

Of Elemental Oracles in Nature

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in the Faculty of Humanities

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Abstract

My project contributes to the field of contemporary art through the broader discourses of nature, place and spirituality. Arryn Snowball maintains that there is urgent need to initiate a “cycle of hope” (2011, Abstract) in response to the contemporary “crisis of meaning” (2011, 49), by offering fresh perspectives to contemplate life’s significance (2011, 3). Following Emily Brady’s assertion that the Sublime in Nature enables a positive correlation between nature and self (2012); and E.O. Wilson’s Biophilia Hypothesis that humanity inherently needs connection with nature and other species (Li 2018, 14), I propose new ways of seeing, and being in, the world, through my interpretation of a Twenty-First Century Sublime in Nature – an intimate perspective that mirrors our self-focused, detail-driven culture. By physically collaborating with nature’s minutiae, I embrace Deborah Browne’s theory that revealing nature’s details elevates awareness of interdependency of species (2008), and draw on the liminal space where inner reality and external life merge (Jackson 2016, 3).

Michael Jackson relates faith to existential situations where humanity receives unseen assistance to overcome negative experiences, and find meaning (2016, Preamble xv), which is foundational to my project, and I support James Elkins’ assertion that contemporary art which references faith in any meaningful way, must engage the Sublime via religion’s core “sense of awe and wonder” (2004, 89), and present an “unrecognizable sacred” (2004, 83) in response to secularism’s marginalisation of faith (Ager and Ager 2011, 457).

By drawing on the work of contemporary artist-researchers - *inter alia* John Wolseley, Judy Watson, Janet Laurence, Bill Viola, Wolfgang Laib, and Makoto Fujimura, whose work negotiates the Sublime in Nature and the Spiritual, to inform my research - I employed an Autoethnographic approach to the methodology of A/r/tography, to create paintings, groundpaintings, and photographs, in collaboration with the ground, vegetation, water, atmosphere and light across a range of test sites that represent the predominant ecosystems on the Sunshine Coast. I then used video, as the privileged postmodern medium of our era (Jameson 1991, 67), that reflects the rapidity of contemporary visual processing habits (Best 2011, 72), to create “locus theologicus” (Zordan and Knauss 2013, 5) - a space where theological revelation is possible - and address my research question: What

does collaboration with nature offer contemporary practice, and society, in terms of ecological and spiritual insights?



Figure 1: Meloney Steyl, *Shifting Perspectives*, 2019.
Digital layering of *Beside Still Waters* painting details

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My video can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/gznZzj0erAM>

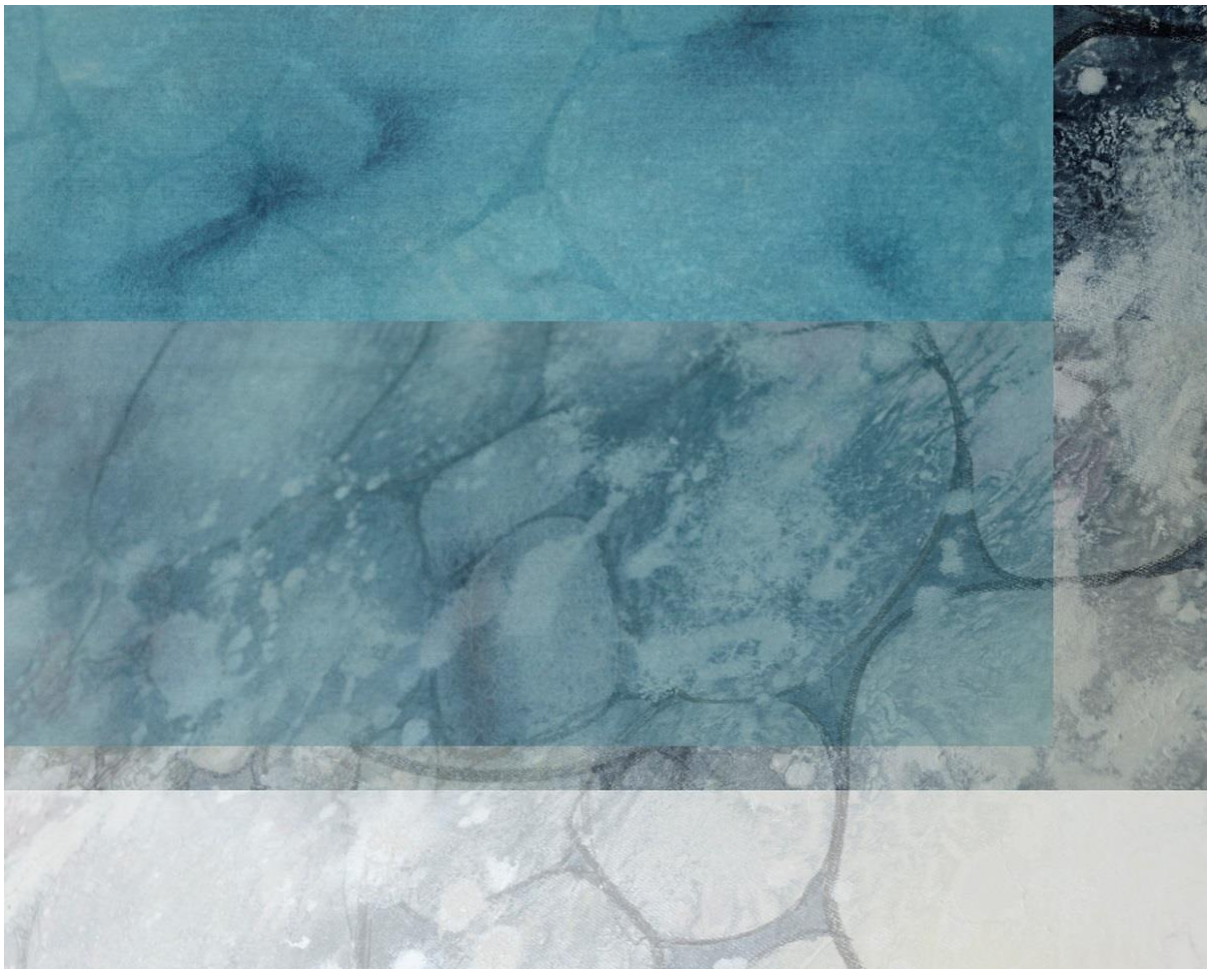


Figure 2: Meloney Steyl, *Looking at the layers and the logic*, 2019.
Digital layering of Caloundra groundpainting and *Living Stones* painting details

Fragments

I am piecing together fragments of remnant ecosystems. Some fragments are larger than others, and they don't all come together neatly. There are gaps. Unravelling edge effects.

I go out into the landscape and let it touch me. I reach out and interact with tiny fragments of nature, and in doing so, I get a glimpse of a larger perspective that grounds me, and helps me be present in the moment, in the process. It helps me breathe...

Even in the creative process there are gaps. Where I have to wait, or respond after some thought, or find additional information or material. There are spaces where I need to step back and let nature and paint collaborate. Fragments of thought come together with fragments of nature and fragments of creation, and the piecing-together is a tentative process that sometimes hangs by a thread...

But threads of connection come together as vision – an envisioning of an 'overstory' of interconnectedness, where all parts - all fragments - belong. Every broken shard has a place in the picture. It forms a kaleidoscope of grace.

It is by grace that we, as humans, can accept one another, with empathy, despite our differences. It is by grace that we can see the beauty in brokenness. It is by grace that unity arises. It is by the grace of God that I am even alive today. Threads of grace bring everything together. Loosely. Not always neatly. But always gently.

Fine gold threads of grace hold our world together. Link the fragments. Tenuously...

It is somehow an act of grace that remnants of ecosystems even exist today, that they weren't all destroyed by European 'development'. And it is concern and grace that is needed for continued preservation of life and of environment. That somehow, by grace, we will be able to pull ourselves together and leave something beautiful for generations to come.

It is by grace that I get to see that this leaf and I are formed from the same fabric of Life. That fine gold threads of grace connect us.

Introduction

My research question is: What does artistic collaboration with nature offer contemporary practice, and society, in terms of ecological and spiritual insights?

Context within Contemporary Society

My research project contributes to the field of contemporary art through the broader discourses of nature, place and spirituality. Arryn Snowball argues that existential angst and nihilism are great contemporary dilemmas (2011, 3) that have culminated in a “crisis of meaning” (2011, 37) – an assertion following theorists including Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger, Richard Rorty and Simon Critchley (Snowball 2011, 4). I contend that soaring statistics of anxiety, depression, and suicide (World Health Organisation 2018) support Snowball’s allegation that scepticism’s ultimatum is life devoid of meaning and hope (2011, 4). The contemporary environmental crisis and the environment’s need for nurture (Foundation for Deep Ecology 2012), and the disconnect between urban dwellers and nature (Li 2018) exacerbate matters. Snowball maintains that contemporary society has an urgent need for a “material and ethical response to the crisis of meaning” (2011, 49), which may initiate a “cycle of hope” (2011, Abstract) by providing fresh perspectives through which we may contemplate and discover meaning for life (2011, 3). My research responds to this crisis by sharing heartfelt experiences in nature, establishing common ground, and revealing elemental interconnectivity.

