

Premonition of this Place
Milly Brown and Becky Dodman Wainwright
30th Oct - 27th November 2022
Southcombe Barn Gallery

“ Never forget that the universe is a single living organism possessed of one substance and one soul, holding all things suspended in a single consciousness and creating all things with a single purpose that they might work together spinning and weaving and knotting whatever comes to pass.”

Marcus Aurelius

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Who Am I

I am a multi-disciplinary textile designer, currently using tea leaf readings to create design plans for woven tapestries and other textile outputs. Having worked for over a decade in the textile industry and as a lecturer at Arts University Plymouth. I draw from a UK, Chinese and Colombian heritage, infusing my own creations with a vibrant mosaic of stories, tales and togetherness - and through this blurring of lines, of shared narratives, the co-designed work I produce emanates this feeling - essentially, ideas, stories, and time, results in feelings and shapes blobbed together, making up a whole - and most recently, as large tapestry pieces. This slippery, confused, and vibrant abstract idea of identity, being, time and now, is where it all begins.

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My current practice is informed by my research project 'Tasseography Textiles' (Tea Leaf reading) which began during my MA in Textile Design at Arts University Plymouth and was completed in 2021 (during a weirdly quiet time not having much tea with people due to the COVID lockdowns). Tea however, despite these turbulent times, has always been a daily preoccupation. My earliest memories drinking tea was listening to the stories of my Grandmother growing up in Shanghai, her buying a tea plantation in Malaysia with my Colombian grandfather and my father being born in a house on stilts, only to make a quick return to the UK after some 'snake incidences' when my father was small. These stories and a frequent exacerbated huff from my Grandmother teaching me to knit or sew, were the cornerstones of my childhood, interspersed with dreaming and playing in the garden.

Tea, therefore, is integral to my now artistic practice, and the development of the codesign approach to creating artworks, playing with the mundanity of tea in our everyday rituals and how it explores and can be used as a sensory activity to bring

ourselves together to talk, share experiences, and plan for the future. Like my British great-grandmother in rural South Devon I use tea leaf readings to subvert the act of tea drinking, exploring spirit, shape, and colour with the people around me. I have created a generative participatory design approach that works with designers and non-designers alike exploring their own internal landscapes and 'otherness' as amorphic future Us. This process forms the basis for design plans for textile artworks.

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Quietly, and until recent years, very privately, I have been an active member of a Goddess Group for 25 years working intentionally with Earth Energies through ritualistic and meditative practices.

We breathe in the cold still air.

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Now and My concerns

There is a tickling, tingling, unnerving and a more than uncomfortable feeling that is permeating and seeping into our future thinking. We try, with our now thinking to find the sparkle, the other, the more than life to mask the looming darkness. Our premonitions are tinged with dread, with clumps of thickening gloop that slide off our downturned faces and sore or idle hands. Divination seeks to soothe a troubled soul.

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Our ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner 1976), and our interrelations are in crisis. We're told daily that every part of our lives, from the micro-, meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono- systems are spiralling, fragmented, damaged, and strained. We are the children of a broken world. If we could fast forward today, what would a-future look like?

We know and understand that there are no easy answers. We are the inheritors of 12,000 years of agriculture, industrialisation, carbon emissions, and now mass extinction and global warming (Morton, 2018). We have never thought first, then act, Timothy Morton writes ...

"foreseeing and planning are strangely overrated, as neurology is now telling us ... our agricultural-based religions tell us that we have a soul that is somewhere inside yet beyond the body, and that this soul guides our body around, like a charioteer steering the horses (this is how the Greek philosopher Plato puts it in Phaedrus). But this idea has its origin in the very dynamic we have identified as

the problem, We've been thinking that we're on top of things, outside of things or beyond things, able to look down and decide exactly what to do, in all sorts of ways for about 12,000 years" (Morton, 2018)

Earth has been manipulated, abused, a silent parent who knows what's right but is ignored. We continue to act as children distant from the very Earth that holds us, our souls -or one collective soul- disconnected and troubled. What would it take to be together, to be part of Gaia rather than separate, narcissistic and/or beyond her?

