

The Movement of Leaves :

A journal

By Anna Husemoller Jeretic



I wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly.

Thoreau

I began my art school in a small, rural village on the Seine not far from Paris. Most of the students, children and adolescents come from the village and a few from neighboring villages. I also have adults come share my workshop on Friday afternoons with me. We drink tea as we work as the occasional sun light passes through the leaves into the windows.

The property we rent is on 2 acres of untreated land, the owner of which is an advocat of a rain-forest, a let-nature-have-its-way spirit. It does rain a lot, but instead of fern and quinine undergrowth, we have brambles, wild berries, and nettles. There are many fruit trees, wild dogwood, walnut, hazelnut and maple trees, with ivy creeping up on them. Behind one house outside there is a curious piano, covered with vines and wildflowers, its metal and wooden keys exposed to the air, playing silent music. There are animals who stroll around, a pony, some guinea fowl, cats and countless dogs who are drawn to the place as if it were their haven. A chocolate colored short-haired pointer gallops from one end of the property to the other, showing off his long sinewy race-horse body. A skunk passes by and leaves its scent at often inappropriate times.

We share this space with two families. One house is occupied by a ceramist and a theatre director and two boys. A painter, both house painter and *artiste-peintre*, lives behind my house with his wife and daughter. He is a vagabond bohemian. You have to either be a foreigner used to un-walled spaces or eccentric to live on this very uncartesian property, so atypical of France. He plays his music loud, and sometimes opera music permeates into the orchard while we nestle the Easter eggs in holes in the twisted branches of the century-old fruit trees.

I put some of the terracotta creatures, such as birds, snakes, trolls, orangutans I modeled which take on moss green patina throughout the seasons. There is a small pond with lily pads shipped in from Giverny by the Monet family, friends of the owners. The Monet family also made a gift of a walnut tree that presides majestically amid the other trees. The Japanese goldfish are protected from herons by a territorial sculpture I made of a white heron. The place is situated in the heart of the village, and yet it is a world isolated from human activity. It is country, except for the hourly train we hear passing through, connecting it to Paris.

My workshop takes you even further away into reclusion, because it is entirely hidden behind trees. The patched-together structure resembles Mr de Sainte Colombe's cabin in the woods where he composed his viola de gamba pieces. There is ivy growing all over it and inside, and some hortensias crowding the entrance. On a summer night, glow-worms light the path.

Inside there are not only paintings and figurines, but samples of wood, seeds, and rocks from faraway places, such as baobab and jack tree wood, also shells with some of my sculptures inside, a huge beetle from Botswana, ana fruit and vegetable ivory, which is what elephants love to eat.

The wind makes the branches creak nearby, and with the rustling of the leaves and the rain pattering on the roof, sometimes coming through the cracks, we are listening to an orchestra playing, with oboes and drums. It is in this Dodone* that I started my classes, until my own work begins to reduce the work space.

My teaching sustains the life of my workshop and kindles the fire of my own work. Ideas and images I have stored within me for a long time have come to life, like objects gradually taking on the morning light.

*Dodone : ancient Greek city where priests and priestesses expressed the messages of the Gods, by interpreting the rustling of sacred oak leavery, flight or doves and the sound of bronze basins banging with the wind.

October 1996
A different world

In my first class there are some shy 4 and 5-year olds. I show them the way down a path through the colored woods to my ramshackle studio. Inside, there is just enough room for 6 children. I put up little homemade slanted drawing tables to preserve their privacy, so that no one copies others' work. These new accessories introduce them to a different world.

We start with pencil. They copy a toy dinosaur, a car, an apple and a cup with a flower painted on it. They make no noise because it's the first day. I give them erasers but ask them to use them sparingly. They end up not using them at all. They are spontaneous and sure of themselves. One boy named Clément has bad vision with no glasses yet. However, he is the only one to understand that the objects can be drawn within their space, one behind the other, and some only partially visible. He doesn't draw very much and is a little frustrated because he alone understands the difficulty of the exercise. But I don't ask this from the others, who happily draw their objects in the four corners of their paper. Clément is also the only one who wants the eraser because he is conscious of making mistakes.

They all do well, and I tell them so: not only Clément for his precociousness but the others too for their productivity and fresh vision of the world, for which we adults are so nostalgic. I invite them to go outside and play. The place is new to them, and they have to go and explore. This is an essential part of the session. It is one of the things that will bring them back for more.

The second class, 6 to 12 year olders, is more serious. They have the same behavior as in a classroom where they learn to read. They spend a long time on their drawings. Some 6 year olders draw the objects in space like in the other class. I ask them afterwards to try to draw them as they are, one behind another. The children also draw the background, including some of their friends who are drawing away at the other end of the table. Child versions of paintings and drawings I have hanging on the walls appear on their pages windows with leaves peeking in. Afterwards, some of them hesitatingly (because they don't expect this extra attraction) go outside to play.

We do not talk about shadows yet today. The act of drawing takes precedence. They have been swept into the world of copying nature and are invigorated. After a few sessions they will look at objects on tables differently, not only for their use but for their transcription onto paper. Objects and the nature around us will now have an other-worldly value.

I am tired but happy to feel the pleasure of something new. Teaching is a surprising thing: how else do we know what we really know? Even ordinary practical details take on meaning and the children are happy about learning them.

Doubts about work as an artist are woven into our lives and can be haunting. The value of this métier seems unstable. It sometimes can feel superfluous and other times utterly important, rising and falling with life's vicissitudes.

Sometimes a mission loses all meaning. What a great test of strength to feel good about your undertakings, when all you struggle for in life becomes, in a flash of a second, meaningless! This happens when I read about a great disaster in the world.

However, in teaching, I find it art acquires a new more palpable and consistent meaning. For a long time wrapped up in my own occupations, I had forgotten about teaching, which is actually an extraordinary world.

It both has the power to transport us into a different realm and keep us firmly grounded on the earth floor.

The Movement of Leaves : a common name

We paint with a Chinese brush. These brushes have the advantage of both a fine tip and a thick body which gives the child an opportunity to try to vary line thickness. Also, by diluting the ink one can produce an infinite number of tones.

And I think of the Chinese masters, like Chu Ta, who with just black and white were able to give an illusion of an infinite number of velvety colors.

We pick up walnut fruit skin under the Monet nut tree and make our own sepia-colored ink with a sieve and water.

I put a small curvy branch on a white sheet of paper. And a shadow appears.

The children take the brush in their hands, gently, and play with its hairs with their fingers. They feel the weight of the water when they smoothe the hairs with their index and thumb towards its point, letting the water squirt out.

First, I ask the children to look hard at what they see for a good 5-10 minutes. Traditional Chinese painters spend hours looking at a scene in nature and then in only a short amount of time, they paint what they have seen. This encourages them to have firm confidence in their gestures. I also ask the children to breathe deeply before they put the paintbrush on the paper. Then it is one spontaneous yet studied swoop. They go from concentrated ink to diluted ink, so the darker areas come first. Then they add water little by little, testing their tone on the side of the paper. Some of the older children attain beautiful results, but the younger ones have a hard time diluting their ink and making the shadow look like a shadow. I ask a lot from them at once. However, they understand the exercise right away. I have found that abstract notions come easily to children, and it seems they treat the work as if it were some kind of experiment that may produce magical results.

I decided to call my workshop the « the Movement of Leaves ». This idea came to me after reading Isadora Duncan's autobiography, who asked the children to study nature and dance the way leaves move with the wind. Her revolutionary movement was a counter-movement, against rule-oriented ballet and the submissiveness of doll-like ballerinas.

I see my workshop as part of an artistic movement, which brings art back to its most true and plentiful sources, nature and life itself.

That night I dream that the « Movement of Leaves » is actually a name for countless associations not only in France but around the world, that I had picked the most common name possible for the school, like Smith is for a last name. As if everyone in our world constituted one single person, united in a common movement of ideas.

I tell the children that in order to do their best they have to be quiet enough to be able to hear the leaves move and rustle. And the shuffling of leaves of paper in the workshop, and the banging of feet against the table legs, as we copy the trees looking into the window.

You might think this impossible with children. Actually, silence can cast a spell on them as they listen for the distant sounds. I tell them they will achieve their best this way, for the magic only works this way. And when others begin to chat and break the wistfulness, I have children like Thomas protesting, « Be quiet, I can't concentrate! ».

The nature of nature

*Human art, as much as it can, follows Nature,
Like a pupil a teacher,
And art is God's grandchild.
Both art and nature, if you remember
The first verses of Genesis, man must thrive on
And go forward*

Dante, The Divine Comedy

We draw a still life with different objects that the children like, such as a wooden pinocchio, a flower, a banana, a truck and a stuffed animal. I give them good quality colored pencils.

I'm never possessive with my tools. We tend to share just about everything. This is one of the advantages of having classes in an artist's studio.

At one point my full collection of marble carving tools were taken by a prowler into my workshop. My workshop, before I moved in, provided a roof for the home-less and meeting place for eccentric lovers. There is no notion of propriety, and the feeling of utopia here is so powerful, that the theft seems incidental.

I try to free the children from classroom structure, but it's not always easy. They sometimes call me « maîtresse » or raise their hands, and then quickly stop themselves and laugh.

When they are tired of copying, they can draw what they like. Children like Thomas love this, because he copies quickly and steps right away into fantasy. Nature is a springboard into the imaginary.

I make comments when the drawings steer toward typical children ones, such as, is the sky really just on the top, or do sunshines really have spokes ? This makes them stop and look outside, which is the first step in getting to know the nature of nature.

And these are the same tools you need to stop and look inside yourself.

We look at the sun's rays with one hand over our eyes to cover the round ball. What is left in our vision is only half the sun's rays. It looks like a sun-lit dragonfly, because two of the rays curve around to form wings.

Not particularly impressed

The leaves are changing color, so I bring in a branch of green, yellow-gold and orange leaves. They make a drawing beforehand, which turns out more detailed than necessary. Unfortunately, they paint over a good part of their wonderful details. Each child has a palette with yellow, blue and red. I teach them how to mix the colors. It is hard for them not to mix the colors all together. They have trouble making orange without forgetting to save some yellow for the gold or green. We make brown with the three colors together that resembles the main brown on the branch. Then they add some brown to their yellow to make

ochre. This happens naturally, but there is also some confusion. Nothing looks too good on paper. These are not paintings to hang up in gold frames! If they learn to focus on even one of the colors in the model, that is, how to make it from the primary colors, rather than have the colors ready for them, I believe they are already taking a step forward.

We are doing experiments and sometimes have to surrender to chaos, with paints all over the place and brushes on the floor. Right when I think I might not be made to be a teacher, I am consoled by the thought that a moment of disorder is inherent in creation. So I send them off to play. Two serious children, Colette and Bastien, stay behind, as I clean the brushes and make a big pile of brown paint with the leftover colors for the older children.

I watch parents' faces as they stare at our mess and the piles of brown paint that look like mud: they are not always admiring of what the children take home. Thomas' mother especially usually can't understand her child's work. However, the children's efforts sometimes bear fruit at a quiet moment in their own home, where they show the same depth of observation I ask for in class.

November
Beyond criticism

As I write these thoughts, I return to a more reflective mode, leaving analysis and criticism behind. I only describe what we have done during the day, and new thoughts flow into my observations.

