

Experience and Abstraction

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For this catalogue, I want to provide a brief "linear" narrative of my life and work. Of course, while this narrative may appear whole, it is in fact fragmentary. I'd like to begin with how my family and I left Laos, and end by writing about my recent return there as a tourist. In the course of telling this story I hope to be able to say something about how experience and abstraction speak to each other in my art practice.

My family and I escaped from Laos to Thailand in 1979 - a year in which things became unstable for many as the rounding up of those connected with the old regime for "re-education" got into full swing. We stayed in a refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, for nine months before we came to Australia. Upon arrival we were provided accommodation by the Department of Immigration in a hostel in Western Sydney's Cabramatta. After one year in the hostel my parents became anxious to leave and start a new life in the larger Australian community.

My father came from a military family. In Laos he had been an army captain, and his brother a colonel. With virtually no English, the only work he could find in Australia was as a manual worker. He worked as a printer for 20 years until his recent retirement. My father worked hard for little pay, but with four young children to support he had little choice.

As soon as my father started this job, we moved out of the hostel to an apartment in Narwee in Sydney's outer south. My parents' hopes for a new life in a new country were mainly invested in their children's education and, they thought, the only way for their children to have a decent education was for us all to immerse ourselves in the Australian way of life and have Australian friends. They believed we would not get an education or speak the language well if we lived around too many Asians.

The only family we had in Narwee was my cousin's. Otherwise we were isolated from the Lao community. Occasionally we would attend cultural events at the Buddhist temple in Stanmore, Sydney. But, one day, the people from The Church of England came knocking at our door and my parents invited them in. They stayed for hours talking about God and Jesus, and how they wanted our family to join their church. My father thought that this was the greatest, that finally somebody in Australia wanted us to be part of their community. So we went to church every Sunday for two years and my three older brothers and I went to Sunday School. This went on until, one night, my mother had a dream. She dreamt there were two men fighting at the foot of her bed, one wearing a yellow robe with a shaved head, the other wearing white rags with long hair and blue eyes. They fought and wrestled, until the man wearing white rags with blue eyes walked away. My mother saw this as a sign, that the Buddha was telling her she was betraying her own ancestral roots and culture by going to church. After working for two years, my father had some money saved, and my parents decided to move back to Western Sydney. They bought a house in Campbelltown.

Campbelltown in the early 1980's was a small town, with a small population of Asians. In the last 20 years it has grown enormously. But living in Campbelltown even then, you got a real sense that this part of Australia was indeed a multicultural society. The friends I went to school with were Greek, Italian, Dutch/Indonesian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Slavic, Romanian and Lao.

Campbelltown has the second largest Lao community in Sydney, the largest being in Fairfield. The growth of this community brought with it a need for a centre where people could practice their faith. There are now two Buddhist temples in the Campbelltown area, both only 20 minutes from our house. One temple is more multicultural, being shared by Theravada Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. The other temple is known as the Lao temple. We frequent both. My mother is finally at home, through religion and our connection with the Lao community. I grew up and went to art school with this cultural and religious background.

Towards the end of my final year at art school I had a studio in the bush at Wedderburn, a rural area fifteen minutes out of Campbelltown. There, you wake up and see birds and wallabies, and when it is hot you can see goannas walking in the bush. Sometimes, when it is really hot, there are bushfires. Once, the fire came right up to the ridge, a few metres away from the studio. The entire area of bush that could be seen from the studio was burnt out. Trees that had been green and leafy were just skeletal. Everything was black and charcoal. It looked like a moonscape. After the fire the rain came and the trees and bush were rejuvenated. New leaves grew and the animals were back. During that rain the light on the gum trees was grey and subdued. My source of inspiration had been from this bushland environment. Here I must thank my friend, the painter Roy Jackson, who has been a great supporter of my work, and has often inspired me to "get on with it".

The works I produced in the first two years of living in Wedderburn were mainly floor installations. I collected and connected many things from the bush such as seedpods, vines and flower stamens. Content and form in these earlier works are derived from the physical properties of these objects, with which I played around, manipulating them to form an image in a metaphorical way.

One floor installation is "Legs on Seeds" (1992) (300cm diameter.). This work is made up of Casuarina seeds and Banksia stalks. The stalks have hooks at the end, which became legs for the seedpods. Each individual "seed on legs" is travelling in a circle towards a diamond centre and back out again, in a mandala form. The work suggests, among other things, that time is cyclical.

The idea for another floor installation work, "Vine Water" (1993) (200cmx200cm), came about while I was walking in the bush. I found some trees and scrub covered in pristine vines. Pulling them apart, I felt both their softness and their strength. I unravelled them and knotted them into strings before crocheting them. The spiral was the natural form to come out of this process.

