

Reflections on Art and Permaculture

By Adam Wolpert

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I'm painting in the garden, under golden leaves. The familiar process unfolds again as it has before countless times, always new, exciting and unexpected. I put down a brushstroke, stand back and observe. How does the mark change the whole? How do the new relationships that emerge give me a sign of where to go next?

I often paint directly from nature, guided by observation and a sense of connection to a place that I have grown to love. For the past 12 years, I have practiced art and permaculture at the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center (OAEC) in Sonoma County, California (www.oaec.org). I have painted there, in the forests and gardens, ever since a group of friends and I founded the project. We have endeavored to create a model of integrated living, bringing together life and work and honoring our relationship with the land. In addition to working on many levels simultaneously – preparing the soil, planting and harvesting, teach and engage in activism, toward influencing practice and policy, locally and nationally – we try to weave a thread of artistic awareness and concern for aesthetics through all of our activities.

When I first moved to the OAEC, the relationship between art and ecology was unclear to me even though the two words appear together in the name of our organization. My formal university education had never connected the two disciplines. But over time, as my understanding of my own creative process grew alongside my deepening understanding of ecology and permaculture, I came to see how much they share. A life devoted to creative exploration can lead one toward holistic ecological consciousness and in turn, the study of ecology or permaculture can foster deep insights into fundamental truths about the creative process. In fact, during certain stages of the practices, painting and permaculture are indistinguishable. Many of the fundamental concepts on which both are based are shared as are so many of the experiences the practitioner has along the way. I see that ultimately this relationship between art and permaculture is rooted in their common source of inspiration, wisdom and guidance – nature herself.

At the beginning of the last century, art and science were often presented as opposing disciplines. The painter Braque is quoted at the time saying, “Art disturbs, science reassures”. This opposition is also sometimes described as a rift between the right and left brain or in terms of the rational vs. the emotional or spiritual. I believe that these distinctions are the misconceptions of a hyper-specialized, fragmented society and that we need to bring these fragments back together. The many reasons that this fragmentation has occurred are beyond the scope of this discussion, but the dangers are clear. Describing the world in terms of objects and not processes, looking only at the parts while ignoring the whole, thinking in the short term while ignoring the longer view and believing that people, creatures and places are separate and disconnected instead of interdependent and connected has lead us to the verge of global catastrophe. We need to reintegrate our consciousness. Permaculture is part of a vision of holistic science, which does just that. It integrates qualities along with quantities, values sensitive observation, participation and collaboration, and sees the scientist as a part of, not apart from, nature. Part of embracing a truly integrated way of thinking is seeing connections between areas of human endeavor that are not often seen or acknowledged. It is in this spirit of shining light on those obscured connections that I write this collection of reflections on how some of the core principles of painting from nature are shared with the practice of permaculture.

When I begin a painting, I sit and I observe. As I look at something and my breathing relaxes, the scene begins to open up before me. As I begin to work on a painting, it seems like every hour there is more and more out there to see. Seeing is itself a practice and our vision works together with our knowledge to give us information about the world and our place in it. The first level of seeing is distinguishing structures, what the ancient practitioners of visual arts called *designo*, or contour, the boundaries between things. I study the structure of an oak tree and see that to really paint its true character, I must draw all the relationships just right, it is impossible to fake it. Why? At first the shapes of the branches seem so arbitrary. But in time I notice that in fact the structure has intelligence. The form is related to the needs and nature of that tree. Every form tells a story. The tall thin reeds at the edge of the pond which crowd together holding each other up focus their energy on height not thickness of stem. The willow develops strong flexible

branches to reach far out over the pond into the light. From the diaphanous poppy petal to the sturdy thorny wood rose, forms offer us volumes of information.

Each individual organism and each particular place has its own unique structure. Once we begin to understand the structure of these individuals, we begin to see how certain characteristics are repeated throughout whole communities. I move from being able to paint an oak tree to recognizing a whole oak forest, and a painting of that forest will only capture its true character if that painting acknowledges both the uniqueness of the individual trees and the general character of the whole community. So, beginning with observations of forms and moving from the particular to the general and back again, a painter's understanding begins to dawn. I imagine that this process is no different for the permacultural designer beginning to awaken to a certain place or deepening their knowledge of the world in general.

I referred to seeing structures as the “first level” of seeing because I think it leads us to a deeper kind of vision. Both painters and permaculturalists must grapple with form from the individual to the community. But as we observe these individuals and communities, we see that everything is nested within some greater whole and that all things partake of each other to some degree. Slowly forms move to the background and what come forward are the relationships between them and their function, at every scale. Wherever we look, we see relationships and it is the relationships that are really being expressed by the forms. The form of the fish speaks of the movement of the water and the size of the pond and so on. A landscape becomes a shimmering constellation of interconnection and relationship rather than just a collection of objects. This new vision of relationships is accompanied by visions of a new kind of form: the web or network. Everything is related and those relationships form webs which can be seen everywhere, between creatures and their environments and each other at every scale. So what begins as a study of structure – essentially of individuals and communities – leads us into a study of relationships. This, in turn, leads us to a more holistic way of seeing.

