
humanity & nature: some general comments from the renaissance to the present

Although humanity has always shown a ruthless willingness to control and exploit Nature one could put forward the proposition that for thousands of years there was a sense that Nature always ultimately had the 'upper hand'; especially in theocratic agricultural societies in which the gods - or God in the case of Medieval Christian Europe – would express blessings or judgements through Nature e.g. drought breaking rain as a thankful sign of divine appeasement; a devastating earthquake as a violent manifestation of divine displeasure. Nature had to be begrudgingly respected, for it recognized Nature provided all sustenance for human life as one worked daily with the very soil to produce food and acquired water from a well or river. However – to restrict my remarks to Europe - in the High Middle Ages, with an ever increasing population, there was an increased need to clear land for mass agricultural production, further urban settlement (which one can imagine led to an escalating 'political rezoning' between the endlessly competing and conflicting tribal 'powers-that-be'.

One could also argue a theocratic shift occurred whereby the age-old notion of 'plenitude' as a sign of God's favour was further accentuated by a belief that God would bless those who 'redesigned' His Creation to gain maximum benefit from it. Humanity would subordinate Nature in 'God's name' rather than wait for Nature to 'reveal' God's will to humanity.

The Church as all powerful as all seeing is reflected within the chasm of each Medieval cathedral which encompasses those inside it from all sides just as nature can also surround an individual; we are *within* nature, not apart from it and nature even enters into human consciousness just as the natural light enters into the vast space of a medieval religious interior through its large stained glass windows: the lingering visible 'light of God' eventually shining into the mind of every pilgrim. God and nature as one. Planted in the village and often beside the castle – the bastion of political power – a medieval cathedral rises 'naturally' up from the ground and with its many spires and buttresses organically appears as a 'holy mount'; to buttress a contradictory belief that humanity has a respectful, harmonious relationship with God's Creation - while at the same time defacing it for more earthly ends.

Incidentally, the pilgrim realises he or she lives within a spiritual maze which is this natural world and so must rely on the Church's guidance to lead him or her to salvation; as so famously typified by the labyrinth pattern on the floor of Chartres Cathedral. The medieval mind was terrified at being caught in the 'wheel of fate' (symbolized on the outside of the church) while on the quest to be enveloped within the bosom of the 'eternal rose' (inside the church).

The Renaissance introduced the visual ploy known as perspective: which led the human eye from an exterior position to a single point in a painted panorama that mainly involved an architectural space - such as a plaza or building - so as to fully utilize this new method of creating three dimensional space. As a consequence there developed a sense of 'separateness' between viewer as an 'outside observer' of the subject matter depicted which often included landscapes as 'background fill-ins' to many secular portraits - as humanity itself became the focus of Renaissance thinking rather than the environment in which humanity dwelled. (Official art often serves a cultural propaganda role and the Renaissance-commissioned-portrait certainly helped to reinforce the wealthy, noble status of the merchant class sitter and thus in a subtle way ultimately undermine religious authority; rather ironic considering how masterful the Church has always used culture to reinforce its eminent social position; also with the historical hindsight of several hundred years the incorporation of classical architecture in Renaissance

religious scenes such as the birth of Christ or of the Crucifixion could now be perceived as a sort of 'ideological Trojan Horse' displacing Church authority).

