

Art Pilgrim



Art school, travel, a degree in Indian art and philosophy, a spell in academia as a researcher critiquing the shit out of educational research using complexity theory... none of it answered my questions about how and why to make art

Number 24

LOOKING FOR ART IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

I've been thinking for a long time about the difference between engagement with art and engagement with music in the culture surrounding me.

Everyone loves music. People go to

See Page 3

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE, IN AN INDIAN MURAL



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December, 2013, and I'm back for

See Page 4



Girl in a Blue Dress, c. 1914

A 'LIMITED' ARTIST, AND SOME CONTEMPORARY DRAWING

Two images jumped out at me this week. The first was a painting by Gwen John, in a review of an exhibition of her work in Cardiff, reported in The Week.

The second was an image on Instagram posted by a gallery advertising a forthcoming show. I'm not going to name the artist, because I have no desire to criticise an individual's work. What I'm interested in is some cultural trends that struck me when I considered these two images side by side.

Continued on Page 2



Though the reviewer summarising press comments on Gwen John's exhibition found plenty of appreciation for her work, they concluded their overview with the observation that '... John was a limited artist, a little of whom "goes a long way"'. This was supported by a comment from Laura Cumming in *The Observer*, who said that 'some of these works are admittedly weak'.

I know, they're critics, and they had plenty of positive things to say too. But these two negative judgements interested me. What is 'a limited artist'? Here's someone who spent their whole life exploring the mystery of life through painting, who the writer says at one point painted some 'brilliant' canvases, and who apparently 'pioneered' a way of altering the surface of her canvas with chalk and animal glue, being judged wanting in relation to what, exactly?

After I had seen 'Trump eats Venezuela', I found myself thinking about John's long years of apprenticeship learning about paint, surface, representation, light, and how these skills were taken for granted and uncommented upon; how we seem to

take such things as read when looking at art from the past.

When I saw the Trump drawing, the lack of any such apprenticeship in relation to coordinating eye, hand, experience, material and world was all I could see; it grated on my sensibilities so strongly that I was unable to respond to the idea. I'm not looking for realism or accuracy, but the marks the artist made jar, rub up against my love of colour, tone and line in an inexplicable way.

It's not that I care about someone making these kind of marks, why shouldn't they express themselves as they please? But from an art-school-trained adult who is being represented by a gallery, I find this drawing oddly disturbing. I feel cynicism, deliberate carelessness, a clumsy attempt at perhaps wanting to make me reconsider my assumptions and preferences in relation to what I think 'art' may be. I'm completely unconvinced, unable to see past the offence of the marks. Of course, I'm judging too, but it's what I feel in my gut as I see the image, not anything to do with the canons of art history.

The write-up from the gallery showing the Trump drawing includes this:

The importance of drawing has diminished a bit over the past couple of decades - despite historically being one of the most essential foundations of an artist's output. So it's very special to see it brought to life in a much more contemporary way, bristling with the artist's typical energy, passion, bravery

and true (and occasionally re-imagined) stories.

In our always-on, 24-7, algorithm-driven digital lives, it's lovely to experience the expressive force of something so powerfully raw and naturally human.'

I don't know what to say. Do they mean that over the last couple of decades people have stopped caring about whether or not a drawing is convincing (not accurate or realistic, just convincing)? Or do they mean that people don't do/use drawing so much now?

It's hard for me to imagine that someone who had developed the skills of hand/eye coordination, who had studied form and light in the world, would choose to make drawings like this. The skills developed in repeatedly looking and seeing, drawing and choosing colour, over and over, *show* in the marks that are made later, whatever those marks may be.

I don't think anyone who has developed observational skills would actually be capable of drawing like this. To me this is like someone learning their first tune on the violin, still playing pretty out of tune, with a scratchy bow tone, booking a concert hall and asking people to come and applaud.

Perhaps it's about confidence. And how you set up the context. I can imagine the violinist with their scratchy 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' advertising their show in a contemporary context as wanting to push right up to the edges of ideas such as expertise, melody, tunefulness; explaining that they want to challenge ideas about who has the right to make music, what music even is, who the gatekeepers are etc. Is this the equivalent of punk in contemporary art?

And what about Rose Wylie, the 91-year-old artist who recently became the first female British artist to have a solo show in the main galleries of the Royal Academy in London? Is she the same, or different? She did have a training in conventional drawing, and I'm pretty much as foxed about her work as I am about Trump eats Venezuela.



