

As a, sometimes unwilling member of the anthropocene I would like to talk about my relation to geo-aesthetics from the point of view of being an artist.

I come from a culture, Australia, where in terms of geo-aesthetics, anthropocentricism dominates. Generally land that is considered beautiful is that which is useful. This is understandable, but as we are now finding, is not sustainable.

I propose that the artist can change how the aesthetics of the land are perceived and help bring about a new relationship between geo-aesthetics and the anthropocene.

In the introduction to the book, 'Nature, Aesthetics & Environmentalism' Allen Carlson & Sheila Lintott state that the natural environment is more likely to be preserved by aesthetic rather than ethical values - or 'by beauty rather than duty'. They go on to state that a sound natural aesthetics is crucial to sound conservation policy & land management.

But how do we define a sound natural aesthetic or a beautiful natural environment?

Definitions of beauty are cultural. One cultures beauty can be another's kitsch, or even ugliness. Consequently how people define an aesthetically beautiful natural environment becomes crucial to sound conservation policy & land management.

Unfortunately many countries around the world have inherited a cultural aesthetic that has become deleterious to the natural environment they exist within. Australia is one such country, where the land has played an important role in relation to the average Australians cultural identity.

For Indigenous Australians, the land has always played a central role in their religious, cultural and social life.

In contrast white Australians have created a variety of identities for themselves over their history, with their artists responding to the varied ideas of how the Australian Landscape **should** be depicted.

According to Ian Burns in his book "National Life and Landscapes – Australian Painting from 1900 to 1940"- "Over the past 2 centuries the landscape has been invented and reinvented many times, in the context of serving different cultural, social and political needs".

Australian history has shown the landscape to appear and reappear as an extension of the European landscape, rather than as something uniquely Australian.

Fig 1. 'Pea Gathering', A.Dattilo Rubbo 1913

By the 19th and early 20th century the notion of beauty in relation to the land still tended towards the green fields of Europe.

The Gum tree was considered ugly and the land was referred to as monotonous, somber and austere.

(Fig 2. Advertise Australia)

In the postwar era there was such sensitivity over what image of the land was being projected overseas that there appeared to be a prohibition on films or images that showed the severity of the drought of 1920. An exhibition of Australian art shown in London in 1923 showed pictures of fertile pastures, with no suggestion of land afflicted by drought.

Amazingly, in some of the most arid parts of Australia you can still find front yards desperately trying to resemble a European garden.

(Fig 3 & 4 . garden broken hill & natural soil)

Perceptions of land are culturally potent, so eclectic styles have developed across the country to represent the notion of an aesthetically pleasing garden - due to the many different cultures that have immigrated to Australia over the past few centuries.

I have witnessed instances whereby a person has paved his entire yard with concrete then carefully placed plastic plants in pots evenly around. He was known to water his plastic garden on a regular basis, to get rid of the dust.

(Fig 5- image Plastic plants)

When I was a teenager I remember my uncle, who owned a large dairy farm, denouncing any trees left standing as vermin, and stating that they needed to be eradicated, as the grass was less likely to grow beneath them. The only purpose for his land was to feed his cattle -which then could be sold.

One question, therefore is how we can convince people who perceive nature as a resource to start to value nature as something intrinsically valuable in its own right?

How we perceive the world, and how these perceptions dictate how we respond to the land, is the basis of the argument I am putting forward today.

Lucy Lippard stated in her essay, *Beyond the Beauty Strip*. In Max Andrews. *Land, Art – A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, (RSA & The Arts Council England. 2006).

“Today- sparked by indisputable proof of human agency in climate change- the environment is in the centre foreground. It has become the radical edge. But the handle on that edge remains the land itself, how we see, understand, use and respond to it”.¹ Lippard goes on to say that society produces our view of ‘nature’ and that artists are complicit in the way the world is seen.

This message has become fundamental to understanding my multi disciplinary practice as an artist.

I began as a gallery based painter, but my practice has now expanded to include photography, installation and writing- as well as cross-disciplinary environmental art projects.

(Fig 6 & 7 -2 images of my work)

¹ Lippard, Lucy, *Beyond the Beauty Strip*. From Andrews, Max. *Land, Art – A Cultural Ecology Handbook*, RSA & The Arts Council England. 2006.

As an artist who has held strong concerns for the environment for many years, my most recent work focuses on the eneration of trees, a subject I was drawn to not only for the magnitude of its environmental significance, but its universal and pan-religious symbolic importance.

(Fig 8 & 9 - 2 images of my work)

My investigation and resultant work has spanned two continents, Australia and India. In Australia, the gallery based artistic output centers on perceptions of land in the Australian desert, in particular the lone tree, found predominantly in the arid zone of far western NSW.

