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## LOOKING TO NATURE: LANDSCAPE, PLANTS AND BEAUTY... (Part 1)

“The rocks are beyond slow, beyond strong, and yet, yielding to a soft, green breath  
as powerful as a glacier, the mosses wearing away their surfaces grain by grain,  
bringing them slowly back to sand”

*(Robin Wall Kimmerer)*<sup>1</sup>

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During the first days of winter last year Dylis and I were in Canberra  
and decided to visit the National Gallery.

I particularly wanted to view and experience  
the Indigenous Art Triennial display called ‘Ceremony’.

Featured were the works of 38 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists from across Australia,  
which revealed how ceremony sits at the nexus  
of Country, culture, and community.

But just before we entered the first of several ‘Ceremony’ display areas  
we passed some other paintings also on display.

And among that display were several by the late Australian artist,  
Margaret Preston (1875–1963).

Having only come across her work in recent years I stopped to look through the display  
hoping to see her six-panel work *Australian Wildflowers*.

But alas, it hangs in another gallery!

During the late 1920s Preston set out to make Australians see beauty in native flowers,  
“and gradually they came to dominate her still lifes, sometimes mixed with non-natives,  
combining English and Australian identities, two hemispheres, and two social eras—one  
the colonial era of Australia’s history, the other the modern era of sovereign  
nationhood.”

She was also one of the first non-Indigenous Australian artists  
to use Aboriginal motifs in her work.

Years later Preston claimed Aboriginal artists focus  
“not only the flower but the whole plant; the roots are of equal importance as the  
blossoms”.<sup>2</sup>

In indigenous art, flowers are about much more than beauty.  
They engage Country, cosmology, environments, ecologies, totalities of being.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kimmerer, *“Intelligence”*, (2022)

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Elias, *“Useless”*, 2

<sup>3</sup> Elias, *“Useless”*, 2

Everywhere we look, from the dirt under our feet, to butterfly wings,  
to the edges of the expanding ‘James Webb’ cosmos  
and on every scale from atoms to galaxies,  
“the universe appears to be saturated with beauty.”<sup>4</sup>

- Useful or Beneficial beauty—beauty that improves the chances of survival of an organism.
- Intrinsic or Useless beauty—beauty that serves no evident purpose  
“other than to make the natural world inexhaustibly interesting.”<sup>5</sup>

And before you dismiss all this as just extravagant middle-class nonsense,  
remember that flowering plants are the dominant plants on earth...  
accounting for more than 81% of all of the planet’s biomass.  
Plants rule the Earth!  
They are the reason the surface of the planet is not lifeless...  
Engines of biodiversity!

Plants are inextricably tied up with the history of a people.  
They mirror changes in culture and land use...  
imported varieties<sup>6</sup> over native,  
plow, sheep and cattle over bush,  
housing development, parking lots over wilderness.

With the planet changing so rapidly from human overexploitation  
I reckon it is important to remember the wisdom contained  
in Australian Indigenous knowledge of earth and flowers...  
Much more than beauty.  
An engagement linking Country, cosmology, art,  
environments, beliefs, ecologies—totalities of being.  
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We live on the third piece of debris from the Sun.  
A tiny world of rock and metal with a thin veneer of organic matter on the surface,  
a tiny fraction of which we happen to constitute.

Immigrants all, the landscape, the trees, the plant life  
out-age us by millions of years.  
Our time is but a magpie’s warble, long.

Irish philosopher and poet John O’Donohue (1956–2008) reminds us:  
Landscape is the first born of creation.  
No two places in a landscape are the same,  
and the landscape viewed or experienced from each place is different.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sanders, “*Useless*”, 5

<sup>5</sup> Sanders. “*Useless*”, 3

<sup>6</sup> According to the State of the Environment Report (2021), Australia has more foreign plant species than natives

<sup>7</sup> O’Donohue, *Four Elements*, 129, 135

An ancient and distinctive land, Australia has stunning and diverse natural beauty.  
A land unlike any other...  
weathered to an unimaginable flatness  
with a consequent vastness of sky, space, and light.