Teaching drawing becomes both a feat of the mind and challenge to sensitivity, because I see the dialogues I have with the children transform into words.

A child's last sketch mark extends itself into writing.

A chocolate ball

In clay we metamorphize my living cats into exotic, imaginary felines, cougars or serval cats.

It is not easy to jump from two to three dimensions. It is difficult also for the older children who thought they were pretty good at drawing, and then find out they cannot make a convincing shape. After telling me they prefer drawing to sculpture, I urge them on by saying their drawing will get even better after they learn some sculpture. This is the case for Régine. She almost refuses to model with clay, because she's worried about discovering her artistic limits. And then she finds out that she can do it after some initial struggle. I think of adults who don't like to take on challenges if they seem impossible for them. How many times have they proved themselves wrong!

One or two younger kids cry because it's so difficult. I feel the same way when I can't get anything right. Others are afraid. But this fear can lead to enthusiasm. Fearful and timid children turn out to be surprisingly the most willing and resourceful.

Given a little time they all come up with something. Just by making the effort to find the shape, I can say they have succeeded. Bruno produces a round ball with a flat bottom that looked like chocolate: it is so perfectly smooth in the end. And he works at it from the beginning to the end of the class. He

looks like he does this with a mixture of pleasure and frustration. Although his finished creation seems small, his experience with clay is in a way more intense than the others'. He has experienced some of the most important problems of creativity.

When I see a child work at the clay struggling to make a resemblance to his or her favorite animal, it reminds me of the difficulty of carving marble. Direct sculpture is slow and pure, by far the slowest and most difficult of all art forms. As much as the result is material, its construction, partly because it involves taking away rather than adding on, has an abstract quality to it. It involves reduction, purification. Bruno's chocolate ball, also reductive work, seems to grasp the quintessence of this idea.

Charlotte covers her hands entirely with liquid red clay. They become live, ephemeral sculptures. The sensual and humble nature of clay frees her hands from vanity.

Soon we will be covering our hands in inks.

A new frontier

I give the children a model of an ABC in italics, a classical yet modern style. At school there is a great emphasis on writing with a special writing style in the slender space between two lines. Calligraphy is an alternative way. There are no lines, just a blank piece of rather large paper. They learn how to breathe deeply before forming the letters. They can change colors and add curly-cues whenever they feel inclined. They tend to exaggerate the curves in the model, which enchants me. For children who have never really written before, they are both fascinated and quickly tired out.

When they are tired of going through the alphabet, they write their name. For this, they work especially hard and are amused with the colorful, quite professional result. Seeing their name written in a new way is a little like putting on a new costume.

The older children are ready to use calligraphy pens. They learn to put the ink delicately in the reservoir with the dropper, which makes for a lot of trial and mess. There are some special exercises to start with before they get to the alphabet which they enjoy thoroughly. It is a breath of new air for them, after making their brains go only one direction with a prescribed way of writing at school. Some of them are messier than others, but no one broods. It relaxes them, once they get over some of their initial frustrations. After a little practice they begin to master the techniques. I teach them the ritual of washing their pens, but they often escape before their part of the table has been cleared of ink drops.

I let them go: their carefree spirit lightens my heart, and cleaning only turns into a pleasure.

December
For someone

The younger children work on a decorated letter. They decorate a large first letter of their name, which is a shape they can identify with. They are inspired by a Roman ABC I made with animals intertwined in each letter.

The older children make their whole name. Charlotte makes a friend's name rather than her own, which surprises me: at only six years old, she has a sense of generosity and selflessness.

And the purest art ever is when one creates for love, for a spiritual or human being, not for love of oneself, for prestige or for money. And I think of Andrei Rublov who created such rare icons out of deep and untarnished love for God.

The meticulous illustrative work takes a long time, and they keep themselves lively by chatting away. They keep up the concentration all the way through the class, no complaints whatsoever, as the rain pours outside.

When this project is over, I will show them the magic of metal plate printing.

Busy yet dreaming

Before class I prepare some small zinc plates covered with a thin layer of varnish, into which they will make a drawing with a dry point.

If I ask them to draw whatever they want, many would make a house or people, sunshine, clouds and grass. I give them an animal assignment to take them from their habitual world and into the wild.

Drawing houses with windows, usually associated with a natural need for security, can also mean boredom. When the children draw houses with windows in my class, I sometimes feel like they're losing interest. I often lead them into new subjects, as a way to open their imagination.

I once had a dream at a very busy time, when I was preparing for a show. I was anything but bored. But my dream was just that, I was drawing a house with windows, something I continually did as a child, and remember being bored at times doing this, or, conversely, resort to this when bored with everything, in the same way that a budding artist persistently doodles in class. I kept adding on windows as if to fill up time. And the result was an infantile view of a house, although I was an adult in the dream. This dream brought on the thought that perhaps we keep adding windows in the same way we make efforts to open a dried-up or misused imagination. Was my dream telling me that I'm still in the stage of trying to open the windows of my imagination? And the organization of an exhibit, even though it demands creativity, prolongs the misuse of my imagination, and that I continue to remain in an adolescent state, where talent is not yet applied fully. If this is so, I have a long way to go.

And finally, for an artist today, doesn't this correspond to the scramble for shows, prizes, and publications? And that the True Path is elsewhere?

The children always add the sunshine and clouds anyway, but their renditions of animals seem always personal and original. Without exception, I see an element of love in them.

The study of animals is perfect for children as much as it is for adult artists. The variety in shapes, texture and color seems infinite. I find drawing the human form wearisome, not at all as interesting as drawing kudu horns, tiger stripes and furry tails and wings.

I have seen so many renditions of the human form. I see them scattered around a bronze foundry, as if we take ourselves too seriously. I find that animals offer more than spending hours and hours in front of a Buddha-like human model, that doesn't even try to scramble away like an animal would. Well, I know children agree with me, at least until they are 9-10 years old.

And I imagine that animals have the same internal movement as humans. They simply have costumes, like actors in a play, of all shapes and sizes covering them.

Drawing wild animals unveils the most unsuspected kind of love, because of their inaccessible nature. Domestic animals can lead us into this realm. And sometimes the fur of an animal, so soft, like a baby rabbit, can transport us into the airy, intangible world.

We make animals come a lot closer to us when we draw them. Hunters think they approach the inaccessible and the unknown, by hunting animals down and collecting their horns or their flesh. Painters and photographers, however, not only get close to see animals, they give animals two lives, their own, and the image they make of them.

Aurélie seems to me particularly sensitive to the animal kingdom. She is also the most distant, the quietest. It seems as if she compensates for her inability to communicate freely and her need for affection by the love she puts in her animal drawings. This is perhaps why a child's representations of animals, be it in clay, drawing or painting, are all the more irresistible.

After drawing their animal image into the tarry varnish, I place the plate in the acid when the children are not around.

When the acid has sufficiently deepened the lines the children make, I take off the varnish with white spirit and put a protective plastic on the back : a terribly messy and toxic business. I am definitely not contributing to saving the earth. The children are ready to print when they come to class the next time, all the dirty work now being over with. I take out some etching inks, fun colors like turquoise or purple or veridian lake, which are transparent like stained-glass windows. I put pieces of paper in the water. The child whose turn it is to print puts on some oversized floppy gloves and of course a smock. I feel guilty about sending the children home, who arrive with spic-and-span clothes and leave with rainbow spots on them. They have fun mopping the sticky ink into the crevices with a firmly rolled up piece of gauze. I take off the excess ink on the surface. Then the big moment is turning the big wheel over our plate and paper.

Thomas and Bruno feel like they're steering a boat. The window of my studio is right in front of the press, with a view only of dense foliage (actually at this time of the year, we have to imagine it) and they're going down the Amazon.

The workshop is so small, even for one person. Sometimes I feel I'm in an airplane, off to unknown places.

We let the press go back and forth two times to add to the fun. Then the final moment of suspense: we take off the paper to see the result. The drawing has undergone a magical transformation. Ink and printing give the drawing an indelible finish. I don't usually try to wipe off the background film of color, which transparent ink especially tends to leave on the plate, because it unifies the image within the printed rectangle. These etchings are framed and sent to grandparents. Because of this metamorphosis into a new image, the process of etching offers a distance already between the child and his or her work. They objectively admire what they've done.

Der Augenzeuge fleht einen Segen auf dieses Bild herab und bleibt zugleich nüchtern. Er weiss, dass in jedem mystischen Augenblick ein allgemeines Gesetz beschlossen ist, dessen Form er zum Vorschein bringen soll und das nur in seiner gemässen Form verbindlich wird ; und er weiss auch, dass, die Formenfolge eines solchen Augenblicks freizudenken, das schwierigste Menschenwerk überhaupt ist. Peter Handke, Kindergeschichte

The children's work, so representative of their particular stage in their lives, so beautiful, will be taken home and perhaps thrown away. Like a solitary elephant against a colorful sky that no one sees, their work becomes part of the realm of the unseen, the expression of their love for life, or for us at that particular moment in their lives. This passing moment takes on irresistible poignancy.

Like my child beaming at me when I go pick him up at school.

Images of nature, like children's work, only acquire a status by our noticing them, and by our having formed a thought concerning them?

Oil painting to me, because of its vivid long-lasting colors, best reflects the child's luminous mind.

January 1997

More yellow, please

A new boy in our class, Benoit saw his sister, Charlotte, draw animals at home, and tried it himself. He is in fifth grade and never realized that he knew how to draw. Quite a discovery: not knowing he can draw says something about the emphasis the schools have on art. He shows me the tiger he made at home, where he took good notice of the animal's bone structure.

We cut square pieces of linen and learn how to make painting ground. We make a magic potion of rabbit skin glue, frogs and spider webs (optional) and Spanish chalk. It doesn't smell too good (my cats are hoping that they'll be getting chicken to eat while I heat up the glue) even without the frogs and other optional ingredients, almost too organic smelling. We learn the techniques which come from way back in time and which resist time, we mix up the solution, apply it with paintbrushes in the sun and let it dry.

I show them how to prepare a palette with pure colors and some medium. I'm very much in demand. (In my dreams I hear echoes of « Give me yellow, give me medium... ») I show them how to mix colors with the palette knife and how to make many different shades, using small amounts each time of, say yellow and ochre, yellow and red, etc. The result on the palette is always a huge mess, but that's life, that's art. I'm not teaching them the technical painting like in a scenography class, where all the fake statues in an operatic set have a repertoire of neat tones. I would prefer a mess, analogous to the chaotic order of nature, with an infinite number of tones, even if some of them are not well studied. As long as there is some study involved, we are making progress.

As soon as the colors lose their purity and take on the color of bird doo, we stop; we wait until the painting dries and begin a new palette the next time.

We paint dark lines like tiger stripes, as a kind of dessert, when the paint is dry.

Andrée makes me laugh: she says she observed her father painting the wall, and imitates him on the canvas, with long spontaneous gestures: « I'm painting like papa! » It's not that bad; she's making the grass next a running horse, which she painted so delicately. But I do have to confiscate her brush just before she erases some refined running legs. I show her, like a piano teacher shows a student how to place hands on the keys, how to approach a canvas.

