

# Knowing the Language of Place Through the Arts

By Lee Ann Woolery, Ph.D.

*He to whom Nature begins to reveal her open secret will feel an irresistible yearning for her most worthy interpreter, Art. -Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

I write from the voice of an artist living in the modern world who uses art making as a way of connecting with the landscape. Since first recognizing myself as an artist at age eleven, I have explored art making with my hands as a way of framing and conceptualizing my experience. Art has been a way of extending my awareness and understanding of the subject of my view. My art provides me with the language and models to explore and express my connection with that world.

Over the past six years, I have engaged in a way of art making that has heightened my awareness of and given me an acute sensibility to landscape providing me a language in which to "speak" about my knowledge of landscape ecology. I have named this process Art-Based Perceptual Ecology (Woolery, 1999.) In the term, art-based perceptual ecology, all words are given equal weight. Art-based recognizes that the art making provides frames of reference and context to my sensory experience in the landscape (Woolery, 1999.) Ecological perception recognizes it is the body that is the location of the connection between self and the landscape (Gibson, J. 1983.) Ecology gives me a way to think about what my senses apprehend in this place (Thomashow, 2002.) In the art making process, the layers and levels of the landscape, or patterns, arise to the surface of my awareness creating a tangible knowing of the networks of relationships found in this one ecosystem. The image I create in this intentional art making practice becomes a graphic record of the intelligence of my body in relationship to place, my embodiment of the knowledge held within this one landscape.



*My naturalist drawing, a simple pencil drawing of the ledge along the tributary of Hominey Branch, says little of my relationship with this place, of the knowledge held in the landscape, the land's stories.*

In the Art-Based Perceptual Ecology practices, the job of the image is to fix the essence of time in space. The image is the container - it holds the space. The image I create in the intentional art making represents one moment in the evolutionary history of the land. Biology, the science of life and living organisms provides a simplification of the life process of organisms as it involves growth about a point in space. Making art in this intentional way has brought me to an awareness of the multiple levels of the landscape, which reveal the patterns. I recognize a point is a record of or the static result of dynamic equilibrium and multiple points become patterns. Patterns are the tangible record of interactions between and among organisms in the landscape. Ability to read the patterns gives me entrance to stories in the land, the evolutionary history of the landscape.

This journey has brought me closer to knowing the place in which I live, giving me a new understanding of my relationship with each ecosystem in which I am a participant. I feel that I have a deeper understanding of the ecology of place and a stronger connection to place because of my art making.

Throughout this process I have come to know that there are three fundamental concepts integral to revealing and recognizing patterns in the landscape. They are as follows:

- Freedom to explore the land through direct experience in the natural world unveils the mysteries of the landscape, allowing one entrance to a "magical" space, which informs an intuitive sense of place.
- Using imagination while directly experiencing the natural world, allows one to experience the past, present and future of the landscape and to know multiple dimensions unavailable through "sight" alone and without the use of technology.
- Art making in the natural world results in images that reveal patterns in the landscape, offering the language to know the lands' stories, first-hand. This experience adds depth to an ecological knowing of landscapes.

**Childhood experiences in Boone County, MO.** As a young child the knowledge I held of the natural world was raw, garnered intuitively through direct experiences with the landscape. I discovered how freedom of play and uninhibited exploration of the land's mysteries are necessary vehicles for understanding the magic and mystery of the natural world.

The creeks and rivers in Boone County that form the Missouri watershed hold special meaning to me. It is there that I spent a great deal of time exploring as a child. This region, at the northern edge of the Ozark Mountains, is blessed with springs and spring-fed streams. One particular stream that most often gained my attention ran north along a draw, about a quarter mile to the east of our house. This branch of clear, spring-fed water went unnamed, but it held immense stories of place, as it captured a young girl's imagination growing up in the 50's. Follow with me as I travel in memory to a place explored as a child.

The marsh freezes time in the footprints of yesterday and yesteryear's visitors, the two-

toed track of the white-tailed deer and the five-toe track of the raccoon. My finger follows the thin outer line of the ungulate print forming silhouette shapes in my mind's eye. Here and there vernal pools resound with the clear whistle of spring peepers, pools formed from melting snow and early spring rain.

Following its northern descent, the no-name creek travels through a boxed-in canyon, either side, washed in rainbow colored chat pilings, the remains of an abandoned coal mine from the late 1900's. Continuing to the woodland edge, it flows gracefully over flat rocks the size of full-grown deer lain down by the hunter's bow. It meanders on, an irregular shoreline building volume till it reaches a shale ledge. Then, a shower of liquid pearls cascades methodically down into a clear pool below. Naturally dammed at its northern bank by a single line of headstone boulders, the stream succumbs to containment and a perfect swimming hole is formed.