During a visit to the MacDonald Rangers in Central Australia  
American ethnographer Debrah Bird Rose (1946–2018) wrote of the surrounding landscape:  
“These rocks were ancient, and their colours suggested that instead of fading with age,  
geological eons had intensified them... Below us the riverbed was pale, pebbly sand,  
above us the sky was bluer than blue, and here and there we met eucalypts—most  
spectacularly, the white-barked ghost gums that articulate themselves so definitely  
against the red earth and blue sky”.<sup>8</sup>

The oldest rocks in Western Australia, for example, are 4.3 billion years old,  
almost twice that of the rocks in South Australia,  
and seven times older than the oldest rocks of the east coast.<sup>9</sup>  
Yet those deserts soils produce the planet’s greatest diversity of flowering plants,  
with up to twelve thousand species.

The ecological system in which we surely ‘live and move and have our being’  
is the ground that nourishes and sustains us.<sup>10</sup>  
What we do now, or don’t do now,  
is going to have enormous consequences for the future.

Especially around climate change which,  
as the State of the Environment Report (Australia) last year clearly indicated,  
we need to urgently live *differently*.

The beauty of nature is a fundamental aspect  
of the human relationship with the wider natural world.

To see the world synthesised in a flower, a sea urchin, a blue wren or in a human being,  
is to contemplate your own life blended with the total interconnectedness of life,  
rather than just staring blankly as if one is an outsider.  
“We integrate our mind, our emotions, our body, through the senses; everything we’ve  
learned from our culture, the context of the present day, all of that wraps up into our  
mind. And when we’re having a profound experience of beauty, our brain lights up and  
we are highly motivated to action.”<sup>11</sup>

Envisaging the wider reaches of reality not only enlarges the scope of living,

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<sup>8</sup> Rose, “*On the Spot*”, 221

<sup>9</sup> ABC Science, “*WA Wildflowers*” August 2002

<sup>10</sup> A Japanese study published in *Ecological Applications* suggests that nature around one's home may help mitigate some of the negative mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>11</sup> Haskell. “*Listening*”, 6

but it sensitises our feel for life and beautifies its quality.<sup>12</sup>

The cosmos is alive with creativity!

It makes a huge difference, when you wake in the morning and come out of your house,  
“whether you believe you are walking into [a] dead geographical location, which is used  
to get to a destination, or whether you are emerging out into a landscape that is just as  
much, if not more, alive as you, but in a totally different form, and if you have come to  
understand landscape as something that forms each of us... you will be absolutely  
amazed at what it will reveal to you”<sup>13</sup>

When we quietly sit under a tree “nestling in the curve of the roots in a soft hollow”<sup>14</sup>  
of grass and gum leaves, or watch a dragon-fly dance on water lily pads,  
the awe and wonder we experience is  
nature awakening us to the heights and depths of reality  
which we have neglected.<sup>15</sup>

So how should we live in a world overflowing with natural beauty?  
Keep seeing and keep asking. You will uncover wondrous things!<sup>16</sup>  
It may even dawn on us that we, too, are ‘ancestors’  
and our actions today will have consequences  
“possibly as broad and far-reaching as the sum total of all the influences that have led to  
us.”<sup>17</sup>

Then we can add our own mite of beauty with whatever talent we possess.

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Ceremony is important.

Indigenous and First Peoples around the world know that and teach us that.

It focuses our attention so that seeing becomes intention.

It transcends the boundaries of the individual.

It shows respect and reverence.

It inspires.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine still fresh in our minds and TV news,  
and aware that Ukraine’s national flower is a sunflower,

what if we shaped a new ‘land’ ceremony?

What if we scattered sunflower seeds all over our neighbourhoods and communities?

And especially in places where tragedies have left a dark void?

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<sup>12</sup> Meland, *Modern*, 288

<sup>13</sup> O’Donohue, “*Inner Landscape*”, 3

<sup>14</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding*, 48

<sup>15</sup> Barrett, *Pragmatism*, 20. While the James Webb Space Telescope now offers ‘deep field’ images of massive galaxies as far back as 13.7 billion years - just after the Big Bang

<sup>16</sup> Palka, “*Butterflies*”, 1

<sup>17</sup> Primack & Abrams, *View*, 294

Would this ceremony not offer comfort, consolation, and beauty  
to a brokenhearted world?

Would this ceremony not offer some gratitude to the Land, to Country, to Culture?

And now a cheeky challenge to Second Peoples...

The well-known eco-philosopher, Thomas Berry, is famous for saying  
one of the best things that could happen today

“is for people all over the world to put their sacred texts in the closet for, say, 300 years  
and learn again to feel the vital presence of the living Earth and live in healthy,  
reciprocal relationship with the more-than-human world.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> A quote from Jay McDaniel in **Open Horizons**, “Recovering Pagan Roots”