The children make several paintings each, some more detailed than others and the results are quite remarkable. This work keeps them going for a long time and gives them a lot of motivation. Régine makes a cat in the evening sun, Charlotte a horse running, Laura a dolphin jumping in the sunset, Sébastien a castle in the fog, just to name a few. When the children have made their animals they move onto the background. They are so happy to move from the studied part, lights and darks and warm and cold tones in the animal, to whatever they wish around the animal. This is where they let their dreamworld take over : it is at this cross-over point, from tensing oneself up in trying to acquire a skill to letting one's natural aptitudes take over and gain freedom, where artistic talent comes alive.

You can lapse into rêverie when choosing colors. If you concentrate too much, or copy too much, the real magic of painting can never take place. Color, in essence, means surprise. A surprise for the painter as well as the person who looks at the painting.

Oils have a sensuous, bright, organic quality to them. It's so good to stay with the painting a little, feel its pulse and watch it evolve with each layer of paint.

And painting in oils is like writing a book. One may take a long time to write a book, and go back to it, bringing contradictions to it many times. Like a painting, it is the fruit of layers and layers of inspiration and thought.

While I'm teaching the children, I have the same pleasure experiencing the long and trance-like process of painting. I go back to my own beginnings, and this time I'm not alone. Through the students' warmth and presence, the artistic process is revitalized.

Teaching safeguards my own activity from veering toward the ready-made-without-thought, the briskly professional, where automatism and slickness may take over an artist's integrity. Instead, here I find true force and knowledge.

Writing begins, as a painting begins, with an unfocussed mass of words which little by little take on clarity and light. I write in the same way I paint, and words and themes communicate like colors and shapes.

Dolphins instead of buffalo

The children make copies from reproductions of drawings in Lascaux caves on paper. They adopt the style very easily : there is an immediate symbiosis. The prehistoric artists thought their drawings had magical powers in their daily lives. They probably never dreamed that the magic would penetrate so much time and extend to children of our times.

The children bring in a rather large rock with at least one smooth side. Here we use charcoal, yellow ochre and red ochre. This time they make their own idea. They may copy from animal photos. Instead of the typical Lascaux animals, they choose birds, dolphins, and kangaroos. Like in the caves, the colors they add harmonize with the colors of the rock.

And then by chance I read that in Australia there are aboriginal rock paintings of dolphins and people coming out of their mouths.

In rock painting, the painters don't go beyond what nature hands to them. Artistic unity is achieved within the wild landscape.

This art form is a model for ecologists. It will be a challenge to inspire this age-old consciousness of balance between human activity and nature on a world scale, yet it is urgent.

I have found this balance also in Africa. In the Tsodilo Hills near the Okavango delta in Botswana, the hills look like they are painted vertically with large paint brushes of lavender, pink, pastel gray, orange and red ochre. One can actually see the vast brush marks made by a giant Painter. The neon green lichen sets it all off especially when the sky is pure blue. Here the people painted animals with red hematite. Evidently, they were inspired by nature's act of painting to make their own.

I also perceived this in the Matopos Hills in Zimbabwe. Here not only is there rock painting, the largest production in the world, but there is harmony between the colors of the live animals and their surroundings. Take the rainbow lizard, a common resident there. Every color on its multi-colored back matches with different elements in the rock and landscape, especially the orange and green lichen. There is local resident there who knows how to call all the lizards and have them gather around him. It is not surprising that there was so much human creativity there.

And the rhinoceros, such a vulnerable species, even though it can hardly see (forget about colors !), finds best refuge in such a harmonious site. They even have hiding places under the rocks, which curiously resemble the rhinos themselves, where they take refuge from wind or rain. There are harmonious vibrations and magnetism, absolutely necessary for survival.

And on the banks of the Zambezi river where hippopotamuses proliferate, one can find huge, smooth, pinkish rocks which strangely imitate them.

February

Vibration transmission

« It's our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities » . Dumbledore in Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets by Rowling.

The quality I look for in the children is not so much technique, but desire. This desire, a delicate and personal attribute, holds more value than winning all the prizes in the world.

I'm thinking of children like Thomas, who have relatively little ease in copying. His very enthusiasm, however, has to do with a sense of vision, which is as much a part of talent as technical facility. He probably won't become a draughtsman, but an art program can serve as apprenticeship for any kind of future mission.

The natural initiative in children is so precious and is most often a wasted resource when too many rules prevent its unfolding.

This inhibition is lasting in adults. How many times I hear my adult student say, « Am I allowed to do this ? » or « what are we supposed to do? » This annoys me, so I tease the adults who talk to me like this and want me to correct their drawings. They forget they have their own impetus and authority within themselves.

The advantage of giving classes in an artist's workshop is that the children see the work the teacher is doing. This gives them stimulus; they feel the pulse, the vibrations. It has to do with transmission of desire.

Out of breath

Today I bring in imagery on Egypt. We look at pyramids, hieroglyphics, mortuary masks, cats, tombs, etc. I bring out clay and paper, so that the children can choose their own technique.

They can copy the hieroglyphics in the clay, or on paper. They make their own name. This way I find that we are able to go beyond the Latin alphabet. The children understand the abstract quality of letters very quickly. It's by looking at ancient or foreign lettering or by inventing our own, that we can see letters as shapes, stripped of their symbolic clothing.

Many of them make pyramids out of clay, which they spend a whole session making, striving to achieve the perfection of the shape. This conciseness is entrancing. It makes me think of Bruno who produced a chocolate ball after one hour and a half of intense work.

I especially like the animal gods and the cats. I discover that my students are often on my wave length. I like to believe we are joined in a common cause. Certain parents say that I have a considerable influence on them. It is actually more a kind of confluence, like a confluence of two streams. Along with the techniques I'm teaching them, I'm trying to give them a full experience of my own art, which has a lot to do with animals and imaginary versions of them, just as the nature I perceive has a magical, unreal quality in its realness. I know that I'm transmitting them some of my irretrievable energy (so it sometimes seems). I do not have an unlimited fountain of knowledge in me and will stop my classes when I feel I can give no longer.

It is February and we are able to do the second session outside. These are the sessions that make us happiest. The children go off when they finish, and I call them back for specific reasons, « The tail needs a little more work », or « there's a color missing ». Some children go too far with their work and lose what they've done, others not far enough. I sometimes have to control this somewhat, that is, make them aware of possibilities and limits, before they tarnish what they've already done.

If I call them back to continue their work, they are willing as long as it is not too extensive... I feel that the panting child returning to the drawing table brings the breath of nature into work.

Spring comes early

If a child wants to make progress, he or she has to go to class even on the days he doesn't really feel up to it. Similarly, I sometimes have to pull myself out in into the rain, and into the cold, damp workshop to solve a problem with a painting or a sculpture. Once I'm there, the warm colors from the pigments engulf me and set my blood moving freely.

And then painting is like a performance ; except for invisible beings who may be around, there may be no one there to watch, but each moment is like giving a concert. We are painting fully to those we love, and these moments of invisible presence are often the very best.

A parent pushes a child who prefers to stay in his warm home. I tell the parent to yield once or twice. Then it's up to me to make them feel like they've missed out on something the time before, as if I gear classes especially to their tastes. Often times this is actually true, and I'm all the more disappointed when someone like Aurélie doesn't appear in class. She has a quirky side to her that I am attached to and has maybe more imagination than the rest, but is not regular. I sometimes choose projects like fantastical creatures in clay and think of her, knowing she would be pleased.

Anyway, I have few drop-outs. The children begin to understand the pleasure that comes with work.

I myself am not always enthusiastic. But then the children, creatures still new to our earth, transmit vitality to me with their good humor.

Recognize diversity and you will achieve unity. Rabindranath Tagore

The February workshop lasts only five days. They have a taste of everything I can offer, and have no time to tire of any one thing.

The diversity of techniques I teach reflects my own use of varied art forms. There is joy in changing from one medium of expression to another. There are certain visions that can only be realized in marble, others in wood. Generally speaking, even if I feel terribly dispersed some days and have no hopes to specialize in any one thing, I see this multiple expression as a kind of renaissance and a celebration of life.

The work I give is good for children from 4 to 14 to even professional artists. I draw and paint with them, because an artist should draw everyday to keep up spontaneity and eye-muscle tone.

In the calligraphy class, a girl named Aurore spills purple ink all over the floor, rug and chair.

The last day is another wonderful summer-like day, and we happily go in and out of the studio despite the chaos of etching classes. The exceptionally warm February cheers us more than a real summer day, because we have been struggling through the cold wet grey Francilian weather.

My relationship with the parents is generally very good. We always have a lot to talk about. In this village, there's a feeling of care and love like in a large family. However, I often feel a certain weight on me, and although I'm offering something to the community and have found a certain spot within it, I also like to see myself as an anonymous being without identity or status, a non-artist, as we all essentially are, people of the earth.

March 1997

A dualism

The vicissitudes of village life have penetrated my work. I think of all the different intricate relationships between people as the day rolls on. Our property has no fences, the public footpath crosses the middle of the garden and some things do get stolen. A studio surrounded by trees has been an effective refuge, but if not, I have few barriers.

The village, like the world, is my key to understanding. Surprisingly, I believe that it is only by embracing my surroundings that I can approach esthetical purity.

The village is the world

I left Paris to live closer to nature. I consciously have divested myself of layer after layer of city life. Rather than getting cut off, which is a fear of many Parisians who leave the capital to live in the suburbs, the opposite is occurring. Living within a smaller community is like reading a book; you learn the laws of humanity through a magnifying glass. And in a certain sense, without contradicting myself, I see no need to go further for self-expression.

Taking on a rôle within this community is a global experience. If we say what we think to one person or to a million people, it's essentially the same thing. If I take on a class and only two people show up and wholeheartedly participate, it's like teaching many many people.

I'm thinking of Halldor Laxness, whose genuine words have ramified to other countries. He lived in Iceland, a small community, and wrote in Icelandic :

« I say that I write for the least numerous people of the world, and I'm satisfied to write for a small group because I know this people and flatter myself to understand it up to a certain point, and I love it. The group of people we write books for, or paint for, can be as small as you wish, it does not need to be more than one person outside yourself, if you know that person, believe you understand him, or love him, you have already said yes to life, you want the world to stay, and from this love that you have for one person, you have become an artist belonging to the whole world... »

There are days when I see no ambiguity.

The fight with the elements

Starting in February and March, I pick flowers for the children to paint. The first flowers we paint are Japanese quince flowers. Searching for their color, somewhere between orange and pink, a brighter form of flesh color, keeps them busy. They paint right away without a drawing. Some of the more impatient children use their colors before getting the right one. However, paintings in which the colors do not match the model are often more beautiful than paintings where the color is right. Here impatience goes hand-in-hand with talent. The younger children are inclined to make concentric decor around the flower and move off onto tangents ; the older children stay true to the model and produce a Japanese-like painting. Both ways are lovely. Finally, they use up their colors afterwards for other experiments.

As in music, when the artist diverges from a studied, correct interpretation and discovers unknown aesthetic pleasure, a visual artist may stray from the model at an unconscious moment and reach magic.

During another session we paint daffodils. Daffodils, as the children find out, are not just blobs of yellow and sticks of green. We find different yellows, yellows with white, yellows with a bit of red, and several greens.

Here I put some easels outside and (not so successfully) hitch the paper onto a board for them to draw directly from nature. Even though they are simple productions, there is something fresh about their paintings. Some of them get dirty because the wind blows the paper down. But the fight with the elements is part of the class.

