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Landscapes of Aesthetic Education: A Review Essay

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Landscapes of Aesthetic Education is a strong compilation of previously published essays by artist/educators Stuart Richmond and Celeste Snowber. The authors express a desire to cultivate a non-linear progression of ideas, therefore their chapters alternate voices while also encompassing the complexity of scholarship in the arts: philosophy, poetry, visual art, dance, spiritual concerns, architecture, mentoring, photography and ethics, to name a few. They employ the metaphor of 'landscapes' in their title to suggest there is an expansive vista ahead of the reader where one might grapple with essential issues of what it means to be human, and to do so artfully.

The arts transform, and the authors note this as a holistic necessity to the "growing disconnection" (p. vii) of human life with the rest of nature. Snowber and Richmond also recognize the need for a return to the balance of intellect and sense-knowing in the body, just

as many other scholars in philosophy, the arts, and education have been clarifying (Abram, 1996; Richards, 1989; London, 2003; Noddings, 2003; and Louv; 2008) over the last several decades.

What sets this book apart from other books on aesthetics is a questioning, intuitive approach to the information that one suspects is also a deeply ingrained part of their teaching. When Snowber remarks, for example, that our bodies have embedded memories, and that there is a sense of expectancy in the new possibilities we awaken through movement, our attention turns not just to the body—but to the awakening body of teaching as an aesthetic encounter worthy of a book-length discussion. Likewise, when Richmond cultivates in a slow, careful manner the meaning of resonance with medieval architecture as more than an epistemological unveiling of history and philosophy it is his intention to *show rather than tell* that is reminiscent of naturalist Freeman Tilden's (1977) principles of interpretation. While Tilden offered interpretive science for America's National Park Service several decades ago, his approach seems to resonate with Richmond's orientation when he defined the 'interpreter' of a site: "Besides being ready in his information and studious in his use of research, he goes beyond the apparent to the real, beyond a part to a whole, beyond a truth to a more important truth (p. 8)." Yet, what moves us forward from other ideas on aesthetics to *the interpretive showing* that is the heart of this text, one that Tillman would say provokes, rather than simply informs, and "address[es] the whole man, rather than any phase" of the individual? (1977, p. 9).

A short browse through other scholarly reads in aesthetics is time well spent before trekking with Snowber and Richmond through their vision of aesthetics. While this review far from encompasses the rich array in aesthetic commentary, these scholarly works are briefly explored to situate this book, *Landscapes in Aesthetic Education*, as a useful, provocative text that should grace the shelves of scholars in the arts.

Michael Parsons and H. Gene Blocker (1993) note that the conceptions of what constitutes art have been in perpetual change throughout the past century, and this also includes how we value the arts, the sense of history they convey, and aesthetic perceptions. Mary Ann Staniszewski (1995) credits Kant, who, in 1790, used the term aesthetics to refer to "a new science of sensuous knowledge" (p. 119). The only pure form of beauty was to be found in nature, according to Kant, with art works deriving their created beauty by beings (men, in Staniszewski's historical reading), as those who were endowed with both genius and taste. While aesthetic inquiry in education has shifted to examine a growing paradigm of *valuing difference* (Atkinson, 2002), being-in-the-world, and culturally embedded meanings as common practice, Kant's conceptions of aesthetics may serve to orient the reader to Richmond's (in particular) and Snowber's discussions because of a strong sensory connection

