

*My immigrant plight or the question of 49/51*¹

Anna Dorrington

Copyright©2013 Anna Dorrington. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.

Introduction

I have decided to approach this essay from a personal point of view. Would it help to read up about how other people did it, what were their coping mechanisms? Would it help if I could quote the statistics of how many elderly people emigrate back to their country of origin. Maybe, I say, but I am not in the business of statistics or politics. I am driven by emotions and my way of making sense of those is through my art practise. In fact, I tend to stay away from artists that line up too much with my work. The German artist Martin Honert comes to mind, but I will not look at more of his art, I want to find my own way within myself.

Context

What makes art interesting for me can be measured at how long I want to engage with the consumption of it, seconds, minutes? If it is very relevant to me, then it will come back into my present mind again and again, and will have a long-lasting effect. Why is that so? David Lewis-William, in his book *The Mind in the Cave*, commented in what the art historian Ernst Gombrich has pointed out, pictures have the power to move, but they in fact convey very little information. Because people read pictures in different ways images always remain semantically equivocal. The best that can be said for pictures is that they trigger memories of information that has to be absorbed in different ways, that is, by experience and verbally. This is exactly what a picture, or art in all its manifestations, can do for me. The meaning hidden in the artwork will align itself with my story and make the experience worthwhile. So it is not the obvious that attracts me but its power of engaging me that makes me linger.

In my art practice, I follow this inner story. It is akin to the literary practice of writing in the way of *Stream of Consciousness*. I admit, my studio is a mess, it is filled with objects that I have picked up somewhere, and which are pushing themselves forward at the right moment. Barbara Stafford, in her book *Echo Objects*, writes on this subject. What is that particular line, colour or combination of any number of marks reminding

¹ This paper is a contribution to the *Placescape, placemaking, placemarking, placedness ... geography and cultural production* Special Issue of *Coolabah*, edited by Bill Boyd & Ray Norman. The Special Issue is supported by two websites: <http://coolabahplacedness.blogspot.com.au> and <http://coolabahplacedness-images.blogspot.com.au/>.

us? Is it in our DNA, our subconscious, or our memory? I love the surprises my way of making art throws at me, it is an indulgence that gives me great pleasure and satisfaction.

I am an immigrant, I am happy here now, or so I tell myself. So why is it that I have to go back to the old country once a year in order to cleanse my sentimental blockages? I am always glad to come back to Australia, after a month or so in the old country. I am thoroughly sick of the old ways by then.

I have come to accept that I am somewhat stuck in the middle, and that I might as well make the best of it. After the packed years of running a business and bringing up children, both of which brought with them a lack of thinking time and a crash course in the Australian way of life, I am now finding that I have time to contemplate what it means to be me. Life in Australia goes on in a somewhat steady flow. Here in Australia I experience a smooth way through life, the days go by, the differences in the mirror are tiny. The yearly visits to Germany are different though, the reality of time passing is more obvious. Relatives and friends are one year older, and this brings back to me the urgency of having to see them again. Another old relative has died, I knew it was getting bad when the bathrooms were fitted with new gadgets. My hesitancy grows when I go there, but I feel the need to build up a store of memories, getting ready for the time when another one has gone, and when I have to sustain myself through memories alone.

As I get older, the cracks in my understanding of place and identity are getting deeper and more obvious. The cultural fault lines that had been covered up by work and family duties are now very visible and are getting noisier in my head. I find myself lucky though to be able to express these emotions in my work as a visual artist. Place and identity, almost lost, find new ways to form in order to survive, a new hybrid personal understanding and production of culture is being formed out of necessity. When floating between my memories some echoes are stronger. I do not know why. I just work with what goes on in my head, the progress of work is determined by the sensitivities that are formed by my memories.

My sense of place is often more disturbed when it is time to change from one season to another. It is as if the years of my early youth in northern Europe have imprinted a rhythm that I find hard to change. Alienation with the landscape and place happens when what is going on around me does not tally up with what my body has seemingly stored in every fibre that it should be different. I deal with this mal-alignment in my first image.

My art practice

Image number one is an intaglio print with some collage added to it. It shows the outlines of a group of rocks from the Australian bush in the hinterland of Brisbane. I have thoroughly arranged the images in a multiple way till it sat well with my inner visual eye. Reminding me about familiar landscapes from my youth, some outlines are repeated, and others are only used once. To make it complete I inhabited the landscape with my own family, some buildings, and animals from my 'other landscape'. It pleases me now.

