

On the seashore of endless worlds,

Children play

– Rabindranath Tagore

A company of porcupines crowded themselves very close together one cold winter's day so as to profit by one another's warmth and so save themselves from being frozen to death. But soon they felt one another's quills, which induced them to separate again. And now, when the need for warmth brought them nearer together again, the second evil arose once more. So that they were driven backwards and forward from one trouble to the other, until they had discovered a mean distance at which they could most tolerably exist.

– Sigmund Freud (quoting Schopenhauer) on ambivalence

1

In 'The Location of Cultural Experience', the influential psychoanalyst and paediatrician D.W. Winnicott explains how this image of Tagore's taught him the meaning of play in human development and creativity – and the vital importance of having the space to play.

But first he had to see beyond some established ideas. 'When I first became a Freudian I knew what it meant. The sea and the shore represented endless intercourse between man and woman, and the child emerged from this union to have a brief moment before becoming in turn adult or parent.' In this image, space is tight, as in the sculpted families of Henry Moore, where a giant King and Queen loom over a heavy-set muscular child who will eventually displace them. 'Then', Winnicott goes on, 'as a student of unconscious symbolism, I knew – one always knows – that the sea is the mother ... the seashore was the mother's body, after the child is born and the mother and the now viable baby are getting to know each other.' This is a lighter image, but the space is carefully bounded: the mother's presence fills the canvas, her body the rented space on which the child grows and the artist creates.

Then, in the 1940s, Winnicott met Marion Milner, a psychoanalyst and painter (later known for her book *On Not Being Able to Paint* ²). She 'was able to convey to me', he writes, 'the tremendous significance that there can be in the interplay of the edges of two curtains, or the surface of a jug that is placed in front of another jug.' Thus Winnicott arrived at his formulations on 'potential space', play and the sources of creativity:

The space where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment... The same can be said of playing... This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being [people] and phenomena outside [my] control.

Winnicott speaks of 'a separation' – between mother and child, creator and surrounds – 'which is not a separation but a form of union'. This forms a third place to be, psychologically, a seashore beyond the ambivalent struggles of the porcupines:

[T]he third part of the life of a human being, a part we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experience, to which inner reality and external life both contribute ... a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.

This 'potential space' is a necessary fiction. The spaces of infancy and childhood are just as often claustrophobic and contested: 'Now wave to Aunty Bee. There, like that!', 'Come on, show the nice people how you can smile!' They can also

be desolate - bare and cold like a glass-topped table. neither of these is a potential space; on the contrary. A potential space is where the child or the artist feels neither intruded on nor abandoned, and depends on the interplay between security and freedom. The origins of a potential space are suggested by Winnicott's definition of maturity as 'the capacity to be alone in the presence of another'. In a potential or creative space there is presence, but not dependence, freedom but not feeling lost. A Winnicott mother can be with her child without hassling it; a Winnicott artist feels confronted by the givenness of the world but, secure enough, makes room for herself and refuses to paint by numbers.

In potential space play is work and work is play. Winnicott doesn't mean things in potential space are always easy or calm. His best-known account of play in the life of the developing child is his account of the teddy bear (or equivalent), who stands for the mother but isn't the mother, who is a bridge between the inner world and the outer world:

I call this a transitional object. By this means I can illustrate [that] the one difficulty every child experiences is to relate subjective reality to shared reality which can be objectively perceived. From waking to sleeping the child jumps from a perceived world to a self-created world. In between there is a need for all kinds of transitional phenomena – neutral territory ... there is a tacit understanding that no one will claim that this real thing is a part of the world or that it is created by the infant. It is understood that both these things are true: the infant created and the world provided for it.³

The progression of thought, then, is in three steps. First there is the idea that creativity occurs as making *history*. Here the child develops, and the artist creates, in a small space between their past and their becoming the past themselves, a porcupine space (referring to the quotation from Freud and Schopenhauer) of constant intrusion, of ambivalence and struggle, where the prize is a passing place in the sun. (It isn't only politicians and business people who fight their corner, as the machinations of the art world proves!) Second there is the idea that creativity occurs in a *landscape*, where the child takes its inspiration from the mother's body – she is a place of womb and breasts before she is a person – but also learns to limit herself, to keep herself safe and stay within clearly marked boundaries. (Art sometimes lingers in childhood, nostalgia, sentimentality, or loses itself in a shapeless merger with its surrounds.) This is the beginning of what I mean by 'seashore' in the title but the word applies with its full force to the third step.