Rose Wylie, *Singing Life Model*, 2017, oil on canvas, 169 x 182 cm.

I don't know. For me, it's something about bothering. Reaching your hand deep into the invisible viscera of the living world, knowing that its sticky plasma is also the lining of your own cells. Something about wrestling at the interface of experience, difficulty, and the world beyond your perception with a mark-making tool in your hand, in the context of history and time.

I suppose this is what these artists are doing, and I just don't understand it. But that's kind of my point; I don't want to have to look for information in order to understand someone's work, I want to feel it, I want to feel a communion beyond words.

I feel a prickly cynicism in this kind of work that jabs at my spirit.

What do you think?



As someone asked, this image is by me. A bit risky after all my complaints! I think I see it as an illustration of pushing my hand into the viscera of the living world...

LOOKING FOR ART IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES



Unfired plate from Sara Santa Clara, here on Substack

I've been thinking for a long time about the difference between engagement with art and engagement with music in the culture surrounding me.

Everyone loves music. People go to gigs, stream albums; listen when cooking their pasta, dance when no-one is watching. But art? Visual art? How

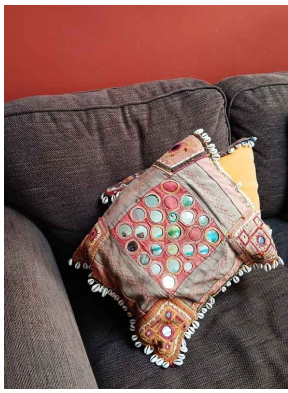
many people go to galleries, or buy art to put on their walls?

I look forward to the arrival of my Songlines magazine every month. I love reading what I find there, and listening to new music from all over the world. This month there are articles about an Algerian/French singer, an all-female band from Saudi Arabia, a British-Burundian musician, an American bluesman, a Ghanaian guitarist, a Dutch-Turkish band, and a pioneering Touareg band, to name but a few.

As I was reading this, I thought, what would the equivalent of this be for visual art, is there such a thing? How would it be to open a magazine and see what artists in Turkey, Pakistan, Korea, the Solomon islands are doing?

Then I remembered the hierarchy. The hierarchy that puts gallery art at the top, art-school-trained artists above crafts people, and the necessity of money if you want to bring a piece of art into your home. I saw that my definition of art had fallen for this hierarchy and its implicit definition of what art is, and is not.

We have art, illustration, design, and craft. Neatly stacked, one on top of the other. Throw them up in the air, and I see that of course art is woven through the culture just in the way that music is in people's everyday lives; if I stop thinking of art as being a two-dimensional thing that I can hang statically on a wall, and instead look at where there's colour, skill and subtlety in the objects that are part of every day life.



Cushion covers from Rajasthan, bought long ago on the streets of Delhi, that I was told were 'eye-work'; the women who made them lost their sight doing such close work for a living

The pottery bowl that I'm eating my breakfast out of, the mass-produced cup that I chose because I liked its shape. The trousers that I bought because I liked the deep green colour and texture of fine corduroy; the colour of the sweater I chose to wear with them, the contrasting colour of a scarf. Fashion, pottery, furniture, house paint; cushions, rugs, fabrics. Now my imaginary art Songlines magazine is full of textiles from Nagaland, pots from Somalia, teen fashion on the streets of Tokyo, tattoos in a London shop, makeup for a night out, stylised birds flying around a handmade lampshade.



The carpet I brought back from Kula, Turkey, after doing an architectural preservation project there

I'm tired of the negativity and disappointment that so often hit me when I go into an art gallery looking for aesthetic nourishment and satisfaction. I think for me, now, there's a kind of uselessness to much of what I see on gallery walls. What is it for, that installation, that articulated concept, that framed static thing? This is what sent me to Indian and Chinese art in the first place - looking for art that was designed to be integrated into everyday life, that was designed to *function in the world* in some way.



Traditional earthen architecture in the village of Tiébélé, Burkina Faso.

I want to see the art that flows through people's lives; art that augments the day to day actions of dressing, eating and drinking, that changes the atmosphere of a room, that makes its human user feel better in the world.



An improvisation by slavetothestitch, a retired man who lives in Ireland.



slavetothestitch self-portrait

Maybe I'll make my own little art Songlines magazine, and call it **Lifelines**; fill it up with examples of every day aesthetic nourishment as a celebration of colour, texture, form, pattern, material and utility...

EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE, IN AN INDIAN MURAL



Kochi, on the south western coast of India, in the state of Kerala, was the centre of the Indian spice trade for hundreds of years. Protected by the Chinese in the fifteenth century, ruled by a succession of Rajas, the first European settlement in India when the Portuguese arrived in 1498, subsequently ruled by the Dutch and then the British, today it's a thriving commercial port city and tourist destination.



December, 2013, and I'm back for the second time that year. It's the Christmas holidays, people are at night markets, being entertained, chewing on sugar cane. Sophisticated art cafes,

favourite junk shops, distinctive architecture.



On my previous trip, I had discovered Mattancherry Palace, a 16th century palace gifted to the Cochin Rajas by the Portuguese, apparently to appease them after they had plundered a temple nearby.¹



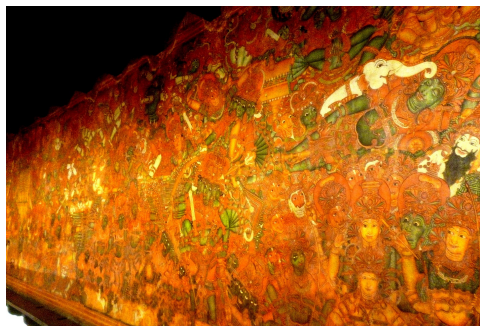
By Ranjith Siji - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51557350>

It doesn't look like much from the outside, but stepping inside you're immediately swallowed up by wall after wall, room after breathless room of brilliantly coloured mural paintings. I hadn't been allowed to take pictures before, so this time I intended to draw for hours on end as I let the colour and images wash over me. No chance. Drawing was also not allowed.

Eventually, after some searching and mainly sticking to Indian publications, you can find a few books that contain photos of these mural paintings. Like most books on art, however, they focus on close-ups of sections of the walls, and tend to simply describe the mythological stories that the murals narrate. Apart from the copyright issues of reproducing these images here, as I've said before, I'm not really interested in describing subject matter in this way.

What I am interested in writing about is what it felt like to be there. What the murals looked and felt like when you stood back from them, rather than focussing in on detail, and what it felt like to be in a whole room of them, with paintings on all four sides of you.

I managed to sneak a small camera in and take some pictures without being noticed. None of them are sharp, many are really fuzzy, but I love these images now, because I can still feel the experience in them.



I've been fascinated by the composition and use of space in paintings like these for a long time. I probably first read about this in a book called *The Speaking Tree*, by a visual artist called Richard Lannoy, published in 1971. Lannoy appears in searches as an artist and a photographer, but also in a more academic looking publication called *'Saundarya: The perception and practice of beauty in India'*, published in 2003.

In *The Speaking Tree* he talks about his experience of the paintings on the walls of the caves at Ajanta, which are the earliest existing remnants of older painting traditions in India that have now been lost. He has a fabulous interpretation of the ritual practices that might have taken place in the caves, involving the use of hallucinogens, flickering candles and sonic effects². Much as I'd love to, I'm

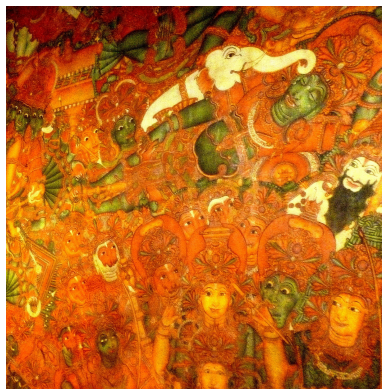
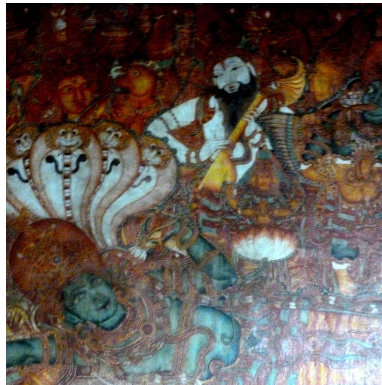
not going to go into that here, and I'm not sure it fits in the Ajanta context anyway, as the caves are Buddhist, and I've not come across hallucinogens being used in Buddhist ritual practices (please get in touch if you know more!).

Lannoy talks interestingly about the way that the forms at Ajanta are placed on the walls in terms of space:

'[The paintings] are exceedingly elusive to 'read'; one must make an appreciable effort to slow down one's reading of their visual language in order to perceive the spatial and tactile relations established between the the figures. There is no *recession* - all *advance* towards the eye, looming from a strange unidentified source to wrap around the viewer ... Each figure is inseparable from its environment ...'

