

An open letter to Kate Walters
from Penny Florence

The Art of the Animal, The Art of the Plant

(Or MS. found in an anthill)¹

*An open letter to Kate Walters, (???)
for 'The Secret Worth A Thousand'
at Newlyn Art Gallery
1st December 2012 - 8th February 2013*



Kinship, 2012
Watercolour on gesso-prepared paper
76 x 47 cm



I have been thinking about growth as transformation in your paintings. Many of them evoke embryonic or foetal form, some quite explicitly, and others more indirectly, through folding the presences they depict into each other, or encasing them through lines that suggest a womb-like relationship, like that of twins or multiple birth.

This led to the thought that the development of the embryo is transformation. We usually refer to the *growth* of the child in the womb, but it is nothing like later growth. The embryo is transforming all the time.

Yet there is a continuity that extends from the human embryo to other animals at the same stages. It is transformation through time, perhaps, and continuity across time. As Bracha Ettinger puts it, "In the matrixial perspective, the becoming-together precedes the being-one" ²



The Kiss of the womb restores the Souls of the Lost, 2012

Watercolour

20 x 28 cm

Chrysalis, 2012

Watercolour on gesso-prepared paper

53 x 69 cm

In the very early stages, all creatures that give birth to live young look similar, becoming more specific as they develop. Indeed, the plant embryo within the seed is analogous, in that it is a new living entity, formed from the union of two adults, enclosed in a protective casing.

Protection is for me one of your most powerful leitmotifs. It derives from the womb, and extends it from source to fundamental structure throughout all life in all forms. You can see this in your wonderful image *The Kiss of the womb restores the Souls of the Lost* you effectively rewrite the myth of the damned crossing the River Styx.



Sparrow Camellia (detail), 2012
Digitally manipulated photograph

Charon, the ferryman to Hades, is displaced through supra-human love. This is the kiss of the womb, the maternal or “matrixial”, greater than any specific mother. Your art is never sentimental. You hold fast to hard truth, as when you said that the miraculous growth of plants from the soil, to which they will return, is like the dark ground of your work.

There is protection, but also death.³ I see this structural way of enfolding as subtly present in *Sparrow Camellia*, in the way the flower encases the bird in a womb-like halo. The effect is both touching and monumental. It makes me think of the moment in Hamlet, when he declines Horatio’s offer to get him out of a potentially fatal fencing bout, and expresses his acceptance of what is to be

Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow [...] The readiness is all.



Bee with Poppy Summer, 2011
Edited digital photograph

The sequencing of the genome in recent years has dramatically revealed how minute our differences are. We are but tiny steps from the humble worm! Research into the therapeutic possibilities of stem cells, now being taken from adults, may miraculously release the potential in our bodies for change. The powers of the womb are still there as we age. Your way of knowing the world is consistent with these scientific advances.

When you take photos of the garden, it is this world of relationships you explore.

You make visible what a strangely wonderful thing a garden can be. The plants and insects are changed through light. You once said to me that growing things was like “waiting/ tending/coaxing in [the] studio for images to surface”.

This is a great form of creativity, unbound from the ego and in touch with the universals that have been denied for too long in much writing about art.

Your way of connecting all living things makes me want to tell you about something Ursula Le Guin wrote in her short story *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*. It's lightly ironic and amusing science fiction, but poses brilliantly incisive questions about art and science, almost without you noticing.

Le Guin's fictional narrator is a scientist who knows that animals have language and art. What a brilliant premise, and one that you share! *S/he* goes on to explore the idea that there may be an art of the plant, too, and, if so, what might characterize it. Would it be "communicative"? Perhaps in vegetable art there is no communication and no time. The plants may "use the meter of eternity".

Le Guin's imaginary scientist concludes:

We do not know. All we can guess is that the putative Art of the Plant is *entirely different* from the Art of the Animal. What it is, we cannot say; we have not yet discovered it. Yet I predict with some certainty that it exists, and that when it is found it will prove to be, not an action, but a reaction: not a communication, but a reception. It will be exactly the opposite of the art we know and recognise. It will be the first *passive* art known to us.

Yours is a similar prediction, Kate!
The readiness is all.

I know this is an awful lot but I really want to link this to the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who understands the definition of art as profoundly animal.⁴ Through the intensity of sensation accessed in art, our bodies are able to effect transformations, not only of ourselves, but universally. Experience is transformative, and it connects with our animal lineage. Art is not about what the artist wants or thinks; art is expanded thought-in-sensation.