We are knee-deep in a climate catastrophe, and this simply terrifies an already disconnected humanity from the living breathing pulsing Gaia (Lovelock, 2016). She is in uproar, angry and getting hot, wet and shaken. We are the told off children of the bleak near future, the shouting inconsolable toddlers of a once harmonious landscape.

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But we are still here, clinging on to our inner child, our rebellious teenage selves, and through the noise and the confusion inside we need to find ways to reconnect, take pleasure in the small natural things and to slow, to relearn, reimagine and place our hands in the dirt. To be at one with our spirit - Earth.

Our seeping, spiralling premonitions, our reptilian brain shouldn't hold crisis at the centre of our future thinking, but help lay paths to new thinking, find the sparkle and breathe.

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What future can we imagine?

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The Residency - Premonitions of this Place.

It is themes of ecology, place, spirit, and premonition that I began to explore when I was invited to spend a week at Southcombe Barn Gallery on a residency. My aim was to spend time with fellow artist Milly Brown to think about our present moment and how I, and she, could vision a now and a future in and around the Gallery, using tea leaf readings and automatic writings to activate and visualise the non-humans alongside the human inhabitants in the space.

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Milly and I are friends. Over the years we have spent brief moments speculating

about the larger, more pressing issues in life spanning across our families, communities and beyond. We often talk about folk tales, spirit, and discuss what it means to *be*. We are at our mid-points where a recalibration from the high energy to the reflective is required. The residency came just at the time when we needed more than a fleeting moment to work together to plan something new that could carry our thoughts out onto the wind.

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Southcombe Barn is located on Dartmoor, in Widedcombe-in-the Moor, a place rich in folk stories. The locality is rural and changes dramatically from the cold wet damp winters with cosy fires and long rainy nights to warm summers bursting with wild flowers, roaming wild ponies and lazy insect-buzzing sunny afternoons. It is a place full of contrasts and because of these polarising opposites, we sometimes feel hung between worlds, as if in a dream. Southcombe Barn, as with many locales in the area, has a rich history and carries “the sense that there is presence of those who are physically not there”. (Bell, M. 1997). With both individual and collective spirits, Southcombe Barn is always inhabited, always alive, always social.

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The Gallery is located as a barn annex, attached to lived-in farm dwellings; with a separate stables now dedicated to wellness activities - ones you can expect in a rural, well-restored location - yoga, foraging days, foraged-cooking days, herbalism, natural dyeing, and artist retreats - focused specifically for women. The gallery is small, a listed building, with low walls, uneven sides, with an old heavy door that separates the farm cottage from the gallery. You can often hear dogs yapping, or children playing quietly, keeping the white walls and potential sterile nature of the gallery glittering with whispers of life beyond its walls.

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During the residency our role was to bring spirit into the gallery, to open its doors to the nature spirits that kept quiet watch over the surrounding lands that the barns inhabit. To visualise a multilayered, multidimensional landscape, visualising the felt, unseen with the seen. This was done through the use of my tea leaf readings and the other spirit finding activities while on the residency, creating a magic circle of play.

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Thanks to the gallery owners I was given permission to visit infrequently throughout the year, dropping in for short periods of time to take note of the changing seasons or join them in their diverse programme of events. As my processes do not emerge instantly, but need time to ferment, gather, and pool around my subconscious; reading, listening and observing Southcombe Barn was necessary. She became my muse, my special

in-between place that allowed me the space to look beneath my surfaces and rekindle the fires inside.

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As an optimistic artist, a person consumed by colour and repetitive process, I seek to find ways to communicate a hopeful future that can often feel drowned by our ever complex fast realities. The act of tapestry weaving, my eventual artistic output, is in itself 'anti-consumption' (García-de-Frutos, N 2018) as the length of making situates the object outside of traditional cycles of textile production and focuses on a long slow meditative process to create an individual piece. Working at a micro level, the works seek to illuminate the magic of a place all the while being pro-environmental.

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Producing less means more. Each pass of the weft symbolises a small, intentional action to create something meaningful. To be hopeful is to work towards celebrating and protecting our future ecologies, for without hope what is the point. Information does not always reassure, especially in relation to our climates. Facts and truth become slippery, confused, and meaningless in the pursuit of trying to understand the complexity of the crises we face. (Morton, 2018) We think we know more but seem to understand less.