With this direct-from-nature painting, we seem to be following the tradition of the Barbizon painters (a town not far from us). We are used to good heating and photographs to copy from, but it is good to also feel the weather conditions. Van Gogh always painted without a hat in the hot burning sun in order to feel the sun fully while painting it, and no one in history has painted the yellow ball of fire better than he. Not that we go out and scorch ourselves, but it's best to be good troopers, and these children are good at braving the elements anyway.

I like copper-plate etching, which is a rather indirect, cerebral activity. This work has its sensual side, however. I love drawing drawing on a delicate sheet of paper, superimposed onto thin soft waxy varnish. Here etching already has less heady appeal. The copper is then eaten away in the acid bath exactly where you make your drawing. The rough pencil marks are thus transmitted spontaneously onto the plate. And the toasty smell of soft varnish perfumes my workshop.

After having made a certain number of these kind of etchings, my adult students say they now see the world around them etched on a copper plate. I'm surprised that this happens so quickly. But this goes to show how much of an organic quality the soft varnish technique has. There are crevices in rocks, spaces between fur on a mammal, tree bark, leaves that cry to be etched in soft ground varnish. Nature itself is one of these etchings. I'm also thinking of the neon green moss that descends the black lava hills in the Icelandic highlands, like an unsharpened green pencil on a black sheet of paper.

Another favorite technique is sugar aquatint. It consists of painting with some sugar, ink and gum arabic directly onto a plate. I go out and paint the trees in the forest with the copper plate my hand. I sit on a moss-covered log and sometimes rain drops fall and integrate themselves into the gooey sugary ink (the ants are already on their way towards it). There is also a reflection of the top of the trees in the orange-tinged metal. One way to commune with nature... In any case, this outdoor painting can bring a certain freshness to the work. Then one covers it with varnish and lets it dry. When the plate is placed in a bath of hot water, the sugar mixture pops out. The now uncovered area, ready to be etched by the acid, is the forest painting made directly onto the copper.

This is an aesthetics which attempts to catch the freshness of nature. The result is not always effective the first time : the image sometimes turns out simplistic and rough. But the process itself, a kind of unconscious absorption of nature's vibrations, will certainly serve as nourishment for work to come.

Nature in etching

Accidents in the course of our work, that is, deviations from original vision, can bring a certain organic quality to etching.

Like in ceramics, when you open the kiln and see what effects occur with the glazes, there is an element of surprise in etching. We don't have full control over the result as we do in painting. We can even allow them to happen more frequently if we have the acid attack the copper in an uneven way ; for example, leaving oil here and there (the acid eats away the copper more slowly in oily parts), or spreading the varnish more lightly in certain spots (the acid attacks belatedly, therefore more lightly), can bring on this irregularity. We can let the cat walk over the wet varnish, or give a plate to a lion to scratch and distort, and then see how it prints up.

Sometimes I let the acid roll down the plate slowly, watching it make ramifications like that of a tree or veins on a leaf. The print is rich, uneven, and captures the nature of nature.

Orange light

Today I have my first class in the evening as the sun goes down. I like having new students: each person brings something new. These classes have a different feel to them, a bit serene. Although I have three 6 year olds, I also have three talented older children, with special abilities. I'm able to discuss with Bertrand at length, in the evening light, all the subtleties of color mixing, almost in a scientific way. The 6 year olders' work absorb everything we talk about and try out. The words give us both a sense of power over the mysteries of this domain. It grows cooler as the time is up. And we walk home towards the warmth as if after a long walk.

Words are small extensions of the visual. They give the illusion of understanding and completion, a dénouement of a composition.

Wet paper

Three labrador puppies are born to the freest dog I know, Loula, our neighbor. Loula, unlike all other dogs I know here, wanders in the orchard, to the bakery, wherever she wishes. She is the queen of the property. Her mistress doesn't mind that I bring a loud group of budding artists, armed with shields (drawing folders) and well-sharpened swords (pencils). We place the puppies in the middle of the room on a blanket. And the children form a circle around them. The puppies still don't know how to walk straight, so it's all extremely adorable. I tell the children they have to learn to draw moving objects, too. Still-lives are getting too easy for them, I tease them. I put them through sheer torture... Thomas finally gets an ear or a part of a snout onto paper, and the puppy is already gone to chase Charlotte's pencil. The puppies unfortunately have a tendency to go toward the children and sit on their paper. Worst still, Colette's page suddenly gets wet. Nothing more tragic happens, but I would understand if the neighbor regretted her offer to have us all over. The children are all lamenting « we can't do it ! » (a most common phrase), « please keep the puppies still ! ». After assuring them it would be too easy for them to draw if I kept them still, I finally agree to take one of the black furry balls in my arms for a moment, before it squirms out. The children are quite frustrated, but I'm convinced it is a good exercise. My sculpture teacher in college, Chris Cairns, always said that it was very important for an art teachers to keep their students in a state of imbalance.

Just as they're about to reach their summit of frustration, the puppies do a marvelous thing : they curl up and sleep on top of each other. They are thoroughly tired out from chasing pencils and running away from getting drawn. The rest of the session is quiet, more than quiet. I give out new pieces of paper, and the kids are in their element, drawing inanimate objects again. They make sure not to rustle their paper, for fear that their still-lives become alive again.

The children must constantly do new things, and understand how to overcome hurdles. It keeps them humble and uncertain, in a healthy way. Some adults could benefit from the same experience. And when I see the children beginning to attack the difficulties, I tell them they're on the right path. This may be one of the motivations to come back for more. So far no one has dropped out because of these challenges.

Children are above all practitioners

One of the teachers at the school is particularly interested in calligraphy, and asks me to teach her class some basics. I'm pleased to have so many students at once; I feel appreciated. I also have an advantage : I come to introduce something different from math and grammar, and I don't have to deal with any discipline problems.

I buy lots of pens and calligraphy nibs in Paris, along with tubes of China ink. The kids learn to put the ink in the reservoirs, shake them a little onto a piece of paper, and then move onto exercises. They learn all the possibilities a metallic pen can offer, the thin and the thick, and a roundness in between. The variety of stroke is the essence of the writing's beauty. Again I start with Italic script. These children are in second grade, a good time to begin. They have had already one and a half years of learning how to write, and are surprisingly enchanted by the possibility of writing in a different way from the way they were taught last year. It is not easy for left-handed children. There are special left-handed nibs, but another way is to turn the paper and place it horizontally in such a way that it is comfortable for them.

I talk about different kinds of scripts, and about Chinese, Arabic, and Japanese calligraphy, and demonstrate the respective tools. All the lecturing seems superfluous when I see 24 kids impatient to use their hands. Some of them have a facility for it ; you can always tell right away which of the children will excel in it. There is no exception : all of them thoroughly enjoy it.

The children in this class express to me how much they liked the experience. Calligraphy is a source of freedom for them.

April
Lalou

My neighbor Martial, the painter, acquires one of the puppies we drew.

I take care of Lalou as if he were mine during the day and become very attached to him. He takes him on when he comes back from work. He is frustrated with him, because the puppy always manages to escape any wall he half-heartedly tries to build. He most deeply would like Lalou to become like his mother, the queen: free.

June 1997

Thirsty to tell stories

It's time for a long-term project to finish the year. This gives the more itchy children impetus to come back not just to do eye exercises the following Wednesday and take up what they leave off. Martin and Rémy, in particular, get tired of basic drawing exercises. After making speedy sketches of dinosaurs and shells, they are already off making a fort in the woods around my workshop.

The older children are to invent a story for a book, and conceive pictures to go with it. The writing is executed in calligraphy, the pictures in etchings. We spend one whole session writing the story, and practising some calligraphy. It is difficult to keep their stories concise (imagine all this in calligraphy...). In general, their joy in writing a story makes it overflow. They are thirsty for it. This shows how much they love creative writing and visibly, they don't get enough of it at school.

I'm amazed at how well the introduction of writing into the art classes works. Writing opens up their imagination, and their drawings benefit from this enormously. This is another instance where I believe we underestimate children's hidden powers.

Then we make drawings which will be transposed onto the zinc plates. Then we plan where the etchings and the writing will be inserted. These etchings, because we can make as many as we wish, can be both used for the book and as a picture by itself.

Then, just to make life more complicated, I give them the choice of different pieces of colored paper as a background for the etchings. These pieces of paper are the same size of the zinc plate. I put some glue on it and place it over the plate before printing. We then place the page over this. We then print the etching and if the leaf of paper moves a little, we have to do it again. This could be another reason why I call my workshop « le Mouvement des feuilles » (in French, feuille means both leaf and leaf of paper). When it does work out, the extra paper adds a second color to the etching and most often enhances the beauty of their work.

I'm now preparing a show of the children's work. I wouldn't like to let this work go unnoticed. It's the end of the year, June, and it is a rainy month. We are all a little nervous because too many things happen at the end of the school year. At this time my own work has become the children's ; we have become one person, and I put my heart fully into it.

Why show ?

For the show, all the theatres, oil paintings, painted rocks, etchings and books are displayed. Next to the books I put objects to bring people's attention to their wealth of details. For example, Paloma makes a book about a girl coming out of a rose and I put a small doll inside a real rose next to it, or Mathilde writes a story about an elephant growing leaves from its trunk, so I have a realistic Steiff stuffed elephant with some greenery stuck in it next to her book.

Almost all the parents and children come. Due to my efforts that are geared toward every child, I'm strangely hurt that a few do not come.

This is a characteristic of village life : people get hurt easily. Fortunately, if I have ill-feeling, I lose it when I work. I can't allow the search for recognition eclipse the joy I feel in what I do. Sometimes a little bit of poison remains, however, and if I'm not careful, it can grow like cancer.

Most children are proud of their work. This reward gives confidence, whatever they do later on. The important thing, I believe, is to put value on the subtle performance of a child. This is probably one of the main rôles of an artistic education, which is not only for art's sake but for any other path the child takes. It brings value to the subtext of a child's growth, so evident in their creations. If the children themselves does not see their own qualities, it is up to me to explain why it is so good, what part of his of her work is so exceptional (the legs you did really well, I can just see them moving . . . , or how in the world did you find those two colors that go so well together, etc. . .)

I hear that some children tell their parents, « But she always says it's beautiful ». In the long path ahead of them toward self-knowledge, children need to know what they're good at. And I can never encourage them enough.

Believe me, I'm careful to not praise what I don't consider wonderful. Even so, if I had more time, I would be telling them about some of their other precious and underestimated traits.

Freedom and danger

Lalou the puppy escapes the property with my 3 year old son. My son puts on a huge sun hat, underpants and teeshirt and crosses the dangerous road with his companion. I find them looking at rabbits on the other side of the street in the pouring rain.

September 1997

Outdoor art gallery

We are shaped and fashioned by what we love.

Goethe

Immediately after the children's show I start to plan the September exhibit of my own work which will take place in my garden and workshop. It is not easy to exhibit intimate work to the general public in personal surroundings, but there are many advantages.

People from far and wide do not always come, but the half-wild garden setting is ideal because it offers a lush background that goes well with any kind of work.