It's an idea that connects with a conversation we had about why your work can be hard to understand. Our culture these days, especially in the West, is a strange and contradictory mix: on the one hand, it is not at ease with that which is difficult to explain rationally; on the other, there has been a revival of doctrinaire religion that demands blind adherence to rules without reason.

We must hold to reason. But we also need to expand rationality, not to allow un-reason to appear to be the only alternative to abstract and disembodied logic, and so make it impossible to consider whatever challenges linear, conscious thought.

This is the leap Grosz makes, and so does *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*. It is signaled in its epigraph "MS. found in an anthill" – a nod to Poe's MS. found in a bottle, also a parody of fixed, over-rational science, or knowledge. The connections go very far indeed!

Scientific epistemology is undergoing a revolution. Nanotechnology, sequencing the genome, the continuing exploration of Space: from the unthinkably vast to the unimaginably minute, we are deducing relationships from factors that we cannot see.

Many of the old apparent certainties that have actually been questioned for some time have reached a tipping-point, where they are changing the way we understand and interpret what we know. It is a paradigm shift.

Not all that results from this is positive. Many ideologues seeking power have been quick to seize the opportunity to promote their version of anti-science, which is always also anti-art. Grosz's work, referred to above, brings together a number of scientists and thinkers – including Darwin – to reformulate how we understand all art and making, from architecture through painting to music.

At the start of this open letter, I mentioned the kinship of creatures that can be seen at the foetal stage, especially early on. The creationists, and others like the promoters

of so-called intelligent design, deny Darwin and any form of evolution. They also oppose and deny what I have just said about the embryonic. The evidence is undeniable, yet they deny it because it links the contemporary with the phylogenetic. In other words, it demonstrates that life is very old and interconnected, and that it has evolved. It can transform.

This is tricky and controversial ground. It is also important in terms of the political significance of work that addresses “mystery” in its expanded sense.

From our conversations, I know you understand my reasons for bringing all this into these thoughts on your work. Art speaks to a place where truth and understanding meet. The understanding to which it leads is beyond ideology and facticity. That is partly why it is also different from, yet related to, what we call science. But like science, it is not a matter of blind belief. It is not theology.

Good science always seeks to discover what might be wrong with an insight. You could say the same of making art. The artist makes work freely, but then makes a number of very difficult aesthetic decisions about what to develop or change, or indeed, leave alone, any of which could ruin the work. The bad science of the creationists, like those who deny climate-change, is primarily interested in insisting on their rightness and winning fragments of arguments. This confuses the whole picture.

There is no point gardening in a state of ignorance and denial! Nothing will grow. The same is true of art. You well know that if you did not listen to what a work is telling you, you would end up with sterility and/or propaganda – a failed work.

With science, the dangers can be more immediate and more obviously lethal. The history of science is unfortunately strewn with the consequences.

This question of how truth and understanding meet is also reflected in art history and its divisions. I want to say something here that might at first appear to be a long way from your work in this show. Please bear with me.