to knowledge of beauty which emerges from both spirit and taste. In a slightly different vein, Maxine Greene (2001) describes aesthetic education as the development of the “discriminating appreciation and understanding of the several arts” (8). Using numerous examples from the fine arts, in contrast to art as a daily-lived encounter experienced in most of Richmond’s and Snowber’s work, Greene also ponders the problem of perception—just what does it mean to perceive aesthetically? Art educator, Howard McConeghey (2003), refers to the original Greek idea of aesthetics which meant *a gasp*, or *breathing in, the taking in* of a perception of the world, however unconscious we may be of aesthetics in our participation. Like Snowber and Richmond, McConeghey acknowledges the paradox of the term aesthetic that allows both the numinous and the pragmatic to emerge as generative, fleshing out a response that breathes life into experiences of the psyche. Infusing the classroom with metaphor is essential, as Greene suggests throughout her writing; and this includes engaging in connections, or relational aesthetics, as Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) regales. Yet, for him, it is the kind of aesthetic sensibility that is no longer fixated on a concept of historical evolution in aesthetics, rather one that is focused on “learning to inhabit the world in a better way” (p. 13). Like Dewey (1934), who believed that artistic activity was a natural daily occurrence, one that organizes one’s awareness of aesthetic form, Snowber and Richmond develop throughout this text the feeling that experiences are whole, and carry with them “their individualizing quality and self-sufficiency” (p. 35). Building upon Western aesthetics, we might do well to look at art educator Ken Beittel’s (1989) thoughts on Eastern aesthetics that thrive on participation, community, and the idea of standing within a tradition, even as we alter the tradition through our improvisational practice in the arts. While evident throughout Richmond’s and Snowber’s work, the concepts of centering, ritual, and wholeness of body and spirit are amplified in Beittel’s aesthetic practice as an artist and teacher. Aesthetic teaching encounters, are *Socratic* and live within the present moment, as Abbs (1994) explains: the meaning of education is derived, (just as Snowber concurs), in “*this* moment of understanding now, as it takes place in reading *this* poem, making *that* dance, reading *this* theory solving *that* equation” (p. 9)—this is the heart of aesthetic intelligence.

Writing a review of this particular aesthetic text-as-landscape then, becomes a bit like composing a field guide for this 191-page volume; a description of what ideas take flight when traversing Snowber’s and Richmond’s terrain, with an interpretive commentary that hopefully provokes and invites further meanderings. The reader may consider various reasons to value the wildness of the aesthetic sensibilities nesting in the souls of these artists/authors/educators through the themes that reoccur throughout their writing.

Celeste Snowber begins by examining the mentor’s role as an artist, which includes a poetic exploration of deep listening. She defines this as “a process not much different than how the artist must listen to specific words, colours, textures, and movements that express content,

form or lived experience”(p. 1). Snowber links listening and mentoring as partners in a dance: “Listening to the underside of what is happening in a student’s life is a sacred act, one that must take form in the soil of mindfulness and loving kindness (p. 4).” Later, she likens this to attending, in much the same way that Nel Noddings might suggest is caring responsiveness (2003), or Mary Rose O’Reilly might refer to as listening someone into existence (1998), or Simone Weil (Springsted, 1998) might pronounce as the sort of deep, undivided attention called prayer.

Knowing oneself as an artist/teacher requires listening to the life-as-lived, deepening the practices that Snowber hopes will loosen the gridlock of preconceived notions of research by encouraging students, through her example, to engage in practices that assist them in listening to their lives. Mentoring is co-creative, and the act transforms teacher and student. In a manner reminiscent of Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings (1977), Snowber voices the intuitive intelligence that recognizes that rigour is developed through loving kindness, awareness of the dark days and the inter-play of light and shadow, and the fragile balance of environments in education.

From this place of deep listening, a receptive field is prepared for Stuart Richmond’s musings on city sights and being an artist in a market economy (Chapter 2). He asks the existential questions that resonate with many in the arts: how best to do my task in education? How can I be the best *me* that can accomplish this task? How best to live in the world?

Employing Wittgenstein’s approach to understanding life through small penetrating glimpses of a situation that reveal deep understanding, Richmond thus parallels Snowber’s attentive listening. Richmond uses his art background as metaphoric descriptors of where he is heading: it is impressionistic—a collage of writing that opens and shows the reader where one *might* go—the path ultimately being the reader’s choice.

He offers strong arguments from Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, laced between his Vancouver life-experiences and the obvious connections between Wittgenstein’s and Taylor’s views: the type of means-to-an-end thinking that pre-disposes us to assume there is an instrumental use for everything--whether this is educational pursuits or a walk on the beach. Richmond solidifies his line of thought with the astute observation that “as educators we are so used to assuming generic utility and skill transfer in learning activities, we often cannot see the inherent attributes and values of the activity or discipline itself” (p. 23). He extends this open-ended thinking to contemporary art and the nature of education in art as well. Students, he says, shape their aesthetic responses by creating—unhindered by rules, genres, or directions of how to proceed.

In Chapter 3, Snowber captivates the imagination and the soul with the eros of listening, which is the love at the center of bringing-into-being. She encourages the reader to consider that listening must be much more than the aural function we ascribe to hearing: listening is a bodily awareness. Indeed, “the innate connectedness between heart and body calls out for our attention”(p. 32). The brokenness, the despair that Snowber discusses are also “the knots” that Buddhist authors Friedman and Moon (both noted by Snowber) find to be the beginning of listening to the body’s need to heal.

