

THE ALCHEMY OF EXILE

Justine Turnbull

The Greeks had two meanings for it: 'eu-topos,' meaning the good place, and 'u-topos' meaning the place that cannot be ... Rachel Menken, *Mad Men*, episode 6: Babylon (2007)

My work is centred around this good place, and the unlikelihood of remaining there, even if we find it. It is a place of loss and nostalgia, love and guilt, innocence and corruption. The title of my Master's exhibition, *The Alchemy of Exile*, conflates the turbulence preceding breakdown and transformation with the universal theme of exile from paradise. I consider chaotic energy to be a necessary aspect of the creative process, one which is exemplified in physical laws and in the capacity for self-destruction in human nature, and which ultimately leaves us to wander East of Eden.¹ In my painting practice, I wanted to capture this unpredictable energy of motion-between-states – an intense, chaotic turbulence that directly precedes new order – as my work at the time had become lifeless due to over-control. My goal for the Master's project was to destroy old habits in order to facilitate the emergence of a new order. I learned to literally destroy my paintings to achieve this new life.

I have noticed the process of transformation in many spheres of life (such as a caterpillar becoming a butterfly), in the physical and cognitive sciences, alchemy, art-making and in the vicissitudes of life – any area where there is creative growth.² Some years ago, I realised that the concept of entropy provided a way to explain this constant destruction and rebuilding. Ilya Prigogine has shown that natural processes are irreversible. This not only increases the entropy of the universe and destroys order; but also the opposite; complex structures created by irreversible processes can come about spontaneously and respond to changes in their physical environment, indicating a perfect balance between creation and destruction that originate from the same source. Prigogine comments: "Near bifurcation, systems present large fluctuations. Such systems seem to hesitate among various possible directions of evolution. A small fluctuation may start an entirely new evolution that will drastically change the whole behaviour of the system. The analogy with social phenomena and history is inescapable."³

I now believe that this analogy pertains to all levels of creative growth – that chaos is a pre-requisite for all creative transformation. In my own work, the raw energy of the initial marks I had made expressed this upheaval. However, my need to resolve the forms would obscure those marks and my finished paintings felt stifled. I had literally choked the life out of them! I wanted to discover what gave a work of art a life of its own, and whether this intensity of sensation was the reason some art continues to engage for years, even centuries, after making.

Philosophers Gilles Deleuze⁴ and Elizabeth Grosz⁵ posit a transformative space where this sensation and its affect – and a dialogue between artist and material – can interact, often unpredictably, to create a force which exists independent of subject and maker. Grosz argues that art is an arrangement of chaos, and that artists organise and transform materiality which then resonates with a force of its own – a vibration peculiar to itself. She makes use of Deleuze's concept of "becoming/flux" to identify movement between relational elements – the motion between states – which leads to transformation. Grosz theorises that we are dependent on our animal history, our memory, for the point we are at now, and are ready to transform because of previous "animal-becomings," or a new order that has been reached before. But, she says, art is not simply a building upon our animal past – it is an emergence of new form, where sensations have reached the right conditions to express themselves.

Painter turned academic James Elkins uses the analogy of painting and the alchemical processes of gestation and distillation to illustrate a similar point. He presents these analogies primarily through a discussion of substances and how they occupy the mind of both painter and alchemist, and notes that alchemists and painters both use rational control combined with intuitive freedom to reach their goals. Discussing gestation, Elkins believes that where the experience and understanding of the artist increases – and given the right intensity of sensation found in the motion of states in-between – the substance may transcend its materiality and become more than the sum of its parts. He describes the process of distillation as that moment when paint forms itself into something more than itself, as the "unpredictable, dangerous agitation that immediately precedes transcendence."⁶

In an attempt to define creativity, cognitive scientist Margaret Boden⁷ argues that a combination of unpredictability and constraint is essential, and together these result in original thinking. She refutes the idea that art is just a novel combination of previous ideas, arguing that an element of unpredictability in a truly creative idea is crucial. Boden recognises that there must be an established style of thinking, or conceptual space, whose structural features can be mapped. She gives the example of jazz melodies as a conceptual space, in the domain of music, whose limits, contours and pathways can be mapped, explored and transformed in various ways. Boden suggests that knowledge of the structural features and some notion of how a new idea can fit into it, combined with an unpredictable element, can elicit transformation. Thus, there is a balance of chaos and control in the art-making process – unbridled and intuitive mark-making is balanced with an understanding of the limits and capabilities of domain-specific processes, even if these rules are then broken.

This idea of a structure that forms the building blocks for a new order is echoed in the birth of a butterfly. Beatrice Bene quotes evolutionary biologist Elisabeth Sahtouris:

Inside a cocoon, deep in the caterpillar's body, tiny things biologists call 'imaginal discs' begin to form. Not recognising the newcomers, the caterpillar's immune system snuffs them. But they keep coming faster and faster, then begin to link up with each other. Eventually the caterpillar's immune system fails from the stress and the discs become imaginal cells that build the butterfly from the meltdown of the caterpillar's body.⁸

This is a neat example of the process of transformation, and the caterpillar represents the scaffold upon which a new life is built. These ideas influenced, perhaps unconsciously, the way I began to work in the studio. I was in the experimental phase of the course and had started using cheap materials as my success rate wasn't great! I made a painting out of acrylic on paper which had some good ideas, but wasn't working visually. I was so fed up I attacked it, obliterating it by blurring and scraping back the paint, dripping and flicking, and using a condensed tonal range to obscure large areas of the forms. The result was a painting with mystery and mood.



