

## Lebenswelt: The Lifeworld of John Curno



There are those that seek to think like mountains.<sup>1</sup> The *guido* (guides) in the forests of Okinawa, Japan are known as *neichaa intaapuritaa* (nature interpreters).<sup>2</sup> Living closely connected to the natural world, bolstered in knowledge by hundreds of hours of species study and deeply committed to their task, their charge is to lead others into rich engagements with the forest. Leaving behind the urban sprawl and smog laden air of the city, the participants engage in a deeply corporeal experience, becoming wholly immersed in what David Abram's book title defines as 'The Spell of the Sensuous'.<sup>3</sup> The *guido* wish never to be 'separated from this place'<sup>4</sup>. Their instinctive sense of connection to soil, leaf and sapling they describe as

---

<sup>1</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1968), 129.

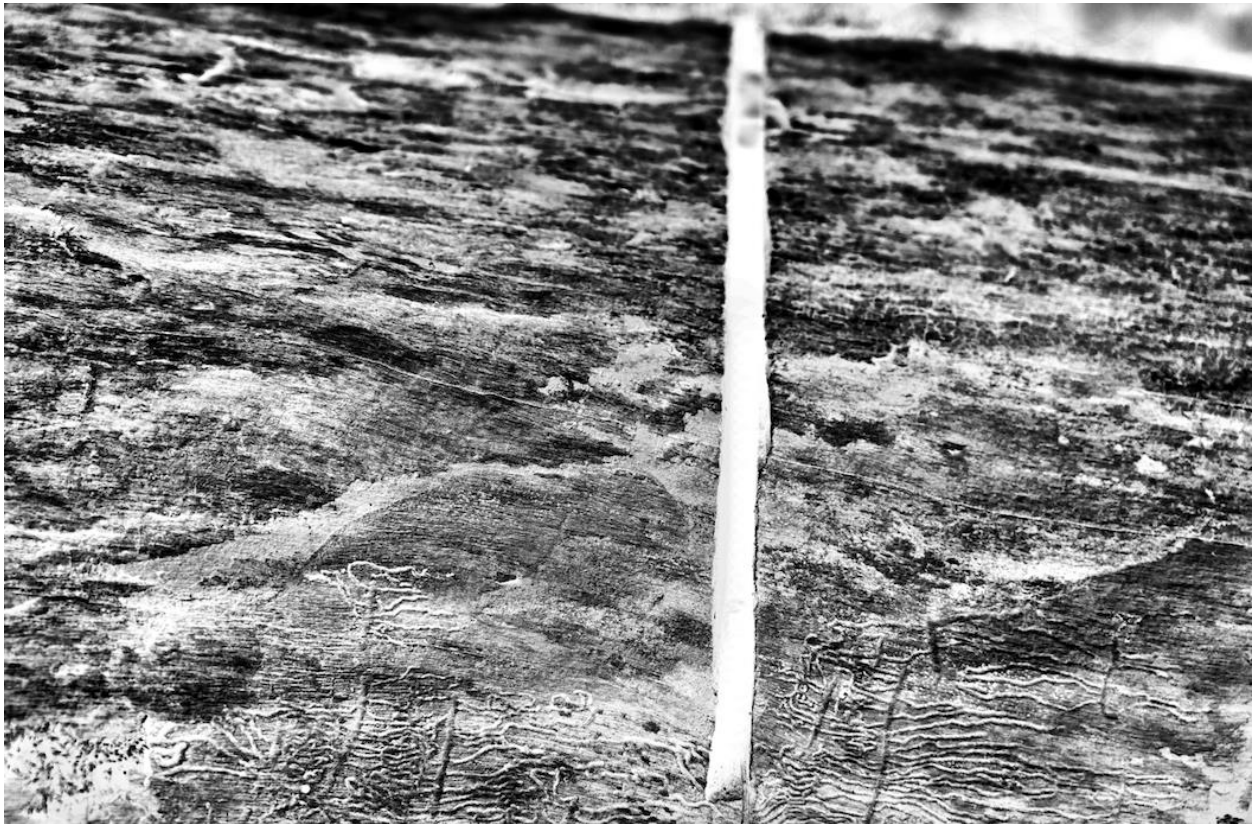
<sup>2</sup> Andrea E Murray, *Footprints in Paradise* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 131.

<sup>3</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Andrea E Murray, *Footprints in Paradise* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 116.

conducting themselves with *Omoi* - an intimate act of cherishing that ensures an intertwining of the human and the natural.

