

## M<sup>2</sup> Gallery 27 November 2022, *To the River*

How can we hold the hearing of the poem? It needs to be heard a few times perhaps because of its richness, each line travels far. Once the poem lands, we need to hear it again - because it takes time to feel its pulse and resonance.

What this poem really tells us is about Jo's relationship to water, and to the river. And how this moves her to poems - a poetic of making

Jo has a very special ability to tune into her environment and find points of contact. In a riverscape, there are a multitude of elements at any one time. The river, the air, the light, the rock, the weather, all the species of trees and plants, sounds, scents etc etc. - and then she introduces the paper, the water and the colour.

All of this coalesces in the moment, where colour touches water touches paper. The image unfolds in an instant, radiating out in all its complexity. It is held by the gaze of Jo as she steers the colour, guiding it in collaboration with the moving water.

In the same way that certain mushrooms can't be cultivated because they only grow within a complex forest ecology, a lot of factors are present that need to coalesce in the moment of making one of Jo's paintings.

It is on account of Jo's singular ability of attunement, being absolutely present to the river, that the paintings happen in the way that they do.

I know how difficult this is because I've tried it. It is not a case of putting paint on paper and submerging it in water and hoping something will happen. It is about a convergence of sympathetic factors in a moment of exquisite attention. It can't be manufactured.

Jo told me she couldn't make these water drawings work when she tried them in a paddling pool. It has to be in at the river, within a total environment. And it is not just that the tides and currents in the river made the marks more interesting, it is about the confluence of all the factors into that one instantaneous moment of making.

I teach watercolour and on occasion I take my students down to the Thames, and we try a version of this. Sure sometimes some lovely things occur, but it is not the same. I think the difference is that we are trying for effect. Not entering into a moment in the way that Jo does.

In the philosophy of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, perception is a form of participation. You cannot be in the landscape as an isolated entity, there is always reciprocity between you and the other phenomena. As David Abram, contemporary geo-philosopher puts it,

*'Perception, experientially considered, is an ongoing dynamic wherein the sensing body finds itself drawn into an interactive, participatory exchange - a kind of nonverbal conversation-with the things that surround it.....Sensory experience functions to bind our individual nervous systems into the encompassing ecosystem.'*

Philosopher Timothy Morton would call what Jo is doing a 'mind-meld'. For them (they use gender neutral pronouns) beauty, for example, is an active agent which is equally the property of the onlooker as it a property of what is being looked at. The 'mind meld' happens between the two and it is in this space that Jo's art happens.

Looking at this painting, it is made of paradoxes. How come, for instance does the action of paint and water create shafts of light? The vaporous veils create a sense of mist but also the solidity of a mountain. It arrests us. But why? What is happening? Borrowing from the art critic Peter Fuller is the suggestion that it:

*'sets up vibrations in the deeper layers of our consciousness and..these vibrations radiate in many directions, lighting up a vast system of correlated feelings and ideas.'*

Or better still, from Jo's poem:

*"I become still in you, the horizon of my being unfolds"*

Lucie Winterson 2022