecting Fielden for this exhibition, during research, I discovered that the artist had her artwork included in an exhibition called 'Radical Slowness', which shares some of the same themes operable in 'Attending'. "What does it mean to break the whirring pace of the present and unabating velocity of our time? "What does slow art offer us in a fast world?" ⁵

Susan Purdy presents light and energy of nature in the meditative form of the photogram. Photograms record rather than imagine or describe. As a record, they suggest a direct connection with their subject, the exact shape and size of the object printed – nature's presence is contained and continues within the space of the paper. The negative X-ray form of the captured things is not the real world as we experience it. The X-ray style leaves enough room for the viewer to complete the object and for us to imagine - for example, the missing colours and textures.

The real subject of Purdy's work is life and death. Photograms' black and white X-ray quality remind us of living things' fleeting lifespan. The photogram stalls life in perpetuity. Stalled and held in time, suspended to enable careful consideration and scrutiny.

Victor Pasmore was a British artist who found abstraction after producing earlier, more figurative work. Pasmore's first work in abstraction comprised hard-edged geometric forms, but later this style gave way to more curved shapes, wandering lines and areas of bold colour. Characterised by simplicity and fluidity, Pasmore's artworks evoke a strong sense of balance and peacefulness. Pasmore has said, "*I felt the picture has to be an independent object in its own right, not a representation of another object*".⁶

'Clearing', by Katie West, is described by the artist as a 'Space for meditation, reading, listening and conversation'. ⁷ The work uses naturally dyed fabrics carrying the scent and colour of Wurundjeri country, the land where the TarraWarra Museum of Art sits. ⁸ The artwork reminds us of the complex systems that sustain life on earth and our place in it. West is a Yindjibarndi woman for whom the process and notion of naturally dyeing fabric underpin her art practice – the rhythm of walking, gathering, bundling, boiling up water and infusing materials with plant matter. 'Clearing' provides a canopy, soft wraps, and cushion-like folded fabric that invites us to sit, rest and reflect metaphorically.

The poetics of the immeasurable are replete in the films of Melody Woodnutt. 'Galaxies (A love letter)' was made according to the artist, at the threshold of falling in love.

'Galaxies (A love letter)' shot first on 16mm film and transferred to video features film static, speckles, ambiguous light and an arm reaching out, extended hand open upwards. Reaching for what? Perhaps to find our place among the cosmos. To be: is one's existence as a subject developed by a sense of presence

and history. Both presence and history are hinted at here, with ambiguous figures in grainy black and white and a romantic song to conclude.

'Galaxies (A love letter)' uses the Cassini spacecraft's sound passing through Saturn's rings. The film also includes the light waves captured from star KIC12268220C from the constellation Cygnus converted to sound. With galaxies emitting hisses and noises, it is conceivable that the world-in-itself performs without us – despite our love. ⁹

The sky and the waterfall are both classic memes in looking at nature and awe. Lesley Duxbury teases us in her works in this exhibition, titled 'Wink' and 'Blink'. Careful looking is rewarded here. Compare and contrast as the artist has played with ideas of seeing and time. With Duxbury's work 'Closing the distance', there is a sense that we see is not entirely as it seems, and so it is.

In an exhibition as romantic as 'Attending', Vee (Violet) Labson's suitably untitled painting of a waterfall from 1974 selected itself from the painting storage racks of the Latrobe Regional Gallery. The quasi-Impressionist approach seems apposite (given it was painted in 1974 rather than 1874) among the ambiguity and conceits of other artworks in the exhibition. ¹⁰

Creating a new sound work with the brief of quietude, self-reflection, consideration, and space for oneself, Amias Hanley will perform at Latrobe Regional Gallery. According to the artist's website, Hanley primarily uses sound to create connections to place and experiences of attunement and careful listening. ¹¹

Metaphorically, try things out, talk things over. Take time to look, listen, remember and reflect. Take a moment and a deep breath.

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Footnotes

1. Eulalia Bosch Pleasure of beholding, ActarD Inc, Barcelona (Pub), 1998, p69
2. Ibid, p64
3. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150716-why-museums-are-the-new-churches>
4. Michael Young, Art Asia Pacific, Mar-Apr, 2009
5. <https://thelockup.org.au/radical-slowness/>
6. <https://www.iapfineart.com/pasmore-main/>
7. <https://katiwularniwest.com/section/480404-Clearing.html>
8. 'Clearing' was a commission by TarraWarra Museum of Art for ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2019
9. <https://sites.research.unimelb.edu.au/cova/projects/symposia/symposia-and-seminars-2020/event-horizon/test-2/melody-woodnut>
10. Vee Labson's painting was purchased for Latrobe Regional Gallery Collection from the 1974 Caltex Alva Award. The image probably depicts MacKenzie Falls in the Grampians National Park.
11. <https://www.amiashanley.com/home>



Image: Vee Labson, Untitled, 1974, Oil on composition board, 27.2 x 19.8 cm, Latrobe Regional Gallery Collection, purchased 1974.