

**co-creating with
the landscape**

STORY BY

correy baldwin

IMAGES BY

jamie ashforth

held by the land



After a recent creative breakthrough back home in Canada, Jamie Ashforth found herself far from home and at an art residency in Ireland, diving into a newly inspired exploration of her environment. “I couldn’t stop myself from indexing or archiving my relationship with this new place,” she says. “I was picking up mud, painting with mud, painting with clay; also going for walks, picking up twigs.”

She placed mud on paper and left it out in the rain, exposed dollops of watercolour paint to the wind and ran river water over shale—allowing the weather and the elements themselves to do the painting. She was playing her tendency toward order against an openness to the unexpected, and in a reversal of the usual order of things, responding to the direction of her materials, which were increasingly coming from the land. “I work in a way where I’m working in exchange or in response to what’s happening,” she says. “It’s open and it’s vulnerable, and it’s giving up control.”

For a lot of artists, writers and other creative people, the land is an invitation, something to engage with and create with. Creative explorations are opportunities to build a relationship with one’s environment, as well as to explore and open up one’s sense of what it means to exist in the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the land art movement broke open the idea of what constituted landscape art. No longer was it merely a scene painted on a canvas; the land itself was the canvas. The land was the studio. These artists created everything from large structures that responded to specific landscapes, to delicate, ephemeral pieces made from found materials like icicles and coloured leaves, to simply noting the creative act of walking a new path through a meadow.

In a sense, working with the land has long been central to artists and craftspeople who gather and forage for pigments and dyes, clay for pottery, fibre for paper and yarns for weaving, as well as objects for mark-making tools, for collage, for sculptures of wood and stone.

But collaboration can be complicated territory to navigate, given the very human ways we tend to approach the land—or nature, or our environment—and the very *non-human* ways in which the land itself exists and responds. How does one co-create with the land? How can we be co-participants with it?



↑
 Jamie Ashforth
 “Experiment
 XV, Printing
 with the River
 (Falling Tide),”
 monoprints: river
 scum on Paper,
 10x15cm and
 20x25cm, 2020

←
 Jamie Ashforth
 “Supine Lake-
 side, Muskoka,
 Ontario, Canada,”
 digital photog-
 raphy, 2021

“When we focus on how organisms relate with each other, rather than on how individual organisms behave as if on their own, the contours of every being begin to blur and breathe. And, when we acknowledge that life and growth can only occur because of relationships of organisms with environments—environments that they help constitute and from which they cannot be extricated—inside and outside touch, mingle, exchange, and fold into each other.”

—A. LAURIE PALMER,
 THE LICHEN MUSEUM



“I have discarded the noun form of *place* as meaningless. The verb, *to place*, as an activity in itself is a condition of being present.”

—RONI HORN, ARTIST



In her *Lichen Museum* project, artist and writer A. Laurie Palmer turns to lichen—a symbiotic organism comprising an alga and a fungus—to re-imagine how we might exist in the world, and to consider what it means to live in relationship, both with nature and with each other.

Her conclusion is decidedly less analytical: Just step outside, she says, and “allow yourself to be captured by a relationship.” When she encounters lichen in the wild, the hand wringing dissipates, and she is left simply exclaiming: “Hello, hello, hello, hello!” The desire to connect is what’s important, no matter how impossible it may be. “Impossible, perhaps,” Palmer writes, “but crucial, necessary, to try.”

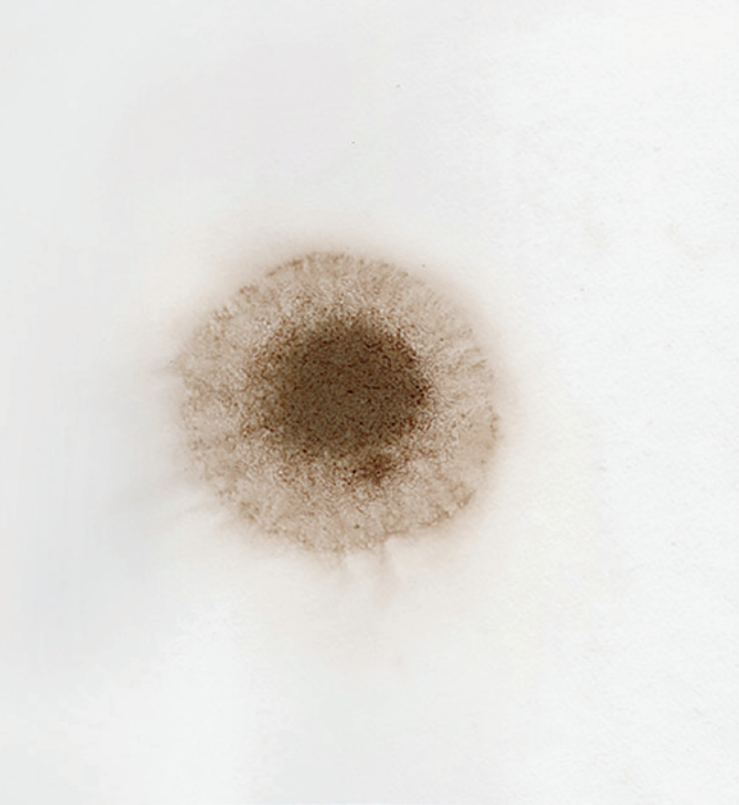
Palmer describes the problem of relationship this way: “A mess of problems could be seen as undermining this project from the start, not least being the fact that lichens don’t even have eyes to look back at me. And of course they don’t speak in any language I can recognize. How can I argue for any kind of meaningful relation with, or the ability to learn from, beings that occupy worlds that are so different in every way from my human world?” The endeavour, she says, is fraught with “the absurdities of attempting to reach across incommensurable difference, and of projecting my own, very human, concerns onto what can’t be known in human terms.”

