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# Letting Aesthetic Experience Tell Its Own Tale: A Reminder

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MARGARET MACINTYRE LATTA

My childhood was spent by the sea. I spent hours wandering the sandy beach treasure hunting. Everyday brought a variety of shells, glorious tide pools. Grafted driftwood, and wayward logs. Every moment shaped unique sand and rock formations. Stormy days and evenings were especially inviting to me. The wind, the spray, the ocean scent, the rhythmic beat of the waves, drew me and enveloped me. I felt the presence of the wind as my hair whipped around my face. Closing my eyes I'd absorb the taste, smell, and touch, letting a wave break the shore, catching my feet. Looking behind me I would find my footprints gone, erased by the comings and goings of the sea. On my comings and goings to the sea I experienced much beauty appearing, disappearing, and reappearing; always in the making. I continually rediscovered that beach and self within.

I developed an acute sensitivity to the nuances of movement through these sojourns. I continue to find myself drawn to seemingly insignificant aspects of the land where sand, earth, grasses, leaves, frost, or woodland reveal wondrous patterns and textures. J. Jagodzinski describes texture as "the exposed history of the thing embodied on its patina, worn like our skin."<sup>1</sup> As an artist, my prints and paintings explore these many patterns and textures found through my attentiveness to the landscape. They tell of an intimate moment, but also, capture a sense of the creating process; the extreme sensitivity of the landscape to many conditions such as time and weather.

This immense dynamism of the living place we inhabit describes my deep connections to an aesthetic orientation with the world. Finding affinity in Immanuel Kant's words, the beach became my "determining ground" of the aesthetic.<sup>2</sup>

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In my desire to trace further the meanings and traditions sedimented in the term aesthetic, inherited and being reconstructed, I am drawn to my knowings of the beach as a place to begin. I know aesthetic experience to be a disclosive dynamic revealing the fore-understandings that have shaped my way of seeing and being. I am a living embodiment of these structures. I know aesthetic experience to depend on this sense of placedness. It is an ongoing search for attunement that assumes and acknowledges the presence of cognitive, affective, and somatic dimensions. I turn to my own knowing of aesthetic experience to offer a living experience of what placedness means. In so doing I remember John Dewey's words calling for "aesthetic experience to tell its own tale."<sup>73</sup>

My canvas is propped on the easel. It is large (3' x 4') because I find small spaces restrictive. The paradox is that I am intrigued by the ordinary and small. I desire to make the ordinary extraordinary. The large size of my canvas gives me the freedom to render visible the complexity I feel as I see. My canvas is not white and glaring. I have coated it with a gray-green oil paint. It has been drying for sometime now. I sit in place with my canvas. The placedness that emerges and evolves gives agency to my work.

As I prepare to paint I am aware that this painting is not beginning now. To trace its origins is impossible. But I do know I am drawing on images conjured in my mind of memories of sounds, smells, wind, water, seaweed, sea grasses, sand, shells, pebbles, driftwood, and sea life. These are paradoxically lonely images with a strong sense of connection, of belongingness to place. A relationship between the canvas and myself is fostered that facilitates the coming into appearance of meaning.

I am attentive to the living relationships I desire to express. I feel a commitment to immediacy; to draw on specific sensual experiences. I recall differences in light and shadow, in tonal variations, in hues and textures that moved me. In my mind I see a striking similarity of texture and shape in the sand and pebbles. As the tide washes across a definitive line is created. The pebbles glisten; the sand softens and darkens. A tide pool is formed. Peering in, I am amazed at the world awakened. Spray and wind disturb my view for a moment. The sea water stirs... and stills. In the still my reflection meets my eyes. I return to my painting, my perception shaped by these residual memories and visceral experiences. As I paint, what I see and respond to speaks to this historical and cultural placedness. Similarly, Dewey speaks of how an artist "observes the scene with meanings and values brought to his perception by prior experiences" (*AE*, 89). "Drawing is drawing out; it is extraction of what the subject matter has to say in particular to the painter in his integrated experience" (*AE*, 92). I know this beach well. I built sand castles here. I swam with my friends and family through the summers. I rode logs over the waves. I spent hours strolling, totally absorbed in the tessellating sounds. I sailed across to the islands and toyed

with not returning. If this beach could talk it would tell of hours of freedom that were sometimes pensive, sometimes sad, sometimes joyful, but always comforting and familiar. My interactions with this beach and the knowing it yields is derived from my participation in it. Perception, experience and expression are intertwined in a body-world relationship. In a sense they are the skin, the surface, belonging as much to the beach as to myself. Morris Berman speaks of this discussing cultural history as being "encoded" in our bodies saying "let yourself move back and forth, then, between your own bodily history and an examination of larger cultural processes and assumptions. It is in this back-and-forth movement, I am convinced, that real understanding takes place."<sup>4</sup> Berman goes on to talk of the body as "the hidden ground of history."<sup>5</sup> The complexity of this cannot be overstated. My bodily history is grounded in emotions, relationships to the world, and to other human beings. My present is constructed on the basis of having a significant past; my past is reconstructed on the basis of the present. An ongoing dialectic between the past and the present evidences itself in a particular way of knowing, seeing, and acting in the world. Dewey reiterates this saying, "the past absorbed into the present carries on; it presses forward" (*AE*, 19).