I held three solo exhibition of this work last year, in Sydney, Rome and a medieval town called Spello in Umbria, Italy.

(Fig 10, 11 & 12 - 3 images of my work)

My process is similar to that of a painter, whereby I layer or 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, and giving it an altered perception.

(Fig 13 & 14 - 2 images of my work)

I was interested to read the essay by Eugene Hargrove, "The Historical Foundations of American Environmental Attitudes", also in the book, *Nature, Aesthetics & Environmentalism*, where Hargrove states, *One way in which painters introduced moral value into a painting (in the 19th century) was to place a solitary tree in the foreground. A Tree of this sort, knotted, bent, broken and decaying often symbolized admirable American character traits including, among others, self-reliance, perseverance and freedom.*

In the late 1980's the art critic Peter Fuller recorded that he felt as though we lived in a world where art and nature had both "lost their meaning". The modern world had lost touch with ways of seeing, no longer encompassing archetypal myth, symbol and ritual, resulting, according to Fuller, in a "severing of connectedness" with the natural world.

As we enter the twenty first century this sense of disconnectedness has come to have dangerous implications for the planet.

Our relationship with the land has deteriorated to a point where it is conquered, settled, farmed and mined.

In his book, *The Wisdom of the Elders*, the scientist David Suzuki stated "...eminent scientists are suggesting that science alone is not enough to solve the planetary environmental crisis and that we must recreate for ourselves a sense of place within the biosphere that is steeped in humility and reverence for all life."ⁱ

In the early 1990's a public statement was signed by a group of International scientists from 83 nations, who called themselves 'The Union of Concerned Scientists.

One of its passages states: -

As scientists many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with

care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment need to be infused with a vision of the sacred ⁱⁱ

Society today, particularly in the Western tradition, where technological advancement is elevated, tends to emphasize the rational, to give credence to reason and sense perception as primary modes of experience, thereby displacing imagination as a prominent mode of perception and cognition. [3].

This modus operandi has not always existed, however. Ancient cultures, whether monotheist or polytheist, acknowledged the sacredness of the land. An important aspect of ancient nature worship was the veneration of the tree, and many cultures throughout history have revered trees.

Considered sacred, trees were dutifully protected and nourished. Over time the belief in the sacred tree “has left innumerable traces in ancient art and literature, has largely shaped the usages and legends of the peasantry, and impressed its influence on the ritual of almost all the primitive religions of the world” [6].

The worship of trees occurred throughout Europe but declined with the rise of religions such as Christianity and Islam, which regarded such activity as pagan [7].

In India, however, Hinduism accepted local cults, many of which worshipped nature. The Rsis, authors of the sacred Hindu texts, understood the importance of preserving the environment, and reference is made to the divine quality of the natural world throughout these Indian scriptures. The early Hindu sacred texts, the Vedas and Upanishads, make frequent reference to sacred trees, referring to them as the most important living forms on earth.

Consequently, to this day Sacred Trees are found throughout India. They are worshipped by tribal animistic people and are considered the abode of the Gods by many other religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Adherents of some of these religions began to decorate the tree as an aspect of ritual or veneration. This practice also enabled recognition of the sacred tree through its aesthetic enhancement.

(Fig 15 & 16 - Sacred tree temple, Palani x 2)

The historic and contemporary practice of venerating the tree through decoration has, over time, effected cultural change in India.

The tree is perceived differently, it is seen as a form that houses the sacred, thus is protected. Even the most rapacious Indian businessman would not dare to cut down the sacred tree, which is recognized through its adornment.

To walk through the natural environment and stumble across one of these transformed trees can be a profound experience for the beholder. An experience that involves all the senses: it is a living art that is available to all.

In this instance the artist is ‘effector’, rather than ‘reflector’.

When I came across a group of decorated trees at Palani in Tamil Nadu, I was immediately struck by their transformation.

The trees, covered with golden yellow turmeric powder, broadened my perception of what was an otherwise normal grouping of trees set amid the bush land, to encompass a sense of reverence and enchantment.

I was told by the local priest that, at this nature temple, women would come to perform a ritual in the wish for a husband. The ritual involves the gifting of small parcels of turmeric with notes recording their wish, or the name of the local deity.

By adorning the tree in this way people are adding a value that is neither economic nor environmental, but aesthetic. This broadens the way society approaches the tree, with the aesthetic adding a sacred dimension. If this tree is destroyed the community not only loses economically and environmentally, but it also loses a site of beauty and sacredness. One approaches the venerated tree with a sense of wonder and reverence, enabling a change of consciousness and recognition of kinship between the individual and the natural world.