While solitude is useful and essential to the productivity of being, Snowber also points out that the daily rituals of our lives, if observed and honored, can bring great peace and cultivate appreciation. Deep gratitude, explained passionately in the story of her mother’s love of the sea, is a matter of the heart finding the body. The result, in Snowber’s telling, is that gratitude fills “our bodies with expectancy” (p. 37) and opens the memory to body-sense, a recollection that we never forget. Humans, she concludes, have “the capacity to attend to mystery in the midst of the ordinary” (p. 38) which makes each attended-to moment an aesthetic experience.

Snowber’s attention to mystery is deepened as Richmond then situates the viewer beside him while he muses at medieval architecture and conveys what it could mean for an interested viewer to examine the topic more closely. Wittgenstein is called upon again (p. 43), with Richmond adding his thoughts that resonance implies an affinity for connecting, harmonizing, and responding. Through his physical presence at Cistercian monastic sites, Richmond accelerates the reader’s perceptual response as one of understanding of what it could mean to be living there at any point in time over the past 900 years. His sensibilities as a photographer are those of the mentor: the “ego must be eased back,” (p. 61) and it is “only with gentle prolonged attention” (p. 62), much as Snowber acknowledges her resonance with Simone Weil’s deep attending of the heart as prayer, that Richmond connects with his surroundings.

The reoccurring theme that ordinary experiences are the stuff of aesthetics, rather than elevated, isolated experiences within fine art settings is conveyed repeatedly through the authors’ lived experiences. Snowber challenges readers to examine their own lives as an aesthetic engagement. *Anesthetic*, the numbing, non-feeling state opposes aesthetic sensibility, which revels in the artful connections Snowber notices: landscapes of water, folding the laundry, “the deep seeing, deep listening, that will allow the colours, sounds, shapes, and textures to sink into our beings.” (p. 68). Her poems (two) in this chapter show rather than tell the exquisite responsiveness of being present to beauty and the aesthetic everyday climate we co-create with our own awareness.

In Chapter Six, Richmond proposes to reexamine beauty in order to solidify its stance in art education. Richmond strongly advances the position “that now more than ever in the arts and

education we need to develop capacities for creating and appreciating beauty, if only to bring us back into contact with what is sensual and intrinsically worthwhile” (p. 70). Here he establishes that there are specific signs that clarify the significance of aesthetic education. He refers to Kant, who states that beauty is noticed as a quality we feel when the subject and object are harmonious in art. Richmond also advocates that one does not always have to control in artmaking, yet can respectfully observe the chance encounters as aesthetically pleasing. Richmond explains that he agrees with Kant who states that “perception of beauty requires a contemplative frame of mind which implies both receptiveness and detachment” (p. 84) – a release of desire, and a receptivity to engaging, attending, and being fully present in the moment. While beauty may have a rational component, (noticing form, pattern, or order), Richmond also accepts that at some point contemplation is important for a deep appreciation to develop, but he notes that it is developed culturally, nourished personally, and nudged by our own artistic intuitions.

In Chapter 7, Snowber picks up the thread of the aesthetic, intuitive discussion by exploring ‘bodydance’ as improvisation, “a paradigm for theorizing with the body” (p. 91). Philosophically she draws nourishment from authors who have explored the phenomena of living in the aesthetic moment, whether it be observations within a related, connected world (Abram, 1996), the lived curriculum advocated by Ted Aoki (2005), or living through the written words of exemplars. (Examples cited by Snowber here are Cixous, 1993; and Griffin, 1995). Their research methodologies, along with Snowber’s feminist orientation, anchor her discussion of dance, bodies, memory and how attending to our bodies opens the narrative within. The interaction of memory and body allow one to glimpse the mystery, which Snowber points out as the heart of improvisation. She refers to this art as “a place for enfleshing inquiry into a visceral place of continually thirsting for knowledge” (p. 95). Imagination, in the author’s thinking, is “a muscle” (p. 99) that must be used to refine intuition into improvisation, the thought into the action. As she closes this chapter, Snowber refers to “paradoxology” or “the praise of paradox” (p. 102) which opens the possibilities in seeing, moving, and being in the place where we began, starting to know it again as though it was the very first time (paraphrase of T. S. Eliot). The aesthetic encounters are unexpected events in one’s life that begin as moments of mystery when, like Abraham, one might entertain angels, unaware.