This is the *potential space* (or 'virtual' space), an intersection, a strip of benignly neutral territory, a bridge of transformation between one place and another and back. Not an over-built block, not an abandoned lot but simultaneously well-filled and appropriately spacious. It's paradoxical, of course, an oxymoron, even a kind of illusion or fiction that only works if you don't ask too much literalness from it. Overdosing with 'reality' – accepted, agreed upon 'truths' – potential spaces can collapse. The child is told too soon that Santa's her dad, the student is persuaded too quickly her ideas are not new, the painter crushed under the weight of art history. There has to be natural progress from

imagined beginning to the realised work. If this sounds twee, the former Field Marshal Sir William Slim once remarked on how many decisive battles took place at the juncture of two maps.

So I take it that in any particular painting, or in a suite of paintings, we have an autobiography of the spaces experienced: one space contested, crowded and pressing, another indifferent, abandoned and arbitrary and the third space, the space that made the paintings possible, that was potential or creative. The pictures will carry stories of conflict and conflict resolved, of love lost and love regained – and, I think, a meta-story, a thread of commentary on the making of the art itself, some account of what it is to be creative (or alive), how it feels to find, if only at times, potential spaces to create (and grow) in. In the play/work of artists there is an unending search for that perfect shoreline, that play and inter-play, that half-remembered, half-imagined place *in between* (the present, between past and future) which makes art (and life) possible in the first place and ever after. Of course, in their turn art, and life, give back, perhaps with interest, what they've received, enhancing and enlarging the spaces for others to develop and create in as they did.

2

I have written elsewhere about Hattam and her father, Harold Hattam⁴. Like him, she has shown an interest in painting where land and sea meet, though not quite the beach. Hers are views of the water and the land, of surfers in the water, of trees in the garden framing them, of screen doors and meal tables and the strong presence of the artist herself in the room looking out. But her starting point is less Tagore's seashore than Milner's overlapping curtains and jugs – pictures are of rooms and the furniture in rooms where her spacing is telling.

I don't know why art critics assume paintings with domestic settings have to be tame. In psychoanalysis, the Bible, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Christina Stead, and a film like *Happiness*, to name just a few examples, domesticity is fraught and intense. Indeed, the world can appear as an anti-climax, a mere re-run of family life. (Politics is family disputation by other means.) A *Canberra Times* reviewer of Hattam's early drawings clearly had a different view: 'We have no difficulty in following her charcoal and pencil nudes as they go about their daily chores of cooking, cleaning, having showers, dressmaking and relaxing with their cup of tea.' This was before paedophilia became famous, but not before Freud. The critic who-had-no-difficulty didn't notice – the showers should have been a clue – the cornucopia of in-house sensuality these drawings represent, the sexual rivalry of the sisters, the *Lolita*-like voyeurism we are invited to indulge. Nor the device of having the painter drawing herself, the instigator of the proceedings, seated in the fatherly chair acting the part of the director of a film. The central provocation here isn't simply sexual but oedipal, art used for mischief-making, for

showing who's Queen of the castle. The King is away, of course, or not yet arrived, so the sister nymphs are given sensuous poses and eyes flashing volumes but no mouths to tell what the painter-director-oldest sister might have made them get up to.

All this is comic, sidelong, like the eyes, and hints at a hardness in Hattam's work that owes something, but not everything, to the unrelenting gaze of psychoanalysis and autobiography. Her more recent pictures (eg. *Revealed Cords* and *Bare Wires* p15) give us ululating seas of colour and Alice-eye views of skirting boards, power points, electricity cords and the like are full of delight and amazement. (In *Alice*, of course, the play is with the sizes and shapes of things and can turn suddenly horrifying; there's no panickier moment than when Alice discovers she's too small to reach the bottle to make her big again.)

