

File Note 147

# Tamara Henderson

Essay by  
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Jennifer Higgle

# Sound, Gardener, Director, Light

As above, so below.

Ideas and images emerge from the shadowy recesses of the mind in fragments, slivers, bursts of light. Some recede, others take shape, intermingle, reform.<sup>1</sup>

Art blooms like compost. Art evolves as an activity.

Art is alchemical. The artist is an archaeologist.

Balance is essential: a compost needs equal parts carbon and nitrogen so it can properly decompose and generate the soil.

The body echoes the layout of the city. The city is a body, its streets like veins. The city is a state of mind. The film camera is an extension of the body.

Canberra is a place of circles and triangles, an asphalt nervous system laid over land and lake. A city formed of cosmic symmetry, envisioned by Walter and Marion Mahony Griffin, who won the international competition to design Australia's capital in 1911. It was said that Griffin's design would create 'the only really modern city in the world'.<sup>2</sup> Marion was an artist who had an esoteric connection to the landscape. The first woman to be licensed as an architect in the state of Illinois, she wrote in her unpublished memoir, *Magic of America*: 'What the Gods have given us we are under obligation to share with humanity, with the world'.

Canberra is 'nestled in mountainous undulations like the curve of a breast'. Its name is most likely derived from the language of the traditional owners of the land, the Ngunnawal, Ngunawal and Ngambri people: *kamberrri*, 'meeting place'.

In Canberra, the screech of cockatoos heralds a new day.

The Canberra characters are physical manifestations of materials:

The Cockatoo. The basket. Starseed. COVID. The director.

The satellite. The pocket. Oz. Turtle. Figure highway. The shadows. The dragon.

Cinnamon flower.

Composting is restless and regenerative. Over time, it produces worm juice, a liquid gold.

Each character has a costume, dyed with plants: eucalyptus leaves, bark, mordant, marigold with indigo and more.

The creative process involves an unlocking.

Decomposing is the act of disappearance as the art of renewal.

Demeter, goddess of the harvest and the fertility of the Earth, searched for her daughter, Persephone, kidnapped by Hades, God of the Dead and King of the Underworld. When she travelled to the underworld to find her, the world was plunged into famine. Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone; Hades promised to return her if she had eaten nothing in his realm, but she had consumed pomegranate seeds. As a result, she could only return to her mother in certain months.

This – the grief, the loss, the longing and entrapment of women – is why the Ancient Greeks believed we have seasons.

The artist digs for herself in the desert to find her bones in order to put herself back together.

The creation of art is the creation of ecosystems.

There are many eyes involved in this: regular, inner and third, perception beyond ordinary sight.

In Australia, around 900 species of eucalypts of different shapes and sizes dominate its landscape, from the alps to the arid interior, and from Tasmania to the tropics.<sup>3</sup> The first specimens were taken to London by Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, who arrived on the continent in 1770 on Captain James Cook’s expedition to observe the Transit of Venus. Eucalypts were imported to Greece in 1862 by the botanist Theodoros Georgios Orphanides. The name ‘Eucalpytus’ was coined by the French botanist L’Héritier, from the Greek roots *eu* and *calyptos*, meaning ‘well’ and ‘covered’. The Australian writer Murray Bail wrote in his novel, *Eucalyptus*: ‘set pendulously their leaves allow see-through foliage which in turn produces a frail patterned sort of shade, if at all. Clarity, lack of darkness – these might be called “eucalyptus qualities”’.<sup>4</sup>

In a garden in Canberra we rub eucalyptus leaves between our fingers and breathe in its potent aroma; it clears the airways and calms the mind.

Film flickers. Images include: breath on glass, balloon, bog, bronze, blue, black, beige; brain, bee, button, banana, bean, blueberry, beet, broccoli, bury, bend, braid, bounce, butterfly, bell, bubbles. Film is experiential, like a mind, a memory, a way of showing you something about a Tuesday afternoon in the garden, without speaking.

Fire is essential to the creation of ceramic sculptures: a chemical reaction that converts fuel and oxygen into carbon dioxide and water. It releases heat and light. It transforms matter. It makes ideas solid.

In art, foraging is necessary for discovery. Gardens have many functions: they’re edible, hallucinogenic, psychoactive. The garden

is the worm’s church. The gardener is a wizard. The gardener is the director. The director is the artist. The gardener needs the light.

