

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 1

ORIENTING THE QUESTIONS

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See Page 2

THE LICHEN WAVE



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See Page 3



WHO KNEW THAT MAKING ART WOULD BE SO COMPLICATED?

Welcome to Art Pilgrim. I hope you find some juicy investigations here and that you'll feel like having a conversation with me! Below is the first post I published on Substack: the historic backdrop to a lifetime of making art and not making art, the context for all the questions that came afterwards....

For most of my life I've felt completely alone with my questions about art. I was 16 years old when I left home to go to art school. It was the mid-seventies, and art schools were focussed on being wild, confrontational, and apparently only interested in abstraction. I got some basic training in drawing and painting at my local art school, but when I moved to St Martin's School of Art in London all of that stopped. On my

Continued on Page 2

first day there, a tutor intent upon 'challenging our expectations' sent a wind-up toy across the floor as another tutor was introducing us to the course. Some weeks later I was asked to react to a mattress while being videoed. These are the two stand-out memories of my art Foundation Course.

The culture that seeped its way into my impressionable bones at that time made it clear to me that if I really wanted to be artist, I would not be going anywhere near the life room, where a few reactionary oldsters were still enjoying making oil paintings of the figure. So I joined the serious artists' room, where everyone was working on enormous abstract canvases and talking about how to get into the best London galleries. I remember making something big out of paper and wire, with curves. I had no idea what was going on. I knew that I was lost. I decided that if making art meant pulling something out of myself with no guidance from the outside, I would have to take a year off to travel, in the hope that something might come into me which I could then use to direct my art.



It took a bit longer than I anticipated. I was 33 when I finally enrolled on a degree in Indian art, architecture and philosophy. Meanwhile, living and working in Oman, Italy, North India, and Japan, I filled up with sights and smells and colours. I wandered souks full of African fabrics, ancient copper and

gold. I travelled the entire length of India by train, staying in endless green, blue and pink hotel rooms; was lulled to sleep in an ancient Tibetan kingdom by outsized copper horns; watched bodies crackle and burn before finally tumbling into the Ganges on Varanasi steps. I gazed at ancient Etruscan city walls, little-known frescoes in crumbling churches, magnificent cathedrals; rented a house amongst sunflowers in a burnt sienna field. I lived under a Himalayan snow peak, watching monsoon clouds move across the valley as I listened to my students practising traditional Tibetan songs in the corridors outside my room. I watched tofu-makers dressed in indigo sieve vats of milky white fluid in the street where I lived; rang enormous verdigris-stained bells in ancient wooden temples; watched sunlight filtering through endlessly repeating squares of rice paper. I was saturated with impressions. And the contemporary European or American art worlds made even less sense to me than before.



In Art Pilgrim I want to explore questions about art that I carried with me for over twenty years of making no art at all, and also think about current versions of these questions after being a so-called full-time artist for the last

fifteen years. As I unpack my memories and dig for the questions I hope that what I explore might offer some company to anyone else who has queries about art, or who wants to make art or play with image-making, but who may be feeling overwhelmed, dissatisfied or confused. Perhaps I'll also find some playmates with over-active brains like mine who just think about these things and find them endlessly fascinating!

ORIENTING THE QUESTIONS



I have no idea where my questions about art are going to take me. They've been with me for so long, and most of the time I didn't even know that I had them. But they've never really gone away.

For some reason I never knew what I wanted to draw or paint. I don't know why that was. The creativity literature might say that I had an over-active inner critic; I might have said that my experience of art school from 16 to 18 had left me utterly confused about what this thing was that I wanted to do.

I knew I wanted to respond to the world, I felt it every day. But the world seemed so awesome, so perfect in its beauty and variety, that I never knew where to begin.

In the years following my art school experience I tried to find my way. I travelled, first working as a disc jockey in a tourist-free Oman, then as an English teacher in Umbria, Italy. In Italy, surrounded by ancient stone and red earth, I painted and drew most weekends, slowly filling up the whitewashed walls of our spare room with images: of the view from my window, a vase of flowers, my boyfriend reading, windswept skies, the room itself. And every time I finished something, I thought, no, not this, not like this, something else, it's about something else.

Over the years there were glimpses, tantalising moments when I seemed to gaze directly into the heart of the world and I knew what to do. But the practicalities of living in human time, of the need to work to eat, combined with my love of travel and my longing for adventure, eventually took me to a place where there was no art-making at all. I thought it was all over, in fact I rarely thought about it at all.

Then one day, 48 years old, recuperating at home from years of overwork as an academic trying to critique the shit out of educational research by means of complexity theory (a sleight of hand to get an Indian world view into the discussion), I unexpectedly tumbled back into the mystery. I had just cut a cabbage in half. I stared at it. Eyeballing the wavy fractals of its purple and white folds, I

fell in; into all that had been so vast, scary, and unknown that my younger self had been unable to handle it.