I believe that ultimately, people who help us in our careers are often those with no particular professional interest in what we do. They are the people we love. Love of earthly or spiritual beings mold our work. We cannot say to ourselves enough , and we let this slip in our minds so often, that the very best work an artist can do has nothing to do with its immediate

commercial value. Those who play the game of an artist are no longer artists : the true artist rebels, not only from playing the artist's game, but from what many believe an artist's life should be. Here and only here is the freedom that is essential for quality work.

I find myself sometimes ridden with bitterness, because hostility and egotism corrode my relationships with others. Fortunately, however, art has the same quality of innocence and sincerity as animals and children. It is a threshold where I can rely on purity of feeling.

I look for people who can bring me into another more simple world just by talking to them, and who can pull me away from marshy human relationships.

A dream to make theatre comes true. The garden is a stage and the art pieces the props and actors. The lighting is the sun, and the shadows that stream onto the paintings become part of their composition.

Lately, I have started printing etchings on very thin Japanese paper and glueing them onto scrolls. I'm trying to lighten etchings, take away their frames, and make the etching itself as transparent as possible.

Outside, an artist called Elian Guili-Guili puts his colorful quirky animals all over the garden. They are made from painted metal objects found in junk yards. They looked theatrical and fit well into their green background. I put my own marble birds around the pond.

Inside, there are also etchings made by an Italian artist, Livio Ceschin. He makes scenes of forests with leaves and branches all excellently mastered. He may spend up to six months on one copper plate, working almost full time. The result is dream-like. It is not surprising that he is so well-known in his country. With his etchings, he accomplishes something very rare and of utmost importance today : we find ourselves loving nature even more than we already do.

The three days are sunny and warm. The show is a success. The adolescents from my new class on Saturday draw the sculptures. Children from the other sections come with their parents and at own initiative, ask for paper and pencil.

Not only animals

Since some of last year's students are moving into high school, I've made a new class for them on Saturday mornings. I have three boys and four girls. They are all quite quiet and shy when they arrive. I'm not used to this shyness. Younger children's shyness is less mystifying. I'm often worried they are bored, but reassure myself that while they are drawing they cannot be. This light discomfort is entirely compensated by the talent they show in their work. I take them to the local stables to draw the horses. They all do quite well despite the horse's movements in their boxes. Some of them add the architecture of the stable. I haven't thought about this aspect, because what seems most interesting to me is the living four-legged creature within.

I know I have to orient the adolescent class a little differently; they should be directed toward what they're interested in. They already have a fountain of strength and knowledge in them, and they are impatient. They are testing their limits.

This year I have a bigger studio, double its former size (not saying much), with two small spaces for four children each. Now I can separate children who bother each other.

Only Elodie stops in order to start up music, but her mother says she continues to draw. Sometimes the whole family is obliged to stop the car in a village so that she may draw a church.

In any case, music is inherent to visual arts. Music is abstract, (although there is some imitation of natural sounds, like Beethoven's birds, and that too is abstract), and abstract art is music. I draw my model for teaching art from a sound musical education, where there is rigor on top of pleasure. I think there is sometimes more to learn about art from music than art class, where materials, heavy colors and fuss often disguise the essence of art. Without the almost military flavour that music class or a sound art class introduces to the child, the introduction to freedom, the necessary unfurling of the imagination, has no meaning.

Although the music we play is most often interpretation, what one plays is hidden, subtle creation, pure expressiveness. There is no pressure of material result, it is ephemeral, and not necessarily heard by others, thus undented by people's reactions, visible or invisible. Only with music can we attain a certain transparency. This may become a prime yet impossible goal in painting, for we are always led by impossible motives. Because of this hidden, abstract ideal, I see playing music as superior to all the material work I do.

Wings

We start the classes with drawings of fruits, leaves, chestnuts, and nuts we find surrounding the studio. They gather the different objects themselves. Some of the children add faces to their naturalistic drawings, transforming them into otherworldly creatures.

This year I'm introducing a new theme, something that emanates from my own work. We will not only be drawing animals, but inventing them, too. These are animals that come from dreams, I tell the children.

I had this idea last year when a parent was talking about his child's drawings, that they were imaginary animals. Suddenly, a new world opened up and I was foreseeing a whole body of work to come.

I don't impose this child-like theme on the adolescents, however, who have their own ideas. But I have to discourage them from merely copying what is in front of them. They can take flight with just a small push. The dualism, the natural world and the imaginary, is then often crystallized in a student's drawing.

For the most part, we adults have clipped wings. But sometimes, it takes very little to be sent soaring. For instance, when I catch a glimpse of a child's vast imaginary world.

I make a winged cat out of bronze with turquoise patina, which I called a « cat's dream ». The children are always drawing it and making their own cats, elephants, deer, horses with wings. I got this idea from a friend, who made a winged cat in time for the show. Hers is coming out of a bluish serpentine rock ever so slightly. And I hear that children from all over the world make cats with wings.

Adding wings to an elephant is the ultimate expression of freedom.
We are emancipating ourselves from the weight of common reality.
And to know how to free ourselves allows us to keep taking on more.

I'm thinking of Anselm Kiefer's winged book : an expression of freedom from the weight of knowledge and the physical weight of a book. A departure point for a virtual library.

And after alleviating ourselves from paper into cyber space, we are so happy to return to the matter from which we have come, and grind our pigments, touch the pages of a book again, and pet the fur of a cat, soft as a rabbit. A virtual life cannot be an ultimate esthetic destination.

I look for similar elements in other artists' work, because with all living things, I believe we share one common inner movement.

And the dream world

The dream world, and a unicorn, are hard to capture. Some dreams we remember, others we lose. It is a part of the fabric of our lives, like the evasiveness of thoughts for the fabric of a book.

The more we try to capture a dream with one side of our intellect, the more it slips away. Like trying too hard to memorize music. It is only at an unexpected and unthinking moment that we succeed.

Also, the more we try to « make art », that is, to « cast a spell », the more we distance ourselves from it. The magic only comes at its own accord. We humans cannot always command our wings.

If the rooster wakes me up in the middle of a dream, it is hard to go back to the dream. In the same way, when I make a beautiful painting, I cannot command equal beauty in the next one.

The lost thought

I had a thought, something about music I believe, which brought all the dispersed elements of my life together in one unified, placating movement like a smooth brush of wind. For sure I'd remember it, so I didn't write it down. I released it, and like a dream it was gone.

And because I cannot remember it, I live with a gnawing feeling, and would like to commemorate this thought, whatever it was.

September

It's a curly world

A straight angle doesn't attract me, neither does a straight, hard inflexible line, created by man. What attracts me is the free and sensual curve, the curve I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuous course of its rivers, in the waves of the sea, in the body of a favorite woman. The whole universe is made of curves.... Oscar Niemeyer, Brazilian architect

Today is a beautiful day so I take them to sit on the lawn in front of the church to draw. A simple romanesque church, very typical of the Ile-de-France region, it has trapezoidal black flaps where the bell tower is to keep out the rain. These details are a challenge to draw. There is also a cross and a wrought iron rooster on top. This catches the younger children's attention, who tend to draw such a detail on a larger scale. Their work breathes charm, with curls for the ironwork and an enormous smiling rooster.

It's Aurélie's birthday. Thomas and Cécile have the idea to give her their drawings. She melts at their unexpected gesture. And I am so pleased about their total understanding of the disinterested aspect of our work.

The older children labor on the perspective, and many succeed through instinct, others who try to understand its science, have trouble.

I never bring out rulers for our views of roads in our village. Better a slightly crooked line that seems to come from nature than a suspiciously straight line.

Before moving on to curves, I point out the basics of perspective. I am thinking of Raphaël's perspectives and how Renaissance artists have this so firmly grounded in them. The excellence of this work ought to be a model for us. The work of the past can humble us in a healthy way.

October

Urgent business

I find a small wren my cat killed. Instead of swinging it into the thickets, I take it into the studio to draw it, even though I'm terribly busy (it is urgent : I have to get to it before it decays). I clear away my disorder and draw, not all the details, just the expression of its closed eye, its stripes, some delicate feathers, its beak, its miniature claws made from the same substance as our fingernails.

Like the rooster on the church, a child does the same, and instinctively chooses only the details that attract, like a magnet. These choices are both at the heart of childhood and art.

Can we persevere these child-like instincts as we evolve toward sophisticated form? In order to retain this quality, we have to remain as if a novice in everything and touch all materials as if for the first time. There ought always to be struggle, as if we're always making something new. This is the only way to reach originality.

Close to the senses

With the adolescents, we draw self-portraits, our hands, and some still lifes. Today it is nice outside, so we take the chairs out to study the trees around the workshop. There is one tree nearby, which is actually two trees intertwined, as if they are one.

Often we forget texture in drawing. But while we draw the bark of a tree, we are also feeling the bark at the same time. Looking with our eyes is the same thing as feeling and then drawing with our hands. We can actually hold our pencil in the same way we would touch what we're drawing. That is, the angle with which we hold our pencil varies ever so slightly, and naturally so, in accordance to the texture. Drawing becomes sensual.

Actually few artists achieve it.

In high school I observed a girl draw a series of hands technically very well, but with one problem : they looked dead. This coldness gave me impetus to draw live plump hands with a softer texture, suggesting the tenderness of flesh. This is when I understood the importance of sensuality in art. And many professionals have a tendency to forget this.

When drawing does succeed in opening our senses, it becomes an outlet for all emotions. The vibrancy of young people's emotions, grief and depression as well as joy, can be transferred onto paper. There is so much life in these early drawings.

Making shadows with the pencil at a slant and crisp, hard lines for dark areas brings us closer to the secrets of the earth. Softening the details the way nature does with sunlight as the details gradually disappear into the darkness, in an slightly uneven way, brings us unconsciously closer to her powers.

All the way

We cannot leave out sensuality. We cannot let the chance to express it go by and produce something so so and add to the mass of trash on this earth, just because we are impatient for the result, or only paid so much for it. We have to always go all the way, be it a backdrop for a school play or a bronze sculpture for a city square, until the magic of expression comes in.

Muddy work

When I came to this village after living among grey edifices in Paris, my spirits were soaring in front of the gingerbread houses along the river. Their colors harmonize with the trees, especially in autumn when the red and yellow-ochre come out in the leaves, leading to the full spectrum of colors. The region has warm colors in its architecture. The Vaux-le-Vicomte castle nearby has ochre tones and red brick and is best viewed, as if taken by surprise as you drive down the road in the autumn, lit up in the orange evening sun.

Painting outside is a somewhat awkward situation, but today we prepare ourselves the best we can with fold-up chairs, a bottle of water and paper plates for palettes, innumerable tubes of gouache and as many Chinese paintbrushes as possible.

The subject matter is extensive, with many details and colors, so I encourage them to concentrate on little parts, or start with the colors and details that catch their eye right away. I am content with the efforts they make in mixing the colors, and arriving at the special red or green that corresponds to what they see. Today we are not necessarily creating pictures ; I would say we are mainly painting and learning in an abstract way.

And the forces of nature take over us : the earth mixes with our colors, the paper flips over with the wind and lands in the mud.

I imagine a painting, entirely painted by the brushes of the wind and the pigments of the earth.

The ephemeral and the abstract

Take long walks in stormy weather or through deep snows in the fields and woods, if you would keep your spirits up. Deal with brute nature. Be cold and hungry and weary.
Thoreau

Land Art, an art form not easily performed in a city, is ideal for us because we live close to the Fontainebleau forest. We are fortunate, even though there will always be far too many roads streaming through it.

