

Migration and Sense of Place: re-contextualising felt experience through creative practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues the potential of personal experience as 'legitimate artistic tenor' [1] in the production of works of art, charting the contextual role of migration and place in my practice-led research. The disparate, geographic relationship between the Northern and Southern hemispheres, Scotland and Australia provides the conceptual parameters where creative responses translate the movement between space and place into visual form. Communicating an attachment to place explores the experience of migration through a series of mnemonic notations and acts of reverie. A synthesis of concept and context presents an entry point in this discussion, where the 'visual grammar' of felt experience highlights a self-reflexive narrative to navigate time and place. Personal and critical perspectives forecast an embodied, emotional experience as an interior and exterior spatial concept that aims to reconfigure self in place through creative practice.

Keywords

Personal experience, place, memory, migration, art practice, felt experience, creative process.

INTRODUCTION

The overall theme of this symposium, *exploring the multi-dimensions of well-being*, caricatures the constant struggle I experience when engaging in my studio based art practice. Wavering between genius and fool describes the highs and lows that accompany the question of creative well-being in praxis. The feel-good sensation of making works of art, although fraught with tension, happiness and sometimes negative self worth, raises questions, such as; is the work aesthetically worthy, does it illustrate cohesively my visual concepts, does it embody the history and theory of my ideas? These questions and many more illustrate the self in praxis and form part of my practice led research. The work has its own identity, characteristics and allegorical voice that decode relationships between space and place and how I view, and elaborate on the world that surrounds me. From this perspective, this paper shall illustrate the role of place as a conduit for creativity that when examined from an embodied point of view translates into works of art. The development of a dialogue, where sensory experience and aesthetic outcome relate the drama of ideas and their evolution contribute to the artistic conversations that shape this Shorelines symposium.



Figure 1 JAGS, digital print, 2007

'I belong to Glasgow and Glasgow belongs to me' [4] kitsch as it may be, is an excerpt from a well-worn Glasgow song, synonymous with the folklore and history of the city. The words embrace a sense of commonality and belonging that has been my experience of growing up in the city's centre. The captioned passage sets the scene for this discussion that posits a personal experience of migration and an attachment to place as *legitimate artistic*

tenor in the production of works of art. A synthesis of concept and context, as such present an entry point in this discussion where the 'visual grammar' [6] of felt experience reiterates a self-reflexive narrative that navigates time and place. Personal and critical perspectives forecast an embodied, emotional experience as an interior and exterior spatial concept that aims to reconfigure self in place through creative practice.

The context of migration and the experience of place has two roles: The void experienced by the act of migration reinforces a sense of loss and dislocation through a juxtaposition of Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Scotland and Australia. As fore and background, these two disparate places develop a conversation between time and place, practice and process. The memory of place, located in the Glasgow experience is the experiential index that links artistic process to felt experience. Acts of reverie reveal emotive responses to an itinerant history that is in a continuous state of flux and transformation, moving between one horizon and another [10].

My works of art and studio practice frame this presentation to negotiate the possibilities of articulating the aesthetic potential of 'embodied' experience as an interior and exterior spatial concept [8]. As a practicing artist, my work navigates its subject matter illustrating the physical and material characteristics of medium and materials to affect a bodily response [2]. The picture plane and its support, the lens of the camera, and poetic notations are vehicles that demonstrate an empirical approach to representation. I am aware of the significant role of process in the conceptual development of an artworks genesis, particularly when chance fuses with the material characteristics of the medium; it is at this juncture where the potential for new visual conversations come into play. The drama of creativity reflects the artist at work reconstructing empiricism, and it is in this space where I, becomes other.

MIGRATION, PLACE AND FELT EXPERIENCE

As a young child, I remember feeling the sensation of departure and knew that moving away from this place was part of my future. I recall having no fear only a firm realisation that a journey would take place. This 'after memory' experience has followed me through my travels, providing clarity, purpose and acceptance of what seemed a preordained destiny [13].