He goes on to suggest that this effect is created through the 'controlled use of equal *tones*', a technique, he says, which was used by Bonnard, Vuillard and Matisse 'to obtain a hallucinating, visionary effect', which he also says was used by psychedelic poster artists. I loved reading this guy. For once someone writing about art wasn't just describing the forms and pigments and techniques of the paintings being discussed. He was assessing them in relation to what he knew of the wider historical and social context of the paintings, and at the same time describing their effect on him as he stood in their presence.

I'm thinking as I write this about whether his comments about space can be applied to the Mattancherry murals, and I think they can.



Every inch of the painting plane is covered; there's no foreground and background. There's no perspective. The priority seems to be the inclusion of all the details of the stories that the panels narrate, embedded in a teeming natural world. There's no above or below; events happen high above other events, occurring at the same time as what's going on underneath, everything taking place in a form of ritual time which is not remotely linear. The spaces between figures are crammed with animals, birds, small decorative panels; ornate jewellery and stacked up headdresses merge with plants, demons, musical instruments, servants and leaves. Everything seems to merge with everything else, as what Lannoy describes as the uniformity of colour and tone prevents too much of a sense of anything being any more important than anything else. In the earlier (16th century) paintings, at least, even though the stories do often revolve around a particular deity who can clearly be identified, the overall impression is one of a glorious overall fecundity, a celebration of life in all its forms, which for me is a key characteristic of so much of Indian art.

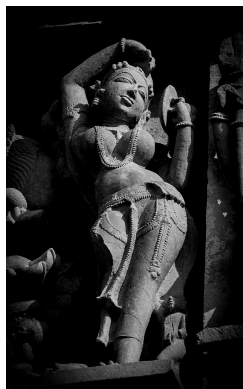
'Creation' in this Hindu view of things is designated by the word *srishtih*, literally the 'pouring forth' of the universe from the source. As a complex plant or tree grows, bursting forth and developing from the simple unitary seed, or as a complex creature emerges and grows from an embryo, so is this whole and diverse universe poured forth ... There is no God who stands apart from it and creates it. Indeed, everything there is, as far as thought can reach, is within the unitary systemic whole ... One could say that everything is a manifestation that has poured forth from the living body of the Whole ...

The notion that the universe is a systemic whole is foundational in the Hindu imagination. Whether it is the egg, or the seed, or the body - all of which are important originary symbols - the system is complete. Nothing is left out. Nothing is set apart. The whole universe is a vast ecological system in which the primary life process is one of bursting forth, pouring forth, growing, flourishing, dying, decaying, withdrawing into seed form, and coming to life again. Within this systemic whole, everything is alive and interrelated'.

Diana Eck, 2012 *India, A Sacred Geography*, p114

This celebration of the interdependence of all life forms is perhaps what I most love in Indian art, and the thing that I've most wanted to appear in my own paintings. In contrast

to what, for me at least, was the dry, cerebral world of contemporary painting, which appeared to me to reject aesthetics and focus only on the individualistic, marketable idea, Indian art floated down from the heavens and gathered me up in its perfect arms, restoring my faith in both art and humans.

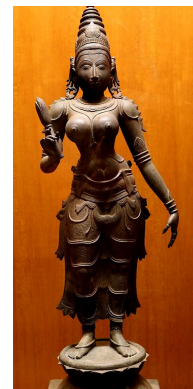


Surasundari Applying Kajal on the walls of Khajuraho.

Something that I haven't yet found mentioned in books about the Mattancherry paintings is their strengthening and protective function, part of the meaning of the word *alankara*.

Alankara can be translated as 'decoration', though in Anglophone countries this carries a subtle derogatory nuance. 'Decoration' is often associated with either craft or folk art, both of which are placed low in a hierarchy of art snobbery that sees 'fine art' as the pinnacle of sophistication, and functional or decorated things as somehow lesser. In architecture, it's common for people to say that, culturally, Europeans have preferred

smooth, unadorned planes (associated with Greek temples), with ornament and decoration being seen as trivial or unsophisticated. I was certainly told this during my degree, that Europeans were horrified by brightly coloured and lavishly decorated Hindu temples, and I've read plenty of colonial literature which seems to bear witness to this³.