The decoration of the tree heightens the effects of the imagination and its perception, changing the cognition of the tree to the realm of the sacred.

Throughout India, Hindu communities have their own individual deity, or *gramadevata*, which are regarded as synonymous with the locality and everything within it.ⁱⁱⁱ

In general the gramadevata is associated with the Mother Goddess, who represents the earth, fertility, healing and protection.

The gramadevata is not visible to the local community, so a specific place or object is chosen to direct the act of worship. The *devasthanam*, or shrine of a gramadevata is usually connected with an important feature of the natural world such as a hill, a rock, a stream or pond – but most commonly they are associated with a tree or grove of trees, with the tree embodying the local God or Goddess.^{iv}

Across India hundreds of thousands of Sacred Trees are worshipped, most of which have been venerated for centuries, so not surprisingly the visual impact of these tree sanctuaries is as varied as the communities themselves.

Often in Hindu communities the Sacred Tree precedes the Temple.

Initially people gather under the chosen tree, slowly beginning to decorate it by placing offerings at its base and tying cloth, braid, rings, bells and an assortment of other decorative items around its branches, making the tree a place of worship.

Over time the offerings become more valuable, until finally there are enough funds collected to build a temple.

Because Hindus anthropomorphize their Gods, the concept of the temple is to house the God next to or around the sacred tree.

In some instances the tree becomes an integral part of the temple architecture, literally growing through the structure, with its limbs perforating the roof, as in the next 2 images.

(Fig 17 & 18. Sacred Tree to the “Traffic” Goddess- Bata Bhuasuanhi, Orissa x 2)

I discovered the Sacred Tree to the “Traffic” Goddess on one of the main roads leading out of Bhubaneswar, Orissa. Upon enquiry I was told that originally there had been a small shop at this site. People would stop to make a purchase, and then take time to pray at the nearby tree for a safe journey on a road that was considered notoriously dangerous

for travelers. The gradual build up of gifts acted as a solicitation for the local priest to sanctify the tree, and eventually to the building of a small temple around the tree.

The process of venerating the tree begins with the local priest, or the shaman in the case of tribal culture, selecting the Sacred Tree. Generally it is chosen through a ritualistic process involving trance, a dream or a vision that may be brought on through tantric practices.

In Hinduism there are certain trees and plants that are automatically considered sacred, such as the Banyan, Pipal, Neem, and Tulsi. Other trees may be considered sacred in certain districts, but this usually stems from its practical use in that particular region. The Bamboo Tree, for example relates to the rice plant because bamboo flowers and bamboo shoots replace rice as the staple diet in times of drought. In ancient times people worshiped the rice plant, so over the centuries the bamboo began to be worshipped as an alternative to rice.

These sites are sometimes hidden from the main thoroughfares, making their discovery even more delightful.

My enquiry in to the existence of sacred tree sites in the Damanjoei region of Orissa led to much deliberation amongst a gathering of men at a nearby temple. Finally it was agreed that they would take me to a site that, from the road, did not appear particularly special.

We walked down a narrow bushy dirt path, which eventually revealed an extraordinary site.

(Fig 19, 20, & 21. Sacred Bamboo Grove – Orissa X 3)

Hundreds of bamboo plants were growing in such a way as to create a natural arch over an installation of bamboo covered with bells, ribbons, flowers and red and gold cloth, establishing a sacred bamboo grove. At the base of the bamboo and surrounding trees countless terracotta pots, horses and an array of other paraphernalia had been left as gifts to the deity that was thought to reside here, Ma Kantabausani

People venerate a tree to pacify the tree spirits and to give offerings to the tree dieties; to pacify an ancestors spirit; to commemorate a death or marriage; to achieve good health, healing or general blessings. Women venerate a tree in the belief that it will help them to find a husband or conceive a child, whilst farmers believe it will assist with the fertilisation of the land.

In Rajasthan local women adorn the “asvattha” tree to ward off widowhood.^v

(Fig 22– Thalís with tumeric wrapped around tree)

The tradition in India for a married woman is to wear a gold necklace that displays the Hindu symbol of a goddess. If a married woman cannot afford gold, she wears a yellow cord with a piece of yellow turmeric root tied to the bottom. This marriage cord is called a Thali. Young girls believe that if they tie a thali onto the sacred Tree, that they will find a husband and will marry soon. This is their wish.

(Fig 23. Tali’s with cradles and turmeric.)

Another decoration found on fertility/marriage Trees are yellow cords with pieces of cloth tied at the end. This represents a ritual performed by women who have not been

able to produce a child after marrying. The cloth is symbolic of a baby's cradle, with the childless woman praying for fertility and conception.