From behind barriers we wave them off, America, some place new. A bigger part of nothing smaller than the incidental I was already a migrant taking tiny steps towards a journey that was yet untold... Looking forward, looking back, through time and space I move to the constant beat of ancestral pool [pull] never knowing always looking for the break in the road, the place in-between.
[Annemarie Murland, 2005] [9]



Figure 2 DIRTY DICK'S BLACK MARKET
digital print, 2007



Figure 3 SKIP THE PASS
digital print, 2007

Glasgow: Shaping as Sense of Identity

Born in 1962, my cultural heritage is Irish Catholic. My great-grandparents were economic migrants originally from the southwest coast of Ireland. Scotland offered them, and many other migrants who moved there in the early 1900's an opportunity of a new beginning. It is this transient legacy of migration and movement across Border States that have played a significant role in shaping family history and personal identity [10]. My cultural inheritance significantly shaped and reinforced an adopted sense of displacement that located me neither here nor there, and it is from this source of cultural confusion that my true story of migration begins.

Glasgow, sandstone and grey colour my recollection of a town that is warm in its hospitality, especially to the visitor. Glasgow's identity is a complex weave of religion, sport, humour and generosity, 'it's miles better' than anywhere else. I have maintained a close relationship with my hometown, family and friends by virtue of new technology and relatively cheap airfares that reflect the global world we live. Retrospectively, I have never truly left Glasgow, and after twenty years, my connection and attachment to the place is probably stronger than it was when I migrated to Australia in 1991.

Embedded within the empty structure of these decaying buildings, lay the remnants of lives long gone. I can hear the sounds of time past, characterised by the constant drizzle that falls simultaneously from a pained grey sky that sits lightly upon tired shoulders. There lies a deep connectedness to this place and it is here that I always return, never a migrant or tourist. I am a Glaswegian as surely as my ancestors are encoded into my DNA. The streets are quiet enough; I can smell the rain as it mingles with the fragments of detritus that lie casually upon and in between the tar macadam and grassy verge that borders Glasgow Green. In temporal space Memory and Reality embrace, attaching like electricity to the surface of skin; the warm sensations are almost melodic in their touch. I am home. [Annemarie Murland, 2007] [11]

Identity in Practice

Re-telling one's story within the context of personal experience has developed a methodological art practice that recognises the role of the artist as individual. Recreating and rediscovering self in relation to place interprets culture, space and sense of place through reflection and memory. My identity encapsulates the experiences of growing up in the city centre of Glasgow where street life and a 'particular' brand of culture impregnated my senses from an early age. The Glasgow experience ingrained a sense of knowing that anything was possible in life. In hindsight, this ontological truth provided a platform for rediscovery in all aspects of my private and working life. It is to this place that I retreat when engaged in creative practice.

Terra Australis: Felt Experience and Loss of Identity

In a light that was not grey I failed to recognise myself. I had nothing in common with this place and so rejected the landscape, culture and people that surrounded me; all of it reinforced a sense of difference and of not belonging. This place was too different. [Annemarie Murland, 1991] [9]

There are moments in life when one's path and destination shifts changing how we feel and recognise ourselves. Migrating to Australia in 1991 with my Australian husband significantly changed the scope and parameters of my life. One might think moving within the colonised world where English is the common language would be an easy transition. However, in my experience this is where the similarities begin and end [10].

The reality of permanently relocating to the new world had an tremendous effect on my identity and sense of place. During my early years as a new Australian language played a significant role in my diaspora. The sound of my voice reinforced the isolation that I felt, and although common to the migrant story, the separation from the place where I knew myself unconditionally, reinforced the loss I felt.

The sound, the unfamiliar syntax choked the vernacular from her throat, who was this girl, a bride dressed in awkward clothing suitable but yet not so suitable? [Annemarie Murland, 1991] [9]

My focus centred not beyond the periphery of self into the surrounding landscape but embedded in my viscera a fragmented self. A figure of modernity, the migrant traveller as I had imagined myself was now without movement and in a state of permanent interruption. Dislocated and external to this space, I was not as remarkable as I had once thought.

Melancholic, old world lyrics invade the senses orchestrating a tableau that fashions as other. "Off course" daily, she lies still in her silence and is reminded of their loss. Where is the greyish, green-

eyed mother? Who yearns for her shadow light, whispering as she tallies "Out damned spot."
[Annemarie Murland, 1991] [9]

Caught in a place outside myself, the light was not always dark upon my face. My voice, appearance, auditory and visual symbols located me, not as unusual, but as individual. Through time, I have been able to embrace my sense of difference as a defining part of my identity. As I have grown, my reflection on the journey of migration offered a realisation that although living here in this place it is acceptable to remain attached to another. By measuring, life experience within the documented experience of others allows one to understand self in place [10].