Needless to say, Hattam approaches some painful themes directly especially the theme of a fallen ideal, a diminished parent, a child feeling lost. One powerful image is of a shrunken wingbacked chair and a shrouded figure heaped on a couch, a King (or his Queen?) awaiting carting away to his mound. In the most recent pictures, busy with cords and computers and video cassettes piled like japanned steps (again, the electric cord and power point pictures), the family themes are updated to the electronic age. The world brought into the house without overwhelming or displacing the house or its inhabitants. Techno-freaks, for or against, are inclined to underestimate the power of human passion, as if Hamlet couldn't dominate a modern-dress setting or Romeo and Juliet must die on the net.

Psychoanalysis has been described as the science of losing gracefully, a long process of relinquishing what must be relinquished; in a book of essays, the great Kleinian art critic Adrian Stokes called life itself *The Game That Must Be Lost*. This is what I mean by the relentless autobiographical gaze or, to change the image, the persistent hum running in all Hattam's work of the drive for self-recognition.

The unrelenting gaze doesn't stop at mucky themes like money and debt. It's said that in the course of a long psychoanalysis sex recedes as a topic and *money* – the time-of-the-month payment, the analyst's greedy eagerness, the patient's disillusion that his life is measured in dollars and cents – starts taking its place. Hattam must be one of the few painters who has given this theme its due.

Certainly the indebtedness is moral and psychological, part of the story of a painter's daughter becoming a painter. In making an identity for herself Hattam has to confront her indebtedness – how much she owes, how she can pay it off. But the bold thing is how she gets right down to the look and feel of real money and real spending and borrowing. Collages from the 1990s rely on a dramatic use of the credit card receipt and the insides of windowed, expense-laden, supposedly secret envelopes (eg. *Oedipal Interiors* p10 and *Repaired Chair* p16). There is a joke here, of course, a reference to the cost of psychoanalysis, but the joke ferries a deeper truth. The philosopher John Forrester claims that in Lacan's psychoanalysis money and 'the law of the father' – money, obedience, identity – are profoundly related⁵.

The law of the father is Lacan's phrase for what makes us subjects or agents, what separates the adult from the child playing on the shore, what makes them parents – literally and again metaphorically in art. We are in porcupine territory here, where the adult isn't infantile and the artist isn't away with the fairies (that is, mad). This law of the father, says Forrester, is *debt-giving and debt-receiving*: it implies buying and selling, reciprocity, circulation, and being grown up enough to acknowledge indebtedness.

If this sounds like being told 'Grow up', which is something some people like to say both to children and artists (and developers like to say to people who like trees and parks and single-occupancy blocks), think again. Notice the emphasis on interplay: giving and receiving, reciprocity, circulation. These are the words for describing potential space, the words that create a space for the work Winnicott calls play.

Suddenly one sees that being in debt is like being in love: both link people in relationships that can be manipulative or destructive but might also be genuinely reciprocal. I said this is porcupine territory. But that's only half true: giving and receiving, borrowing and lending are the terms of the seashore. It's true that being indebted puts us at risk of being overwhelmed, or of being ostracised when we insist on being ourselves. But our debts – to parents, to teachers, to the past in general – can be re-negotiated, a potential space can be cleared where even buying and selling, borrowing and lending, share in Winnicott's play.

Hattam had already made this astonishing connection, and made it vibrantly. In *Repaired Chair* and *Oedipal Interior*, those little coloured money slips, those promises to pay, are symbols of the painter's struggle to find the sort of space that would let her become a person in her own right, the agent of her own art. Mere scraps of thin paper, they indicate the painter's acute awareness of a world of separateness and connection, at once a web to hold her securely and a myriad of gaps she could lose herself in. How to avoid being submerged – in her father the painter, in her mother, her sisters, her children, in the history of art and in the opinion of the artist-elders of the tribe – and how to avoid the opposite, being ignored, getting lost? Here answer seems to be: by *re-negotiating debt*. Not letting herself be crippled by it, not defaulting (denying) on it, but figuring out how to make the most of what she owes.