We are inspired by the work of a master, Andy Goldsworthy, whose ephemeral work is beautifully photographed in many books. The book I show to the children is called 'Wood'.

Landart is an art form that uses the earth as a support and the natural elements as its materials. I explain the project in different steps, because the idea is quite difficult to understand. Many of the parents ask me to explain it to them.

The children each conceive an idea which they first draw on a piece of paper. The children have a lot of questions because the abstract idea is somewhat difficult to perceive. We are not looking for something figurative ; we don't want it to look like anything. Certain children would like to make people or houses, but I encourage them toward geometric shapes and abstract ideas. I choose about ten of these projects which are more plausible than others, and we make up groups according to the children's preference.

On the way toward the forest, a real hike, we pick up colorful leaves and thorns which can be used as natural thumbtacks to stick the leaves on the trees. In the forest we use leaves, branches, moss, forest flowers, chestnuts, rocks, mushrooms, etc.

One group makes a serpentine shape around two trees, another a spiral around two trees with different color leaves, others concentric or triangular shapes on the forest ground with different types of brightly-colored forest materials, another a huge bouquet of flowers in a crevice of a trunk, another branches alongside each other forming a kind of movement, another a sort of multiple necklace of leaves between two trees. All are a success. I don't know if everyone participates fully, but they all seem happy to be outside whether running around gathering materials, or sitting down to arrange the moss. The confluence of work and nature makes us very enthusiastic.

In Sweden, where people are used to fighting the elements, rain or snow, there are progressive schools where everything happens outside, regardless of the weather. The natural environment becomes more than just a place of leisure. The children study there. I'm certain that this is the way we can educate our children successfully within the laws of nature. This is how we can make hunting less popular some day, because the desire humans have to hunt can be replaced by other outdoor challenges. If we bring up children within the love of nature, the desire to protect it will naturally follow.

Landart introduces two new ideas to the children : abstraction and ephemeral art. The notion of abstraction does not always put children at ease. Children tend naturally toward figurative work, --they want to make a person or a house-- because this keeps their feet on the ground. But I'd like to see them walk on unstable ground, and taste something new, a new world of signs. It's a bit like mathematics, an abstract set of signs. In many children there is an underlying symbiosis : they are easily seduced and adjust quite quickly. The more down-to-earth types are at least attracted to the materials we use.

The ephemeral aspect creates another initial instability : our work will be destroyed by time and the elements, quite a bit faster than a painting. It could be the wind, a dog, a wild boar, or maybe a roebuck, if we're lucky. In Goldsworthy's book the different steps of natural destruction are shown in photographs : this is all inherent to his the work of art. Sometimes even one of the successive steps where nature plays an adverse rôle is more interesting than the final, or actually, in this case, initial product itself. Here creation is in reverse. Nature collaborates with the artist.

Here, I believe, is a domain that artists have yet to explore much, much further.

In any case ephemeral art invites the children to appreciate the actual process of construction, placing it higher in value than the final result. The children are in the habit of bringing home a complete object, and some parents expect this from them.

There are compensations for the lack of take-home result. One, they sleep very well that night (some ever-complaining parents complain about the long walk). Two, the children bring their parents during the weekend to show what they did. Three, I make pictures, one with and one without the artists in front smiling away, and another several days afterwards.

My only regret is that the project is not ideal for everyone ; there are always a handful of independent-minded children whose creative spirit is lost in all the hustle and bustle. I'm thinking of Clément, who is also in my classes. He is dreamy and seems to be taken over by everyone else. He hovers over his group's work on his knees, an arrangement of mushrooms, flowers and pinecones, as if he alone understands the futility of human vanity. I'm not too worried : those with creative will-power or a lesser sense of competition may make their own creation on their own at a later date, maybe in their back-yard. I'm just giving them an initial idea.

In my studio I have a photograph of some calligraphy I wrote in the sand « Only those who write in the sand understand the meaning of eternity », and there is a wave about to roll over it. Far from understanding the meaning of eternity myself, I keep a photo of it on the wall ...

The ephemeral does not exist: it is integral to continuity.

Harmony and suggestion

After painting a still life, flowers, a toy elephant and some fruit, the children make a totally abstract image. They really enjoy this after all the realistic exercises we are used to. After realism, abstraction takes on meaning.

When I was in high school, we were encouraged to make abstract after abstract. We gave imaginative and poetic names to them. Abstracts teach composition and reveal the different possibilities colored pencils or paints (whatever, material we're using) can offer. My teacher at the time had an interesting method to understand the powers of suggestion. Once you perform your abstract, you think of what drawing you can put within its forms.

After piles of abstract drawings, I get to a point where there will be both drama and unity in composition every single time. I asked my teacher then, what next? The challenge was gone for me. As if there were a hidden code to succeed in making a unified picture every time.

In any case, if this mystery is gone, be it forever or just awhile, you can always benefit strongly from abstract apprenticeship, especially in matters of color and composition.

You can keep going and explore other territories, such as observe the abstract within nature. Artists and photographers have already touched upon this. Photographs from an airplane look like abstract paintings.

This is what I explore in my series of paintings about Iceland's landscapes.

I go to school one day to have children make abstracts. The children get square pieces of paper, and they fill them with colors and shapes, mirrors of their personalities.

By filling up the square completely with colors and signs, the child not only gets a taste of the world of suggestion but also of the harmonious whole. The sense of harmony which comes from this can serve as a model, even unconsciously so, for whatever the children do in their lives.

Innate ability and experimentation

You hide these things from the wise and learned but reveal them to children, because you wish this to be so. Luke X-21

Perhaps the most enriching aspect of abstract painting is experimentation with color. Here color is treated in a pure way.

When my middle child was two, she had a habit of making drawings of just colors piled on top of each other with colored pencils. We had a set of many colored pencils which she used, and the results are an unlimited source of knowledge for anyone who searches for new color mixes and juxtapositions. I keep all of these drawings in a pile, in my workshop, and consult them like an encyclopedia. I have already reproduced one of them faithfully with oil paints on a large piece of linen. The harmony in these colors is very strong. Two year-olds don't study colors, they feel them.

And I've learned that when I'm not thinking the better colors come about naturally. If I'm too calculating, nothing has that surprising quality in it that goes beyond what I planned. I feel that young children are closer to the spiritual world because they have emerged from it more recently, and through their natural powers, have a key to it.

Infinity lies in a child's being. There will always be unprecedented things that come from their world.

I encourage the children in the classes to daydream rather than think too hard as they paint. The adolescents are seduced by this, too. They are forging their identities, and there is so much they can read about themselves in their abstract paintings or drawings.

I'm finishing a painting on wood of a tropical forest. Something's missing. And then I take some color from the children's palettes which I haven't thrown away yet, a little like peach or abricot, a mixture of white, English red and other colors. This is what I need for the light.

I can not say I'm really teaching. Instead the students and I are absorbing elements from one other, simple particles of an inherent universal order, which appear spontaneously in our individual paintings.

November 1997
Hopeless cause

I go away away for vacation. My neighbor is Lalou's only owner at this time. And I have many villagers crying out at me for my irresponsibility with Lalou. He even ate a hen's leg. He will probably have to find a new owner for him, because the two-master system is not working. When I get back, I take the dog out on a run in the forest, watching his black silhouette dash through the blur of oranges and yellows in the foliage. It is an image of freedom I would like to fight for, but am powerless. All reasoning, about how the dog should be brought up, conspires against this idea.

Children are born ecologists

Today the children use a self-hardening clay which is hard to make details with, such as eyeballs and claws. But that doesn't prevent them from coming up with some interesting globular-like creatures. I especially like Séverine's dinosaur coming out of a shell.

The children use materials and tools of varying quality, even the less-easy-to-manage ones, and they can see for themselves what is the best. They become discerning.

There are lots of plastics and synthetic material that you can use for sculpture on the market. However, I'm partial to using mother earth's recipes, not only to pollute less but to make things that harmonize with the earth. We can go a different direction and use objects from the trash, as Elian Guili-Guili does,

and many others. I discuss these varying ideas with the children. It is remarkable how quickly sensitive they are to ecological concerns, much more so than certain adults I know. Children know intuitively that our planet needs protection; it is an innate quality in them, and teaching them about this is like teaching wisdom to sages. Now it is a matter of preserving this very quality in them as they approach adulthood.

Michelangelo spent months chopping around for the right marble. Nowadays, the imperfections of marble have gained a different beauty. I'm also thinking of Giuseppi Penone, who uses surfaces of veiny marble as a support for his work. I love this roughness, and it becomes a need in an overly perfectly-made industrial world. This art form, imperfect and representative of human struggle, corresponds to our need for revitalization. It is true realism, laden with the mud of the earth.

December 1997

Lalou has a new master. She is a woman of strong ideas concerning the education (that is, imprisonment) of the animal. He even has to wear a muselière. No more forest for Lalou. And no more danger for the cars.

I am relieved of responsibility and make myself believe he will be « happier », because he is more secure.
Still, reason can never outweigh the glorifying image of a forest run, even if death must follow soon after.

At this moment, the Unicorn sauntered by them with his hands in his pockets... when he happened to fall upon Alice : he turned round instantly, and stood for some time looking at her with an air of the deepest disgust. 'What-is-this ? he said at last. 'This is a child !' Haigha replied eagerly, coming in front of Alice to introduce her... 'We only found it today. It's as large as life and twice as natural !' 'I always thought they were fabulous monsters !' said the Unicorn. 'Is it alive ?' 'It can talk,' said Haigha solemnly. The Unicorn looked dreamily at Alice and then said 'Talk, child.' Alice could not help her lips curling up into a smile as she began : 'Do you know, I always thought Unicorns were fabulous monsters, too ? I never saw one alive before !' 'Well, now we have seen each other,' said the Unicorn, 'if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain ?' Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

We are gradually moving into our new domain, imaginary beings. The children are a little reticent when given an open door into the imaginary world, yet overjoyed. I can't help thinking though, that it's best some timidity exist.

This mixture of repression and release gives a touching aspect to their work, a restrained craziness. This is a psychological state found in artists throughout history. I'm thinking of Raphaël, for example, whose unicorn in the Lady with Unicorn was painted over an initial painting of a pet dog. Raphaël broke away only slowly from what was expected of him.

There are two boys in my class that have this double quality. Clément, shy yet daring, produces sophisticated drawings yet tries to hide his production with his hand. And Thomas is always producing something original and fantastical, yet shies away from learning to draw more realistically. Both of their shynesses give character to their work. Happily in art, certain weaknesses become strengths.

With the younger groups, we take up the magic markers and calligraphy pens once again in order to practise Latin lettering. After some practice, before they get tired and lose interest, I ask them to make up their own alphabet. These are letters that are totally made up by the children, with distinctive curves, dots, zigzags. They all make 26 letters, as reference points to our alphabet. Then I ask them to make up some imaginary beings to go with it. They still reside in what their world already consists of : an angel, a dragon, a devil, a unicorn, mermen, trolls and witches. Little by little, however, they understand they can go further, and add wings here and there, curly-cue noses, antlers, interesting tails, double heads, etc., go all out. They finally dive into the playful infinity of the imagination.