Navigating a Foreign Land

My relationship with Australia articulates visually the experience of existing between two places, Scotland and Australia. Putting down roots in a foreign land, whether socially, intellectually and or emotionally presented an emotional challenge that centered on the recreating a home space. 'Mapping oneself in a foreign space' required that I shift my focus beyond the space in between towards a new course of action: towards abstraction. The disparate relationship between the Northern and Southern hemispheres conceptualises colour and line creating micro woven formations that re-appropriate the 'ground we walk over' [3]. The characteristics of the medium, compulsive mark making and tightly woven oil paint forecast emotional exchange as artistic process.

LOCATING PRACTICE and THEORY

Providing a theoretical and historical context to my art practice outlines the works trajectory within an academic setting. I am an artist whose work navigates practice and theory; I position my oeuvre within the context of a developing modernism, which acknowledges Greenberg's philosophy of High Modernism and Formalist aesthetics. It is necessary, however, that my practice not be read exclusively as temporal formal aesthetics, but recontextualised within a contemporary framework of New Formalism. This return to form explores the complex relationships between contemporary cultural materialism and art history's temporal trajectory within an aesthetic context [14]. The advent of technology and access to new and immediate knowledge has reshaped the past towards a revisionist practice, which in theory explores creative process as a continuum that is constantly re-identifying and adjusting itself in line with contemporary culture. Placing my art practice in the context of both past and present theories of formal aesthetics provides identity for the artwork within an institutional hierarchy. However, this presentation remains focused on the nature of creativity as a source of well-being through praxis that examine felt experience in terms of aesthetics.



Figure 4 TRACKING SHADOWS
Oil on canvas, 70x90x8xcm, 2011

MIGRATORY AESTHETICS

The Reality of Abstraction in Practice

Bessie is a living organism, constantly changing, constantly ingesting food and air, transforming it, getting rid of it again. Her blood is circulating, her nerves are sending messages. Viewed microscopically, she is a mass of variegated corpuscles, cells, and bacterial organisms; viewed from the point of view of modern physics, she is a perpetual dance of electrons. What she is in her entirety, we can never know; even if we could at any precise moment say what she was, at the next moment she would have changed enough so that our description would no longer be accurate . . . Bessie is no static 'object', but a dynamic process. [5]

Bessie offers a textual response to the authority of process as an evolving and dissolving metaphor in non-representational art practices. Reinterpreting and contextualising subject matter regardless of its form, within a hierarchy or single perspective or trajectory seems pointless and is not part of my art practice. This response illustrates the futility of codification in a process driven, creative practice, advocating my position that insists that, the power of the creative force is a legitimate vehicle from which to contextualise works of art.

My view of abstraction is multidimensional and is not reliant on any master doctrine for the purpose of interpretation. Although, concerned with landscape as an abstract concept, I favour a more liberal and expressive extension of aesthetic possibilities to render personal experience. The vehicle of abstraction illustrates my visual concerns, and, therefore, rejects formal representation, as there is no alternative model or strategy that can portray a visual phenomenon of experience.