Figure 1. Justine Turnbull, *Beauty as Burden*, 2016, acrylic and oil on paper, 150 x 100 cm.



Figure 2. Justine Turnbull, *Template*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.



Figure 3. Justine Turnbull, *Template*, 2018, oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

Having a structure underneath that could be fused with a new idea, and an element of chaos, fitted with my theoretical concerns and played out in this work. The structure is hidden, yet integral to the outcome and therefore never truly lost.⁹ It represents that which is unknown and unseen, yet which precipitates sudden changes of fortune and overturns the established pattern of life. This template represents an intelligent and orderly plan behind the apparently random changes in life.

Myth acts for me as another template in terms of narrative. Just as referring to art-historical work gives a starting point for pose, colour or composition, myth can be used as a key to navigate the structural features of say, losing one's innocence, job or loved one – examining these maps in depth and detail may help us ride the wave of change. Myths express the profound, permanent tendencies in the nature of man; thus the idea of God expelling Adam and Eve from paradise for their sins, and loss of innocence in general, is universally appealing. The process of transformation – or death, if we do not have the required learning capacity to creatively self-organise and transform – and being constantly expelled from all we build, causes anxiety and alienation. I have learnt techniques from the neo-romantics and other contemporaries to express these feelings without succumbing to sentimentality. For example, Figure 4 is an exploration of anxiety based on Manet's *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, which shows a group of figures crowded into an intimate space, yet isolated.



Figure 4. Justine Turnbull, *Exposure*, 2017, acrylic and oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

The work in my exhibition referenced art history, often from the Baroque period. I am naturally drawn to the drama and extravagance of the Baroque with its dynamic compositions, rich colours and the use of chiaroscuro. This latter technique has connotations of emergence – an acknowledgement that transformation is a painful process which is often undertaken unseen, such as with birth of a butterfly or the journey through grief.



Figure 5. Justine Turnbull, *Limen*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm.



Figure 6. Justine Turnbull, *Limen*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 100 cm.

Some work I've made over the last couple of years shows great change from under- to overpainting, and in some the differences are subtle. Nevertheless, the practical outcome is that the underlayer provides me with the confidence to play *with* the material,¹⁰ rather than flogging it to death. I enjoy both processes – the tighter more accurate portrayal (as with the resolution achieved in the hand of the Madonna in the underpainting of *Limen*), and the looser, more expressive qualities that celebrate the sensual nature of oil paint in the top layer.

In conclusion then, change is an evolutionary process that occurs throughout life and creativity. When sensations have reached the right conditions to express themselves, an agitated energy builds, preceding death or transformation. In the studio, a combination of structure, an idea whose time has come and this element of unpredictability work together to create a new order. In my own practice, I have adapted my process to create a stronger dialogue with the material. The underlayer represents structure, while the unpredictability is in the material itself, and it is this which I explore through the top layer of oil. The idea of Utopia – equilibrium – is one we strive toward. But once a level of completion is attained, we must sum up,¹¹ and our growth as artists and people insists on our expulsion.



Figure 7. Justine Turnbull, *Reckoning*, 2017, acrylic and oil on canvas, 120 x 120 cm.

Justine Turnbull gained an MFA in painting from Dunedin School of Art in 2018. She had a highly successful Master's exhibition in Wellington and won the People's Choice Award at the NZPG Adam Art Award this year. Justine tutors part time, and works from her studio. Follow her on instagram - <http://www.instagram.com/justineturnbullart/?hl=en>

- 1 Genesis 4:16: "So Cain went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden."
- 2 Beatrice Bene has been working on a similar concept, and cites systems as diverse as natural ecosystems, social systems, the Hero's Journey and the three-act story structure as evidence of this "archetype of change" at work. Beatrice Bene, "Demystifying the Pattern(s) of Change: A Common Archetype," April 2007, <https://beatricebene.com> (accessed February 2016).
- 3 Prigogine is a Belgian scientist who received a Nobel Prize in 1977 for his work on the thermodynamics of systems operating dynamically under nonequilibrium conditions. He argued that systems that were far from equilibrium, with a high flow-through of energy, could produce a higher degree of order: Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1984).
- 4 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W Smith (London: Continuum), 1981.
- 5 Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press), 2008.
- 6 James Elkins, *What Painting is: How to Think about Oil Painting, Using the Language of Alchemy* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 7 Boden, Margaret, "Creativity and Unpredictability," *SEHR*, 4:2: Constructions of the Mind (updated 4 June 1995), <https://web.stanford.edu/group/SHR/4-2/text/boden.html> (accessed February 2016).
- 8 Bene, "Demystifying the Pattern(s) of Change."
- 9 "Omnia mutantur, nihil interit" is a phrase used by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* meaning "Everything changes, nothing perishes."
- 10 According to Jane Bennett, because artists are interested in the force or tendency found in matter; they develop a deeper understanding of a specific material and can have a productive collaboration with it. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). My own experience of learning to let the paint speak was profound.
- 11 *Reckoning* is inspired by the times of summation in our lives, when we reap the harvest of our choices and a new beginning emerges from the past.