

Louise Fowler-Smith and the Possibility of Hope

“Science can lead to truth, only the imagination can lead you towards meaning.”

CS Lewis, as quoted by Tim Smit, founder of the Eden Project

A recent edition of *The Guardian Weekly*¹ contained an article by Madelaine Bunting in which she reviews the Barbican’s current exhibition Radical Nature and explores its satellite projects such as the growing of wheat on derelict wasteland in London’s Hackney, where the writer lives.

“Can art succeed,” she asks, “where science is proving insufficient to generate the will to act effectively on climate change?” And as I read though this inspiring essay on possibilities and collaborations, my mind kept flitting back, at various junctures, to the work, example, and lifestyle of the artist and educator Louise Fowler-Smith.

“Scientists sound increasingly desperate as the evidence they are carefully accumulating stacks up but fails to prompt the urgency they insist it requires,” Bunting continues. “Science seems only to create a panicked paralysis: a language of probabilities, statistics and numbers fail to gain traction on the public imagination. Is this where artists have to step in to prompt understanding, to challenge what is taken for granted, to turn our ideas upside down?”

This is certainly the role that Louise Fowler-Smith has taken on, and the challenge to which she is constantly rising.

I am always curious about the roots of such commitments and obsessions and find that often they go back to early childhood. I was not surprised therefore when Louise told me that, “I have been interested in the natural environment ever since I was little - in part because my father has a dairy farm near Dungog. My favourite thing to do

¹ 17 – 23 July, 2009

was to climb by myself to the top of a hill on the property, called Manns Hill, and sit under the huge gum trees, which for me had a real presence. One of the images in the exhibition is of one of the remaining gum trees at the top of Manns Hill. Sadly this property of my fathers is going to be dammed by the Hunter Water Board in the near future- an event my family has been fighting for over 50 years.” Her work, and her life, is therefore a heady mix of curiosity and passion.

This photographic exhibition, which we are privileged to view, is of Australian trees. While she is preparing it, Louise is also working on a companion exhibition in New Dehli of Indian trees. Yet this is much more than a “photographic exhibition”. Louise trained as a painter, she spends much of her time teaching painting and supervising postgraduate painters at COFA in Paddington, and she brings to photography not just the eye and the sensibility of the painter but many of the painter’s techniques. Only a painter, talking of her darkroom techniques, would say “I glaze light onto specially chosen trees that may otherwise have been disregarded and ignored; concentrating on its individual qualities or personality. This process draws out the tree, making it special, individualistic, even sacred.”

In Australia, Louise has focused her research on the Mulga Tree found in the arid zone of far western New South Wales. In recent years she has become a regular visitor to this region through using UNSW’s field station at Fowler’s Gap, 112 km north of Broken Hill, as the base for ILIRI (Imaging the Land International Research Institute) of which she is Director. Its aim is simply – but ambitiously - to promote new ways of perceiving the land in the 21st century.

The Mulga tree lives an isolated life, but stands out from its surroundings through its distinctive umbrella-like shape. Depending on how she uses her painterly sensibility within these photographs, her Mulgas remind one alternately of the biblical burning

bush, of a quasi-organic lightning flash, or of a coral reef risen out of the sea and set against a pink sky.

Louise Fowler-Smith recently presented her research at the Accademia of Art in Rome² in February and will give a Lecture as a part of a six month Land/Art Conference in New Mexico in November. For those wishing a deeper insight into her research into “Hindu Tree Veneration as a Mode of Environmental Encounter” her article on this topic can be found in *Leonardo* magazine.³

One of the most memorable weeks of my life was one I spent with Louise at Fowler’s Gap as part of a symposium which she organized (with all her energy and skills) that brought together artists, architects, writers, scientists, environmental planners and indigenous elders from two quite different countries, Australia and Holland, to explore the issue of sustainability in the arid zone and how cultural perceptions of the land contribute to present land use.

It was one of those inspirational and life changing events which would not have been possible without Louise’s passion, and tenacity for getting things done. If I can borrow a quote from Raymond Williams used in Madeleine Bunting’s *Guardian Weekly* essay, “To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing”. This is exactly what Louise Fowler-Smith does.

Dr Peter Hill is an artist and writer. His book *Stargazing: memoirs of a young lighthouse keeper* (Random House) won a Saltire Award for best First Book of the Year in 2004

C Dr Peter Hill

2009

² Louise Fowler Smith will exhibit in Rome in November 2009

³ *Leonardo - The Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology* - Volume 42, Number 1. This can be accessed online at <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/leon/42/1>- under general articles.