Fredric Jameson argues that viral capitalism has produced a postmodern depthlessness (1991, 6) and “fragmentation of contemporary life” (Best 2011, 63). In 1968 Roland Barthes’ “death of the author” bore theological overtones (Gass 2016, 514,515), and postmodern theory brought an end to “master narratives,” birthed “historical deafness,” and created a “schizophrenic present” (Jameson 1991, xi-xii) where traditional meaning is overturned in favour of multiple meaning; truth is questionable and relative; and theology is perpetually challenged. Colin McCahon’s depiction of postmodern despair (Figure 3) is powerful. Jameson describes a “waning of affect” (Best 2011, 71) – ever-decreasing sensations of well-being or excitement (Best 2011, 67) that register as ontological rather than epistemological

(Best 2011, 71). Bombardment by advertisements seeking to induce, and commercially plunder, Affect, numbs and alienates humanity from genuine significance and meaning (Best 2011, 72,75), and Jameson describes an “Anxiety of Utopia” (1991, 331), where materialistic and biological anxieties, akin to existential angst, are now all-pervasive (1991, 340). Obsession with self-image, to a level equated with fear, is fuelled by inescapable technology (Best 2011, 76), and contemporary society is in the throes of a “cultural convulsion born of a despair that will give way, in time, to measured hope” (Baggini 2017, 8-9). I am rebelling against what contemporary society offers – the superficial, chaotic, commercial-driven overload – and, perhaps naively, turning back to nature and theology to resist postmodern despair, and explore meaning and hope.

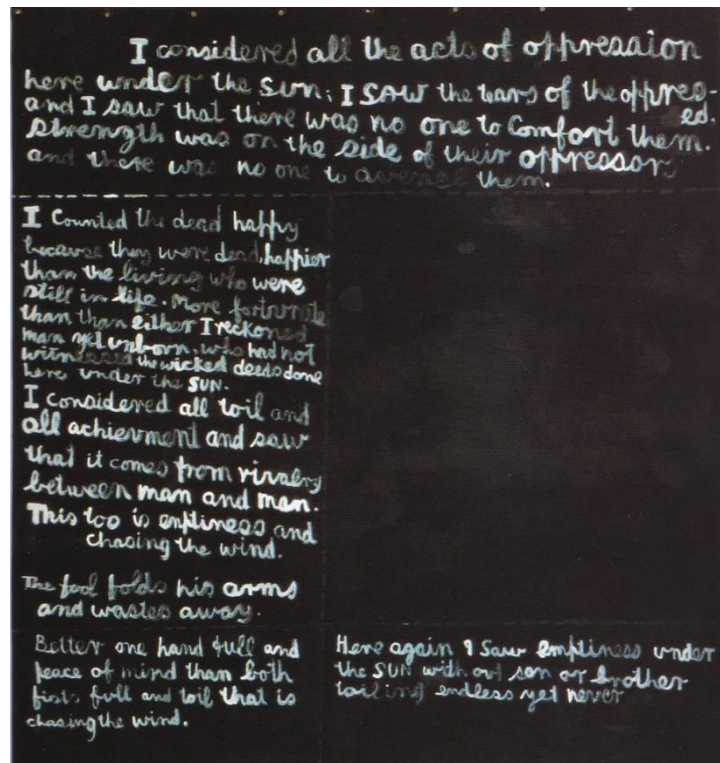


Figure 3: Colin McCahon, *I considered all the acts of oppression*, 1980-82.

Acrylic on unstretched canvas

196.4 x 180cm

(Bloem and Browne 2002, 157)

Hope and meaning are critical to survival, according to Viktor Frankl, an Austrian survivor of Auschwitz, and subsequent professor of neurology and psychiatry in Vienna. He writes about how hope, meaning, and purpose, are essential for life – even from the perspective of enduring the Holocaust (2004). These attributes also assist in fostering the positive mindset that effectively re-programmes neural pathways, according to neuroscience studies undertaken by Dr Carolyn Leaf (2018). My project supports Bresler’s new of way of seeing, and being in, the world (2006, 56), by offering alternative perspectives of life, nature, hope and meaning.

The Contemporary Sublime in Nature

My project nestles within the art-historical dialogue of the Sublime in Nature (Morley 2010, Tate 2017). Pseudo-Longinus' First-Century text refers to knowledge of the Sublime - "the power of the Divine Being" – accessible via Genesis in the Bible (Riding and Llewellyn 2013). Nineteenth Century Sublime paintings featured awe-inspiring vistas that glorified God as Creator, which then faded into Twentieth Century glimpses beyond urban backyards, reflecting humanism's "more pessimistic or tentative outlook" (Elkins 2004, 96). My interpretation of a Twenty-First Century Sublime evolves further, into a close-focus, intimate perspective, which echoes our self-focused, detail-driven culture.



Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above a sea of fog*, 1818.
Oil on canvas
98.4 x 74.8cm
(Artble 2019)



BW Leader, *A Worcestershire Lane*, 19?.
Oil on academy board
30.6 x 20.3cm
(Art Gallery of NSW 2019)



Meloney Steyl, *The Sapling*, 2019.
South African chalk-based acrylic and Australian acrylic paint on canvas
90 x 60cm

Figure 4: Pictorial depiction of the evolution of the Sublime in Nature from 19th Century grand vista to 21st Century intimate perspective.

Brady alleges that the Sublime must reference nature, because it enables correlation between nature and self (2012). This intersects with de Botton and Armstrong's theory of Art as Therapy (2013), and E.O. Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis, that humanity innately needs connection with nature and other species (Li 2018, 14). Dr Quing Li, in his medical study of *Shinrin-Yoku*, concludes that time in the forest physically benefits participants (Li 2018), and I propose that art, created in collaboration with nature, may induce similar positive effects on viewers. Deborah Browne argues that revealing nature's smaller details elevates awareness of the interdependency of species, and promotes environmental care (2008), and

so, via physical collaboration with nature's minutiae, I explore an intimate perspective that whispers to the individual, rather than calls from the panoramic vista.

Art and Faith

James Elkins contends that the Sublime engages the “sense of awe” fundamental to religion (2004, 89). Historically, art aimed to inspire faith, or celebrate nature's wonders, and John Ruskin's rather didactic perception was that “all ancient art was *religious*... all modern art is *profane*” (Fuller 1988, 144). Contemporary artists are free to “formulate missions that evaluate entire value systems, behaviours, ethical standards and social trends” (Weintraub 2003, 282), hence I defined my mission: to investigate whether artworks, created in collaboration with nature, bearing spiritual intentions, might create “locus theologicus” (Zordan and Knauss 2013, 5) – a space for spiritual revelation - and address humanity's disconnectedness with both nature and spirit. I draw on Jan White's argument that we live in a “post-secular” culture, evidenced by the “re-introduction of religion into studies as a province of thought within, rather than a refusal of, intellect” (2006, 5). Elkins contends that while Paul Klee, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko openly discussed religion (2004, x); and Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich overflowed with spiritual fervour (2004, 22), secularism has declared contemporary art and faith incompatible - unless the work criticizes or mocks religion (2004, xi) – refer Figure 5. Elkins maintains that a gap exists for earnest and scholarly contemporary expressions of faith because the “secularization theory of modernity might be losing its grip” (Elkins 2004, 23).



Figure 5: Juan Devila, *Holy Family*, 1985.

Oil on canvas

60 x 50cm

(Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, 2019)

Personal experience, feedback, and research, supports Ager and Ager's claim that secularism purports to be ideologically neutral, yet marginalises faith (2011, 457), so my project will present what Elkins terms an "unrecognizable sacred" (2004, 83), as shown in Figure 6. Elkins contends that art that aims to explore "heartfelt beliefs... untarnished by art



Figure 6: Meloney Steyl, *Light of the World - drawing on Living Water*, 2019.
Digital photograph

world irony", combined with rigorous academic interrogation and critical reflection, remains a viable prospect (2004, 57). I hope my project bears testament to this, and provokes contemplation of matters of meaning and significance for a broad range of viewers. I draw parables from nature that are relevant to contemporary life, where parables are defined as "illustrative examples intended to stimulate intense thought" (Simmons 2017, Matthew 13 footnote).

Faith and religion require differentiation. Unlike Elkins' institutionally-defined religion (2004, 1), Michal Jackson relates faith to existential situations, where the unseen offers potential for humanity to overcome negative experiences (2016, xv), and he argues that art and faith belong to the liminal space where inner reality and external life merge (2016, 2-3). My project explores faith as lived-experience, rather than public-institution-linked-ritual. I

adopt Elkins' stance that the name 'God' remains part of art's vocabulary, because while controversial, it is irresponsible not to keep attempting to talk sensibly about faith, whilst addressing art intellectually (2004, 116). For those who do not ascribe to faith, I request tolerance, based on Maurice Blanchot's postmodern conceptualisation that "the best way to name God is to imagine Him as a failure of language," where the pseudonym of the Unnameable is "God" (Elkins 2004, 109).

Jackson contends that art's capacity for multilayered meaning allows association between visual and spiritual – the "ultimately unknowable" (2016, 24) – enabling us to "construct simulacra of inner experiences" (2016, 32). Patricia Spyer agrees, arguing that contemplation of the seen, the unseen, and the inability to see (2008, 16), bears potential for "transformation of simulacrum into substance" (2008, 29). Leonard Brown, winner of the 2010 Blake Prize, insists that his abstract paintings, such as shown in Figure 7, are "realist" (Dauber 2011, 50) and record his daily reality of prayer, painting and communion with an Ultimate Reality (Dauber 2011, 51). Brown aims to initiate a spiritual experience for his viewers (Dauber 2011, 51). My research facilitates hope that in a truly open-minded culture, where all provinces of thought are considered, there is space for a project that unites a nature-focused perspective with spiritual expression and intellectual interrogation.