My painting process is a constant exchange between self (the personal) and situation (the contextual). Dewey refers to this relationship as necessitating participation and involvement in sense-making. In distinguishing between appreciation and understanding he explains that it is similar to flowering plants — one can enjoy them without understanding. To understand means commitment to finding out something about the interactions of soil, air, water, and sunlight that condition the growth of plants (*AE*, 4-17). Thus, engagement in this process is paramount. I confront boldly the artistic inquiry ahead of me with a willingness to engage in the imaginings of the making process. Dewey claims that "the conscious adjustment of the new and the old is imagination" (*AE*, 272). Peter Elbow's "believing game" is necessary here.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, belief involves faith that artistic purpose is something to be worked toward, rather than something that is necessarily present at the beginning of the making process. This search for intentionality is an engaging, emerging process.

I like that the oil paint dries slowly. I rework and move the paint around for weeks. The gradual drying insists that I take time and return to my painting with new eyes over and over again. I select hues, shapes, lines, and textures, playing with the arrangement of them. As these elements interact I respond to many inadvertent occurrences. Searching for balance is a part of these interactive relationships. Sometimes the orderliness of symmetry pervades. Similar linear dimensions and geometrical arrangements seem fitting. An overall tactile quality with recursive shades and tints of analogous colors seem appropriate. This metaphorically embodies the routine, habitual

movements of the sea. As I mix colors on the canvas and move my brush through the paint I am aware of a codependence between elements; an attunement of rhythms and patterns in the making. This complementary symmetry is interrupted by asymmetry as I vividly recall a gust of wind encircling, gathering the clouds, the waves, and the grasses, in a spirited, rapturous interruption. I re-experience the insignificance I felt as a spectator. I desire to feel at one with the interruption; to be the wind or the sea, to experience the strength; the ensuing disruption. My brush strokes swirl and thicken. The hues darken. I recreate the storm on the canvas. The clouds become thick and heavy, the grasses are flattened by the wind, and the waves rise and pound the shore. I abstract this part of my painting, exaggerating the proportions, elongating lines and shapes, purposely creating drama with color. As I paint, I become the storm. The swift movements draw attention on the canvas. It contrasts with the ritualistic movement depicted elsewhere.

Demands are made of me throughout the creating process: the perception, selection, and organization of qualities and a responsiveness to them. Lines, shapes, hues, and textures are combined as I play with balance (symmetrical/asymmetrical), proportion (abstract/real), emphasis (dominance/subordination), movement (real/implied) and rhythm (regular/irregular). These are responsive and reactive to each other. These relationships reorganize my painting throughout in an ongoing dialogue. This “dialectic of growth” is conversational between the medium and myself.<sup>7</sup> At times, this is a tactile dialogue. My body frequently knows more than my mind can explain. In fact, I often become aware of a painting technique or approach as an intuitive bodily knowing first. At times the dialogue is visual. I respond to what is happening on my canvas. At times the dialogue is emotional. I have a moment in mind I desire to reinvent. These dialogues are interconnected and indivisible. Feeling and thinking, the head and the hand, the mind and the body, the private and public, seeing and acting, nonverbal and verbal, are all interactive and interconnecting relations that are alive and vital within aesthetic experience. My understanding is akin to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s description of the body articulating the world into meanings by grasping it through the integrated operations of the senses, relating what is thus grasped to its past and future.<sup>8</sup> There is a vital connection within experience to the past, present, and future. Similarly, Dewey pictures people living both in (“interaction”) and through an environment (“continuity”). “Different situations succeed one another, but because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later one” (*AE*, 44). The conceptions of situation and interaction are inseparable. “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (*AE*, 41). The two principles of continuity and interaction

“intercept and unite” (*AE*, 17). Thus, experience is a living and moving force. In this sense, it is creative too.

Within my responses to my painting I continually experience self. I understand this to be making meaning for myself. This acknowledges that I bring prior experiences to bear on any given situation. I make sense of things based on my knowing. Knowledge for me, then, is personal and temporal. Such interpretations are an existential process — the interaction and exchange of self with the infinite complexities of the situation. This conception is neither subjective nor objective, but the integral relation of both. The resulting contextual vision is what qualitative means to me. Qualitative thought is the willing immersion of self in a phenomenological situation, cognizable through the senses. It is a lived experience. Experience is an umbrella word that acknowledges the interrelationship between the cognitive, affective, and embodied dimensions. The thinking, feeling, reflecting, and talking, throughout the process of selecting and organizing qualities is termed “qualitative intelligence” by Elliot Eisner. He suggests that, “what is mediated through thought are qualities, what is managed in process are qualities, and what terminates at the end is a qualitative whole; an art form that expresses something by virtue of the way in which those qualities have been created and organized/<sup>9</sup> Eisner further comments that “experience is what we achieve as those qualities come to be known. It is through qualitative inquiry, the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world, that we make sense.”<sup>7,10</sup>

In reflecting on the significance of the art making experience to me I find that what I value is not so much “art”<sup>7</sup> but the aesthetic experience of making art: an experience that values my knowings, interpretations, and expressions; an experience that involves me in constructing meaning for myself; an experience that relies on dialogue and participation as a means to this sense-making; an experience that has to be felt and lived through as a whole. Aesthetic experience is this awareness that the act of creation precipitates. My art-making embodies and conveys through its form that which philosophy can only refer to.