As to Church design the square and circle became predominant features as a Classical approach became prevalent. One could argue that Nature was kept *outside* as the pilgrim now found one's self walking into a Neo-Platonic perspectival 'heavenly space' based on mental abstract 'perfect forms' mathematically devised from the human intellect rather than being directly inspired from the Creation. With the rebirth of many of the tenets of Europe's classical past Humanist scholars would proclaim that humanity itself was the 'central keystone' in the 'architecture' of the whole Creation. Consider Leonardo da Vinci's famed *Vitruvian Man* which took on board the Ancient Greek ideal of 'man as the measure of all things' – everything in nature including the cosmos itself scaled to the proportions of a human being. Renaissance humanity at the foreground of the Creation with Nature at the very best – as many Renaissance portraits imply - marginalised to the background. Adam is no longer a gardener in the service of God but 'landed gentry' mastering a domesticated Eden as if equal to God. (Gainsborough's much later *Mr and Mrs Andrews* immediately springs to mind; it is ironic this painting is considered such an iconic painting of 'the property class' when one notes Gainsborough's preference for an unfettered landscape painting over portraiture).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century Cezanne would 'restore' nature as a conduit through which 'truth' and 'reality' could be worthily revealed by an artistic reductionism which would display oranges, buildings, mountains and human beings as 'structures' internally based on spheres, cubes, pyramids, cylinders etcetera: nature 'verified' by human geometry).

Humanism was certainly a positive force for social change freeing people from an enslaving, persecuting religious dogma (to actually encourage true religious freedom); yet with the industrialisation and secularisation of Europe a total disconnect from Nature was achieved: humanity revelled in its over-arching ability to fully exploit the whole Earth. John Ruskin in the nineteenth century – looking back to a pre-Renaissance past and who inspired the Pre-Raphaelites - urged that humanity culturally reconnect with Nature but modernism's belief in 'human progress' has remained too strong. Yet the divorce between nature and humanity which occurred when we placed ourselves in the center of the Universe needs to be reconciled. Today Nature ominously shows her ultimate relevance through climate change. Humanism is to be credited for creating a liberating intellectual environment that aided in bringing about scientific, technological, architectural, medical, educational, social and democratic advancements which – despite an ongoing barbarism that ceaselessly inflicts humanity – have vastly improved the quality of life for the majority of individuals living in the West.

However, it can also be stated that by the end of the twentieth century humanity is being forced to seriously reconsider its fraught relationship with Nature as the planet signals that humanity's Herculean exploitation of it has to be abruptly scaled down due to the real threat of global warming. The carbon economy that has generated much of the wealth enjoyed in the West – which has been able to pay for humanity's advances – has come at the expense not only of many non-Western populations placed into colonial servitude by many a Great Power but also at the cost of the natural environment in which a vast portion of the Earth has been quarried, de-forested and over-urbanised. The planet is simply desiring that human achievement and ecological sustainability be equally balanced. Despite being scientifically informed by Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Einstein and many others that the human race is not actually at the centre of the universe – but on the mere periphery of a galaxy amongst billions of others - and that it evolved on this Earth as a process of Nature and perhaps as a random accident of it – the modernist human intellect still needs to be budged from a mindset that it can no longer overlord the Earth as if the 'good times' will never end: history shows us how very often utopian aspirations have led

to many hells. Yet this time the so called human paradise that is modern civilization will literally erode away at the onset of an ecological 'dark age' that may last for many generations. We will only have ourselves to blame.

In regards to the Australian context we should be very grateful to the Aboriginal Land Rights movement which has instilled into the national consciousness that lands other than those listed as national parks should also be left alone. In an age of ravaging economic rationalism the original custodians of this continent lead us to pause and think about something as 'ephemeral' as the vital ecological need to uphold the ongoing spiritual link between nature and humanity.