Figure 7: Leonard Brown, *Angels Ascending and Descending Jacob's Ladder*, 1991.
Oil on Belgian Linen.
153 x 122cm
(Charles Nodrum Gallery, 2019)

Research Objectives

My research objectives were to:

- Respond, materially and ethically, to the contemporary “crisis of meaning”(Snowball 2011, 37), through the methodology of “A/r/tography,” (Springgay, Irwin, and Wilson Kind 2005, 899), to offer an alternate way of seeing, and being in, the world (Bresler 2006, 56) and resist postmodern despair.
- Create a 21st century version of the Sublime in Nature by adopting an intimate perspective of nature, created in collaboration with nature.
- Present what Elkins defines as an “unrecognizable sacred” (Elkins 2004, 83) to engage a wide range of viewers, and bridge the gap between Christian faith and a secular population, by whispering of spiritual connections. By ‘whisper’ I mean subtly, gently, quietly; and by ‘spiritual’ I refer to that which relates to the spirit in a person.
- Frame the research systematically, by mapping test sites across the Sunshine Coast Bioregion (refer Figure 8), to allow direct engagement with the predominant ecosystems.

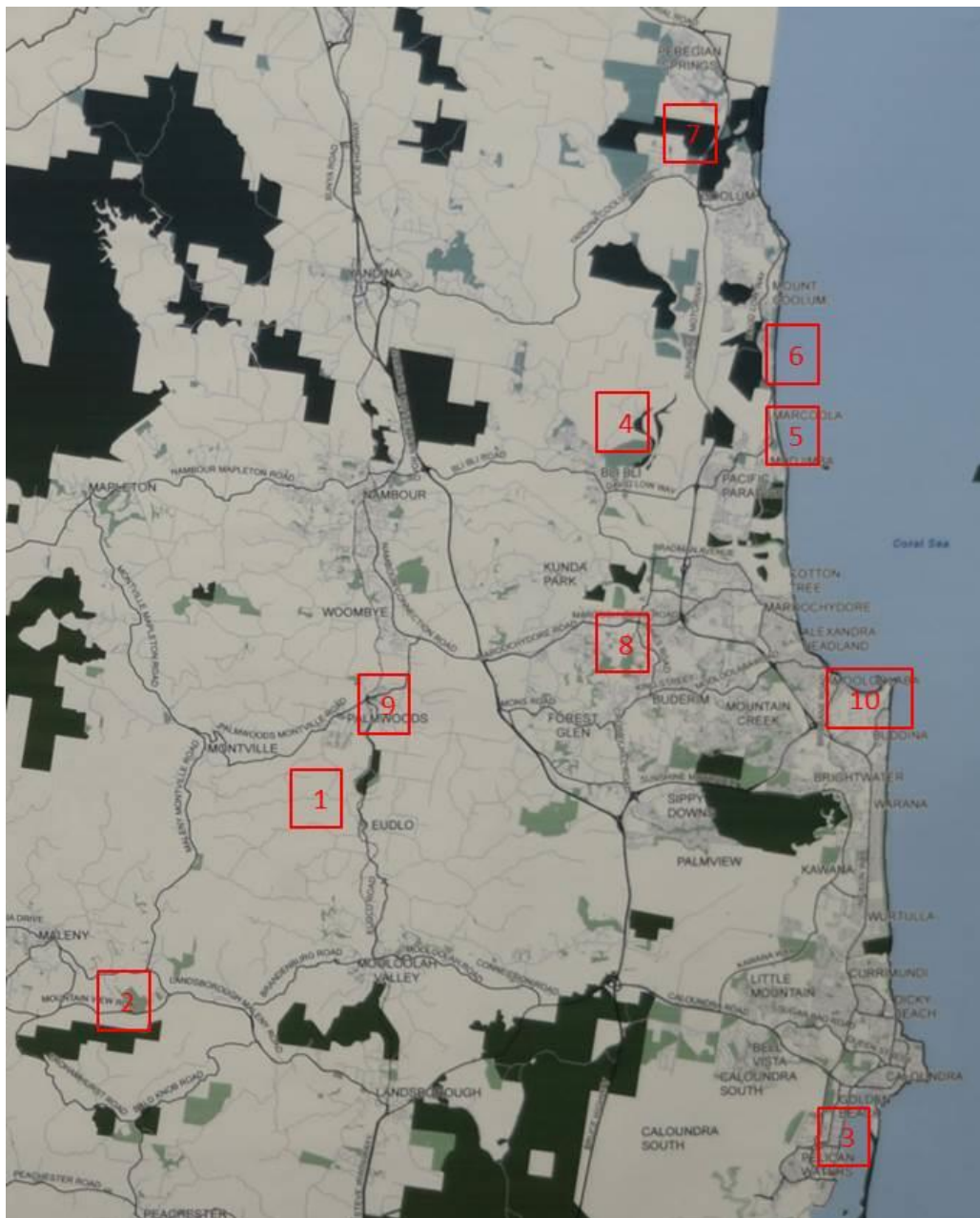


Figure 8: Mapping test sites across the Sunshine Coast Bioregion
(Map obtained courtesy of Land for Wildlife and Sunshine Coast Council)

Legend:

1. The Retreat (my home) - Dry and Wet Schlerophyll
2. Maleny – Rainforest at Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve
3. Caloundra – Seagrass communities and Mangroves in the Pumicestone Passage
4. Bli Bli – Paperbark wetlands and Mangroves at Maroochy Wetland Sanctuary
5. Maroocha – Coastal and dunes
6. Town of Seaside – Wallum and paperbark wetlands
7. Emu Mountain – Montane heath
8. Buderim – Freshwater creek at Buderim Forest Park
9. Palmwoods – Freshwater billabong in the Old Orchard
10. Mooloolaba – Coastal Rock shelf

Contextual Review

Review of contemporary artist-researchers who negotiate the Sublime in Nature and the Spiritual; significantly informed my research; and establish my project's broader discipline-specific context, will highlight key differences where my project's contribution to contemporary art lies, whilst outlining my project's development.

John Wolseley



Figure 9: John Wolseley, *Natural History of a Sphagnum Bog* (detail), 2013.
Watercolour, pencil, pen, ink and sphagnum on 8 sheets
155.6 x 407.6cm
Photograph taken at the NGV in 2015, with permission

John Wolseley's research-led practice springs from his passion for environmental conservation. His creative process involves "making connections between phenomena," glimpsing the "architecture of the universe," and for him, "it all starts with a leaf" (Grishin 2006, 173). I share this meaning-making approach that expands from specific to universal. Wolseley's collaborative methods include leaf-frottage; watercolour imprints; charcoal markings from burnt trees; and burying works for later retrieval (Wolseley 2019) as he seeks to convey the "full sense of wonder and revelation" experienced in nature (Grishin 2006, 173). In contrast to Wolseley's broader geographical and ecological narratives, I adopt a local perspective, collaborating – via painting, photography and video - with the ground,

vegetation, water, atmosphere, light and sound, from test sites across the Sunshine Coast bioregion. I extend Wolseley's "connections between phenomena" towards matters pertaining to the heart and spirit in humanity, and talk about faith-based perspectives in my video. Materially, my paintings-on-canvas combine the permanence of Australian acrylic and chalk-based acrylic from South Africa, to support my Autoethnographic approach from the perspective of an immigrant, and reference the enduring nature of Snowball's "cycle of hope" (2011, Abstract) and the Spiritual, whereas Wolseley's paper-based works emphasise the fragility of the natural environment.

Judy Watson

My 'groundpaintings'¹ demanded environmentally-undamaging use of native earth pigments, inspired by Judy Watson, an Indigenous artist/researcher who gleans the earth's imprint as reference to her spiritual connection with Country; the trauma of Aboriginal displacement following Colonisation; and the blood shed on the ground (Watson and Martin-Chew 2009, 19). Watson connects sacred ground with individual lives, exploring a landscape as "internal and metaphysical" as tangible (Watson and Martin-Chew 2009, 14), as do I. My connection to the land occurred through immigration, as nature helped me find my place in my new country, and then in this project, Watson inspired me to "learn from the ground up" (Watson and Martin-Chew 2009,



Figure 10: Judy Watson, *low tide walk*, 1991.
Pigment, pastel and charcoal on canvas
191 x 130cm
(Watson and Martin-Chew 2009, 27)

¹ Paintings, on canvas, laid on the ground to imprint the earth's topography into the work

14), start over as it were, following the displacement of marriage separation, and an emotional and physical breakdown. Finding a way to activate hope became a personal quest, on my knees on the ground – literally. Painting became embodied prayer. It is interesting to note that Wolseley found refuge in the landscape after his mother’s suicide (Grishin 2007, 28), and Watson engaged the landscape more directly after discovering familial connections to Lawn Hill (Watson and Martin-Chew 2009, 16). Perhaps, for some people, traumatic events trigger the need to physically engage with the landscape, and I believe that this process provides metaphysical insights and spiritual comfort. Watson’s writing adds depth-of-understanding to her work, as does Wolseley’s – both inspired my A/r/tographic methodology. However, as my research progressed, a more diverse, multilayered visual approach became imperative, to convey multiple perspectives, meanings, transitions, and connections between physical and metaphysical phenomena. Paintings and groundpaintings expanded into photographic and video investigations.

Janet Laurence

The work of Janet Laurence provided the impetus for significant evolution in my project.