Tribhanga bhudevi, dalla regione del chola nadu, xvi secolo

Vidya Dehejia, in her book *'The Body Adorned'* (2009), points out that people often refer to Indian sculptures as being naked, when in fact they are 'adorned':

The perfectly formed body of the Indian tradition, whether male or female, is decorated with fine fabrics, jewelled ornaments, and flowers. It is further adorned with an entire range of conventions ... [which] includes elaborate hairstyling; the heightening of the body's beauty by anointing it with oils, pastes, cosmetics, fragrances; and a range of other refinements, such as elegance of gait, gesture and posture'. (p24)

As well as representing a complex and refined ideal of beauty, she explains that the Sanskrit word *alankara* literally means ‘to make sufficient or strengthen, to make adequate’, and that it suggests ‘enhancement in the efficacy of the thing or person thus adorned’. In other words, it makes the person stronger and more powerful. She also talks about another Sanskrit word for ornament, *abharanam*, which means ‘to bring near, to attract (through magical power)’, in the sense of attracting forces that act to protect the person:

‘Ornament is auspicious; ornament is protective; ornament makes the body complete, whole beautiful and desirable. To be without ornament is to provoke the forces of inauspiciousness, to expose oneself to danger, even to court danger ... In the context of India, the significance of ornament cannot be overstated.’ (pp24,25)

Architecture is also protected and beautified by ornament, particularly temples and palaces:

‘Frequently, barely an inch of plain space remains visible, so that this tendency toward overflowing ornamentation has been termed ‘horror vacui’.⁴ But the underlying idea is not so simplistic: *alankara* is much more than a mere dislike or abhorrence of plain surfaces. The ornamentation of buildings in pre-modern India is not ‘mere’ ornament; *alankara* had a symbolic content of auspiciousness, protection...’ (p71)

The lavishly painted walls of the Mattancherry palace would have been seen to have this function of

strengthening, beautifying and protecting the Raja who lived in the palace.

The idea of art strengthening and protecting figures and buildings will come up again in relation to the next part of my 2013 trip, which continued on to the Jain pilgrimage centre of Sravanabelagola, and the temples at Halebid and Belur (both in Karnataka, the state adjoining Kerala to the north).



Footnotes:

1. <https://indianculture.gov.in/paintings/other-portfolio/wall-paintings-kerala>
2. The use of hallucinogens is verifiable at least in principle: The Rig Veda, for example, one of the oldest and most sacred texts of India, discusses ritual uses of an still unidentified hallucinogen known as soma

3. Having said that, I also wonder how much of this is a cultural fantasy that somehow grew up as part of the Darwinian ideas of progress that I’ve talked about before, which saw cultures and religions as ‘developing’ in a straight line of progress from lesser to superior. In reality, it seems, Greek statues were not the plain, white, unadorned figures we’re used to seeing. According to Gombrich, these are often lifeless copies of huge original statues that were destroyed, which were originally painted in bright colours and decorated with inset jewels.

4. ‘fear of empty spaces’

Articles included in your edition of the Substack Print:

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/a-limited-artist-and-some-contemporary?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/looking-for-art-in-all-the-wrong?r=1b6gdj>

<https://tamsinhaggis.substack.com/p/everything-everywhere-in-an-indian?r=1b6gdj>

Apologies for the odd bit of wonkiness in this print version. The programme that pulls the articles off Substack sometimes can't cope and I have to adjust manually - hence the little extra paragraphs or images that may appear at the top or bottom of a column, and sometimes handwritten punctuation.

About Art Pilgrim

Follow the adventures of Art Pilgrim as she leaves art school perplexed, becomes a teacher, and journeys onwards to Italy, North India, and the distant mountains of a Tokyo skyline, before studying Indian art, philosophy, and Sanskrit. Dive with her into complexity theory as an approach to unpicking models of adult learning, then follow her out of academia and back into the world of colour and paint. Watch her struggle to reconnect to her art as she draws on biology, fractals, and the sculptures of ancient India as sources for her painting. Finally, arrive with her back into the Edinburgh present and see what happens next.



This is a Substack Newsletter published every week by Tamsin Haggis at tamsinhaggis.substack.com.

There are currently more than ninety essays on Substack. The personal story (which, though personal, takes in Indian and Chinese art, complexity theory and teaching) runs from October, 2024 to June, 2025. After that, they cover a range of topics which are stimulated by visiting Edinburgh galleries and reflecting on what I find there. Check me out!

The order of articles in this print version is different from online, in order to create some variety. The online articles often appear in a series, which might not make for interesting reading as a one-off newsletter!