This evolution is familiar to me. First, I made an ABC with animals and then an ABC with imaginary beings intertwined into each letter, which was engraved on 26 little copper plates. Now I'm making 26 three-dimensional letters in red clay and imaginary animals in white clay poking themselves in and out of them. These letters can also be written, as two-dimensional entities. I use them for poems in artist's books that I don't want people to understand, unless they want to go through the trouble of de-coding it. In these artist's book, it is the image, or the effect, that is of primary importance.

Although this was not my original intention, this made-up ABC can be thought of as a type of parody of the personal esoteric language certain artists develop today, in order to affirm themselves, without actually communicating to anyone.

Douk

I'm wondering what are the forces behind the timeless need to create new beings. We humans love to create new worlds within our world. Like the timeless Dr. Seuss creatures. Or Pokemon, the magical world of Harry Potter.

I have not given names to my own, except for Douk, a lemur-like forest creature, a hero of a children's book, with long ears that curl up and roll out to shake the tree when he's hungry so that his food, the caterpillars, will tumble helplessly to the ground. Until he discovers cocoa beans which also fall to the ground that way. He ends up preferring chocolate to caterpillars (I'm not sure he goes so far as to become a vegetarian).

In general, the creatures the children and I make are a part of the infinite mass of different possibilities without names, which are conceivable in art but not on earth. Unless they can be found on another planet?

A scientist, however, would say that there are so many queer animals on this earth, some yet to be discovered, such as the deep-sea creatures they have found recently in the depths of the Pacific near the Galapagos Islands, that there is not anything left to create. As I travel and learn about far-away endangered animals, I'm more and more in agreement with scientists. In this respect, art and science are linked.

Our creatures sometimes resemble Dr Seuss' animals, which are only conceivable on paper. In « If I ran the Zoo », the little boy says he's tired of old-fashioned animals like lions and giraffes and wants to bring something new into the zoo. They defy laws of mass and volume. My favorite will always be

Horton the elephant, in another book, who babysits an egg (that is, he sits on the egg) for months on a flimsy tree. He gives birth to a fat baby elephant with wings.

The creatures do need nostrils, though. Above all, they need to breathe.

At a time when I try desperately, like other artists, to inhabit through my art the realm of the disappearing wilderness, these child-like animals seem to console us all the more with their inherent accessibility.

And to create a world within our world can bring untarnished happiness and peace.

Douk is also a ceramic creature hanging from his tail on a branch on my way toward my studio. The look in his eyes gives me companionship. He is an inhabitant of the imaginary world which lies within our control. Wild animals in the wild are the opposite : their own poetry is written in distance.

One of my adult students, in her seventies, who lives alone, makes animal after animal with yearning expressions on their faces. Her home has become as rich as a museum. These animals live with her, and they reflect her own love she put in them while she painted them. Her own love is returned.

Controlling the Uncontrolled

Imaginary animals can actually include real animals. Those we haven't seen, those we dream of. It can be dinosaurs. Although we know they've existed, they only really live in our imagination. Tigers too, because they are threatened, take on mythical meaning. They have bodies with festive stripes and silken loins, with an almost unreal orange color especially in the evening sun. And the Siberian tigers in the snow. Will we, humans, be able to prevent them from becoming exclusively part of our imagination or virtual world?

I am thinking of the book *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh, where Ryder the architectural artist has a lot of work painting family manors at a time of their impending doom right before the 2nd World War.

In the same vein, animal portraits are likely to become more and more a popular subject today, a time when we feel we are losing the real thing.

I see animals more and more part of advertisements, titles of books, etc., because they attract notice. They correspond to an inherent need, a dimension we are losing within ourselves.

The Siberian tiger

The animals we paint and make take on meaning not only as representatives of their real counterparts, but as creatures of their own. They take on a new and live personality.

I have a painting of a Siberian tiger in my room. His feline eyes accompany me when I go to sleep and wake up. His calligraphy stripes vibrate: he is alive.

But it is not enough.

Timelessness

Cette familiarité à acquérir, si loin de l'urgence d'aujourd'hui, qui règne partout, et accélère le pressoir tragique du temps. Balthus

I ask the children to compose a short poem which they can write with the letters they have learned in calligraphy. Then they can make an etching which illustrates their poems. They will become illuminated texts.

I have often worked with this combination of techniques. Artist's books are most often a combination of typography and prints. The effect can be beautiful, but it is no longer an original art form. Unlike these two techniques, calligraphy is not a multiple art form. If I were to have a commission to produce many books (this hasn't happened to me yet) I would taste the life of a monk and copy texts as if in a timeless trance. I see this as a great antidote to our stressful, time-directed realm.

Etching and calligraphy together can make a powerful image that breathes, like in a time-defying illuminated manuscript.

I sometimes add a small bas-relief or a part of a terracotta animal that looks like it comes out of the paper, which we glue onto the paper.

Once I was watching some penguins on a rock in Chile. Two of them stood side by side, back to back, each with its beak upward toward different sea breezes. Animals such as these have a beautiful sense of timelessness. To remind myself of this peaceful state, a goal for an artist today who too often is pressured by deadlines, I make a painting of the two penguins. I stretch it inside the frame of an old grandfather clock, underneath which I paint the word Timelessness.

Nature's calligraphy

Is calligraphy a separate discipline from drawing? Calligraphy and drawing use different parts of the brain, so are two different disciplines. This is not a concern for Asian artists.

It is clear that calligraphers who paint and draw as well, make paintings and drawings as if they're writing, and it happens most naturally. Calligraphy permeates into the artist's work. Learning how to write well can only enhance an artist's skill in drawing and painting.

And nature's own calligraphy is omnipresent. One can see a kind of writing in mountain ridges, estuaries, on a trunk of a tree, in worms' paths under the bark. There are ridges in the sand, like veins of a leaf, writing traced by the waves or foam making white calligraphy in the black sea. Don't you have to be a calligrapher to paint waves?

The mastery of calligraphy can only enrich the artist's capacity in drawing and painting.

And the artist learns how to write like nature writes.

Not in a bland pretty and overly regular way, but with life's warmth and sensitivity.

We can find this sensual calligraphy in ancient texts, such as in the book of Kells, the secret visions of the 5th Dalai Lama or in Rustica graffiti in Pompeii written on the walls in a red that doesn't fade with time. In fact, the writing is alive.

I see a tree with words at its branches, replacing the leaves. For words are extensions of images, like infinitesimal curls at the ends of lines.

January 1998

Nostalgia

When a child draws, it is always beautiful, because it is an act of freedom. He has no worries ; for him it is a spontaneous act. Freedom and drawing are fundamental for man.
Oscar Niemeyer

After Christmas and the celebrations are over, I'm always happy to go back to drawing. I see it almost as an intellectual interlude, after the sticky etching inks and drippy calligraphy inks, the gloves and the newspapers that stick together because of the varnish and adhesive protections.

We free ourselves from matter. The immense realm of color, which an artist tries hard to behold, is imprisoning. A burden, because you need equipment for it.

That is why in my studio you can see a sculpture of a bird, who may represent the artist, in a cage made out of colored pencils.

Drawing with just a pencil, be it short and eaten up, not complicating your life with the different 2H, HB, B or 87B pencil numbers, is more pure and relaxing, almost ethereal. And drawings can be lush. Sometimes I wonder why we would want more.

It seems to me that certain children think the same way I do about going back to drawing. Surely it brings us all back to our first days together when we drew toy dinosaurs and cars, with a flower in a doll's cup. Like our first love, when all is new. When life with all its complexities makes us feel tired, disorganized and overwhelmed, drawing brings us back to the essence of things.

Drawing is analogous to Bach's music. When fatigue and dispersion take over, and people criticize, nothing consoles me more than a few pure and voluptuous notes composed by Bach. In drawing a rock, the rough pencil marks placate me in the same way.

And then we will be ready to take on more once again... Such as add color.

Or play Schubert...

Produce, produce, produce right away

When I was a child, the teacher wanted me to draw the world as it is, and I wanted to draw things as I saw them. Dr. Seuss

When children are 2-3 years old, they are hardly interested in the product, apart from the pleasure they derive in showing their creation to their parents and receiving compliments. They are especially interested in the procedure. They still belong to the blessed order of nature, and materialistic systems have not yet exerted their influence. These children can teach us many things, because they have something more than us. If they can communicate to us this spiritual knowledge—we have to allow them to—it's as if they commit their own knowledge to memory and there is a better chance that this wisdom will be safeguarded for a lifetime.

The children love putting their fingers in the paint, seeing what brushes can do—this gives them a sense of power and confidence-- or simply playing with the different materials we can offer them. If something comes out on the paper, it may not yet be figurative. But we are impatient for them to make a drawing that looks like something.

The people who take care of these children in nursery schools also would like them to produce something to give to the parents and please the parents that way, as well as themselves. If only we could let the children follow their own evolution without anyone forcing them into the idea of a product that the parents would be proud of. There are ways to put value on the process rather than the product. Have a child paint on a black piece of paper or a blue one. It brings unity to the scribbles ... This seems more meaningful than having them make drawings into overused shapes like Christmas trees cut out by adults.

At three, they are usually ready to begin figurative drawing. This is when you can already begin to open their eyes to how something is built, a church or a truck, for example. We can invite them to look, and draw directly from nature rather than copy the simplified versions of other people's drawings.

With the sometimes outlandish interpretations contained in the many books, toys, videos, decorations, etc., we use to educate our children, we present a more and more artificial world for our children, instead of give value to what the children really see, which is the source of all interpretations. Without realizing it, we sometimes impose too much material on our children and don't allow them to build their own personal interpretations of nature, that is, how they personally see the world.

Four year-olders are soul-mates

To me, the ideal age to start my classes is 4. Maybe it's because 4-year olders are my very first students, and I have a certain nostalgia for the our common beginnings, like a first love, when all was new.

Fortunately, four year-olders draw a lot at school. Some children's drawings are imbued with such a charm that it's best they not color them in with paint or magic markers. They will tend to draw over their priceless lines. Painting seems to be a separate language from drawing. Unfortunately, reading and

writing, which they will learn shortly as new languages, tend to obliterate this newly found mode of expression. I have found that is why, the better they know how to draw at five, the better they can keep it up as they begin schoolwork at age 6.

Now or never : Art and Science

At age 6, the children have begun to read. Letters and numbers take the place of some of the images in their mind. This is a good time to balance schoolwork with art class. Art class is now essential. However, this is when a good many people stop drawing altogether, as if this part of childhood were over with. Instead, drawing is part of mathematics, writing, biology, economics

The artroom at school, the way I see it, is as useful as a gymnasium. The body is disciplined and let loose in a gymnasium. An art room is a kind of gymnasium for the creative mind.

This room ought to be used also for biology and botany. When we look down a microscope and draw what we see, or draw a flower with all its parts, it's a way of learning more, seeing more, loving more. When it comes to loving and protecting the planet, art and science are joined as they were during the Renaissance.

Once the school letters have been taught, it is time for calligraphy. This makes them understand that there are many ways of writing. In school, it is only one way, not THE way necessarily. Most importantly, calligraphy combines the world of letters and images, bringing harmony to the child's spirit. (This idea would not be questioned in Asia).

Many children mature quite quickly during this first year. They are ready for different things : calligraphy pens and oil painting. They are even more interested if I give them responsibility.