She explores the

interconnection between
all living things from a
core of empathy for all
species, and conceptually
embraces

“transformation...and
transience; threatened
creatures and
environments; notions of
physical healing, and
cultural restoration” (Kent

2019, 28). Her layered

materials include

minerals; plant matter;

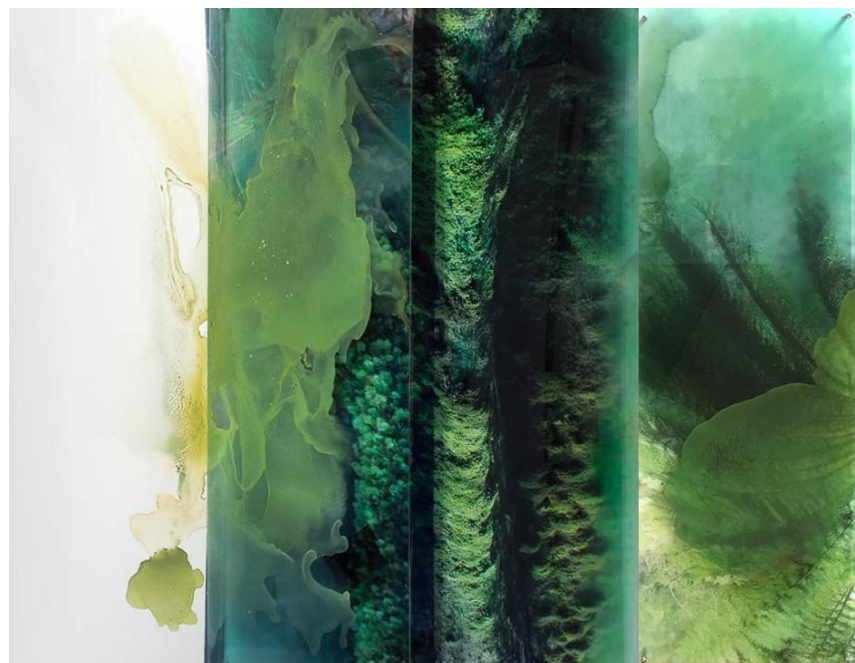


Figure 11: Janet Laurence, *Avalanche-Conversations with plants in the Tarkine*, 2012.

Duraclear on acrylic

120 x 180cm

(Dominic Mersch Gallery 2019)

photographs; glass/acrylic; and veils of gauze, muslin, fluids and text, that play with light and elicit contemplation of meaning (Kent 2019, 35). In contrast to Laurence's physically-layered materials, I employed a cost-effective digital approach, to convey more complex, intriguing perspectives; unite seemingly disparate elements of research; magnify painted close-focus perspectives; materially reference the digital age; and engage layering-and-veiling as spiritually-significant concepts. In addition, my faith-based perspective sets my work apart from Laurence's. Occasionally her installations incorporate nature's noises - "*umwelt* sounds" (Gibson 2015, 64) - which inspired my video soundscapes from the Sunshine Coast, merging visual, sound, and time-based engagement.

Bill Viola



Figure 12: Bill Viola, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain under a Waterfall)*, 2005.
Video 9:46min
(Lumen 2014)

Bill Viola uses video as the language of the contemporary age, to "direct the viewer towards personal discovery" (Francis 1996, 70). He engages concepts of infinite repetition; cycles; spiritual themes; and natural phenomena such as water (Viola 2019). His childhood near-drowning led to endless fascination with water (Viola 2019), and works such as *Tristan's Ascension* and *Inverted Birth* consider Biblical notions of resurrection and being born again, using water as motif. Viola's videos are a channel for spiritual communication, expressed via conservative emotional detachment (Francis 1996, 71). Viola's work features human

presence, whereas mine addresses human concerns via nature-based images and the spoken word. We aim for similar spiritual communication – but my video also features my paintings, groundpaintings, photographs, digital layering and magnified perspectives, and Autoethnographic expression, which diverges from Viola’s practice.

Wolfgang Laib

Wolfgang Laib creates portals to deeper dimensions of consciousness and contemplation (Wallach 2001) via site-based installations, using materials including rice, pollen, beeswax, and milk, linking sustenance and survival to sacred ritual and offerings (Stringer 2005, 12). Laib qualified as a medical doctor, but determined that art facilitates the spiritual approach essential to healing, and could enable him to impact humanity more significantly than via medicine (Wallach 2001). He maintains that world-wide viewer response endorses his approach (Laib 2017). My series of photographic stills, and painterly collaboration with nature’s minutiae and the ground, echo Laib’s humble, repetitive gleaning, and gallery-floor-installations. When merged into a video, my work presents contemplative space - unconfined to any physical setting - for viewers to consider things natural and beyond, but with subtle allusion to Christian faith, as variant to Laib’s Buddhist perspectives.



Figure 13: Wolfgang Laib installing pollen
(Foiret 2012)

Makoto Fujimura

Issues of faith, art and culture are explored by American-born Makoto Fujimura, via abstract paintings created with crushed minerals – including pearl, malachite, azurite and cinnabar –



Figure 14: Makoto Fujimura, *Sacrificial Grace*, 1997.
Mineral Pigments and gold on Kumohada paper
228.6cm x 167.6cm
(Fujimura 2019)

and metal leaf, in the *Nihonga* tradition (Fujimura 2009). For both Fujimura and I, gold signifies the Divine, which has Biblical links, and references Gothic Cathedrals and religious iconography (Fujimura 2013). Fujimura seeks to authentically portray the heavenly realm, promote peace, and establish dialogue with viewers (DuCharme 2007). Jackson argues that the mind needs something familiar to trigger deep thought (2016, 22), and even Jesus found metaphor useful in his parables, so my project frames the spiritual within the natural, in contrast to Fujimura's abstract visual approach.

My unique contribution

My project expands and enriches the diversity of the discourse embraced by contemporary artists who collaborate with nature, and engage in dialogue regarding the Sublime in Nature and the Spiritual. While components of my research may overlap with the work of my contemporaries, conceptually or materially, the overarching difference is that my work explores Christian-faith-based perspectives, via collaboration with nature on the Sunshine Coast, using painting, groundpainting, photography, digital compositions and magnifications, and video, to share my personal – yet archetypal - narrative in my own voice. This draws all my threads of exploration together, in an endless video loop that materially references the “cycle of hope” (Snowball 2011, 56), the cyclical seasons of life, the concept of eternity, and is my unique contribution to contemporary art.

Methodology and Methods

A/r/tography from an Autoethnographic Perspective

Springgay et al. argue that A/r/tographic research enables viewers to draw meaning from their interaction with both visuals and text (2005, 899), and consider what lies beyond the visible (2005, 897). I adopted an A/r/tographic methodology, informed by an Autoethnographic perspective, linked to the Historical tradition of Sublime landscape painting. This enabled me to merge my faith, perceptions, experiences, and physical and metaphysical landscape, with the concept of the Sublime in Nature.

Research position

My engagement with landscape was born from the crucible of immigration. The landscape provided comfort and refuge, and I found my heartland in the belonging that grew after being uprooted. I still live in Palmwoods, on the Sunshine Coast, amidst the ten peaceful



Figure15: Meloney Steyl, *Home Landscape -where wet schlerophyll transitions into dry schlerophyll*, 2019.

Digitally layered photographs

acres of
subtropical
Land for
Wildlife,
where I first
experienced
unexpected
revelations in
nature.
Investigations
are influenced
by my South-
African
background,

Australian foreground, and Christian faith, which has carried me through violence and terror, and witnessed physical manifestations of inexplicable realities, such as the healing of my brother's broken body in front of our eyes in a South African ICU in 2018.

In my project, I launch a new phase of “learning from the ground up” (Watson and Martin-Chew 2009, 12), following the trauma of displacement from life-as-I-knew it. This directs the project from a personal perspective as I sought to discover what metaphysical insights the natural environment might offer me - but displacement and renewed search for identity, meaning, and belonging, is arguably a global phenomenon relevant to contemporary culture (Lippard 1995).



Figure16: Meloney Steyl, *Displacement*, 2019.
Digital photograph

Concepts and Methods

Painting

In the Nineteenth Century, German Romantic painters like Caspar David Friedrich and Otto Runge, painted Sublime grand vistas to express faith that was alive, rather than linked to institutions; while philosophers - including Johann Wolfgang van Goethe, Johannes Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm von Schelling – compared religion to a shell that conceals the life-of-faith within (Elkins 2004, 78). The life within and beyond nature is elemental to my inquiry, so painterly collaboration with nature – engaging with the life-force itself - is a critical method in my research.

From a theosophical perspective, painting is a means of communicating (with) that which is “beyond ordinary vision” (Elkins 2004, 79) - equally integral to my project. The limitations inherent in painting-as-method relate to the two-dimensional depiction of what is unseen, and the risk of cliché, and I had to think expansively, maintain objectivity, and explore extensively, to negate these limitations. Photography, as painting-with-light, coupled with paintings on canvas, evolved into layered compositions, and eventually a video loop – evidence of my ongoing critique and ever-evolving visual outcomes that sought to best address my research question.