John Curno's *The Final Peace* is an invitation to relationship, connection, interconnection if you will, with the landscape. An antidote to our incessant modes of technological living, it invites a deep engagement with the earth. It also suggests a kind of border crossing. Curno offers alternatives to a landscape somehow partitioned and set apart, to an alternative psychological, almost bodily union. Curno becomes the intermediary to the land in which we live - a necessary Western *neichaa intaapuritaa* (nature interpreter). His latest work echoes a connection to the land mirroring his deep sense of kindred existence with it. Much like the contemporary shaman, Curno presents a landscape that demands we move nearer, see underneath, around and even through organic structures that remind us of our own internal frameworks -our births, our deaths and our regenerations. Much like the Japanese *guido*, Curno powerfully interprets our identity as an 'intraspecies', <sup>5</sup>challenging our notions of separateness from non-human species - from those living organisms with whom we tread the earth. For although many of Curno's pastoral images seem at first hand unpopulated, solitary spaces, they are in fact a movement through interstitial territory suggesting a mutuality of existence that we would do well to heed.



---

<sup>5</sup> Andrea E Murray, *Footprints in Paradise* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 115.

In opposition to Curno's unique oeuvre, reverencing the undulating forms of land, water and sky- acting as witness to external scarring, deaths and rebirths - we have waged war with the earth. We have disavowed our 'mutual inscription'<sup>6</sup>, imposing upon the land, stealing resources that have damaged our symbiotic interrelations, possibly beyond repair. *The Final Peace* offers a long-held profundity of vision echoing our linked histories, even our linked internal structures and modes of being. As we witness Curno's photographic renditions, presented with the hidden gap, wound and scar alongside the wider vistas of a unique landscape, we are reminded of our own bodily markings. It is to our physical odysseys and our long-lost connections that Curno brings comfort and an antidote to our misplaced isolation from nature.

This disentanglement with what Abram calls a 'more-than-human matrix'<sup>7</sup> is a complex one, historically traceable and more than a little convoluted. Our dislocation from the earth has not always emerged through a lack of honor. Yet whilst The U.S. Wilderness Act (1964) undertook various protections, it sited the natural land as "set aside as something pristine and free of the modern human touch."<sup>8</sup> This ideology of imposed distance -for the act of idolization invariably sits within a 'you/me' relational paradigm- splits us from nature. The very notion of the sacredness of the soil, rather than forging bonds, created a psychological schism that has been difficult to overcome. What takes place is an othering, an 'objectification' of the land and its 'beyond-human' inhabitants, encouraging an alienation that causes us to forget our own status of belonging in and amongst the natural world. We consume the land, whether by visual methodologies or by physical act. Our tragic sense of separation, arguably initiated during the Enlightenment period, saw an increase in technological development alongside a pathological addiction to control. With our burgeoning knowledge of the intricacies of our environment came the desire for domination, even over a landscape we had previously lauded as mythical, magical and of transcendent value. This anthropocentric turn- the act of placing ourselves above<sup>9</sup> not alongside- became a recipe for our emerging divergent paths.

The challenge to activate fresh avenues of communication sometimes falls to the scientist. Sometimes to the artist. John Curno's knowledge of and connection to the land has been lifelong. We may suspect the mechanical methodologies with which the camera engages, its anatomical disconnect from the body a handicap when connection is sought and visually imprinted. For surely it is the sculptor or the painter who is more keenly able to use the body as a tool for corporeal engagement with nature? For an intimacy of vision, even a melding of one organism to another, the photograph is an ungainly and distant cousin. Yet even a brief

---

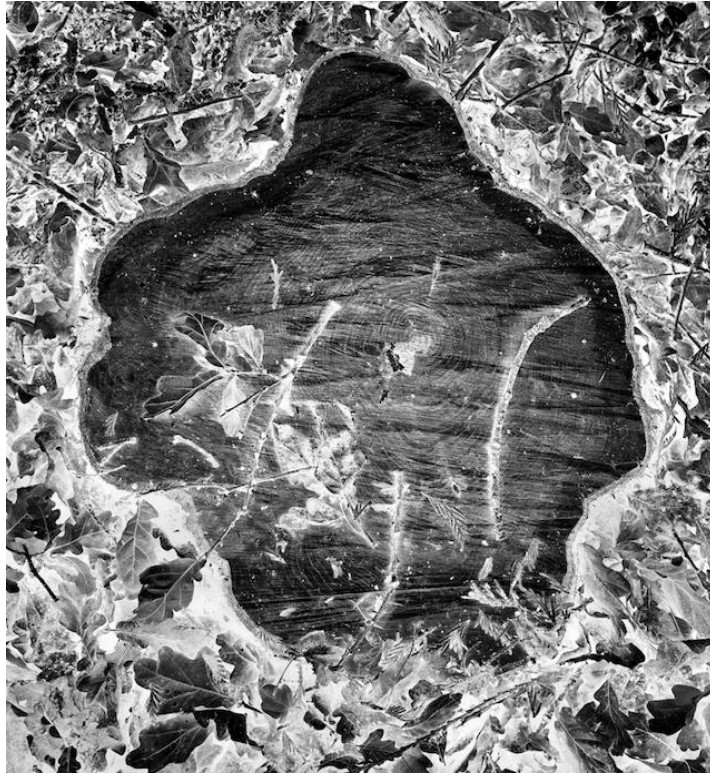
<sup>6</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017),39.