3

In the second half of the 1990s Hattam returned to her early subject matter but with a new interest and a fresh eye. The human figures, like banished ghosts, have gone, except that, as intelligent ghosts, they've changed into something else and come in disguise. Hattam herself has changed. Many of the titles – *Return of the Repressed*,

In My Father's House, *Oedipal Interiors* and others – tell of looking back and of psychological interiors, but the point is that a path has been trod. She's not who she was, and who she is now involves asking, who was I then? This was Goldilocks' question. The painter is older, wiser (that is, less certain), not as comic but too bright to be ponderous, and her works are infinitely more colourful; they offer lashings of pleasure and carry the promise of some sort of redemption. But these same colours are resting on dark layers of earlier works, on earlier selves painted over, unconscious selves, out of which come depth and biographical strength. (Matisse said somewhere layering gives a picture authority.) Goldilocks and the Three Bears: a girl and her two sisters has become a child/adult universally, perennially, confronted by the triangle father, mother and child and the question where do I fit? (Goldilocks fled the house, defeated, leaving a mess behind her.)

Her autobiographical *motifs* are, especially and for now at least, the chairs. The chairs are characters (the pursuit of character, like the family plot, identifies Hattam's work) whose attitudes change, who alter their roles, whose meanings are complicated, contradictory and changing. In one set of pictures each of the three chairs is painted sitting alone, like portraits commissioned to hang in the family house. In those called *In My Father's House*, mentioned above, the wingback is maybe fixedly father. The William IV is defiantly, suggestively, both female and male and it is the symbol that appears to change the most. The Krimper is pert and underdeveloped at the same time, the chair of the novice in life, the adolescent, and of the creator in art. It's the artist always attending the birth; mother/father/child always starting again, always just beginning, whether it's making her way in the world she's come into or creating her own.

Three observations here. First, the Freudian eye for detail and complexity, for over-determination, for substitutions and displacements, images that stand for one thing, then another, that contradict themselves, dissemble, play games with us. A Hattam rug, a Hattam curtain, her tables – ready for eating but bare and awaiting the confidences and betrayals at the heart of convivial life – are humming with messages, like the rugs on Freud's couch, like the crowd of antiquities on his desk and the tumble of words from his voluminously dressed patients. The new electronic rooms are the same: everywhere communication and interrupted communication, lines snaking this way and that, plugged and unplugged, above all, *exposed* when, more secure and subdued, we'd normally have them tidied away. A child's curiosity about sources is here, her need to know about grown-up talk, about power and money, about sex, babies and painting. If the moonlight blues, blacks and greens of *The Return of the Repressed* paintings suggest private, middle-of-the-night soul-searching, these new pictures remind us how exposing the modern world is, and how frank our lives have become since Freud taught us to know and, one way or another, we began learning to tell.

Second, the eye for key symbols, for leading actors, as it were, such as Oedipus. She's impatient with cascading de-constructionism – the hunt for symbols all equally valuable and equally dispensable, one damn new twist after another. She refuses to be always rehearsing, never getting started, never homing in on 'grown up' truths. (The seashore is not enough, or not everything.) Her cast numbers thousands, in the rugs and on the walls, and they are part of the action; they speak of childhood, of siblings, of lovers and friends. But the key actors are few, full of the promise of connection and the threat of capture, a space for porcupine ambivalence between parent and child, and siblings, not just a vague sea of unsorted 'relationships' lacking precedence and power.

Finally, the eye for relationships: how – in space – the figures relate. It's important to understand that paintings can be roomy without being empty and filled without being crowded. Winnicott's seashores are the beginning, the inner experience (first for the child and artist, then for the adult looking at the painting), and the finished work may be busy or calm, tense with ambivalence and issues to be resolved or relaxed and complete. Part of the pleasure and the instruction in a Hattam is seeing how a certain fullness and close quartering in one picture (or one set of pictures) will give way to the opposite in another, although in the most intense scenes there is always enough dancing colour to link even the spikiest chairs/actors to each other, and a welter of domestic detail to enclose them even as they struggle to be separate.

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¹ *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth) Penguin 1967, chapter 7. See also chapters 5 and 8

² *Real name Joanna Field*. (London) First published Heinemann Educational Books 1950. Second edition 1957

³ Quoted in *Donald Winnicott* by Adam Phillips, Fontana Modern Masters 1988, p 117

⁴ *Art Monthly* July and August 1998

⁵ *Truth Games: Lies, Money, and Psychoanalysis*, Harvard University Press, 1997

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