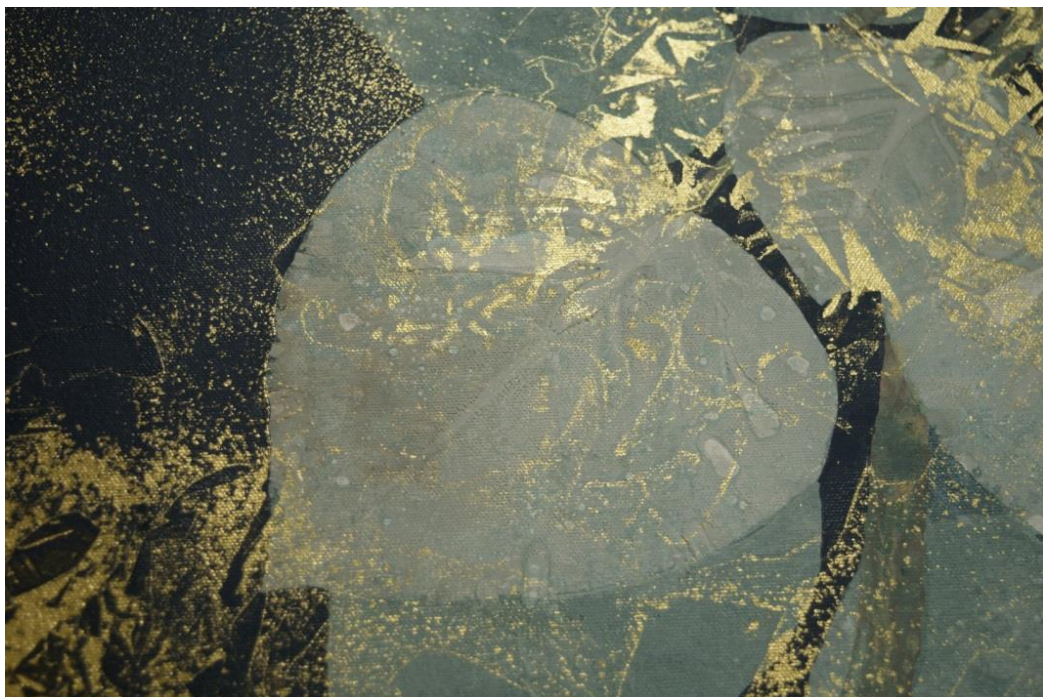


Figure17: Meloney Steyl, *Hosting a spiritual baptism*, 2019.
Photograph of *Homolanthus nutans* painting detail

Faith and the Creative Process

Numinous experiences relate to both faith and the creative process, including being inspired, experiencing grace, or being moved by the Spirit. This links to experiences of the Sublime, where one is in awe of the mysterious (*mysterium*); filled with terror (*mysteriumm tremendum*); or overcome by grace and mercy (*fascinans*) (Jackson 2016, 28). I resolved to make “visible and tangible, the significances to be found through attunement to process, manifesting outcomes not yet imaginable” (Bresler and Latta 2012, 6).

Jackson argues that the balance between natural and spiritual must be regarded from an “optimal distance” to effectively participate in any contemporary dialogue pertaining to art and faith (2016, 3), and that artists must “become radical empiricists,” transfiguring the ordinary (2016, 186). This compelled me to develop discrete visual vocabularies to engage a broad range of viewers. I adopted an Autoethnographic approach, hoping my personal vulnerability might establish common ground with viewers, and devised an empirical approach to research (refer Figure 8).

Metaphor

Metaphor – nature-based parables - became an essential method in my project, to evoke deep contemplation. Nature’s minutiae and processes are used to introduce broader ecological information, significant concepts, and simultaneously serve as metaphor for human experience. The landscape touches and whispers to all willing and open hearts – not only of faith-based things, but things of significance to the spirit of a person. Engagement with light and gold serve as spiritual signifiers that echo Abbot Suger’s treatise on colour and light in Gothic Cathedrals (Honour and Flemming 2009, 376-377).

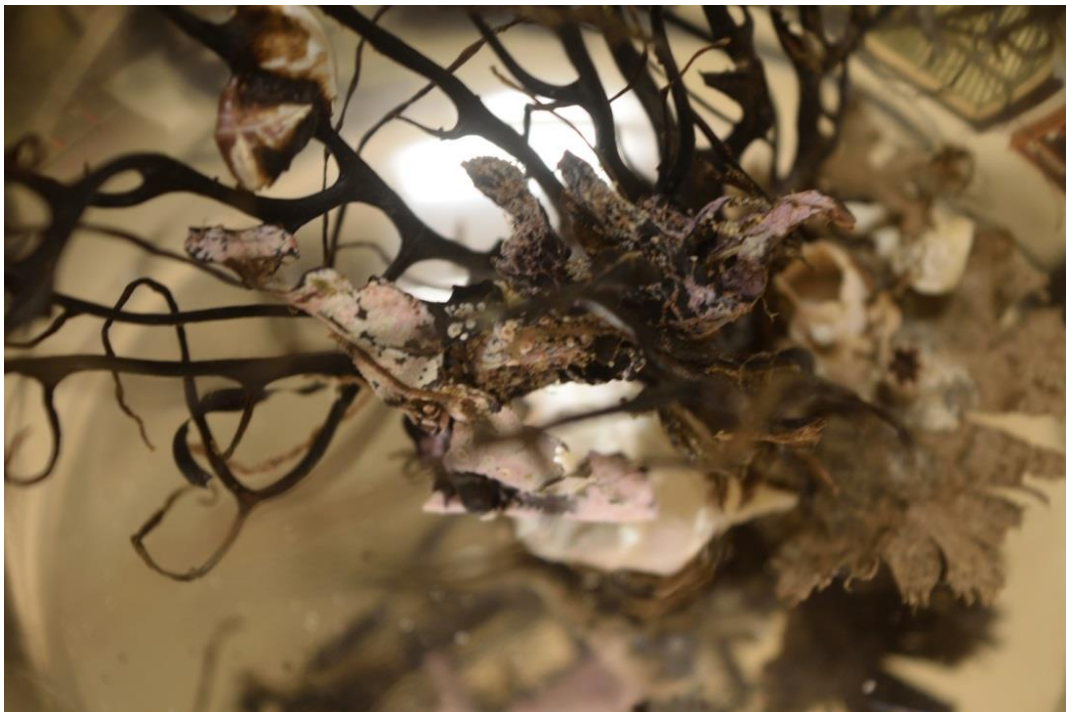


Figure18: Meloney Steyl, *A new way of seeing*, 2019.
Digital photograph

Collaboration with Nature

I examine the predominant ecosystems that extend across the Sunshine Coast bioregion to, intellectually and intuitively, access insight and meaning that may be drawn from collaboration with nature. By ‘collaboration’ I mean *physically working with* elements of nature, and its life-flow. Personal narrative and perspectives merge with the Sunshine Coast landscape, through immersion in nature, painting, photography, video, and experimentation with materials and processes. My “collaborative methodology” (Hamer 2016) included intimate engagement with the:

- ground – rock, sand, soil;
- water – saltwater and freshwater;
- vegetation – from coastal dunes, seagrass communities, wallum and paperbark transition zones, open forest (dry and wet sclerophyll), rainforest and montane heath;
- atmosphere – humidity, air - via breath and aeration, sky panoramas etc.,
- light, and
- sounds of nature

to establish connections between physical and metaphysical in a fractured environment of remnant ecosystems that need nurture and protection. Just as humans do.



Figure19: Meloney Steyl, *Seeing the beauty in a murky rainforest pool*, 2019.
Digital photograph



Figure 20: Meloney Steyl, *The Lion in the Rock*, 2019.
Emu Mountain (montane heath) test site imprints, native earth pigments
and freshwater from the wallum at Town of Seaside (nearby), on canvas.
68 x 71cm

Working in situ on the
groundpaintings
demanded an eco-
friendly approach, and
research on Judy
Watson's practice and
processes led me to
work with the earth
more directly, materially
and physically, by using
native earth pigments on
canvas. The challenges
were immense –
working outside
demanded rainless days
– and on the Sunshine

Coast, even winter offers no such guarantee. Winter also meant 3 to 8 hours' drying time, where I remained on site because park rangers demanded that I not leave the work-in-progress unattended while it dried. I became immersed in nature, observed it closely, and began photographic investigations. It gave me time to breathe... feel the cold... and grow in resilience.

It became increasingly evident that photography was equally collaborative-in-nature, and an integral part of my research. Informed by the close-focus photography of

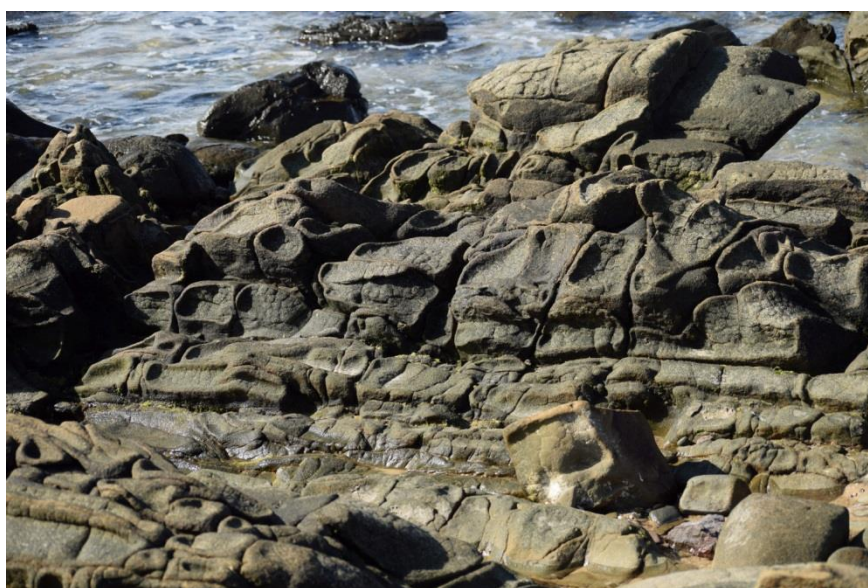


Figure 21: Meloney Steyl, *Convoluted*, 2019.
Digital photograph

Thomas Merton (Francis 1996, 88-91), I extended my visual explorations, and captured a myriad of close encounters of the Sublime in nature, digitally.