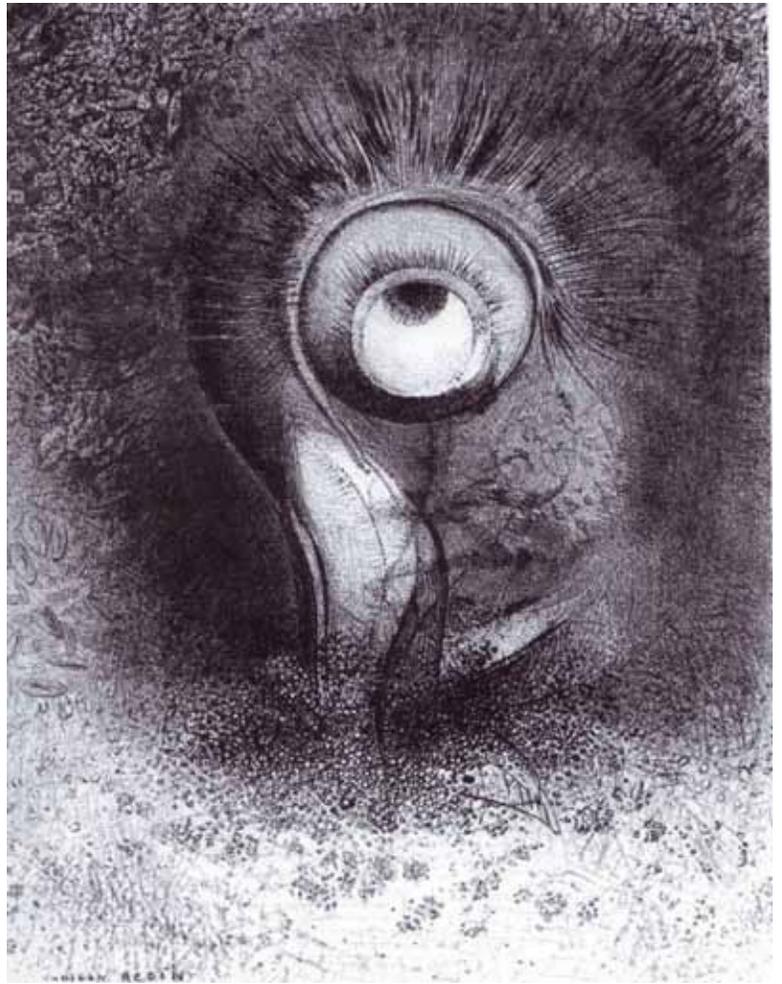
The divide between abstraction and figuration in the 20th Century, and in the privileging of the former, was partly ideological. Abstraction was a wonderful (re)discovery, and nowhere did British abstraction flourish more greatly than here in Cornwall. But later, more broadly, abstraction became a doctrine. I would compare that with disembodied logic.

Your work, like much of the best of contemporary art, draws on both the abstract and the figurative. After all, all art has abstract elements.

It gets complicated. But we could see the relevance of these very large issues through a comparison of your work in this show with the visionary 19th Century artist Odilon Redon's⁵ series *Les Origines*, a work that stands at a turning point during the emergence of Modernism.

This extraordinary lithographic album explored an imaginative evolution, responding to Darwin⁶ and exploring the implications of ideas so challenging to the prevailing orthodoxy that Darwin refrained from publishing them for some time. He knew that his science was not compatible with literalizing the religious story of creation.

One image in particular, *Perhaps there was first vision, tried out in a flower* clearly indicates how this comes from an understanding of art and of humanity that is very close to yours, Kate.



Il y eût peut-être une vision première, essayée dans la fleur
Odilon Redon, 1883
lithograph, 22,3 x 17,2 cm,

You can see behind the eye both the suggestion of a head and of a growing seedling. Redon asks the profound question that all painters grapple: what is vision? But he asks it at a time when artists are really challenging what has been assumed to be. What if there is no difference between human, animal and vegetable life? Like yours, his thinking evinces a kind of monism that Grosz also brings into the present, where relationships and continuities are much more compelling than definitions and distinctions, especially hierarchical.

In the words of Le Guin's fictional scientist, the implication is: "If a non-communicative, vegetative art exists, we must rethink the very elements of our science, and learn a whole new set of techniques."

So the idea of understanding the life of plants reflects on how we understand ourselves. Darwin's interpretation of the evidence of the then new science of paleontology revealed all kinds of previously unsuspected relationships. You bring our attention to this fundamental kinship by embodying it, by giving it form.

Many of us experience the power of animals and plants to affect our well-being. Put like that, the idea may appear relatively ordinary. But what if we follow it through? What if we do not assume, egotistically, that this effect is all about us and what we take from the natural world? What if the natural world is, in ways we do not (yet?) understand, trying to tell us something?

Your paintings, Kate, show us a world that is alert to just such non-communicative, mutually generated understandings. I have expressed the thought this way deliberately. It is not a matter of an isolated human consciousness listening in a mysterious world for messages from strange, hybrid creatures. It is a shared and connected universe in which "we must rethink the very elements of our science".

One final expansive thought of the kind your work inspires. I want to bring what I have said towards a focus on the contemporary relevance of what you are doing.

I began my open letter to you with the idea of birth. A large element of our science is about destruction and control. Significant elements of human science and psychology are concerned with dominance and self-gratification of perceived 'needs'. It comes from the centrality of a notion of the ego and its desire predicated on what is disconnected or lacking.

Your art is elsewhere. As an exploration of continuous motion and transformation, it is birth and connection that defines the paradigm, even where death is present. Because death is part of the cycles of transformation. People may say they know that. But would they contemplate changing the whole structure of the way they think to accept it fully?

When I compared you with Redon just now, and said that he stood at the beginnings of Modernism, I was preparing to say something about you and how Modernism is transforming now.