For a small sum women are able to purchase the sacred yellow cord (thali) with the turmeric root or the cloth at the temple.

(Fig 24. Cradle with the offering of a lime and a flower.)

The women often place something inside the cradle as an offering to the Goddess, such as a rock or, in this instance, a lime and a flower.

After hanging the yellow cord with the cloth cradle or the root of turmeric, the woman lights a small earthen pot with ghee inside, called the Agal Vilakku.

(Fig 25- Fertility and marriage tree, Arunachala)

At this particular tree the women also burn camphor on a stone in front of an image of Ganesh, the God often related to fertility.

(Fig 26. Sacred Temple Tree, Meenakshi Temple, Madurai)

At Madurai in Tamil Nadu, the deity or gramadevata is believed to be the Goddess Meenakshi, whose power is considered so great that 'several kingdoms during the past millennia have owed their importance to her beneficence.'^{vi}

Within the grounds of the Meenakshi Temple the sacred tree has become known as important for fertility rituals. Stone serpents, have been placed around the trunk of the sacred temple tree, along with a large Ganesh sculpture

(Fig 27 & 28. Fertility Tree, Meenakshi Temple X 2)

The performative aspect of the fertility ritual involves the circumambulation of the tree shrine three times by the women, who have applied pigment to the tree, to the snake sculptures and to themselves, completing the ritual with the final gifting of little wooden cots housing baby toy dolls.

(Fig 29 - Other fertility Tree – with doll in cot)

In Indian mythology the 'feminine' plays an important role in the fertility of the land. It is believed that the tree deity is capable of fertilising a barren woman, but equally the feminine deity plays an important role in fertilising the trees and surrounding land.^{vii}

(Fig 30, 31. Aiyandar horses and attendants- Tamil Nadu x2)

In country areas of Tamil Nadu it is possible to find life sized terracotta horses and figures placed in a decorative fashion at the base of trees. These are known as the Aiyandar horses and spirit attendants who ride with Aiyandar, the God of the natural elements and protector of the village boundaries.

As a tradition of the ancient Dravidian religious system, the shrines are always found in rural areas and trees are an essential component.^{viii}

Art and religion are inseparably linked for the artists who create these intricate sculptures, with the traditional skills being handed down from father to son.

(Fig 32 – Kadond Tree)

On the edge of a mountain path in the Himalayas I discovered a sacred Tree site to Kadond, the God with displaced teeth.

As a semi- demon, this God protects the local people from other demons in the area. I was told that the locals give offerings to this tree to keep Kadond happy. Local legend states that this site has existed for at least– 5-6 generations.

(Fig 33 - Temple of Balu Nag)

At the Temple of Balu Nag the tree represents the jungle deities, called Bانشira The Shiva tridents leaning on the tree represent male power. A festival, called Panjo occurs here each year in August at which time the ram is sacrificed. Apparently 2,000 – 3,000 people attend this festival each year.

The Sacred Tree, as a signifier for renewal, may also be important in rituals pertaining to death. It is believed at the town of Gaya in Bihar that the Buddha preached the essence of life and Vishnu preached the reality of death. According to legend, the God Vishnu blessed Gaya with the power to absolve sinners. Hindus traditionally travel to the Vishnupad Temple in Gaya to honour their parents a year after death and to liberate the wandering souls to a more heavenly state of nirvana.^{ix}

(Fig 34. The Sacred ‘Pinda’ Tree – Vishnupad Temple, Gaya)

The immortal Banyan tree, or Pinda Tree stands in the courtyard of the temple, which is where the final rites for the dead are held. According to legend the Buddha is said to have meditated under this tree.

Fig 35- The Para Bhrama Temple at Ochira)

The Para Bhrama Temple at Ochira, in Kerala is renowned as a site of healing, where people specifically worship the tree. There is no actual temple structure, simply three very large decorated trees - one to Vishnu, one to Bhrama and one to Maheshera. Para Bhrama is considered to be the Indian version of Lourdes in France. Local legend states that the sacred trees represent the God Parabrahman – the God without form.

[Wooden votive healing sculptures surround the entwined roots of the ancient Banyon, Peepal and Kadamba Trees. Devotees use these sculptures to circle the part of their body that needs healing.](#)

[A wooden image of the Goddess Parvati also rests at the base of one of the sacred trees, and legend claims that many miracles have occurred here with the aid of this Goddess.](#)^x

I have found that, through aesthetic adornment the tree is transformed into a precious, sacred and living form in the eyes of the beholder. The sacred tree, or ‘Sthalavrikshas’ is perceived as a form that exists in both mythical and present time and that traverses the three worlds of the heavens, the earth and the underworld.