Why necessary? Because the things we can learn from nature are too valuable, and because any attempt to imagine the “incommensurable difference” of nature opens the door to new possibilities for ourselves as well. To imagine the life of a symbiotic organism like lichen, for example, is to imagine a world based fundamentally on relationship. For we were never simply individuals, closed off from each other and from the world: “Interdependent relations among many and diverse worlds is what makes any of us what we are,” as Palmer writes.

Years after art school, Jamie was living in Toronto but not feeling rooted. While walking the shore of Lake Ontario, she saw a piece of driftwood rolling around in the

↓
Jamie Ashforth
“Excavation:
August 23, 2021 -
Toronto, Rachel,”
photographic
image-unwrapped,
18x27cm, 2021





←
Jamie Ashforth
“Study: Painting
With the Rain,”
marl and rain
water on paper,
22x30cm, 2020/
“Study: Painting
with the Wind,”
watercolour on
paper, 22x30cm,
2020

water, and immediately recognized herself in it: “That’s me,” she remembers thinking. “That’s how I feel.” This notion led to a show called *Drift/Land*, a collection of driftwood suspended in the air: a visual representation of a feeling, made possible by the materials given to her by the land.

Soon she was in Ireland, exploring this connection to her environment, how it could act as a mirror, or a counterpoint to herself. She began immersing herself in places in the land that felt resonant: “I felt like I was reading nuances, of seasonal changes, flowers blooming. I felt a huge experience of integration—that, there was this place that I knew, but that it felt like it knew me.”

Of course, having to reorient ourselves toward seeing ourselves as being in relationship with nature is not just a modern predicament, but a very Euro-Western one. Many Indigenous cosmologies, for example, have long viewed the creatures and elements of the natural world as our relatives, and as sources of wisdom.

And of course, Western empires and nations have long attempted to eradicate these ways of understanding. With colonialism, landscape has become a highly politicized space. “The problem with exploring resonant spaces in the land [here in Canada] is that I’m not Indigenous, I’m not native to this land,” says Jamie. “So I’m building relationship without permission, in some ways.” Of course, reframing our understanding of this politicized environment can open new, meaningful opportunities—just as can reframing our understanding of our relationship with the land.

Still, for those of us not raised in an Indigenous worldview, coming to terms with what this relationship means can be a struggle. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and member of



“We ... are reluctant to learn a foreign language of our own species, let alone another species. But imagine the possibilities. Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don’t have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. Imagine how much less lonely the world would be.”

— ROBIN WALL KIMMERER, *BRAIDING SWEETGRASS*

the Potawatomi Nation, deftly guides readers through the twin wisdoms of Western ecological science and Indigenous ways of knowing.

In one chapter she discusses wild strawberries as a gift from the land. A gift? Is this a metaphor? Yes and no. “When I speak of the gift of berries, I do not mean that *Fragaria virginiana* has been up all night making a present for me,” she writes. And yet, thinking of them as a gift changes our relationship to the land. An *object* is easily wasted, forgotten, commodified—but a *gift* is cherished. With a gift, a relationship is established. A gift prompts another in return.

“What I mean of course is that our human relationship with strawberries is transformed by our choice of perspective,” Kimmerer writes. “It is human perception that makes the world a gift. When we view the world this way, strawberries and humans alike are transformed.”



“In the mid-sixties I sort of metaphorically walked out of my studio. I had a sort of intuition that the natural world was far

more dynamic and interesting, and had far more possibilities, it had far more potential and even pleasure for my work. So I began to work in fields or in woods, on riverbanks, using just the material of the place. And that opened a whole new territory for making art. I could use time and distance to make a work of art. And it also gave me an amazing freedom, because I realized I could make my work in the world just by walking. And also the walks gave me opportunities to make sculptures along the way.”

—RICHARD LONG,
LAND ARTIST



Interacting with the land may be less about understanding what the environment is experiencing, and more about, as Jamie says, “registering for ourselves—via our body, thoughts, memories—how the interaction is impacting us. We are always registering ‘relationship’ by our own individual experience.”