Tamara’s mentor, Clive, works at Australian Bronze in Manly Beach. He says: ‘Hey, tomorrow, you could really consider the green that will be in the grooves.’

The studio is a greenhouse, a kiln of sorts, rich earth, transformed. The artist’s body is filled with green light. Its energy moves through the nervous system, through the chakras, through the meridian points: grounding energy.

Growth is inevitable. Literally, in the soil, and in the mind as a metaphor.

Home, at times, is a nebulous concept. A reminder that reality is often hallucinatory.

Tamara makes incense from eucalyptus and lavender from her garden. She says: ‘I go electric on that.’

Art is formed of ingredients from disparate sources: ideas, objects, energies, animals, words. These might include: jellyfish (rubber, purchased at tackle shop), jute, jasper (purchased at Dinosaur Museum), jasper sphere (purchased at Dinosaur Museum), jade, jasmine, jiggle. Kangaroo. Kiss. Knit. Knot. Knock. Key. Kitten. Kite. Knot. Khaki. Kangaroo paw. Kale. Kiwi. Knee. Kidney.

The light character is everyone: the internal light that radiates. The light is glass, mirror, reflections. Trataka meditation becomes a painting of the light character. You can go deep and ask: what does that light feel like? The light is connected to Ajna, the sixth primary chakra in the body according to Hindu tradition – the third eye in the middle of your forehead: the pathway to perception, awareness and spiritual communication.

Language is one of light’s materials and like light, it’s sensitive to its environment.

Lock, lavender, lead, lungs, lips, leaves, lemon, lobster, lace. Love. Art, being alchemical, is real magic.

More words: numbers, nails, nasturtium, navigate, names, notebook.

So much still to learn. Occult knowledge: the knowledge that has been hidden.

Painting is the act of transforming a thought, a feeling, a meditation, into an image. But what might a plant's eye view be? Think of that.

Paintings emerge from Trataka: a yogic purification and tantric method of meditation that involves staring at a single point: an object, a flame, a dot. An image in a bowl of water, the moon, someone else's eyes, someone else's face.

Painting is a form of unravelling.

Poetry: so much can grow from a single word.

Quartz (purchased at Dinosaur Museum): from the Greek κρύσταλλος or *kristallos*, a reference to its icy appearance. The first historical documentation of crystals originated from Ancient Sumerians (c. 4500 – 2000 BCE), who used crystals in magical formulas. According to some belief systems, quartz is a vacuum cleaner for harmful vibrations and enhances spiritual growth, wisdom and clarity.

Quince: Goddess Aphrodite holds the fruit in her right hand.

Quince leaves, quince tree, the inside of quince. The prevalence of question marks.

When you shoot a light beam through a prism you get a rainbow.

The artist thinks of a rainbow of sounds when she sings one note.

The soil is insomniac, full of sounds: of worms digesting; the compost breaking down and reforming. Of seeds pushing towards the light. It's beautiful; it never stops. Without soil – seed propagation, soil ecology, composting – humans could not survive.

A moment of reflection: observe the perfect coil of the snail. Its connection to seashells. The beauty of the shadow. Sleep and its visions. Surrealism: a deep spiritual and energetic body and body practice connection.

The Starseed Mission: 'to create abundant systems of perpetual renewal, build community, teach and model productive living systems and share knowledge with the world'.<sup>5</sup>

Tamara: the artist is 'like a seed blowing in the wind'.

Art is a constant act of translation, from one material, one thought, to another. To be an artist is to travel, in the mind and through the energetic body.

A true leaf: one that can perform photosynthesis, the process that plants use to make their own food. Eating light.

More words: Violet, viridian, velvet, Venus, valerian, verbena, viola, voice, vein, vertebra, vow, vocalise, visit, vowels, view, vase, vegetables.

Vocabulary: ever expanding.

Worms, engineers of the underworld, entwine like questions marks. The Wizard of Oz is a book, a film, a dream, a reality, a vision, a journey. Dorothy enters another realm where she sees the characters who are present in her life, but the filters in her glasses enable her to see things beyond appearance. How do we have the capacity to do that as humans?