The concept of holistic seeing is very important in art. When a painter makes a painting, it is easy to get lost in the details, to pay too much attention to one small part of the painting. This is called “piecemeal seeing” and can be a painter's downfall. As I work, I am challenged to always

see the painting as a whole. Every part is connected and any change I make to one part of the painting affects the whole painting. The question I must ask myself as I am working is not “Is that tree or sky or field working?” but “Is the whole painting working?” This kind of holistic thinking and seeing can be applied to the practice of observing and understanding any particular place, as a painter or a permaculturalist. You do not assess the health of a forest by looking at one tree but try to see the forest as a whole system. When we see the world in terms of webs of relationship, we change the way we paint or practice permaculture, never making a move without the whole system in mind, never making conclusions about the whole based only on knowledge of one specific part.

When you start to see in terms of whole systems, a new awesome dimension is added to your vision: you see that the systems are in motion. I am out engaging in my practice of painting, looking across the meadow at the forest and the bay beyond. I finally begin to grasp the landscape, seeing a web of relationships, infinitely nested wholes within wholes, all part of some greater whole that extends beyond the reach of my vision and even consciousness. But that word, grasp, betrays my still considerable limitations of vision: the webs are not static, they cannot be grasped as such, they are dynamic, they are flowing. The more still I become as I observe, the more I see that everything I’m looking at is moving. There is the obvious movement of the wind, the more subtle creeping of the shadows, and then the greater movements, more subtle still, of the tides and seasons and even the forest as I notice the fir trees marching down the hill into the meadow. As a painter this presents problems, I am trying to depict a scene, a place in time, and to do so by observing that scene. Yet it is not fixed; nothing is. It becomes more and more clear that I am not painting a fixed scene but a moving system. How do I visually express a moving system?

Moving systems express themselves visually in patterns. When an observer gets to the point that (s)he is seeing in dynamic holistic terms, then patterns of movement appear everywhere. The white oak and the black oak express particular energy flows in distinct dynamic patterns of branch growth, water’s movement across land is expressed in patterns on sand and stone and those patterns speak of rate and volume of water and frequency of floods and flows. These patterns tell stories of dynamic relationships, which have cycles and seasons of their own, as well

as being subject to the great cycle of seasons that affect our whole planet each year as well as others we do not understand. As I paint flow patterns in the landscape or in the bark of trees, I see the very same patterns in the clouds above me and reflected in the waters, and the truth of universal connectedness is again confirmed. As in that famous Van Gogh painting *Starry Night*, where the same energy flows move through the old tree, the forest, the hills and the whole universe represented by the sky above the town. The truth of the balance between the particular and the general is also spoken as I see that each cloud is unique and variations are infinite yet they still conform to a certain pattern of cloud. Everyone can recognize a snowflake even though the one we hold in our hand is unique and new. Of course, one of the most primary components of permaculture education is the study of patterns, a study that a serious painter of nature also cannot help but undertake in the field. Both lead to the same truths.

This journey teaches us a process orientation. As a practitioner of painting for over twenty years, I see that each painting is just another step on a long path which goes far beyond any particular piece. Even seeing a particular landscape is a process, as I continue to see it anew again and again as my capacity to see expands. Painting is a process just as everything else is. Permaculture designers also are engaged in a process. They do not create or control places but rather participate in the process of a place or a system, a process which continues on its dynamic way far beyond that particular designer or any particular moment. Just as paintings that really describe nature show nature *in process* with everything alive and changing (a fine portrait of a person depicts that person breathing not holding their breath) good permaculture designs take the changes that come with the flow of time into account. Holistic thinkers can never be Machiavellian since everything is always in process and there is no end, thus the ends can never justify the means.

The last shared experience between painters and permaculturalists that I want to touch on is the experience of mystery. Part of the deeper understanding I have been trying to describe is this fact that we are part of the great whole of life. Since we are part of the whole that we're observing, we can never see the system entirely, as if from the outside. There is no true objectivity. This is very humbling because it means that our knowledge is always partial, the universe will always exceed our scope. We need to acknowledge that we are limited. All designers and artists see that

in spite of all of our understanding that comes from observation and practice, we still can't predict outcomes. Unpredictable properties continue to emerge and surprise us. That is one of the signs that our knowledge is partial. We can never completely know anything. Part of our practice has to be coming into good relationship with this mystery. Our work challenges us to set aside the arrogance of someone who thinks they know how it's all going to work out and embrace the unknown. Perhaps this is the greatest shared aspect of these two practices. Both the painter of nature and practitioner of permaculture sit in wonder before this vast everchanging miraculous world. Our fascination with our work motivates us to seek more and more knowledge and understanding and yet the more we know the more we see how small we are and how much is yet unrevealed.