Decorated trees act as a signifier, taking us back to an ancient form of visualization

Studies have found that sacred Tree and sacred Grove sites preserve old growth trees and forests, so are considered ecologically unique and important for conservation on varying scales of landscape, community and species. The fact that these sacred sites contribute to biodiversity conservation is an important point to be made.^{xi}

Having traveled through ten States of India it became increasingly clear that decorating the Tree for the purpose of ritual or worship is widely practiced, with numerous aesthetic variations, through out the country. It occurred to me that, as a non-Hindu/non-tribal, I too had started to perceive the tree differently, and it was the aesthetic enhancement that persuaded me to re-cognise these natural forms. This led me to the question whether it is possible for people outside of Hindu/tribal nations to inspire a re-envisioning of the environment through the aesthetic; and whether sacredness could be transferred through artistic vision without transplanting any specific religious ideology. Indeed, philosophers have investigated the importance of the aesthetic to humanity for centuries. For Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the aesthetic provided a promise of reconciliation between nature and humanity. Kant asserts that perception is based both upon experience of external objects and a priori knowledge." ^{xii}

We have come to realize that a shift in consciousness is vital if we are to re-establish a relationship with the land based on mutual respect, rather than the manipulative and exploitative attitude evident in many of our current behavioral paradigms.

Authors such as Thomas Berry have suggested that the mission for the 21st century is to develop a new philosophical framework that can overcome the existing system of high consumption and high waste.

Suzi Gablik, in *The Reenchantment of Art* calls for artists to meet the challenge of transcending the disconnectedness and separation of the aesthetic from the social that she believes existed within modernism.

How we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land, and ultimately how we live within it. If we see the land as separate from ourselves we are less likely to honour and respect it.

This premise has driven me to explore the Veneration of the Tree in India & Australia – but it has also inspired me to establish a research unit at the University of NSW called ILIRI.

Fig 36. ILIRI image

Although based in Sydney, ILIRI has access to the Australian Outback through the University's Fowlers Gap Research Station, located in the 'corner country' of New South Wales' far west.

Fig 37. Map

The 100,000 acre property is comprised of desert, semi-arid grassland and scrubland.

Fig 38. Desert , Emu & chicks

The ILIRI vision incorporates three functions of Education, Research, and the provision of Artists' Residencies.

Fig 39. Student group

It is here that ILIRI operates the only artists residential program in the Australian desert.

Fig 40. Ochre House

Time doesn't permit me to expand in detail, except to say that in the past few years ILIRI's interests have grown to incorporate inter-disciplinary projects that explore how

we perceive and ultimately live in a land particularly vulnerable to climate change, through collaborations between artists, architects, engineers and scientists from a cross-cultural perspective.

ILIRI has held exhibitions and participated in conferences both nationally and internationally.

At Fowlers Gap I established what I have called the ‘**Creative Laboratory**’, which is a large area of land where artists, architects, scientists - people concerned with the environment – can collaborate on projects that explore new ways of perceiving and interacting with land in the arid zone. The aim of the Creative laboratory is to search for new paradigms that help to alter public perception about the meaning and significance of the land and challenge conventional thinking.

It offers artists the opportunity to restore sites and to work with the land, in collaboration with experts.

Fig 41 –Eco Art statement

Fig 42 – 45 –Water Tank House

Fig 46 – 47 – Bottle wall

ⁱ P.Knudtson & D. Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders*. P.xxiv

ⁱⁱ P.Knudtson & D. Suzuki, *Wisdom of the Elders*. (St.Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin Pty, Ltd, 1992) P.182

ⁱⁱⁱ S. Huyler, *Meeting God- Elements of Hindu Devotion*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1951). P.102

^{iv} S. Huyler, *Meeting God- Elements of Hindu Devotion*. P. 105

^v B.L.Malla. *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* (New Delhi: Aryan Books, 2000). P.70

^{vi} S. Huyler, *Meeting God- Elements of Hindu Devotion*. P.102

^{vii} B.L.Malla. *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* P.66.

^{viii} R. du Bois. ‘Larger than Life: The Terracotta Sculptures of India,’ *Ceramics Today*. http://www.ceramicstoday.com/articles/clay_horses.htm

^{ix} For more information see <http://www.manshi.in/piligrimage.html>

^x S. Huyler, *Meeting God- Elements of Hindu Devotion*. P. 213

^{xi} From article- "Tibetan sacred sites conserve old growth trees and cover in he eastern Himalayas

^{xii} I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [1781], trans. Norman Kemp Smith (N.Y.: St. Martins, 1965), A 51/B 75