Figure 22: Thomas Merton, *Rocks*, 1960's.
Photograph
Merton Legacy Trust cat. No. 44
(Francis 1996, 89)

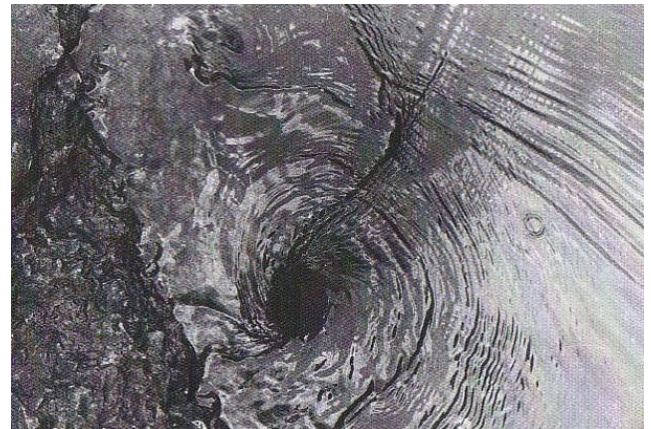


Figure 23: Thomas Merton, *Water*, 1960's.
Photograph
Merton Legacy Trust cat. No. 52
(Francis 1996, 89)

In the studio, acrylic paint and 24ct gold leaf offered archival collaboration with fallen ephemeral natural materials. I adopted a more restricted colour palette based on Google Earth overviews of the Sunshine Coast, to artistically echo the whisper of Nature. I eliminated visual signifiers of my South African background, because this became clumsy and detracted from my broader intentions. Instead, I imported a limited palette of an eco-friendly chalk-based acrylic paint, manufactured in South Africa, to link my land of origin to my Sunshine Coast habitat, which I used in conjunction with Australian-made acrylic paint.



Figure 24: Meloney Steyl, *The Sapling (detail)*, 2019.
South African chalk-based acrylic and Australian acrylic paint on canvas
90 x 60cm

Collaboration with the universal life-flow was equally relevant, and I sought to experience Presence as my breath and touch merged with nature's elements and aerated paint. I followed Wolseley's lead, and made connections between phenomena - seen and unseen. Marcus Bussey explains that in contrast to humanism, which exalted humanity above all else and rebelled against religious authority, "neo-humanism finds a relational connection with all of creation" (2019, 19), without elevating any singular element, instead acknowledging

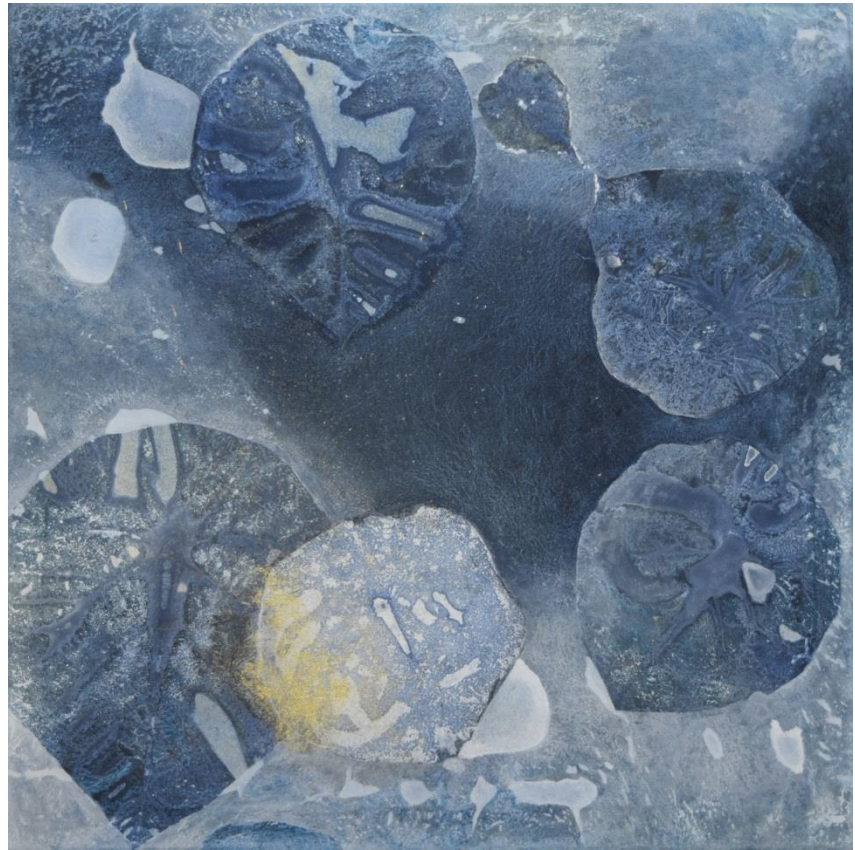


Figure 25: Meloney Steyl, *Macaranga and Beyond*, 2019.
South African chalk-based acrylic, Australian acrylic paint, and gold dust
on canvas
61 x 61cm

interconnectivity and inter-dependence. My research draws tentative and experiential connections between the geology, ecology, and botany of the Sunshine Coast; and the spiritual aspect of human life, to communicate meaning that I hope will register as significant for my viewers.

Text to Spoken Word

Because art has two life-phases – the first between maker and object, the second between object and viewer - the “circle of understanding” must be completed (Jackson 2016, 4-5,23), and text was essential in this regard. I sought to seamlessly integrate subtle, handwritten text within paintings, where appropriate, to communicate as a “quiet, whispering voice” (GOD'S WORD 1995, 1 Kings 19:12) and evoke contemplation of things of meaning and significance. The risk of being prescriptive remained, but critical reflection led my resolve to retain the capacity to communicate that the spiritual aspects of life might be seen by

looking at nature in a new way. However, I became aware that text within paintings all-too-often resulted in ineffectual cliché. *Beside Still Waters*' text is well integrated, as shown in Figure 26, but it was often more appropriate to rely on textual accompaniment to visuals. I drew on T. S. Elliot's practice in *The Wasteland*, where his poem is supported by notes that assist in conveying meaning; expand on concepts engaged within the work; or simply reference his sources (Elliot 2019), and provide notes to accompany my exegesis and video².



Figure 26: Meloney Steyl, *Beside Still Waters*, 2019.
South African chalk-based acrylic, Australian acrylic paint, and 24ct gold leaf and dust on canvas
150 x 80cm

Griselda Pollock's engaging writing and poetic descriptions (1997) inspired my use of evocative and emotive words in my A/r/tographic communication. *Fragments*³ is one such outcome, and when the project evolved into a video, my spoken word extended my A/r/tographic and Autoethnographic Methodology.

Video

Video enabled me to consolidate my research, and communicate via the privileged language-of-our-era (Jameson 1991, 67). The sequencing of still images of nature, paintings, groundpaintings, digitally layered images, and magnified close-focus perspectives, together

² Refer Appendix 1 and 2, and *Fragments*

³ Refer page v

with video segments and sound recordings, overlaid with my vocal expression, was a humble, repetitive process⁴, and a huge learning curve! I had to learn to use Adobe Premier; overcome the focal challenges of the video function on my DSLR camera; engage in research to improve my sound recordings; and then combine everything in a meaningful way. Video demanded a new way of thinking, and opened up a new way of seeing for me. I hope it does the same for my viewers.

Creating a video that could loop *ad infinitum*, enabled me to materially frame Snowball's "cycle of hope" (2011, Abstract) with specificity. The video is compiled to perpetuate an infinite loop from sky, through local predominant ecosystems, and back to sky, which embodies the cycle of hope, the circle of life, and the concept of eternity. Conceptual looping also occurs at intervals within the video - addressing *inter alia*, moving from despair to hope, through life's seasons, from faith to doubt and back, etc. Video enables a time-based encounter, re-enacts immersion in nature, and opens up space/time for contemplation. It was an unforeseen and delightful breakthrough in my research.

Conclusion to Methodology and Methods

Gray and Malins advocate the use of multiple methods to examine the research question from varying perspectives by "generating data in different ways by different methods" (Bresler 2006, 31). This I have done rigorously, to the best of my ability, given the time-constraints of Honours. I trust that my methodology evidences Bresler's interdisciplinary "spirit of border-crossing" (2006, 53); responds to the politics of this age; and clarifies and justifies my approach⁵.

⁴ My sequencing of stills references Wolfgang Laib's humble, repetitive rituals of gathering and installation of his materials

⁵ "All knowledge is tentative" (Gray and Malins 2004, 17)

Analysis of Outcomes

Three distinct series of creative works, created in collaboration with nature, emerged from my research alongside textual accompaniment to the visuals: acrylic and chalk-based acrylic paintings; groundpaintings⁶; and photographs. My visual journal ponderings introduced a pivotal point to the project:

Pain overlaid with joy...

Life is so continuously multi-layered.

Reflections shine through muted layers, depths are revealed in contemplation of here and there, and it's a magnificent, living, breathing, life.

