Waking Ourselves In Place

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.”

— Henry David Thoreau, Walden: Or, Life in the Woods

Recall a place you feel you know very well.

Now try to envisage some details about that place.

How does it look if you gaze towards your feet? What lies above your head? When you look to your left, what is it that greets you? Now, try to recall the smells of your chosen location – does more than one come to mind? Is there a breeze present? If so, from which direction does it blow and does it affect anything else in the environment around it.

More than likely, the above exercise will produce hazy results. A few flickering details, perhaps a sensation or a collection of related memories; but possibly the detail you thought might be attached to special places in your life is likely a sketch rather than a portrait. To create a portrait of place, takes more effort than one might first expect – something realised by Henry Thoreau during the process of writing Walden: Or, Life In The Woods. ‘Knowing’ place, especially those in natural spaces, is a temporal affair. It’s an undertaking that requires almost monastic dedication and demands both a patience and an attentiveness that takes time to develop and then refine.

For most of us being able to recall a location and actually ‘knowing’ it intimately are markedly different propositions. Beyond the required investment of time, another obstacle exists inherent within us all – a pre-Copernican hard wiring in which we (as individuals) place ourselves at the centre of an overtly personal solar system. This singular positioning finds itself at odds with the orbits of natural (and indeed, urban) world. Understanding place requires divergent views – sensory triangulation if you like – if it is ever to be successfully mapped and understood. Place is not a singularity, rather it is a composite of incredibly complex elements; light, sound, atmosphere, smell and so much more – working in and out of phase with one another.

There’s one final aspect within us that challenges our abilities to achieve truly deep navigation. When we are within any place, our senses work tirelessly to filter out much of that which surrounds us. This phenomenon is the result of many thousands of generations of conditioning that have trained our minds to reduce any given space (in which we might

find ourselves) to a series of fundamental markers. These markers provide for manageable navigation and, more importantly, allow us to swiftly perceive potential hazards that could adversely affect us. All the senses feeding our brain are as remarkable filters, as they are receptors.

Examples of this filtering are taking place even whilst you are reading this text. Sonically, your ears are filtering out constant flows of information – the sounds of air conditioning, music or television in the background, traffic droning, children playing or insects chirping outside – all of these sounds are reduced to the point of conscious extinction for most of us on a minute by minute basis. Equally, our bodies sense of touch is greatly subdued – your feet rubbing up against your shoes, for example, is something you're more than likely unaware of; unless there's some anomaly such as a blister or sore actively seeking your attention. Habitual behaviours tend to breed complacency and it's in this complacency that the uniqueness of space, time and environment can be lost to a kind of uniform opaqueness of presence and memory.

How is it then we are to awaken ourselves from this involuntary sensory slumber? How can we retrain our senses and repurpose their efforts towards heightened experiences over muted blanking? These are the questions that resonate from the works presented in Score For A Mineral Landscape. From these points of inquisition, a set of strategies were tested by artists Allyson Reynolds and Heinz Riegler, who both sought to deepen their understandings of place through a daily practise that called for consciousness and consideration.

The resulting collection of artworks, co-exist at an almost cellular level. Each of the works (which draw on light, textured pigment, sound and drawing) thread into the next creating a rendered whole. Just as blade upon blade of grass colours the hillside, so to do these works offer a time based sensorial map of a place central to the lives of these artists.

The works created here exist within an evolving spatial field, in which in which one's visual and sonic positioning is utterly personal and temporal. At no single point for example, does the installation's sound repeat itself. Acute sonic experiences therefore play a crucial role in this work. They act not only as an agent of creation – generating a particular aural landscape that transubstantiates the 'blankness' of the gallery – but also as an agent of orientation. Sound not only fills space, but, in subtle often imperceptible ways, it expands the vista of physicality – our ears collecting sound data as it reflects across surfaces and expands out beyond the visual space. Sound, after all, bends. It shuffles around corners, colliding layering and folding into itself in ways light simply won't allow. It's the interactions then, of light and sound, working in evolving orbits that creates this installation's spatial richness – one that is hauntingly temporal – the moment is fleeting and therein lies its beauty.

In creating Score For A Mineral Landscape the artists fundamentally invite us to reconsider how it is we come to understand that which surrounds us. Moreover, they asks us to consider how it is we might form our own triangulations and better position ourselves to navigate the richness that lies at our proverbial doorsteps each moment.

Lawrence English