In wintry Canberra, wattle is like an explosion of scattered gold in the streets.

The writing, over time, grows as a response to itself. It asks: who, what, where, when, why?

Like X-rays: what was hidden is now revealed.

Xylophone; xylosma (genus of flowering plants in the family Salicaceae); xeranthemum (genus of flowering plants in the family Asteraceae), xylography (engraving on wood), xylarium (collection of wood).

Yo-yos, yellow film gels, yellow lens, rubber yabby (purchased at tackle shop), yolk, yam, yard, yeast, yoga, yawn, yew. Zig Zag, zucchini, zinc, zinnia, Zenobia, zygote, zipper, zebra, zircon (mineral purchased at dinosaur museum), zone, zest, zucchini flowers, zinnia.

Zoo: it's 200-years-old and has a film archive.

*Jennifer Higgle is an Australian writer who lives in London. Her latest book is [The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World \(2023\)](#).*

- 1 Unless otherwise stated, words are quotes from, or inspired by, conversations, messages and notes of various kinds between Jennifer Higgin and Tamara Henderson in Canberra, Australia, July and August 2023.
- 2 'The Siting and Naming of Canberra', National Capital Authority, <https://www.nca.gov.au/education/canberras-history/siting-and-naming-canberra#>
- 3 Genelle Weule, 'Eucalypts are icons of the Australian landscape, but their family tree is shrouded in mystery', 31 July 2022, ABC Science, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2022-07-31/eucalyptus-native-trees-evolution-dominate-australia-landscape/101229092>
- 4 Murray Bail, *Eucalyptus*, 2021, Vintage Classics.
- 5 Connect with Byron Bay's Visionary Culture: Starseed Gardens', <https://byronnow.com/starseed/>

## Reading List

- David Abram, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (London: Vintage, 2011)
- Anne Biklé and David R. Montgomery, *The Hidden Half of Nature: The Microbial Roots of Life and Health* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016)
- Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951)
- Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Contacting the Power of the Wild Woman* (London: Rider, 2008)
- Matthew Evans, *Soil: The incredible story of what keeps the earth, and us, healthy* (Crows Nest: Allen Unwin, 2021)
- Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)
- Derek Jarman, *Modern Nature* (London: Vintage, 1991)
- Bernie Krause, *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (London: Profile Books, 2013)
- David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007)

- David Murphy, *Earthworms in Australia: A Blueprint for a Better Environment* (Melbourne: Hyland House Publishing, 1993)
- Mary Ruefle, *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures* (Seattle: Wave Books, 2012)
- Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life* (London: Bodley Head, 2020)
- Rupert Sheldrake, *Ways to Go Beyond and Why They Work: Seven Spiritual Practices in a Scientific Age* (London: Hachette UK, 2019)

## Viewing List

- ABC News In-depth, *Recycling revolutionary Veena Sahajwalla turns old clothes into kitchen tiles* (Australia, 2021), short film
- John Feldman, *Symbiotic Earth: How Lynn Margulis rocked the boat and started a scientific revolution* (USA, 2019), documentary
- Deborah Koons, *Symphony of the Soil* (USA, 2012), documentary

# Biography

Tamara Henderson (b. 1982, New Brunswick) lives and works in Canberra, Australia. Henderson's film *Womb Life* (2018) was included in the group exhibition *The Botanical Mind, Art, Mysticism and The Cosmic Tree*, at Camden Art Centre in 2020 and her film *Seasons End: Out of Body* (2018) was exhibited at Tate Modern that same year. Following those presentations, this will be Henderson's first institutional solo show in London and builds on her significant national and international exposure, which includes solo presentations at Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2018), Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin (2018), REDCAT, Los Angeles (2016), the ICA Philly (2015), and Grazer Kunstverein (2014), as well as inclusion in group exhibitions and festivals, such as *Thin Skin* curated by Jennifer Higgie at Monash University Museum of Art, Australia (2023); the São Paulo Biennial (2021); the Virginia Woolf exhibition at Tate St Ives, Pallant House Chichester and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (2018); Glasgow International (2016); Vancouver Art Gallery (2016); Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm (2016); Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2016); and dOCUMENTA 13 (2012).

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‘Go out in the woods, go out. If you don’t go out in the woods nothing will ever happen and your life will never begin.’

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

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