Richmond’s strongest chapter follows Snowber’s praise of paradox by wrestling with important questions about teaching and art: Is it art if an expert notes its values in an accepted art venue? Is it teaching if it lacks prescription and/or direction? Here Richmond uncovers the meta-narratives of a post-modern direction, one built on conceptualism, which speaks of “ideas rather than objects” (p. 105) and avoids contextual interplay. Rather, socially laden material has swept aside traditional skills, although Richmond acknowledges that there is a

tremendous overlap in the extremes of practice—making the instruction of art decisively difficult. Yet Richmond carefully unpacks his view: skills, history, social traditions are all important, yet should combine their foci “with a degree of postmodern irreverence” (p. 107). Contemporary art has encouraged art education loosen its fixed gaze on the artist as sole genius; and has encouraged an influx of improvisation and collaboration that unite personal vision with community and cultural concerns. Richmond continues his discussion by addressing the nature of creativity, for he says that this is central to the question “Can art be taught?” According to Kant who is peppered throughout Richmond’s chapters, art cannot be taught. A student can learn the mechanics of drawing, but the composition, the organic sense of intuition that pulls the work together cannot be conveyed through direction instruction.

Richmond discusses Matthew Rampley’s views on creativity: that new ideas emerge unintended from the constraints of solving a problem. His discussion seems to echo Patricia Stokes (2006) findings that visual and performing artists often adapt to what they have, embellish on that, and become a master of their own domain through improvisation that is the direct result of constraints. Like dance educators Oreck and Nicoll, Richmond values the finding of interesting problems. As Oreck & Nicoll (2010, in press) comment, “to develop ideas beyond the initial inspiration they must discover a form integral to the problems they are trying to solve.” It is the discovery of that hidden form that has most likely led Richmond to his investigation of Asian artmaking as a rich source of spontaneity that breaks the confines of “behavioristic notions of education” (p. 113). The initiation of the student into the tradition of practice, as Beittel has suggested in *Zen and the Art of Pottery* (1989), is the tacit knowledge that Richmond also alludes to: a practice that is silent, vigilant, ever-attentive to a form that can be individuated. Richmond then extends his philosophy of teaching art to teaching photography, grounding his theories in practical explanations for the reader. The strengths here come from personal mentoring, it seems (i.e.; how to assist students in valuing their aesthetic choices; keeping the work from being overly-manipulated; setting limits in order to develop creative problem solving; and exploring the art of others). He ends with a pragmatism that anchors both his discussions on aesthetics and teaching, and Snowber’s value in attending to the intuitive. He states, “Artists can only be prepared broadly and quipped minimally—I say minimally because the fetish over equipment (and technique) can be an obstacle to vision and creativity” (pp. 115-116).

This discussion is furthered in Snowber’s work on *Leaning Absolutes* in which the continual conversation of “leaning into creation, letting creation lean into me” (p. 120) parallels Richmond’s words about curriculum. Here, it is the unplanned surprise, the messy unexpected arrival of events that cause us to pay attention, give attention, or lovingly attend to what happens right now around us. Snowber states “I am coming to see that it does not just take an honouring of new ways of seeing our own stories, really an honouring of a spirituality of

messiness, but of a compassionate patience with all that happens in our lives, even the places of discord and paradox (p. 129). This understanding has developed in her life as a “theology of suffering” (p. 129), it is what is needed as a necessity in the classroom so that students can open themselves to life, to the incongruities of experiences and ideals and thus allow them to migrate to the places where the body meets the soul.

Richmond positions himself as an advocate for the arts in Chapter 10, who explains how art education might offset or balance globalization’s strong instrumental, technocratic, and market focus” (p. 131). A realist, Richmond clarifies that art education is not a panacea, but a means to develop the powers to appreciate and thus contribute to the connections we feel socially and ethically with others. Indeed, Richmond suggests that viewing art enables one to set aside personal views, and examine visual works with an aesthetic lens, one that fosters cognitive and affective responses to the world. It is not only art viewing that Richmond sees as an effective response to globalization. The making of art, often given short shrift in public education today due to a variety of misguided beliefs, is essential for a creative, artistic spirit to emerge that can challenge, benefit, and possibly even alter the direction of human existence. Yet, Richmond takes it further. In the act of creation, there is something deeply productive that develops the human capacity to shape the future, the identity of the human being, and uniquely fits one to respond with sensitivity to the surrounding wisdom and beauty. Globalization, as Richmond concludes, affects the quality of life issues that matter greatly. Thus an art education that increases awareness of aesthetic understanding deepens the hope that “no ideology is inevitable, and that philosophies and conditions can improve” (p. 146).