I know there to be constants in my art-making experiences. Firstly, I am very cognizant of my relational nature. Inherent in this image is time, place, personal experience, the embodied and subjective nature of these, the interrelationships of these threads, and the evolving process that ensues. This requires me to be completely involved in my work. A strong emotional commitment to my inquiry is necessary. I experience an attunement to process that asks me to listen and respond sensitively, being open to what is heard and what is said.

Assuming this relational nature, implications for design, organization, and form, follow. The design is dialogic by nature. Dewey’s discussion of a “reorganization or reconstruction of experience”<sup>7</sup> is my knowing.<sup>11</sup> Entering

into such a continuous dialogue acknowledges time, context, and experience, creating a pattern of thought that suggests an organization and a form for my inquiry. As Eisner says “aesthetic experience is a process emerging out of the act itself. Unlike so many other types of human activities the experience that constitutes art does not begin when the inquiry is over — it is not something at the end of a journey, it is part of the journey itself.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the organization is inquiry guided. It involves a willingness on my part to immerse myself in process; to see the inquiry as a search for intentionality; precipitated by a faith or confidence in process. This is Dewey’s sense of confidence denoting “not conscious trust in the efficacy of one’s powers but unconscious faith in the possibilities in the situation. It signifies rising to the needs of the situation.”<sup>13</sup> It absorbs my attention. I desire to take artistic risks. I experiment and play. There is a rhythmic, seductive quality to time that establishes its own tempo.

The form that emerges is generative. Through involvement and evolution the relations, connections, and interactions are parts of the whole. I enjoy the experience of self as knower and inquirer. It is a freeing experience. I am cognizant of an emergent self. I am keenly aware, though, that this self is always becoming because it is impossible to fix otherness into certainties and absolutes no matter how thoroughly I am caught up in this process.

These are the commonalities or constants of aesthetic experience that I have intimate knowledge of. But, the embodied particularities cannot reoccur. It is this particularity which Paul Crowther calls “the very flesh of the art work.”<sup>14</sup> It exposes and discloses my being as inseparably bound up with the question of what it means to be uniquely human.

I have not told you what art is or what the proper response to it might be, but, I hope I have reminded you of how art speaks, how it draws you in, and what is entailed in understanding what it says. Through exploring what Dewey terms “the texture of the actual” I reveal some of what I know to be sedimented within the aesthetic, acknowledging that this is a journey only begun, with so many parts calling to be explored (*AE*, 345). Aesthetic experience ought to engage you in such a constant process of reciprocal interaction and modification. Such attunement to process perpetuates a fragility. This fragile nature of the aesthetic is paradoxically its strength. The releasing or surrendering of self to the present, immersing self in immediacy, offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human relations as they are lived. There is an ebb and flow, a rhythmic quality to time that is not determined by external timetables. Such a dialogue of faith embraces uncertainties, thriving on unforeseen possibilities. The significances of aesthetic experience are found harboring within these fragile relationships. These harbored significances, found in my painting through direct expression to concrete realities and relations, Dewey calls “aesthetic experience in

its integrity... experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience” (*AE*, 274). Seemingly, inherent within the aesthetic is a learning approach and direction. It conceives of participants living in and through situations, engrossed in caring relationships and of inquiries as searches that acknowledge complexity and comprehensiveness. Placedness, living and breathing in situations as an artist, holds tremendous possibilities for teaching/learning of all kinds.

As I stand on a sandbar breathing in the moment, what appears to be a singular island of meaning begins to reveal a connecting pattern with a collective shape of its own. Such is the nature of aesthetic experience. It is ongoing and self-perpetuating. The tale goes on.

## NOTES

1. J. Jagodzinski, “Curriculum as Felt Through Six Layers of an Aesthetically Embodied Skin,” in *Understanding Curriculum as Phenomenological and Deconstructed Text*, ed. William F. Pinar and W. M. Reynolds (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 159 -83.
2. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 71.
3. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934), 275. This book will be cited as *AE* in the text for all subsequent references.
4. Morris Berman, *Coming to Our Senses* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 23.
5. *Ibid.*, 158.
6. Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 273-76.
7. *Ibid.*, 40.
8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).
9. Elliot W. Eisner, *Educating Artistic Vision* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1972), 114.
10. Elliot W. Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 21.
11. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1916), 76.
12. Eisner, *Educating Artistic Vision*, 280.
13. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 181.
14. Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 190.