



Empathy Towards Plants

Susan Gourley/Sally Molloy/Cosima Scales

Salient Definitions

To empathise is to have the ability to understand; to share feelings. It is the capacity to be sensitive and aware enough to vicariously experience the experience of another.

This perspective lies in opposition to romanticising, which is to hold onto unrealistic or idealised notions, without meaningful interaction and the option of change.

The Desire to Connect

Australians are often guilty of romanticising nature in its conception of the Wilderness, in which we desire the opposite of what the myth of modernity promised. It is a longing to connect with untouched nature not yet dissected.

This romanticisation could only stem from the long-standing Othering and backgrounding of nature, and its consequent destruction, conversion and interruption: its colonisation.

Nevertheless, our situation in a post-colonial urban environment means that in the face of that history, such desires are often inescapable.

In *Empathy Towards Plants*, Sally Molloy, Cosima Scales and Susan Gourley eschew romanticised landscape aesthetics. Instead they work to represent the reality of landscape within postcolonial urban context; an experience of nature that is fractured and mediated. In this way, to empathise with nature in its everyday manifestations without expectation is necessary to embark on a journey for connectedness from a place of sincere openness and honesty.

Nostalgia for Childhood

Evident in this exhibition is a desire for childhood understandings of space: a sense of metaphysical and whole-body (intuitive) connection to something bigger than oneself.

Author Richard Louv intensely advocates for the importance of playing in nature as a child, propagating the notion that most of us suffer “nature deficit disorder”. An integral part of playing in the garden, the park, the clump of trees at the end of the cul-de-sac, is cultivating one’s intuition by “demanding visualization and the full use of the senses”¹. Engulfed in nature, children also have greater capacity to experience without socialised boundaries, observing that, in such environments, children are much more likely to make up their own games. One thinks of an Enid Blyton story where children have freedom to explore, build, and contemplate life’s big questions through imaginative experience.

This nostalgia for childhood is precisely described by Ecofeminist activist Maria Mies as “seeking for a simple, spontaneous, open and confidential relationship with our surroundings, with the natural world ... the experiencing of love, tenderness, care, warmth as gifts, without the need of prior achievement for reward.”²

This sense of unaffected play permeates the works. Molloy plays Frisbee Golf with an orchid in an upside down landscape, surfing on starry skies. Gourley arranges spindly flowers to stick out of an upturned bucket, like a tiny castle, utilising both random and deliberate acts to subvert capitalist notions of value in the monumental. Scales depicts leaves as they appear

¹ Richard Louv, *Last Child In the Woods*, Atlantic Books, 2010, London, 7

² Maria Mies, *White Man’s Dilemma: His Search for What He Has Destroyed*, Ecofeminism, Zed Books, 1993, 132-165:140

right in front of and around her, rather than surveying from afar, and paints miniature illusive landscapes in luminous watercolour.

Agency through Contemplation

Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray focuses on the need to modify our conception of subjectivity in order to give birth to a new way of existing in the world, with intimate relations to vegetal life. Having grown up close to nature herself, it was the main source of recreational activity and refuge. She describes being in a complete state of openness towards the natural environment, breathing not only with her lungs but through her whole body, through her skin³, and contemplating its selfhood:

*"In the woods, in the garden, I was contemplating the forms that a tree adopted, how it was able to change while remaining itself, a change in which it did not risk losing its devices as it amounts to the appearing of a living being. And I wondered why we, as humans, have ignored such an aptitude and thus resort to constructed forms to become acculturated."*⁴

Examples of such contemplation are littered through *Empathy Towards Plants*. In *Lying on Stolen Land Until Lavender Scallops Begin To Grow Over Me* (2016), Molloy depicts herself in stillness and contemplation as a sign of deference towards the plants around her, attempting to give them agency in a gentle interaction. Across Scales' practice, the activity of painting is used as a contemplative activity, letting intuitive conclusions about her feelings towards the environment emerge from her work, and thus allowing a mutual exchange with the environment she depicts. Gourley integrates recycled and waste materials into her work, speculating on the possibilities of such "artefacts" to interrupt anthropocentric viewpoints of the environment.

Concluding Thoughts

As Michael Marder puts it, "at the extreme, to empathize with plants is to recognize in ourselves certain features of vegetal life, rather than to project the metaphysical image of human existence onto other life-worlds."⁵ Playful and contemplative, Susan Gourley, Cosima Scales and Sally Molloy leave room for nature to be itself, and enough, in a form of subtle and sensitive activism. *Empathy Towards Plants* occurs in the realm of intuition, and is cultivated in nature.

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³ Michael Marder, 'Afterword – Cultivating Natural Belonging: Luce Irigaray's Water Lily', in *Building A New World Luce Irigaray: Teaching II*, ed. Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder. (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2015) 297.

⁴ Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*, Columbia University Press, 2016, 24

⁵ Michael Marder, 2012, The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy. *Dialogue*, 51, pp 259-273: 265

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