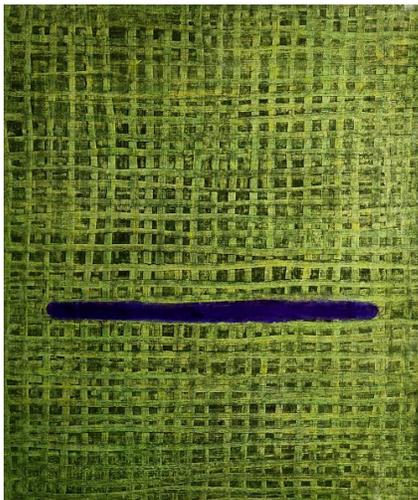


Figure 5 GALLOWGATE EAST
Oil on Belgian linen, 70x90x8cm, 2010

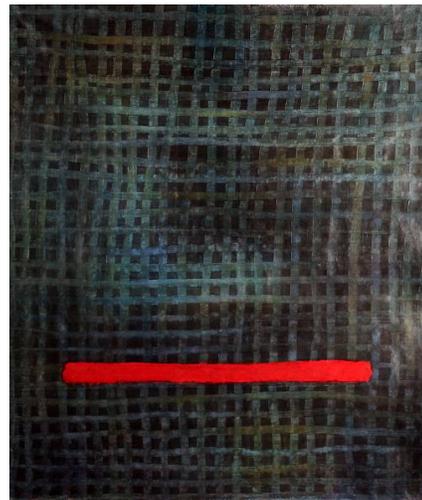


Figure 6 HIGHGATE,
Oil on Belgian linen, 70x90x8cm, 2010

Structure Becomes Image

A philosophical and conceptual lens provides the artistic context in which to view my creative practice. The evolution of a body of work follows a process where concept and materials converge in a self-reflexive exchange articulating the notion of felt experience through pictorial strategies and compositional devices. The stretcher frame acts as an archive transporting memory of place into a new dialectic of spatial relationships that connect form and content. Conceptually, the stretcher plays with the dynamics of the body in space suggesting that objects and or people do not necessarily belong wherever they are placed or located. In the physical space of the gallery, the work arranged according to site hovers close to the floor reinforcing a sense of gravity and of belonging to the space they occupy. The aim is not to confuse the viewer but to encourage considering the relationship of its placement and emotional affect upon the body. As a transformative experience the viewer, guided by the artist's manipulation of the picture plane, absorbs the painting with not only the eyes but with the bodily to engage in an overall sensory experience [10].

The works on paper that form part of my art practice explore the authority of line as a metaphor for decoding personal experience. The drawings function as visual re-remembering, floating off the wall in the gallery space; they lack gravity reinforcing the physical reality of the experience of movement. The line as language substitutes

personal experience through soft bands of colour and the repetition of sgraffito over the embossed surface of the paper, imprinted with the knitted blankets made in response to memories of my mother, who taught me to knit. A process of erasure and mark making reveal obscure details of the blankets history and highlights the process and material engagement that characterise as sense of nostalgia and embodiment. The quality of the papers soft, opaque surface resembles woven grids capturing the tactility of the repeated rows of deft line [12]. The narrative of movement flows through the work merging in patterns that form structure. Aesthetically and formally the works develop their own language that intends well-being as a bodily experience through the process of looking.

A personal painting methodology breaks down the surface of the canvas into grid-like structures that embody the subjectivity of place and felt experience. A process of weaving paint gives form and shape to the artwork, and though material engagement a network of painted pathways underpins the image, creating a structure that becomes image. Developed in sections, the picture plane resembles micro fibres that give the effect of wool or yarn. The technique of scratching, weaving and frenetic mark making transforms pictorial space into a site of self-expression. Compulsively the line extends and directs its identity in long horizontal lines until deconstructed into small and fractured marks, which indicate the traditional grid, common to the history of painting. The overlapping structure of small grids forms a new spatial environment that takes on the appearance of fabric that could be construed as tartan blankets. Each layer of paint adds another row or dimension to the overall interpretation of the works aesthetic form. Heavily worked, the paintings ironically read as fragile in their delicate surface viscera that conceptually convey a deep, physical sensation of felt experience. Developing this thematic further, a combination of composition elements that echo the drama between contrasting colour arrangements, the paintings foreground penetrates the viewer at eye level and in returning the gaze the painting enters the body.

CONCLUSION

Migration, place and felt experience embody my approach to creative praxis. The physical experience of migration and memory of place relocates as a visual concept onto the picture plane to redefine felt experience as a material investigation [7]. It is my experience that the body as a site of creativity is at the crux of my practice that infuses a sense of well-being as an evolving metaphor in my work. The phenomenon of felt experience, although difficult to quantify within traditional spheres of knowledge production finds expression, and new space to be in the actions of the brush, the marks on paper and the textual responses that accompany my visual, art practice. Describing place and the ontology attached, resolutely locates individual experience as a justifiable source of artistic production. In this discussion, I suggest that by responding creatively to one's interior through praxis, a dialogue that relies on empiricism engages in the development of a discourse. Given this, creative practice expresses itself within its own language, supporting my original posit that creativity is legitimate artistic tenor in the production of works of art.

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