<sup>7</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017),27.

<sup>8</sup> Vining, J., Merrick, M., Price, E.,2008, 'The distinction between humans and nature: Human perceptions of connectedness to nature and elements of the natural and unnatural.' *Human Ecology Review*, Vol15, No1, pp1.

<sup>9</sup> Vining, J., Merrick, M., Price, E.,2008, 'The distinction between humans and nature: Human perceptions of connectedness to nature and elements of the natural and unnatural.' *Human Ecology Review*, Vol15, No1, pp2.

encounter with Curno's practice reveals immersion in an intimate dance between earth and human. His vision is rich and spreads itself wide, scouring monumental landscapes, acknowledging vast skies and the ever-evolving cloud formations he has always captured with such astonishing alacrity. Equally, we are brought close to the intricate and sensuous complexities of rock, the fragile internal construction of the leaf and flower as if immersed ourselves in these living structures that mirror so strangely our own psychological and physical existence.



In recent works, Curno deploys an intriguing visual trope - one of negative inversion - redolent of the medical x-ray, the invasive scanning of human tissue, veins and organs. The marks of the land become the marks of the flesh. The connection between our own existence, our battle wounds, tears of the soul, mind and body are somehow mirrored in the many and varied translations of the soil and its inhabitants. It is with tenderness and honor, yet without distance, that Curno's camera walks with the land. He treads carefully yet gains access to those frail, at times battered spaces, that our own bodies would keep hidden. *The Final Piece* is vulnerable work, yet triumphantly forged through companionship, with an almost familial linking with the natural world. Disconnection disavowed, Curno is mythically enveloped by tree, river and rock and we are reminded of an interconnection beyond value. We are immunized, if only for a

moment, from the fallout of our contemporaneous detached technological states. There is companionship to be had here - and we come willingly.

*When human beings remove themselves from the natural environment, the biophilic learning rules are not re-placed by modern versions.... instead humans persist from generation to generation, atrophied and fitfully manifested in the artificial new environments into which technology has catapulted humanity'.<sup>10</sup>*

Curno mercifully catapults us back into a landscape that gracefully merges with us, “as if it is our own body.” (Curno.J.) It is, as ever, restorative and hope filled. *The Final Peace* proffers a sense of kinship with the earth, prompting welcome re-integration.

It is this sense of kinship, a distinct mode of walking with the earth, that Curno’s empathic vision evokes. Elkins suggests this to be ‘the projection of one’s own consciousness into another being, thing, or place.’<sup>11</sup> In contrast with his urban cityscapes, notable for their disrupted forms and uneasy compositions, it is this work which acknowledges a graceful alternative - the return to our native dialogue with the earth and its subsequent gifting of integration. It is the writings of Edmund Husserl, early 20th century German philosopher, that speak so well to the work of John Curno. ‘The land is not ‘object’, he insists.<sup>12</sup> There is a key resonance within the natural world that is an echo of our primordial language. We are nothing less than ‘mutually inscribed’ onto one another. Husserl’s suggested phrase was *Lebenswelt* or Lifeworld. We are intertwined, ourselves and the land, owning a basic shared structure which acts as antidote to our fractured urban living. *The Final Peace* is an ‘un’-rupturing of our relationship to the earth, a reminder of our joint genetic heritage and the incumbent succor this can bring.

---

<sup>10</sup> Gullone, E. 2000, ‘The Biophilia Hypothesis and Life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Increasing Mental Health or Increasing Pathology’. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Vol 1, pp 296.

<sup>11</sup> Rachel DeLeu, James Elkins, *Landscape Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 44.

<sup>12</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 2017), 39.



*And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.*

(Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*)