I would extend my body as far as possible out over the pool, my hands white knuckled at rock's edge protecting me from my worst fear, being swallowed into this dark abyss of the unknown. Peering underneath the ledge, at the very furthest point where dark green black mud met russet rock crevices fused in black light, my eyes searched for movement. Even as a young girl, I knew the magic held in the darkness beneath the overhanging ledge was the point of juncture, a place where this world and the other world met.

The air that emanated from this dark place was full, a thick musty ooze choked by silt brewing with the fragrance of life. As it filled my nostrils it created a tension in me I could not explain, yet I could not walk away. I feared the sounds of air bubbles popping in the dark, suction released in the moist mud flat, eminent properties of feet walking. I fully expected life to come ashore, walking, crawling, or slithering from the dark oxygen less place, where nature was still busy with experiments (Eisley, 1957.)

I experienced all of this over forty years ago, but recently renewed my childhood experiences. In the fall of 1999 I returned to the land of my origins, the streams and wetlands of the Missouri River watershed. I returned to this familiar landscape to reconnect to a place-based language I knew as a child, by creating dialogue with this place through intentional art making practices.



*On my journal page, I draw the ledge as form and shape, color and line, primary design elements found in*

nature.

**Conceptual Framework** In my early childhood I was free to explore the land unsupervised by adult constraints at a time when the world was much safer. At that time I knew this place through direct experience, as I engaged in its dance, its songs, whispers, and cries. My exploration with place allowed me entrance to the unknown, the "mysterious" and "magical" space of the landscape. I was influenced by the shifting patterns in the land as well as the stories of other species, Missouri box turtles, Dutchman's britches, and Canadian snow geese. These direct experiences in the landscape led me to an intuitive embodied knowing of place.

**What defines magical space?** As a child my view of nature was that of an enchanted world where rocks, trees, rivers, and clouds were all seen as wondrous and alive. They were not inert objects but expressive subjects, entities, powers, and potencies (Abram, 1996.) They were the characters in my childhood stories, the subjects of which I spent countless hours in uncensored play. All had the power of speech; therefore I found myself in silent conversation with all living things.

The western culture in which I was raised leaves little space for the exploration of magic beyond the childhood age of three or four unless you choose the profession of "magician" or the study of "metaphysics." In other cultures, people we might consider indigenous or of oral context experience their own consciousness as simply one form of awareness among many others (Abram, 1996.) In the English language we might call these people magicians. The magic being performed could be considered a heightened receptivity to the nonhuman sensibilities in the landscape.

In "The spell of the sensuous," David Abram describes the traditional magician or medicine person in indigenous cultures as having the ability to temporarily shed the accepted perceptual logic of his culture. In order to enter into relations with other species, to make contact with or to learn from the other powers in the land, the magician must alter the common organization of his senses (Abram, 1996.) Abram in describing the relationship between magical experience and intuition states,

*"Magic, then, in its perhaps most primordial sense, is the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences, the intuition that every form one perceives—from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass, and indeed the blade of grass itself—is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own." (Abram, 1996, p. 9)*

As a young child, my knowledge of the land and its inhabitants were uninformed by the language, social customs, and taboos of my culture. Instead I experienced the landscape through my body as raw visceral sensations of the unknown, the mysterious dark abyss that emanated around, beneath, above, and within places where magical worlds met. There were no words in my English vocabulary to express that rawness or to define where the mysteries of life began or ended. In the moment, I was the storyteller and

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nature the supporting cast for my unrestrained story. It was in this direct experience that I was shaped and influenced by the place I inhabited, a world of damp earth, thick musty ooze, and meandering paths of spring-fed water (Abram, 1996.) This exploration opened me to an intuitive knowing of the mysterious powers and entities of place. Perhaps I was a magician, perhaps we should consider all young children as magicians.

As a child, I respected and valued the intelligence of all living organisms. I recognized each had its own story its own unique way of being in the world. My world was inclusive of others' worlds, no entity greater or less than another. One day the white-tailed deer was the main character in my story, next day the bark of the black walnut tree held the treasures of all the worlds' mysteries, the worlds out beyond the stars I observed in the deep black Midwestern sky the night before. My intuitive sense told me that scale was not relevant in this magical place as I was but one intelligence in a vast ocean of Others (Abram, 1996.) [1]

**The role of intuition.** Intuition is the bridge between knowledge that is explicit and that which is silent. As a child my intuitive embodied knowledge of the natural world was both explicit and silent. Explicit knowledge was experienced through; the size of burr oak acorns, repetitive shrill calls of the barn owl, the musty flavor of morel mushrooms, moisture frozen in my nose from sharp January winds, and silent knowledge experienced through; sink holes in the land the size of automobiles opening to cavernous pathways below, carcasses of dead ponies that vibrated with energy, silently moving across the landscape.