I think that what looked like the end of Modernism was actually a coming into its potential. There were so many currents in its extraordinary richness that, like a garden, or, indeed the Renaissance, you needed to see the complete cycle to understand it.

As a movement, the ways it brought its spiritual side to contemporary life often became occluded. Kandinsky (1866-1944) is perhaps a good example of an artist who kept them together, although others who were associated with the Bauhaus could easily be cited. The dynamism of his composition is not like your subtle energies, but the spirituality and the shifting borders between abstraction and figuration often are.

These comparisons are not about style, which are the concern of so much art history. It is about what drives the work. Where Kandinsky is geometric, your work is biomorphic. Where his use of colour is prominent, yours is subtle and understated (like your use of materials – watercolour, oils, linen, paper: they are neither obvious nor traditional).



Special Gaze, 2012
Watercolour on gesso prepared linen
55 x 70 cm

The Bauhaus was probably the most important art school in history, promoting freedom and inner growth. No wonder the Nazis ensured its demise! No wonder that they put Kandinsky (along with Klee and others) into their notorious show of “degenerate” art!

The rise of the extreme Right today manifests in many forms. But it is almost always against the visionary freedom of the female principle we see in your work.

The female principle is in all of us, as is the male. We are much more like than unlike, women and men. When the female and male principles are out of balance, either way, the tendency is towards destruction and control. Kandinsky learnt much from Monet, among the insults hurled at the Impressionists, especially Monet, was the claim that the work was weak and effeminate.⁷ The Impressionists originally called themselves The Intransigents, and they saw their art as politically engaged. It's now easy to forget their radicalism, and how much they were derided and misunderstood.



Matrixial Tree, 2012
Watercolour on gesso-prepared paper
37 x 26 cm

Those who said the work was effeminate, however, had seen something true. Impressionism is responsive. At its best, it melds the visionary with the everyday. It defies categories such as realism and abstraction. It has elements of the 'passivity' of *The Art of the Plant*. The problem is not with the insight that there is a female quality in Impressionism. It is with the value and interpretation put on it. By assuming that the non-assertive is weak, the detractors were saying that the female principle is weak and inferior.

The history of Newlyn as a centre of progressive art is well over 100 years old, and it relates directly to Impressionism. It is a history that is proud of its many women artists (at least 30 were active in its heyday)⁸, like the wonderful Dod Proctor, whose luminous figures of women draw on the discoveries of the Impressionists she saw in Paris, bringing to it not only the immediacy evident in her Newlyn peers, but also an original sense of female experience in the modern world. Yet she takes it somewhere else altogether.

There is a powerful connection between that aspect of the art of the Newlyn School and your work, Kate. You share what Norman Garstin was getting at when he said:

It is dim work groping after the genesis of things – even recent things – there is such a tangle of prehistoric causes shaping themselves out of the formless void.⁹

Of course your work is not the same. Of course the differences are significant. What is revealed, however, by concentrating on connections rather than distinctions is extraordinary. As Ettinger says of the matrixial, it is "co-emergence in difference".¹⁰

But then you of all people don't need me to tell you that!

Notes:

1

This is the subtitle of Ursula K Le Guin's 1974 short story *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, published in Compass Rose, Toronto, Bantam Books, 1982. "MS" is, of course, the usual scholarly abbreviation for "manuscript", and Le Guin's story satirizes scholarly conventions.

2

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, painter, psychoanalyst and theorist, *The Matrixial Gaze*, Leeds, 1995, p. 30.

3

Kate Walters, video interview for her show at The Millennium Gallery in 2011.

4

Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth, Columbia UP, 2008.

5

French graphic artist and painter, 1840-1916.

6

Les Origines was published in 1883. Darwin died in 1882, by which time the controversy over the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* in 1859 had resolved into general scientific acceptance.

7

"Impressionism" was coined by a journalist as an insult, taking the word from Monet's painting "Impression: Sunrise".

8

Women Artists in Cornwall (1880-1940) lists 30. Published to accompany the 1996 - 1997 exhibitions at Falmouth and Plymouth Art Galleries. By Dr Melissa Hardie, Dr Valerie Reardon and Marion Whybrow. Published by Falmouth Town Council.

9

Quoted in *100 years in Newlyn. Diary of a Gallery 1895 - 1995*. Edited by Dr Melissa Hardie. The Patten Press.

10

The Matrixial Gaze, Leeds, 1995, p. 50.