

Thinking (of) my art practice

after Edmund de Waal

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***You walk into the forest and pick up an object.
You hold it in your hand and feel its history.
Through that object you begin to tell a story.***

I'm in a pine forest. I've been here before but it looks different. They tell me a forest is always changing but I'm never here long enough to witness it. Branches drop. The lantana grows higher and thicker. How I remember the place is different too. It depends on how I felt that day when I last came here, but today I feel grateful for some aloneness, grateful to share time with the trees.

I find a clear spot to set up my stool on the edge of the forestry road, amongst the carpet of crunchy pine needles. I stretch briefly before taking off my backpack and sitting down. I take out my sketchbook and box of pencils and put it on the ground to my right. I take out my watercolour kit and brushes and put it to my left, within reach.

I can hear black cockatoos in the distance, probably feeding on the pine cones. Their calls are eerie and melancholy, their pitch rising up and down, like ragged breathing. I hope they come closer so I can see them. Disappointingly they eventually drift away. I open up my sketchbook to a blank page and write "Black Cockatoos". I don't know whether they are red-tailed or yellow-tailed. I'm sure they don't care.

Today I am here in the forest without a plan, or perhaps my plan is just to be here. To stop for a while. I could write some words in a list. A list of birds, a list of plants, a list of biting insects. In a pine forest there are lots of pine trees and lantana, so maybe my plant list will be short. I could write a list of senses - what I see, hear, feel, smell, taste, touch. That would be useful for some creative writing later on and then I can see what connects with me later on. Or I could do some nature journaling. No, I'm not in the mood for pretty pictures so perhaps just some sketching in my book.

I feel impatient with the blank pages, so I ask myself, what story should I tell? It's not the story of the forest, it's the story of me in the forest. My lens, my noticing.

I'm surrounded by tall pine trees, all the same species, in straight lines, in rows. They're clones of each other, swaying slightly in the south-east breeze but held strong together. They're the same today as they were yesterday and will be tomorrow. But one day this part of the forest will be unrecognisable, full of light and wind and sand. Today this forest is my shelter against time, but one day I will be unrecognisable too.

I pick up a pine cone lying next to my stool and begin to draw some lines. As I move my eyes between the cone and my pencil, I see words. Initially, like those first drawn lines, I document the obvious. The basic shape, the spiky silhouette, the awkward geometric configurations. I

then shift closer to it - the sugary scent of decay, the sharpness of the wind fingering my face, the anger of ants emerging from their cone shelter.

I'm surrounded by lines of trees. There are a lot of lines in my art practice. I work with paper. My paper may come with lines on it – lines to guide my writing or lines of text on book pages. Or my paper may be blank, ready to accept the lines I draw or print or write. Anthropologist Tim Ingold says that humans live, and give their lives meaning, by making lines. 'Everything is a parliament of lines, to study both people and things is to study the lines they are made of'.

Lines they are made of..... I'm thinking about lines and about the forest in front of me and behind me. There are many lines in a pine forest – the tree trunks, the branches, the pine needles, the rows of planted trees, the forestry roads, the long limbs of lantana stretching out to reach the sunlight. I draw a line in my sketchbook to represent that thought, and write "a forest is a line" underneath it. Now I have two lines in my book, because a sentence is a line of words.

My art practice is like a line of verbs – it's a series of actions, seen or unseen, to achieve the outcomes which are needed for monetary reward. It's the process, the bit between the start and finish, that drives me. It's the sitting in a pine forest, alone, with a sketchbook and pencil in hand that is the verb, whether it's thinking, seeing, smelling, writing, or drawing. Or maybe it's just a random object in my hand – a leaf, a pine cone, a lantana flower, a wing from a dead butterfly – it's how I see it through the lens of my life experience and personality that defines my art practice. I know that's what I want to capture, to tell my story. Maybe as an artist, I don't tick the right boxes? I'm not young, I don't live in a rural town, and I don't have an Arts degree. I tell myself that I shouldn't care about ticking boxes anymore.

I'm back in the pine forest. Thinking about lines and thinking about verbs. 'Thinking is my fighting' [Virginia Woolf].

I've been looking at Richard Serra's 'Verb List' and how I can use it to map the interior of my art practice. Printmaking has been the traction of my art practice for many years. The act of printing is a series of verbs –

to scratch	to etch	to roll	to ink	to wipe
to stack	to spill	to wet	to dampen	to register
to wind	to peel	to hang	to flatten	to name

I do a lot of monoprinting with leaves, that adds more verbs to my list –

to observe	to hike	to pedal	to paddle	to stop
to gather	to discard	to collect	to trim	to reach
to rub	to stash	to press	to select	to place
to cover	to flow	to force	to arrange	to tweak

And then there's the untellable –

to throw	to crumple	to rip up	to tear	to smudge
to dance	to swear	to sing	to cry	to mourn

All of these verbs tell the story of me as a maker. The how I work, and why I do it, the interior of my practice. There is another layer though – how my body moves through these verbs, the performance of process. This makes my art practice unique. No-one else dances like me. There is no audience for my process. The verbs and my body are alone in the forest.

The trees sway slightly, pine cones and branchlets whispering against each other. The unsaid words between my words. The gaps between the trees and the rows of trees, where the darkness is and the lantana thorns pull at my writing confidence. Like the double spaces between my sentences.

What has been my relationship with words? No belief. No trust. But what if my noticing, my deeper connection with the natural world is wrapped in words, rather than passing thoughts or prints of leaves? Words could be my map, a guidebook to finding myself within the natural world. I want to explore where my life intersects with the natural world, both yesterday and today. Words allow me to have a heart-to-heart with my other self (the stranger) in the sanctuary of the private page.

My noticing is sharpened when I'm alone in the forest, no distractions pulling at my thoughts and observations. I sit here with paper and pencil in hand to capture moments of thought, the lines of words that pass through and are gone within an instant. I offer the forest my undivided attention, flirt a bit, inviting the trees into my head.

Mary Oliver is standing next to me. She asks 'Do the trees feel? Do they love their life? Or does their patience drown out everything else?' Nothing is in a hurry in the pine forest today. Time lingers. My slow lines still the mind. A slant rhyme. It's very seductive this language of lines,

My thoughts turn to a tree in a park near where I live. A big old gum tree, a eucalypt, I don't know what species because I never took the time to get to know it. That tree made an impression on me, elongated branches like warm welcoming arms and shimmering leaves with ancient eyes watching the cars hurrying by. But there were too many cars, mine included, and the road needed to be widened. I was there the day the chainsaws and nailed boots tore at its bark, severing limbs and splitting the canopy. Did that tree feel? Did it feel the pain of metal on flesh?

Suddenly I am surrounded by pain. The forest of pine trees is a manufactured forest, here for a purpose.

The lines are tearing. Ripping. Bruising.

I gather my gear into my backpack, fold up my stool and return the way I came down the line of the forestry road.

Branches drop. Lantana grows higher and thicker.

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