For this work I did some research into hydrodynamics, learning how in England the locations for castles were chosen because there were signs of water lines in the ground.¹ My work was inspired by this juxtaposition of man-made form, the castle, and the natural geodetic lines. Thus, in my installation a grid of plaster cubes (moulded from ice cubes) formed the base for the natural material of the bush vines, with their watery spiral forms.

The last floor installation I have done to date is "Rice Lines" (1994) (200cmx200cm). This work is made up of flour, water, salt and rice grains. Black rice grains are embedded in circular "cakes" (moulded from cake tins) arrayed in rows of one, two, three and four. The rice lines become denser in the centre and expand out, expressing my abiding concern with the mandala and the meanings it contains.

The longer I stayed at Wedderburn the more I felt I wanted to paint. Two years after arriving there I did. Initially, I stuck bush material onto paper, drawing with Casuarina seeds directly onto paper (as in "Annica", 1994). Next, I stuck fibre washers onto canvas to create the "Kasina" series ("Fire Kasina", "Air Kasina", "Water Kasina" and "Breath Kasina", 1995).²

After graduating from art school, I had a casual job as a gallery technician at Campbelltown Regional Art Gallery. It was here that I was exposed to contemporary Aboriginal painting and Asian textiles. After an exhibition called "Phoenix and Dragons" came to the gallery, I realised I didn't need to look far for inspiration. I was impelled to look at the Lao textiles which were part of my own heritage and cultural background. These became an important reference point for my work, and as a result, my early works on paper from 1996 involved perforating the paper with a sharp needle as a direct reference to stitching.

Growing up I was always surrounded by beautiful Lao textiles, which I have in turn worn to temples and weddings. Until I woke up to them, Lao textiles were for me always something that was only functional. My current appreciation of traditional Lao textiles is not only for their beauty and vibrant colours, but also the structure of the weave, especially in a complex piece of fabric (for instance where a skilled weaver has deliberately offset the image to give it an optical illusory-effect). I am also keenly aware that in Laos, textile production is woman's domain, and a vital part of the domestic economy.

Although a Buddhist, I am not an avid reader of Buddhist books. My house is not filled with them. I do have a few books on Buddhist philosophy that I return to, contemplating a sentence remembered or discovering a new one. But my practice as a Buddhist consists chiefly in going to the temple, talking to the Abbot, eating and so on, and is ultimately bound up with Lao Buddhist cultural practice. If my work has been informed by Buddhist metaphysics, then these are principles that I have absorbed in my many visits to the temple as a child. This is reflected in the fact that my very first installation work in 1991 referenced the food offerings that are a vital part of Theravada Buddhist cultural practice. I had hand-moulded cooked glutinous rice into rough conical objects that looked like miniature stupas. These were then slowly burnt in the kiln, which resulted in the base of the cone turning a golden yellow colour which

gradually turned into charcoal at the top. I then stacked these objects in a pyramid form on a circular bed of grains of rice. At the temple food is offered to ancestral beings accompanied by the rhythmical chanting of the monks. The monks are mediators for these offerings. Their consumption of the food denotes the end of the offering. The laypeople can then participate in eating, an act symbolising death and rebirth. My installation evokes this burnt offering, not least in the smell of burnt rice which emanates from it. It was included in the "Untitled 92" exhibition at the Performance Space, Sydney.

Dating from 1996, this Buddhist influence can also be seen in the names of my perforated works on paper, which are titled in Pali, the Theravada Buddhist language (e.g. "Sakala", which means 'entire', and "Jitatta", meaning 'one who has subdued the mind'.)

In 1996, I started to think about paper as object rather than just surface - a result of the technique of perforation, since perforating the paper had warped it and given it a wave-like appearance. After perforating paper I moved on to perforating canvas. Initially, I used a hole puncher to cut into the canvas. This allowed the play of light, air and space through the work. Subsequently I replaced this technique by that of using a soldering iron to make the holes - a method which proved more efficient and provided more scope for experimentation. Unlike the hole punch, the soldering iron made raised perforations, which created a marked tension between the canvas as two dimensional surface and three dimensional object.

From 1998, the landscape entered into my work, represented in the abstract through colour, light, space and mood. The textile influence is still present, but increasingly in the abstract rather than as a direct reference to my cultural heritage. The painting "Weaving Trees" (1998) is suggestive of the synthesis of these two elements, weaving and the landscape. One could read this as a metaphor for the way Australia for me is about home and place, and this is woven into the painting - much like the Lao women weaving their life stories into their fabric.

I have been painting for ten years now, and my work no longer draws on traditional Lao textiles alone. Rather, I have spent some years looking at and appreciating other textile traditions. In 2000 I had a residency in Arbroath, Scotland, at Hospitalfield House. Discovering an old book on clan tartans in a second-hand bookstore in Edinburgh actually led me to experiment with tartan designs as visual abstract forms. I combined tartan patterns with bindis which I bought in Singapore's Little India shortly before going to Scotland, so that the works I produced in Arbroath and on my return to Sydney form something of a travelogue. What resulted was the "Highland Mandala" series.