A Multi-layered Approach

Multi-layered visuals echo life's layers; multiple perspectives; complexities; and convergence of natural and spiritual. Janet Laurence's layering and veiling led me to consider how conceptually-significant veiling is from a spiritual perspective; how it conceals, yet when pulled back, allows something to be revealed. Viewer distance from the veil, angle of approach, and directional light also affect perceptions. Revelation of new insight and perspectives is the goal of my project, and my digital approach to layering and veiling enabled me to create more intriguing and meaningful visuals; materially reference the digital age; unify elements of my research; and magnify details within close-focus paintings,



Figure 27: Meloney Steyl, *Re-turning to Nature*, 2019.
Digitally layered photograph, groundpainting and *Living Stones* painting details

⁶ Refer to Appendix 1 for my thoughts on groundpaintings

revealing the intimate moments where nature collaborated with paint, as shown in Figure 28. Working with visual fragments brought new meaning to fragmented remnant ecosystems, and the moments that make up a life.



Figure 28: Meloney Steyl, *The Sapling_5*, 2019.
Digital layering of photograph, groundpainting and *The Sapling* painting detail

Neuroplasticity and Logotherapy

Ongoing research on ways to overcome adversity and anxiety, by thought management, was life-changing. Viktor Frankl devised the concept of “logotherapy” to address the postmodern “existential vacuum” following the atrocities of the 20th Century (2004, 112). He writes,

One should not search for abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment which demands fulfilment... one can only answer to life by answering for his own life (Frankl 2004, 113).

Carolyn Leaf explains how seeds of positivity and hope can be self-nurtured, and the brain’s neuroplasticity responds – is even physically renewed - through repetition of words (logos), which, pondered, lead to thoughts; which, dwelt on, lead to feelings; which, surrendered to,

create our reality (2018). My present “concrete assignment” demanded that I engage with honesty and empathy, visually and verbally, to sow positive seeds and initiate a “cycle of hope” (Snowball 2011, Abstract) within my viewers, and within me.



Figure 29: Meloney Steyl, *Depths of Purpose and Layers of meaning –with water and breath*, 2019. Digital layering of Palmwoods water and breath (on glass), with *Depths of Purpose and Layers of Meaning* painting

Secularism and Faith in Contemporary Art

Ager and Ager argue that secularism’s marginalisation of faith (2011, 457) proves to be a debilitating factor in humanitarian efforts globally (2011, 460). While my project is not humanitarian by any significant measure, it does seek to promote human welfare by touching lives in a positive way. Ager and Ager provided the scholarly impetus I needed to resist notions that Christian faith is now deemed politically incorrect; that secular prejudice would negate my efforts academically and practically; and fuelled my resolve to pursue faith-based expression. If I had not discovered this article, I may have surrendered to silence. I became fully aware that I have to answer to life by answering for my own life – as Frankl highlights so effectively.

The Video Resolution

The video loop materially references Snowball’s “cycle of hope” (2011, Abstract), and enabled me to bring my research to a fully-resolved response to my research question. My

video replicates the immersive experience of being in nature, and I hope that the encounter enables a viewer to sense a deep connection with nature, and initiates “eco-spiritual awareness” through the “poetry of creation” (2006, 135). My video offers time-based engagement that can be considered sacred contemplation space - especially in our time-poor culture – or even the “locus theologicus” (Zordan and Knauss 2013, 5) that I initially sought to create via paint. Video enabled me to incorporate my spoken word as an extension of both A/r/tography and Autoethnography, and reference Viktor Frankl’s “logotherapy” as means to address the “void of meaning” (Frankl 2004, 103), as I speak to myself, and my viewers. Video is unconfined to any physical setting – tentatively intangible – similar to the spiritual. I hope it establishes a kind of Holy Ground where renewed perspective beckons.

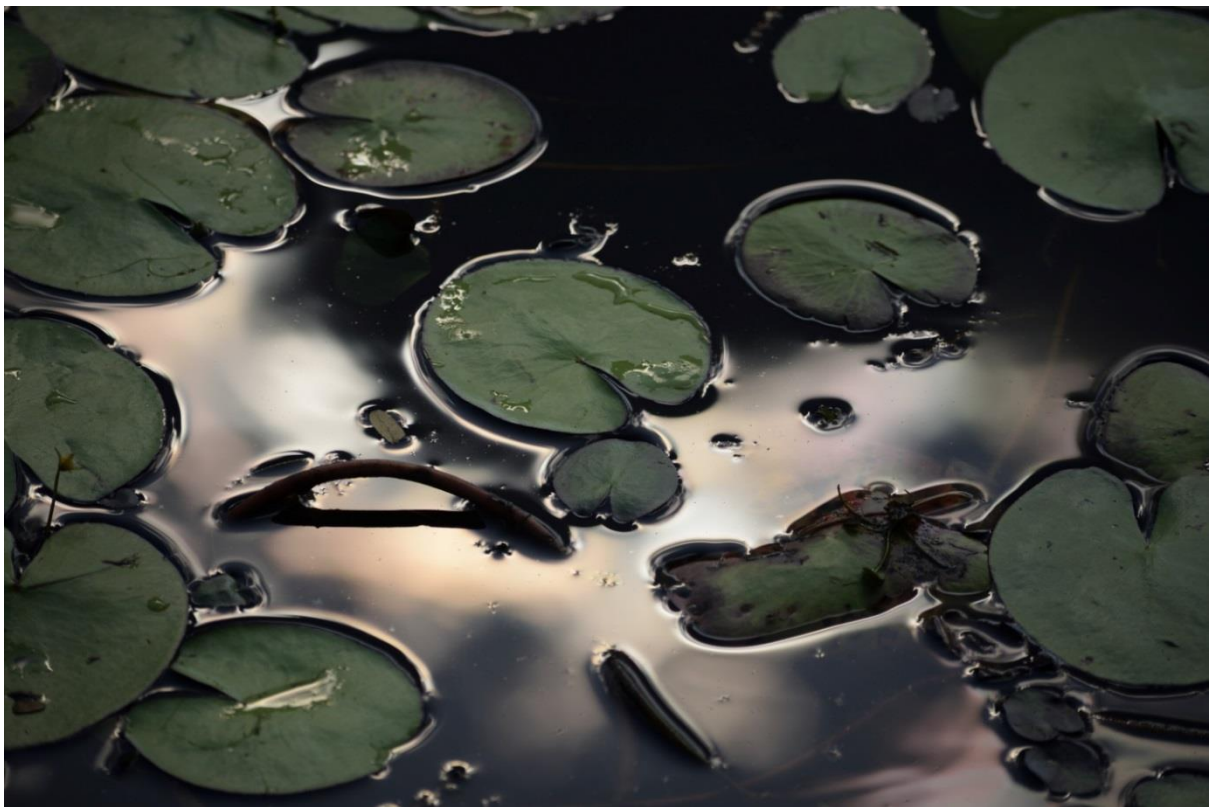


Figure 30: Meloney Steyl, *Touched by the Light*, 2019.
Digital photograph

My video can be accessed at <https://youtu.be/gznZzi0erAM>

Conclusion

Isobel Graw argues that the value of painting is related to the social negotiation that results from artworks (Graw, Burnbaum, and Hirsch 2012, 55). I contend that there is room, amidst the postmodern chaos, for every attempt to address the crisis of hope from every perspective; heighten environmental awareness; and engage in open-hearted artistic communication. Our environment, and our internal world, may be fragmented and fractured, but it is still sacred space, and creative and collaborative exploration may well initiate a paradigm shift for viewers, as it did for me.



Figure 31: Meloney Steyl, *Beauty in Brokenness*, 2019.
Digital photograph

Makoto Fujimura states:

Art has the capacity to challenge pre-set presumptions... to operate in the gap between the church and the world, and to address deeply spiritual issues. The power of art is to convey powerful personal experiences in distilled language and memorialize them in a cogent manner. Such communication will resonate in the context of larger culture (2009, 39).

I hope I have effectively communicated in the manner Fujimura describes. It is endlessly challenging to negotiate the spiritual through art – especially from a heartfelt Christian perspective - but as Elkins argues, it is irresponsible not to try (2004, 116).

To the best of my ability, I have fulfilled Terry Smith’s criteria for “contemporaneity”, by creating a project that bears a spirit of excellence and ethical engagement, encapsulating multi-layered realities with both local and global vision (2006). I trust it will resonate in the context of broader contemporary culture.