Well, I scanned that cabbage, and then I coloured it in. It was a brilliant ruse on the part of my soul to bypass all the questions and confusion that had paralysed me for so long. The questions and challenges that had haunted me have never gone away, but for the last fifteen years or so that I've finally been painting full-time, fugitive answers have come and gone, simply through the act of doing. I still fret over what to paint, but the answer to the question of how to proceed has in some way answered itself, simply by refusing to give up.

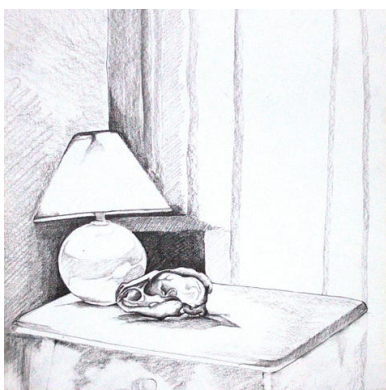
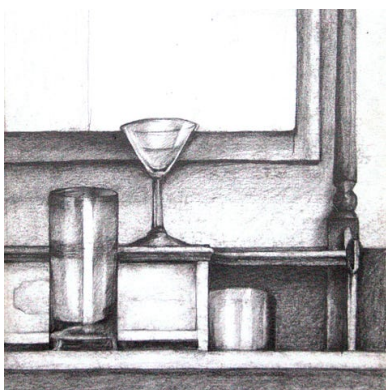
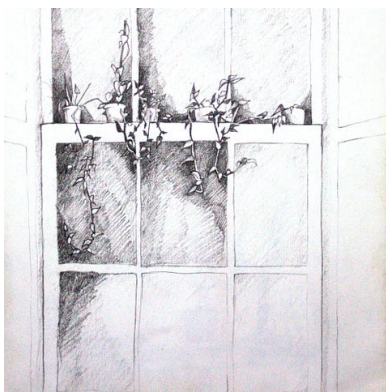


THE LICHEN WAVE

Some months after leaving art school, I was staying in a house in Argyll, Scotland, when I picked up a piece of wood covered in lichen. I found myself reaching for some paper and charcoal, transfixed by the world I saw there. Tiny, exquisite rolls of curling pale green spiralling over underlying stains of yellow ochre, softness and hardness; a living thing that looked like a frozen wave, living off another living thing underneath it. The wave held me in its gaze, and it said, 'Look, look some more, do you feel it?'



Things went quiet after that, for the next three years. I had returned from my first round the world trip and was living in a flat in Edinburgh, waiting for my English teaching course to start. Late one night, for no particular reason, I looked up at a house plant that I had placed in the middle of the big Victorian window, its leaves and stems falling down in front of the panes of glass. It was dark outside, and raining. Suddenly I saw and felt what I was actually looking at. Alive. Electricity. Something. That night I drew until the early hours, and in the days that followed everything in the room became a fascination. Cotton wool in my ears against all that my art school tutors had told me not to do, I followed the shapes and tones, captivated.



The magic of light and dark soothed me. I began to thaw, slowly understanding that the mystery and wonder that had seeped into me from the earthen streets of Korean villages, the ceramic curves of Taiwanese temples, the crowded alleys of Hong Kong, were also present in the unremarkable objects on my chest of drawers, the shapes in my fruit bowl.

I was 19 when I drew the lichen wave, 23 when I saw the trailing tradescantia plant. I was an art school dropout with no profession or skills but it didn't matter. I knew from my father's books on Egyptian and Cretan art that somewhere in the world there were people who sculpted figures of fierce women with snakes in their hands and dresses cut below their

naked breasts; I knew there were women with luscious long perms bending backwards towards the sky. As a child, I had been a regular visitor to the Chamber's St Museum in Edinburgh, my home town. I used to make drawings from Egyptian friezes, noticing that often animals seemed to be more important than people; that sculptures and paintings showed human bodies with eagle heads holding up the sun, and snakes with wings balancing the moon. The world felt like a vast cauldron of wonder, waiting for me to discover it.



Egyptian painting, source unknown

I went first to Italy, where I lived for three years, teaching English to pay my bills and drawing and painting everyday objects and landscapes whenever I could. But the images were strangely unsatisfying. I've written before about how every time I finished something I would look at it and think, no, not this, it's not this, it's something else.

But there was one exception. It was a small drawing done with a red biro on a scrap of paper. I don't know why I made it, it was a doodle, my attention had been elsewhere. But when I looked at it more closely, I felt that strange movement again. I had no idea what it meant. The line was spidery and free, wandering all over the place with no apparent plan or intent, as if ending up forming a man and a tree had been a casual accident. It felt like they had been spewed out of some kind of primordial goo into a previously unknown space between the worlds. And I couldn't stop looking at the line that connected the man to the tree.



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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. Most recent newsletters have an audio version.

There are currently over seventy 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. There's a seven-part series, for example, on Context and Time, which arose after my first visit to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. Check me out!