My intuitive knowledge came from a "sense observation" employed by my full body. Moustakas speaks of the intuitive in this way, "...in the intuitive process one draws on clues; one senses a pattern or underlying condition that enables one to imagine and then characterize the reality, state of mind, or condition. In intuition we perceive something, observe it, and look and look again from clue to clue until we surmise the truth." (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23) When visiting the tributary of Hominey Branch as an adult, I began the drawing exercise by recording what my eyes saw in front of me. But what my eyes saw and what I drew in the realistic illustration, which was an exposed and explicit view of the landscape, was not congruent with that which I knew intuitively and was experiencing viscerally. So I looked and looked again at my subject, the riparian ecosystem and drew with more abstraction practicing Arts-Based Perceptual Ecology. It was then that I began to really "see," beyond what my eyes recorded experiencing the magic and mystery of place.



*In the image created in the abstract drawing exercise I no longer recognize the familiar, instead I shift the focus of my view and the subject takes on new associations and new meaning.*

In the abstraction process, I eliminate the details of the view before me and instead focus my attention on the shapes, forms, color, line, light and dark, value, and pattern. Focusing on light and dark, shape and form, I am able to let go of the existing knowledge I hold of the object and instead consider the dynamics of the relationship created between objects. By shifting my awareness, I am able to shed the accepted perceptual logic of my culture. The deconstruction process cuts away all preconceived notions and cultural "shadows" opening me to the magical space where the land and all animate beings converse.

In these intentional art making exercises I am studying the detail of the shale ledge situated in the Missouri River watershed. Deconstructing the subject concentrates the essential qualities of a larger more detailed whole into parts. I have a deeper understanding of the watershed by focusing on the individual objects within this one system. If I look at the concept of deconstruction from an ecological system's view, the breaking down of the whole into parts, I consider the parts as object and the whole as the relationships amongst those objects. Fritjof Capra tells us "...the web of life consists of networks within networks. At each scale the nodes of the network reveal themselves as smaller networks." (Capra, 1996, p. 35) So the shale ledge is the object in relationship with a larger network, the hydrological cycle imbedded in relationship with a much larger web of life, which I can understand ecologically as the riparian ecosystem.



*This abstraction exercise, created as a collage, was the language of symbol and metaphor to speak of the cycles found at this riparian ecosystem. In this visual narrative notice the decomposing life seen in the foreground, a mixture of coagulating leaves and debris, decomposers busily working on the decaying body of a sparrow. A fine example of the nitrogen cycle at work.*

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As a child, the information that entered through my body was raw, yet I had an intuitive understanding of my connection to the microorganisms evolving in the mud flats. Direct experience in this landscape lent me a heightened awareness and acute sensibility to the animate landscape. There was a wholeness that came from this intuitive knowing of landscapes. As an adult, in order to get in touch with that embodied intuitive knowing of place, it was necessary to enter through my art work. I knew there were more worlds to discover at the mouth of the tributary than meets the eye. The image created in the abstraction drawing exercise provides a graphic record of the intelligence of my body in relationship to place. The image becomes a representation of my translation of the language of place as I find myself a fluent speaker of the native language of the tributary to Hominey Branch. This one image gives "voice" to my intuitive knowledge of that landscape.

**From an Educator's Perspective** As an educator, there are two main reasons for which this work is important; 1) Currently, we live in a culture with an emphasis on singular methodologies of thinking and knowing and 2) In the youth of this culture there is an ongoing loss of experience in the natural world. As an educator I am aware of the drive in our public education systems for standardization in imparting knowledge and assessing intelligence. This drive establishes now more than ever a need for finding effective ways of recognizing and building on the diverse learning styles and intelligences among all students.

There is an ethical foundation for the work as well. To learn pluralistic ways in which to perceive the landscape, we may come to know the place in which we live, finding connections with the local habitat. Connected to landscape through practical application of Art-Based Perceptual Ecology, all of us as both teachers and students may be more likely to be good stewards of our ecological and cultural communities.

## Notes

**1** Independent Others are our ancestors, mammals and primates. Independent Others are a part of the animate beings of the landscape. Animate does not only refer to that which we know to be alive, animals, but all phenomena as it calls us to participate through our senses, as it influences and engages us bodily.

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