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My work is not filled with facts, statements or a definitive knowing but rather seeks the magic in-between. The in-between spaces of warps and threads that make up a story. My focus is therefore to pause and find wonder in a situation, a place, or in nature - believing there may be something magical, where it holds spirit, just invisible to the eye. Tea Leaf Readings, sitting, thinking, drinking, provide a ritualist - cloud watching space to imagine. My Tea Leaf Dictionary and a planchette helps illuminate that energy.

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Understanding Spirit. Understanding Place. We Play.

We have known for a long time that the more we play, the more we find the shimmer and creativity that lies in all of us.

"In any endeavour, play has the ability to bring forth creativity. In fact, it is impossible not to be creative while in a state of play; the two have a strong correlation." (Ham 2018)

We do not talk about our childhood with the things we had, but the things we did. Our memories are hardwired to the events - good or bad - and no matter how many times we're told we need something in the now, it is the moments of *doing* that stay with us.

Now at my mid-point, I may look older, but I feel the same as I did when I was a child. Life may look more grown up, but I am, as you are, only a longer living child that needs time to play. And in this realm of childish play I find the orthodoxies of adulthood slip away and the magic returns. Ham wrote a fantastic journal article, 'How designer's play: The ludic modalities of the creative process' (2018), articulating the phenomena of play and play space as the 'magic circle' outlined by Huizinga. He writes:

"In this magic circle, he describes a state of being that takes players into a mode of thinking and behaving that allows them to behave differently than they would in an active state outside play. Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside the 'ordinary' life as 'not being serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit gained by it." (Ham 2018)

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The tea leaf readings, therefore, emulate this, as a tool with fixed rules and conducted in an orderly manner, allowing myself and my participants the opportunity to play, to be creative. The ritual allows people, or spirit, to settle into the exploration of their colourful internal landscapes. For people, this amorphous, blobby, vibrant abstract idea of identity, being, time and now, is visualised into small collages.

So I use my art processes to help articulate and understand my relationship with humans and non-humans, and to place, aiming to gain a better sense of our existence, exploring both feeling, confidence and beauty from within while responding to my physical environment. I commonly anchor this through a participatory experience, the commonly held ritual of tea drinking, and generate works as a result. I am not the holder of special knowledge, but I talk with another to find artworks together.

I have been brought up to believe we have a soul or spirit, not defined by religious rhetoric but through an understanding that we can influence through a feeling of enthusiasm and energy. And how we define or feel or see these energies beyond us are a source of inspiration. These inspirations can be lit, and create multiple fires. The fires don't have to be shining bright, and certainly not all the time, but celebrate the spirits, shimmers, and the warmth that resides beneath.

It is with courage and abandon that we seek the child within, the child we always are, before language and before society conditioned us to think and feel and respond in known, predictable, and orthodox ways. We seek Earth spirit. We seek the spirit of Southcombe Barn Gallery, the particular way areas of the landscape hold onto the

marks that humans have left, or the ones that have been swallowed by fauna and flora. We seek the way it is feeling, its characteristics, enthusiasm, energy as well as how it feels beyond what is perceived merely by vision. We seek its ancestral adventurous spirits because we are children and we have much to learn.

In this vein, I undertook several spirit findings and future hunting activities. Having been given the freedom to roam, I sought the amorphic abstract spirit realms through simple esoteric tasks which resulted in place conversations, design plans and the generation of new work. I found Southcombe Barn's spirits and shimmer. The activities included:

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Automatic writing exploring spirit of place.

Inspired by specific locations around Southcombe Barn, notably the Glen, Meadow, Lawn, Crystal Pond and Barn, I sought to connect to the Earth and wild spirits. Inspired by automatic artists Georgina Houghton and Hilma Af Klint I used a planchette to connect the physical and metaphysical landscapes to explore the spirit of place through automatic writing sittings. Signs, symbols and incidental pattern making which created a body of work that is layered with other spirit finding activities.

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Tea leaf Readings (Tasseography) to create amorphic designs.