In Chapter 11, Snowber gently brings us back to the teaching presence/present: whether it be human in form, or a relational awareness that instructs. She asks that we examine *eros*, once again, the love that is sought by the soul or *psyche* and is always acknowledged within the body. “Teaching is the art of the word becoming flesh” (p. 149) Snowber explains, and we teach who we are. Subject matter, then, whether dance, art, or aesthetics, in this view, is the means of teaching who we bring to class each day. The subject matter is the full plate offered from a passionate inquirer, or simply a meager fare if the instructor is not fully present. Once again incorporating her poetry expressively, Snowber nudges: “Be in the skin of now” (p. 149).

Richmond continues with giving us his notes on Wittgenstein in a series of small, collaged essays, which, although loosely conceptualized, shift and extend pleasure in a unique expressive form. Indeed, we are reminded through his sharing of stories that Wittgenstein believed that the spirit of humanness was revealed through the artful forms, such as telling a story, creating a new perspective from a camera’s lens as in the remarkable film, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, or in simply living artfully, everyday. Giving space for the subjectivity

of experience to emerge as a valid voice in education seems paramount to his discussion. The concept of *wu-wei* the ability to let things flow, take their course, and in doing so, become the action that teaches, is mirrored in the Western thinking of Wittgenstein and Richter. As Richter noted, “Strange though this may sound, not knowing where one is going—being lost, being a loser—reveals the greatest possible faith and optimism” (Richter, 1988, p. 15). This undergirding of not knowing yet garnered with faith, exquisitely expressed by Richter, is an important idea for both Richmond and Snowber in their philosophies of aesthetic education.

Richmond’s appreciation for their stance on aesthetic and ethical similarities becomes enhanced through his own teaching of art and photography, where, at some point, he says, “you have intuitively to feel your way to an understanding” (p. 167). The thrust of his discussion echoes the same clarity that Snowber expressed earlier. Theory may estrange thought and feeling: in artistic practice, they merge in ways that are not easily analyzed or categorized. He ends with a caveat: “Preserve the original human touch at the risk of some spilt ink, and promote aesthetic responsiveness” (p. 170). The openness in this kind of artistic teaching and practice values what Richmond rightly notes as “living patterns of practice” that “still serve to inform thinking” (p. 170).

The world within, and the world outside of us inform us when we listen, according to Snowber’s final chapter. Here, she connects what it means to be a leader or a teacher with the nuances of an inner life. She also addresses arts-based research through her implementation of it—with poetry as a way of bridging the ordinary with the intimate, inner life of the self. The unplanned curriculum, the hidden journey, the spirals and angles that offer astonishment are part of the living pedagogy that call the teacher to growth, as she acknowledges from educator Ted Aoki. It is as though this kind of teaching she is showing the reader sweeps one into awareness, suddenly into a state of *darzán*, which phenomenologist Laura Sewall (1999) would say is not just within the image, but is the gift of revelation received in the image or experience, where one might behold beauty and the holiness of the moment as though for the first time. This revelation, according to Snowber, allows us to teach and to lead with an attention to the daily life of aesthetic encounters. The random interactions with beauty give one cause to return to a state of wonder and the small act of noticing beauty mentors teachers and leaders because it is “seeing and attending that transforms” (p. 187) whatever it is we encounter. This is, as Snowber closes her thoughtful chapter and this book, where “first sight begins” (p. 187).

This book returns full circle to where first sight begins, in a way, for there is no concluding chapter that sums up the landscapes travelled. We have been accompanied by two strong leaders through the underbrush, gleaning their experiences on mentoring, ethics, teaching, listening, and marveling at the world, in the hope—at least I am thinking that Snowber and

Richmond hope for this---that we take this myriad of experiential, shown phenomena and bring our own musings, daily encounters in teaching and learning in the arts, and discover the artful forms that are individual aesthetic solutions.

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