And just as our own individual experiences vary, so a relationship with the natural world can take many forms. Some will best understand nature in human terms, while for others, nature is simply too mysterious. The writer Nan Shepherd, for example, whose book *The Living Mountain* describes her lifetime spent walking in Scotland’s Cairngorms mountains, “was thrilled by evidence of the earth’s vast indifference to human consciousness,” according to writer Robert Macfarlane.

But for Shepherd, the incomprehensible landscape is the very thing that allows for transformation. One’s sense of self dissipates, allowing for new perspectives on what it means to exist: “One walks the flesh transparent,” she writes. “But no metaphor, *transparent*, or *light as air*, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. ... I have walked out of the body and into the mountain.”

The musician and writer Richard Skelton immersed himself in a different landscape. Suffering an immense personal grief, Skelton returned to his birthplace and began wandering the moors. He carried with him various stringed instruments, creating music on, and with, the land.

In his book *Landings*, Skelton writes of his attempts to “sound the landscape,” as well as his attempts to physically meld sounds and land: “[I] grasp handfuls of balsam leaves and thread them into the sound hole of my mandola. Rub their greenness onto its dull brown strings.” He explores the sound of “soft soil sprinkled on resonant wooden bodies. Grasses and leaves intertwined around neck and fretboard. Bone and wood plectra. ... A collusion of place and instrument.”

Skelton also returned to certain sites to play recordings of this music back to the places where it was created, “returning the music back to its birthing chambers.” Here, as “the wood listens to itself,” he witnesses the music “losing shape and form,” its echoes and reverberations diminishing, “commingling with the residual undersong” of the moor. “What would it be like if

I could amplify those residual sounds?” he wonders. “Could I become a string, resonating in sympathy with the landscape’s inaudible melodies?”

Jamie was in Europe when the pandemic hit. Unable to return home, she sought out further residencies in Ireland, and then an MA in Cork. Altogether, it was a long time away from home. “I felt this huge longing to be able to touch base, physically,” she says. “I imagined falling down, laying down on the ground.” The desire to touch home soil was so great that she reached out to her community of friends and family: she had them bury white cloth in the ground where they lived, then later unearth the muddied cloth, and send it to her—dirtied and stained with home.

“The fabric was basically time and place, imprinted—which is amazing,” Jamie says of the more than dozen “mud prints” that she received. “They’re these entities; they’re maps of this moment of time and place. They were these incredibly vibrant, living documents.”

It was the first time she had invited people into her artistic process, and it broke open a new way of working and thinking about her art. “I realized that contributions from other people create a new thing,” she says. “It’s creating another kind of ecosystem—a kind of visual ecosystem, or an ecosystem of contribution: I’m making a new space, we’re making a new space.”

Co-creating with the environment had transformed naturally into co-creating with others, as well: human and non-human alike are integral to the process; the art is created by all. Jamie followed up her mud prints with Groundswell, a project in which she invited people, across time zones and geographies, to join her in lying down outdoors at the same moment. Earlier Jamie had been compelled to lie down in a pine grove, and found herself staring up at the trees, “held by the land.” It made sense to open this experience to others, and to create something greater through sharing it.

“Linked together, you all make a map of what I belong to,” she wrote in her invitation. “In this way, you belong to each other too. And to the ground you’re laying on.” Creativity becomes a collective act—as perhaps it always has been.


Here, relationship is seen as central to creativity. In *The Lichen Museum*, Palmer notes that neither of the two “partners” in lichen, the alga nor the fungus, “would look or act, on their own, anything close to how



they look and act together”; by coming together they create a wholly new and unique organism. This, she says, should give us “a greater appreciation of relationship as a creative event.”

When it came time to present her mud prints, Jamie ended up placing them in boxes made from semi-transparent tracing paper, thus obscuring them. It was in part a way to resist the expectation for a final product: the process of creation was the important thing. But it was more than that, too: “The blurred visual experience also articulates this thing-in-motion, or this thing-in-process—this thing that’s becoming,” says Jamie. “That space is really fascinating because we are often wanting clarity, wanting conclusion, wanting a sure feeling about something. But mostly we’re living and experiencing ourselves in the in-between.”

The natural world is a place of constant change, flux, transition—as is our own process of engaging with it. And thank goodness: if we were to arrive, then wonder would cease. As Nan Shepherd says, “knowing another is endless.” Others agree: “Embrace the ongoing process of ‘coming to know’ each other,” writes A. Laurie Palmer, while Robert Macfarlane encourages us to pursue “celebrations of not-quite-knowing,” to “finesse the real into a further marvelousness—and reveal other realms of incomprehension.”

“The work that I make is like a partnership,” Jamie says. “I’m the one making it, or working through it, but it’s like this call and response, always, back and forth. I’m contributing to an artistic practice or a piece of art or a call for participation, and in response something else happens that I couldn’t expect. And then back and forth we go.” 

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↑
Jamie Ashforth
“Experiment
with the Land
(Forsythia)”/
“Portrait of
Lockdown: 66
Days, March 13
–May 17, 2020,
Richterswil,
Switzerland,”
diptych, digital
photography, 2020