Using Tea Leaf Readings I worked with 5 key inhabitants of Southcombe Barn to visualise their internal landscapes - exploring signs and symbols in the tea cup, and using the tea leaf dictionary allowing us to shed light on their own spirits while at Southcombe Barn. As Carl Jung is quoted as saying

"Your visions will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes." I hoped to awaken a sense of wonder. The resulting collaged design plans were then layered with other spirit finding activities.

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The tapestry weaving "Hopeful Child" was created using a tea leaf reading after the initial discussions took place to do the residency. Six-months in the making, the piece was created with a cotton warp and wool weft. The Tapestry weaving is my meditative musings that represent slow textiles and my daily connection to my spirit and my own personal development. As Wood writes

"Tapestries are pondered, not made quickly, an essential difference from other media." (Wood Conroy, D. 2012. 231) And through this, by its very nature of being firmly beaten, tightly woven with its discontinuous weft, this weaving can be passed from generation to generation, as tangible evidence of time and history." (Wood Conroy, D. 2012. 227)

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Digital Photography

In an effort to combine the automatic spirit drawings and amorphic participatory designs, I placed each piece of work within its physical landscape in and around Southcombe Barn Gallery. These were then printed onto chiffon or organza.

Each layered piece is specific to an area, place, spirit and divinated future. They are amorphic, realistic, abstract and confused. They celebrate the complexity of the human influence and energy of a specific place. They are ethereal but not. They communicate a time gone and an unknown future. They are external and internal summers. They are dreams. And as Thoreau wrote *“Do not lose hold of your dreams or aspirations. For if you do, you may still exist but you have ceased to live.”* (Thoreau, 1849). And these dreams are the beginning of new visions.

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Conclusion

The resulting exhibition at Southcombe Barn gallery opened on All Hallows Eve in Oct 2022, exploring multidimensional internal and external landscapes that are soft, earthy and contain shimmer.

The merging of the landscapes begins to visualise how we can be in, with and part of our world - not separate from the places we inhabit. I do not want to experience our landscapes as 'IT' but as a living breathing ecosystem, continuing to foster a real sense of belonging (Blackie, S. 2018), if this requires us to find our inner child, and our inner wonder again, to strip back orthodoxies of engagement, and find the magic circles to play in, drink tea from unusual tea-cups, maybe there is a positive future we can divinate.

My closing quote is from the really wonderful Sharon Blackie (2018) ...

“If we can create a shift in the fundamental ways in which we see and approach the world, so that we come to feel again that sense of wonder, awe and belonging that we felt when we were children, then we will dramatically enhance the quality of our own lives and increase our sense of wellbeing. But more importantly - those internal changes will spark off wider and more enduring changes in our behaviour and our actions, and lead to an entirely new relationship with, and sense of responsibility for, the living world around us.” (Blackie 2018)

Together as we continue on our creative paths, let us embrace the amorphous and the ridiculous, seeking inspiration from esoteric interpretations of signs and symbols. Together, we weave futures, celebrating the vibrant tapestry of individuality and self-expression, while coming together to find joy in the spaces inbetween, the unhurried, the deep breaths and the quiet chatter of focused play.

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Becky Dodman Wainwright

I am a member of the Crafts Council, the British Tapestry Group and have exhibited both in solo and group gallery shows. In 2021 I was shortlisted for the group exhibition Making It at Jubilee Gallery in Bovey Tracey, and presented 50 tufted and woven artworks inspired by the Tasseography Textile process in a solo show at Ocean Studios Plymouth. The latter project has also been featured in the 'Next Generation' edition of Li Eldekoort's New York Talking Textiles magazine in 2020. In 2023, I showed in Cista Arts online exhibition, Frontier Gallery's Fortune Teller Exhibition in Sheffield, and the British Beinelle in The Crypt in Blackburn. I had a further solo show of tapestry weavings at Ocean Studios Plymouth, and took part in Field System's Winter Solstice Group Exhibition in Ashburton. Field System is a new Gallery space dedicated to esoteric art works, run by Milly Brown, artist and ex-Arts university lecturer and Mark Jessett, Fine Artist.

@beckydodmandesign

<https://beckydodman.work/>

rdodman3@gmail.com