As my studies at university progressed, I acquired more skills and tools for the expression of my cultural needs, and I am now in a place where I find that the materiality of the object tells me a story and vice versa. My work might start with an idea, an image a story, in the above image a landscape, but it might also be that some object grabs my attention and starts telling me what to use it for. Barbara Stafford, in her book *Echo Objects*, writes: "... sometimes visual perception does not produce an optical image at all. Instead, it re-enacts a memory from the past stimulated by touch or gesture. Or occasionally, it might present us simply with the jigsaw puzzle of raw sensations." This often forms the beginning of my works of art, a seed has been sown and from it my artwork will evolve.

Image number one: Altered Landscape



Having started as a print maker, I soon found it necessary to find other ways to express myself. I am a scavenger of techniques now. Anything that I need to express myself with I will use. I find this liberating and exciting. On a deeper level it allows me to access memories that were until now inaccessible. My foray into found objects have at times found me near tears when realising where I had seen this object before. Now I cannot make art without going into assemblage and collage and whatever else is necessary for my cultural production.

For the second images I used the tool of breakage. I break things up in order to show the state of mind that I am in when I think about an image or a feeling, is it anger or despair? Going to Germany only once a year, I am not privy to the build-up of situations, I am confronted with the story, I am not part of it. Some part of my history has been broken or changed. The image is not complete, I have to make sense of it, or at least try to.

These porcelain bowls (image number three) represent my family. They were all made from the same mould, the same parents. I have broken some of them in order to experience the feeling of fracture. I have then tried to 'put it back together again', yet the scars are visible. The passage of time is included in the image. I find this a universal

image, we can all relate to the time that stands between the first image of a bowl and the second image. Like bookmarks, the story is contained in-between the two pieces. How did I get from one to the other? For immigrants it will quite often be putting your identity back together again, yet with some cracks only barely mended.

Image number two: Fractured Image



Multiple layers of print on collected images are also a technique that I use for expressing what I have to say. Rules and expectations are expressed in image and literature. In image number four, the combination of the book cover of an edition of *Heidi* (Johanna Spyri) overprinted with the well-known image of Botticelli's *Venus*, is a way for me to show the heartache and uncertainties that a young girl has to go through in order to fit into the pre-ordained role that has been allotted to her. Heidi's story of a wholesome girl living in the Swiss Alps was, when I was growing up, the pin-up girl of all well-behaving girls. A sequel to *Heidi*, written by Pelagie Doane, called *Heidi Grows Up*, is a testament to its popularity. I have overprinted the book cover with an image of Botticelli's *Venus*, which shows the young adult face of a virgin. The painting stems from a time when allegory in painting was rife, and I argue that it lines up well with the story of Heidi, hence my tool of overprinting one image with another.

Image number 3: no title



Identity is multi-layered. In image number five, I try to represent that through layering several images within the one image. The image above is assembled from an aquatint overlaid with a screen print; it also includes a double page from the novel *The Swiss Family Robinson*. The noble image of a German Heroine on a banknote is broken by the page of the novel, a novel that is based on the trials and tribulations of a family.

Image number four: Mixed Feelings



Image number five: Who's story is it anyway



Lewis-Williams D. 2002. *The Mind in the Cave*, London: Thames & Hudson, p.67.
Stafford B. M. 2007. *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*, Chicago: University
of Chicago Press, p.108.

Acknowledgements

All the images are © Anna Dorrington

Anna Dorrington is an immigrant from Germany to Australia, and after having spent her adult life working and caring for a family, it was time to attend to her great love, Art. Working in the fashion industry gave her a 'light' start into visual art, but now, in her mid-life, it was time to combine her interest of creating with what was going on in her head. Step One was to give herself grounding by attending university and achieving an Honours degree in visual art, with a major in Printing. However, her interests soon shifted to incorporating printing and screen-printing into installation work. She is currently working on an exhibition for the Regional Gallery, work that deals with the interaction of puberty and the "60s". When she started Primary School, she was writing on a framed piece of slate with sticks of chalk; now she is writing this biography on her computer – long way in-between with many changes, that make her re-think of how she coped with all these changes. It is this going back to her past and trying to connect it with what is going on now that informs her work. Ageing, cultural changes, relationships are all part of her work, they are all components that throw up surprises to the image she has of herself. Anna now works as an independent artist. (Email: badgf@bigpond.com)