

Creature Discomforts – a geography of symbols

A printer, a composer, a sculptor and a writer on common ground, a patch of land on a steep incline with three great rocks forming a dramatic, if imperfect trinity – a proper beginning to a baroque expression. It is already inhabited: plants, fungi, molds, yeasts, lichens, animals, insects, arachnids, bacteria. They are the land and shape of air, they root it, traverse it, feed from it, and add their detritus to its shifting masses and volumes. Its demeanor reflects their uses, their parasitic relationships, their take-overs and die-backs, their adaptations and evolutions as they pursue their sole agenda, survival. Our human-artist agenda: to express a relationship with each other, the world and this specific site while disturbing, as little as possible, the agenda of its primary inhabitants.

From the first steps we take on the site we begin the inevitable process of failure in this agenda. We are confronted with the discomforts of nature – wetness, bug bites, cold, heat, no washrooms – which our own instincts to survive prod us to reshape to our convenience. Of course we can tell ourselves that we are only a newer component added to the more constant population, no less natural than an insect that's flown in from the next site. But it is obvious that although we may not be unique in our desire to reshape our environment for our convenience, our ability to do so is unparalleled. Our motives may – arguably – have survival as an end game, but they are so obscured by our more immediate subsidiary motives – love, hate, revenge, power – that we are perfectly capable of destroying ourselves and our fellow earthlings in their pursuit.

The “right” to reshape our environment, to see the world as human domain, is imparted in virtually every creation myth, but never more clearly than in the Judeo-Christian book of Genesis. The period in Europe referred to as Baroque was marked by the need to reaffirm this absolute “right” or “truth” as it's explorer-soldiers, its missionaries and its colonists flooded the banks of the “new world”. They claimed dominion over it even as they came face to face with societies already coherent with their own symbolic systems. Europeans used the infant ideas of proto-science with its zealous faith in codification to impart its “universal” symbols upon the new lands and their inhabitants – to name a thing was to know a thing, was to own a thing (The race to read and copyright strings of DNA shows just how far we've not come).

Since we cannot build comfort at our site we send a trinity of surrogates whom wont mind – the horse (mind), the boar (body), the pole lady (spirit). We try to give them tools to communicate with each other in our stead through 3 common symbols we choose for their supposed universality, pyramids (aspiration), bowls (containment), spirals or waves (continuity). We place the symbols with our surrogates to reflect their “character” and their “place” in nature. We introduce voices and sounds to animate them, yet these too are reminders of other places, other times; they are only passing through. At intervals jewel like sacs of water sparkle, chemical footprints of our temporary alien selves, for, although we attempt sensitivity to the site it must be clear that even our surrogates are only tourists, and this, after all, is what we would prefer.

Time, however, is a great mediator of symbols, and proximity a great moderator of ownership. The ambiguity of symbols lend themselves to evolving metaphors, meanings are layered and subverted to the “site specific” context. We include symbolic companions, the chi-chi doggies, our “trickster” friends, to facilitate the transition. Above, near the perceptual “top” of our site, a great rock looms, a mute observer, overlooking our frail failure to speak to each other, to find common ground with nature. It will observe the inevitable mediation of our symbols, our surrogates, as we are separated from them by space and time, and their meanings become their own and yours.

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