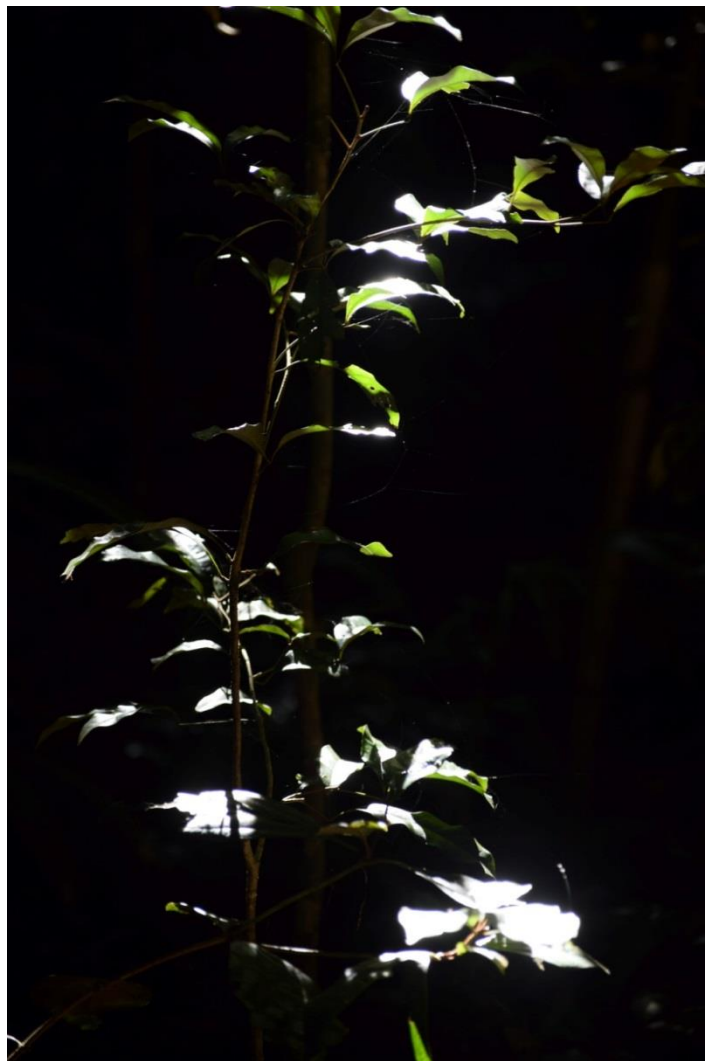


Figure 32: Meloney Steyl, *Even Light Falls*, 2019.
Digital photograph

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Figure 33: Meloney Steyl, *Seeing the magic...*, 2019.
Digital photograph
(No harm was affected to pond flora or fauna)

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Figure 34: Meloney Steyl,
Shalom, 2019.
Digitally layered
photographs and *Tjhoko-on-*
glass painting

Appendix 1 - Groundpaintings

My groundpainting excursions grounded me.

Re-connected me with earth,

and dust,

and rock,

and leaf litter,

and the lowest vegetation.

I breathed in the smell of the earth, and took time...

Time to breathe...

My groundpaintings breathe, in a way.

There is a rhythm, akin to breath, that unites the fragments

no matter their landscape of origin.

I imagine them united across a huge wall,

or hanging on individual threads within a larger space,

yet retaining their own space...

Or stitched together with fine gold threads...

because our natural environment is so fragile and fractured –

hanging by threads of grace alone.

We would see what we are made of...

dust to dust...

with this amazing,

incredible,

wrestling,

life in-between.

Appendix 2 - Notes to the video *Of Elemental Oracles in Nature – from the Sunshine Coast*

1. This video features, and was created on, the traditional lands of the Gubbi Gubbi people, and I respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal elders - past, present and emerging.
2. All photographs, paintings, groundpaintings, digital layering, and video © Meloney Steyl.
3. Research of the test site at the Mooloolaba rock shelf identified the geology as Mesozoic (Marshall 1980, 3), so the ancient rock shown in the video is referred to as such.
4. I relate the ancient rock at Mooloolaba to the Biblical reference to the “Rock of Ages” (GOD'S WORD 1995, Isaiah 26:4) as a name of God.
5. “Living Water” (GOD'S WORD 1995, John 7:38) was used by Jesus to describe himself, and the refreshing life that flows from knowing him.
6. Creation, nature and faith/wisdom come together in the narration of the creation of the world, in Genesis 1 (GOD'S WORD 1995).
7. The “heavenly realm” (Simmons 2017, Ephesians 1:20), also referred to as a “higher realm” in the video, or visually referenced via images of the sky, or reflections of the sky in water, refer to spiritual dimensions, including those beyond time.
8. The still waters that bear reflections of the sky within the Pumicestone Passage are used to reference Psalm 23:2, where King David writes of the rest and refreshment God provides (GOD'S WORD 1995).
9. The young mangroves that germinate and “stand” despite inundation, serve as a metaphor for Ephesians 6:10, where the reader is charged to stand their ground, despite adversity (Simmons 2017).
10. “Beauty from ashes” in the mangroves in Caloundra references Isaiah 61:3 (GOD'S WORD 1995), where new life springs from what is seemingly dead.
11. “Selah” is often used in the Biblical book of Psalms to denote a pause in the poem or song – such as in Psalm 3 (GOD'S WORD 1995) – a time to pause to reflect.
12. Jesus referred to himself as the “Light of the World” (Simmons 2017, John 8:12) – a life-giving light that causes darkness to flee – so all references to Light within the

video refer to this spiritual connotation, in addition to the physical property of light on the landscape.

13. Building on the rock – mentioned in connection with the Montane heath of Emu Mountain – references Jesus’ parable of being wise and building on rock rather than sand, so that one’s life/house will withstand the storms (GOD'S WORD 1995, Matthew 7:24).
14. The spring wildflower season is an expression of the seasons of life mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3:1, where there is a “time and a season for everything under the sun” (GOD'S WORD 1995).
15. The image of the lion that arose from the groundpainting on Emu Mountain, is used allegorically to reference the Lion of the tribe of Judah, mentioned in Revelation 5:5 as a metaphor for Jesus (GOD'S WORD 1995), and the indelible imprint he leaves on us when we have a spiritual encounter with him.
16. In the dry and wet sclerophyll ecosystems, the young sapling shoots (which grow into a mighty tree over time) are used to visually reference the “tender beginnings” which shouldn’t be despised, according to Zechariah 4:10 (GOD'S WORD 1995), because big things always start small.
17. New life – renewed life – is used within the video to reference life beyond depression, anxiety, despair, and brokenness, as well as the new life found in God-as-Creator and in Christ (GOD'S WORD 1995, Colossians 3:10).
18. Nature and Breath come together as Life in Genesis 2:7 (GOD'S WORD 1995).
19. Through the story of Creation in Genesis, we are all connected as the work of God’s hands – whether plant, animal or human.
20. The capacity of a sapling to withstand the storms rely on characteristics such as flexibility and resilience – also applicable to humans.
21. “I’m still standing, yeah, yeah, yeah” are the words of Elton John’s song *I’m Still Standing*, released in 1983.
22. Letting go of things that hold us back, including unforgiveness related to being wounded by people, is essential for growth and a flourishing new life beyond the hurt and brokenness (GOD'S WORD 1995, Ephesians 7: 13-14).

23. Lepidoptera larvae and the threads spun during the process of metamorphosis (Herbison-Evans and Crossley 2019) are used as metaphor for new life and inevitable change in my video.
24. Heart-shaped leaves are presented by plants such as the cotton trees (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*), which grow alongside the water at Cotton Tree on the Sunshine Coast, and the bleeding heart (*Homolanthus nutans*) that we have used extensively in our bush revegetation efforts on The Retreat in Palmwoods.
25. Psalm 92 reveals that when we are planted beside streams of Living Water, we flourish like palm trees, even in old age (GOD'S WORD 1995). Also see note 5 above.
26. It is written that we become like "Living Stones" that form a living, breathing, spiritual house (GOD'S WORD 1995, 1 Peter 2:4,5).
27. It is written that Jesus walked on water in Matthew 14 (GOD'S WORD 1995), and John 1:14 refers to Jesus when it states, "The Word became human and lived among us. We have seen his glory. It was the glory that the Father shares with his only Son, a glory full of kindness and truth" (GOD'S WORD 1995). In the video I bring these concepts together in my explorations of the freshwater creeks.
28. Nature tells us a lot about the Creator-God, who concerns himself with both the detail and the big picture, and I try to convey this in the video that loops from the heavens, all the way through details of ecosystems and life experiences and back again to the heavens, in a loop that never ends. This is an expression of eternity and the endless cycle of Hope, that spirals from Grace all the way through to Glory, through ever-higher revelation.
29. "Beside still waters, he restores my soul" is written in Psalm 23 (GOD'S WORD 1995).
30. In Psalm 94:13 it is written that I have the power to calm myself, and find peace in the days of adversity; and verse 19 states "When my anxious thoughts multiply within me, Your comfort delights me" (Meyer 2017).
31. In the freshwater billabong paintings and photographs, the waterlilies featured are *Nymphoides indica*, native to Australia.
32. "Seek and you shall find" – spoken of in connection with the native water hens in the video – references Jesus' promise that when we wholeheartedly seek Him, we will find him (GOD'S WORD 1995, Matthew 7:7).

33. The Spirit that hovered over the waters is mentioned in Genesis 1:2 (GOD'S WORD 1995).
34. The image of perforated leaves in the rainforest, and my words "because pierced and hanging on a tree says something to me," references Isaiah 53:5, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed" (International Bible Society 1973).
35. The pillar of light that penetrated the rainforest in Maleny reminded me of how God led the Israelites through the wilderness via a pillar of light (Meyer 2017, Exodus 13:21,22).
36. In the video, when I mention that "even a shrub can host a spiritual baptism" and that when this happens "we'll know we were standing on Holy Ground," I am referencing Moses' encounter with God via the burning bush (GOD'S WORD 1995, Exodus 3), as well as present-day possibilities.
37. My white-on-white waterlily painting and digital layering reference the "depths of purpose and layers of meaning" that saturate everything God does (Simmons 2017, Psalm 92:5).
38. Jesus was called "Immanuel," which means "God with us" (GOD'S WORD 1995, Matthew 1:23).
39. "Shalom" is a Hebrew word that is used as a greeting/blessing, and it encompasses peace, harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity, welfare, tranquillity and abundance.
40. Olafur Eliasson explains that "if the light doesn't go into your eyes, there's no rainbow"(Duxbury 2011, 40).