Another studio residency I took was in Tokyo, in 2002. I went to Tokyo to research contemporary and traditional Japanese textiles. While in Japan I also became interested in Japanese Zen temples and gardens, which I saw on my trip to Kyoto. The golden yellow of Kyoto's autumn leaves, and the silvery grey lights reflected in the gravel, gave welcome relief from the gaudy colours of Tokyo. This experience led me to experiment with the lines of the raked stoned garden. Another enduring experience I had in Japan was that of walking among the confusing

multiple levels of the cityscape around Shinjuku in Tokyo's "centre". The ground, the raised walkways between buildings, and the subterranean passages all exist within the same visual space. This had the effect of disorientating my whole sense of balance and perspective. "Various Levels" (2002) is one of the results of this experience.

I have travelled so much in the last 3 years, living between Australia and Singapore. I have travelled in Asia, once to Scotland and twice each to London and Paris. After all this, I can still say that the most enduring inspiration for me is Australia and the Australian landscape. The vastness of the country awaits my discovery. Still holding strong in my memory is that mysterious rock in the Centre: the light, the colours...and Asia, real as a place, experienced by an Asian woman who inhabits Australianness.

On a recent trip back to Laos between December 2003 and the New Year I had an experience I want to relate (my second time back, but my first time back as a "tourist"). Eating outside at a restaurant on the Mekong River in Luang Prabang, I saw an elderly man with thick glasses sitting on a chair under a tree. He was weaving a fishing net hooked onto a branch of the tree. I could hardly contain my curiosity during lunch. After our meal I went straight to him, still hungry to know what he was doing, and how he was doing it. At the same time I was in awe of the exquisiteness of his fine work, which must have taken him months to do. Like a true capitalist I offered to buy his net, a price for which I had to negotiate with his son, as the father appeared to be perplexed by the whole thing. Walking away feeling elated that I had possession of such beauty, at the same time I felt sad and guilty about the fact that I had taken away his net for a miserly 80 000 kip, which is equivalent to \$13. What would he do now? A friend suggested "He'll just make another one," and I was a little bit consoled. I like to think that I have recognised a fellow artist, but some nagging questions remain from this encounter with the elderly man. Should I have taken his net away from him? Was he actually intending to use such a fine-holed fishing net? Is this a measure of how depleted the fish stocks in the Mekong River are? Was he aware fishing with such a net would make things worse?

In retrospect, after walking away with the net I could not put my finger on why the feeling of guilt and sadness came over me. I was torn between wanting to keep the net as an exquisite object and wanting to give it back to him. The elderly man's reaction to the money exchanged was an anti-climax for me, as he appeared totally uninterested by it. Not knowing what to do with it, he even tried to give the money to his son, but the son said that it was his money, and he should keep it. I think deep down I expected him to be thrilled by my offer. The fact that he was not threw me. We were momentarily caught between each other's worlds. With my money I had dragged the elderly man into my world; I had turned something that had for him only a functional and useful value into a commodity. What was traditional became an object of fetishisation. At the same time I had identified with his mode of production. The image of him weaving under the tree spoke to me about the net being made according to the rhythm of a pre-industrial world. The unexpected meeting with the elderly man made me think about my process of perforating the canvas and paper, and about the contrast between the 'staccato' movement of the perforation and the fluid motion of the paint brush. The repetition and

regular nature of the perforations are much like the elderly man's weaving, and suggest to me a similarity in the passage of time through our work. The old man's work was not made as a commodity; the production of the net was an end in itself. All of which made me think about my early installation works. Why I had chosen to make the kind of work I did, using the perishable kind of material that I did? It also made me think of my recent works on canvas - how they get sold, and the strange relationship of ownership. That to me is an abstraction in itself.

The fishing net is now hanging in our house in Canberra, the object of my inspiration. I plan to do a number of canvas works using this weaving technique. I am fortunate enough to have a cousin living in Australia, originally from Luang Prabang, who is a fishing nut and knows how to make this type of net. He will teach me, and I hope to collaborate with him.

Finally, what can one say about abstraction in one's work, where the process of working is not about words but everything about the visual: colour, light, space and composition? And if the work is done through the process of doing it, how does one describe this 'process'? What I can say is that before I begin painting there is always a visual inner plan. Often this plan is not the end result, and the work goes through a visual journey to arrive at a finished result that includes elements not conceived of before the painting was started. But sometimes this inner plan is so clear and so in harmony with the material - paint, paper, cotton threads, seed pods or grains of rice - that the work seems to travel along a single road. I don't really have the language to talk about how I get from where I am when I start to the finished work, but if I had to sum up the meaning of abstraction in my work, it would be found somewhere in the space between experience and memory.

¹ Guy Underwood, *The Pattern of the Past*, London: Abacus, 1972.

² Kasina are coloured discs used by monks to aid meditation.