The national park conservation movement started in the U.S. in the nineteenth century and was fermented culturally by artists as well as by writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was a Transcendalist - being inspired by German Romanticism, which in a repost to the rationalism of the Enlightenment encouraged a mystical reverence of Nature (what also comes to my mind from earlier art periods is the enigmatic landscape *The Tempest* by the High Renaissance Venetian artist Giorgione and the evocative pastoral works of the French landscape painter Claude Lorraine. One also thinks of Turner's swirling skies such as in *'Storm at Sea'*. In 1816 in *The Examiner* William Hazlitt wrote of Turner's work: "They are pictures of the elements of air, earth and water. The artist delights to go back to the first chaos of the world." Reuben Wheeler remarks in his book *Man, Nature and Art* that Turner's *'Snow Storm – Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth'* that he captures some of the 'cosmic energy' of nature so as... '...to experience something of the power and energy of the cosmos itself.' It may be of interest to know that the volcanic explosion in 1815 on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa - which killed 12,000 people and led to the starvation of another 44,000 people who died in the ensuing famine - inspired Turner's formless nirvana worlds; for the atmospheric conditions in the northern hemisphere were very much changed; it said that in 1816 there was no summer; it impresses me how in Turner's orange-yellow skies both time and space have seemed to dissolve. As for the United States - which had the world's first national park at Yellowstone - there is Ansel Adams the American naturalist photographer who inspired his compatriots to appreciate the awesome beauty of their country through his magnificent work. In Australia - which had the world's second national park - Royal National Park neighbouring Sydney - the photographic images of the Tasmanian wilderness by Olegas Truchanas have also played a valuable conservation role in inspiring environmental activism. Bob Brown leader of the Greens certainly holds him in high esteem). It was certainly a progressive idea - well ahead of its time - that natural wildernesses deserved to be secured in their pristine condition and not be valued for purely utilitarian and economic reasons.

Labelling land as a national park as well as agitating that regions like Kakadu and the Franklin River be put on the World Heritage List do valuably contribute to saving such wildernesses; the paradox being that in regards to Australia all 'Crown Land' outside the protected borders still faces the danger of being seen as 'unworthy' of salvation due to it not being a part of the 'elect' - to use a theological expression. In regards to Australia the Aboriginal Land Movement has - in essence - also shown how most of this continent's land mass has to be perceived beyond its mere resource value. After all, one has to be reminded of the appalling fact of how up to ninety per cent of rainforest has already been cut down since the establishment of the First Settlement in 1788. It is pitifully ironic that mining multinationals will have large canvases of the Aboriginal dreamtime decorating their boardrooms while at the same time digging up the very landscape reverentially portrayed in these indigenous paintings. Although Aboriginals have also used sacred lands appropriated back to them for an economic return - the pros and cons of which can be argued *ad infinitum* - it has also given back to them in the 'white fella's way' the chance for a self-sustained self-determination.

Aboriginal contemporary art with its conceptual appreciation mainly on the 'mythical quality' of the land is a mature aspect that should be taken up by non-indigenous Australians. It is in this overall socio-historical context in which I 'position' my own prints which dwell on the natural realm. Thus my conscious decision to take into account how Aboriginal artists have portrayed the Australian landscape. I wish to qualify this remark by sincerely stating *not to steal* from them – in the manner that the Chiapas Indians of southern Mexico feared that their very souls would be stolen when photographed - but to hopefully *learn* in the manner of recognising that a forty thousand year old 'cultural stamp' on this continent must not be conveniently ignored by those who are only here in this land due to its relatively recent alien conquest.

In regards to a broader artistic context I am intrigued to discover while doing some rudimentary research for this rather generalised commentary to find myself identifying in the Western tradition with aspects of both the Pre-Raphaelites and the Romantics as well as to the 'cosmic Turner'; with that said I am entranced by Ian Fairweather's painterly natural rhythms influenced by Chinese calligraphy which in turn fascinates me; I am also very much attracted to the depiction of nature by such twentieth century greats as Georgia O'Keefe, and Fred Williams as well as to a rhythmic abstracted /ethnographic 'universal spirituality' in Kandinsky. Jackson Pollock's abstractions identifying a 'universal rhythm' also intrigue me. One should also express appreciation to the artistic legacy of the Heidelberg School - a group of Australian Impressionists who in the nineteenth century took the audacious step to depict the Australian environ true to its own unique character – capturing for instance the bright Australian light - rather than rendering it in the formalist painterly tradition of the European northern hemisphere.

All in all it should be lastly stated that in the inevitable ongoing process of humanity constantly redefining its relationship with nature – not only as envisaged on earth but also in regards to the whole universe - our universal 'cultural dialogue' can play a vital role.