In drawing, they still have a hard and confident line, others move into over-light lines. This is when they can just begin to understand shading, light and dark tones, contrasts. Their drawing will lighten where there are lights and kept dark where there are darks, through practise.

It is such a sensitive period. Schoolwork can make certain children lose some of their natural confidence in themselves. I can perceive this in their excessively light or small lines and tiny drawings (which I have a real taste for actually). It is important to give these children confidence before the damage is done and has to be undone.

February

Keeping up with the métier

We have so little snow in our village unfortunately, so when it just happens to snow on a Wednesday, I have to let go of all pending projects and seize the opportunity to make sculpture in snow.

Seizing the moment is part of the métier, almost like a photographer who has to be ready to shoot at an given instant or a reporter who has to write down information then and there. This self-imposed obligation can be quite a burden. But if you choose the artistic profession, you have to be ready for the consequences. And the work is often much less sedentary than

traditionally believed. I have a long record of missing opportunities because I'm often too wrapped up in other things I'm doing. I was about to draw a fantastic uprooted fruit tree, when the landlord cut it up, just to name one example. Now when any living creature passes by or any phenomenon of nature is in front of me, I feel forced to draw it right away even if I'm very busy with something else, for fear it will be dead or gone the next moment. Otherwise I draw the dead creature, which has its own mystery, even if it is limited to a single resigned expression.

Sculpture in the snow is a totally new technique. The children cannot model the snow the way they model clay, and making snowmen, where you roll snowballs along the ground and make bigger and bigger balls, doesn't prepare them for this. Snow sculpture is like marble sculpture in that part of the process is digging into the matter to shape the object one is aiming for. We use spoons or fingers.

The children make very beautiful things: a beaver with a smooth flat tail, a chick, a huge elephant, a bear with a bowl in front to eat from, and other animals. And of course Martin and Rémy make a snowman (a rough copy of Michelangelo's David) with some snowballs to go with it. Like with the Landart projects, I make photos of all these ephemeral sculptures for posterity.

The second group of children has dirtier snow, and must work with the extra leaves and dirt that the snow has had time to absorb since the morning. We have to add white surface snow as much as we can onto the dirtier parts in time for the parents' arrival. That responsibility falls mostly on me, while the children tend to the finer points of their works.

The kids go home with blue fingers, but are elated.

I also take pictures of the sculptures as they melt in the sunshine. Some of them even look better this way, as if they are being polished with a fine stone. They become like stone sculptures in churches in Brittany, which get smoothed over by salty moisture from the sea.

Sometimes I drive by the bushes hiding the garbage heap near the forest, and think how ugly they are. They are probably depressing-looking because of the garbage in the back, but it could just be the wintertime. I'm also thinking of river banks where a dam was built. Only certain robust scraggly plants can live there, and few birds.

The depression I feel in seeing this, connected with routine and car rides, metamorphizes into a drawing with infinite possibilities. The frigidity of winter takes on warmth and life.

The birth of passions

It's the springtime again, and I ask the children in one class at school to bring in branches with small buds on them to paint. Many bring branches in with majestic flowers instead. The most demonstrative and generous children bring the largest bouquets. The more sensational the better. And then I try to have them understand the more subtle beauty of the simple branch with simple buds. We use transparent inks to paint. I bring in Chinese brushes with fine points and large bodies in order to be able to vary the stroke.

This is the first time for many so I don't expect great results. Before they paint, as a kind of ritual, they look at the model long and hard before they make their strokes. There are very few, in fact, who achieve the spontaneity I'm hoping for. They are in first grade and a bit self-conscious. This may have to do with their efforts this year in learning to read. So they have a tendency to sketch and touch up, which is the opposite of what I'm looking for.

This painting is exactly what they need to be doing every day, at a time in their lives when the scholastic system weighs heavily on them, in order to keep up the natural confidence in themselves. This is not possible, but the idea may stay with them, and may be remembered at certain times in their lives.

I think the best a teacher can do, is transfer a passion into a child. I'm hoping above all, to convey the pleasure I feel in the small elements of nature around me.

Also in painting, there is no hierarchy between weeds and flowers. Weeds have many shapes and beautiful flowers if you look hard enough. And children know this. In my studio, children bring in nettles to draw as much as flowers.

I'm thinking of others, such as the karate teacher. He has children, even less athletic ones and as many girls as boys, come to him.. One of the teachers at school loves bees, and all of her pupils come out of her class as budding apiculturists. Such teachers are truly magicians.

The small branches and buds take the shape of unborn passion within the child.

I'm happy to be able to have a larger group of children again. My small groups in my workshop seem somewhat exclusive at times. I find that the classes are not open enough to others. I'm thinking in particular of children, sometimes the more athletic type, who would never even think of taking an art class outside of school, and then surprise themselves with an interest in it when they they have the opportunity in their classroom. School should also be a place for such internal discoveries.

I would like to show the children a path purified of imposed artificial images. This alternative path will enable them to and grow into their full, authentic selves.

March

You don't need to spend a fortune

In the Fontainebleau forest, the Office National des Forêts cuts down trees here and there and leaves some interesting cross-sections on the ground, some parabolic in shape, circular or oval. I ask the children to spot these new clearings and look around for these pieces of wood.

Some children come with beautiful pieces with extraordinary grains. We prepare the wood with sandpaper and rabbit skin glue. They may get an idea of what to paint by what the veins suggest. For instance, Bérangère chooses the scene of a sea-turtle reclaiming the sea. The grains of the wood look like waves, so she paints only thinly over them, and kept some of it bare. The bark, undulating or pointy, also becomes part of the painting.

This is to show that you don't need to buy expensive canvasses to paint. We have so much at our disposal next to the Forest. If you don't live near a forest, there is also so much being thrown away which can be used as original painting surfaces. A standard canvas, covered in protective plastic, loses its lure.

I am no longer allowed to see Lalou. His mistress reports that when he hears my car motor, or when I call out to him as he walks by with her, he refuses to go home. I catch him looking at me pleadingly.... She pulls him away. This situation occurs also in human relationships.

And I conceive a sculpture of a heart behind closed bars.

April 1998

Village safari

Dieu a inventé le chat pour que l'homme ait son propre tigre à la maison. Victor Hugo

Since I cannot have a baby elephant grazing in the orchard next door to us, or a tiger by the pond displaying his loins in the golden sun, I have to be content with the animals around us (however, I use the baby elephant as an April fool's joke, « I have a new pachiderm in the garden ; I'm a little worried about the state of the trees, but he's adorable ». It very often works). What is familiar can easily become as magnificent as a polar bear. A magpie has such lovely iridescent colors in its wings : is is like looking at a toucan. And the great dane next door has the body and coloring of a lionness.

I have a natural reserve for magpies. At first, I tried to keep them away because I saw them eat the song fledglings leaving their intestines dangling from the branches like a string. So, hoping they were territorial creatures like herons, I put a sculpted magpie on a branch in the middle of the garden. For 3 days I had no magpies. Then little by little they came back, and now I have more than before, sometimes up to 7 around the sculpture having a meeting. It seems that the immobile magpie has gained a reputation of being a philosopher, and the other magpies talk to it, as if they're telling it their problems.

Spotting a red squirrel is like spotting an antelope. One of my cats knows how to stalk like a lion, the other a bobcat (the one with the short tail). Observing a tiny robin on a branch with buds, preferably with snow or frost, can be the wonder of the day. I also have a pony walk around my premises, with very short legs – this is a good change from horses with too perfect, academic proportions-- and some guinea fowl who don't let the pony go anywhere without them. The children draw them.

We bring in tadpoles from the local creek and study their development by sketching them every Wednesday before we embark on the daily project. Until they become frogs.

We also sometimes use a microscope to look at a small red bug, a drop of pond water or a blade of grass, and draw what we see. Unbelievable wild creatures in our midst ...

We draw the goldfish in the pond, a baby hedgehog making his way across the grass, a garden snake when Clément was lucky to find this and shy boy as he is, picked it up without any fear, much to his buddies' admiration. There is always a snail around and interesting insects like beetles and leaf-bugs.

Spiders have always been a favorite. Carole says she hates spiders, yet makes the effort to draw one, with hairy legs and all. Her mother tells me this actually has cured her fear. Drawing the uncanny, the wild, keeps inner instabilities at bay.

Animal artists can usually only draw wild animals in zoos. But it can be real sport and definitely a better source to draw animals in wild places like Africa or my village while they are in full action. Photography is also a fine replacement for hunting.

We think we're giving our children a lot, in the way of activities and trips and playthings, but I believe we can give them even more by encouraging them to bring life to what is common and familiar. This capacity to transform.

I cannot pretend to work miracles and demystify the media culture and what you see on the screen, but a child will never lose this artistic faculty, and its magic can be used throughout a lifetime.

With the adults, I teach little. But art has helped them with their personal lives. There is nothing surprising in this. And I only have to do what I naturally do, through simply presenting them with a virgin copper plate, or a piece of wood to prepare and paint on.

I otherwise have little community spirit.

And then who should appear in my etching class ? Lalou's owner. She makes a plate, a copy of Lalou when he was a puppy. The other adult students don't like her, and don't understand my affiliation with her, but I prefer to ignore this. Maybe her drawing of Lalou will free her in a certain way, and consequently free the dog ?

With such an atypical person in my class, I am exploring.

The world of bark

I accompany two classes to a local exhibit in a castle nearby. There are many paintings and sculptures, and the work of a guest artist. This person makes abstract works with bark. This gives a lovely unique texture. Sometimes she paints the bark to add color. I decide then to make this a project for school, and make sure they take a good look at this particular artist's work.

I ask the children to bring in pieces of bark to school. They need to find as many colors as possible. Reddish undulating bark from pine, white, pink and peach bark from birch, etc.

Their school teacher brings thin rectangular pieces of wood to school, and wood glue. Now we can begin. The children grab interesting pieces and begin to conceive a composition according to what the bark suggests. Benoit finds a piece of pine bark that looks like a dog, so that sets everything off. Audrey makes a sunset with the different orangish and pinkish hues with the insides of birch bark. Some make 3-D compositions, because certain pieces of bark are not flat, like a boat with objects inside. Many make trees. Whatever they do, they have fun.

The teacher, who doesn't completely understand the project, wants to know why we can't add other elements, like acorns, pinecones, leaves and such. We end up adding a few pinecones which she duely gathered in the morning, but I think it is important to keep to one thing, like bark, and really enter its world. The children's imagination is thus directed on one path, and not dispersed with a variety of elements that make their life too easy and too handicrafty. We also do not paint the bark like the guest artist in the exhibit. The children discover the real colors in the bark, which are subdued when they get dry, like the colors in stones. Then there is an amazing variety of texture, from bumpy oak to smooth beech. The children use these different textures instinctively. At first I don't want them to cut the bark, in order to let nature and suggestion rule, but as the period goes on, we do a little cutting here and there.

Daydream landscape

After sketching a scene on my own, a coastline during a trip to the sea, I lay back and close my eyes in the sun. Now there is a different scene that appears before me ; an imaginary landscape. There is a black coastline with white blue water glistening and pink and orange earth, crowned by a golden gate. A bit like a volcanic landscape.

Carnaval theatres

The end of the project will be small theatres. Scenography is a realization of a fantasy world that children dream about, and that adults often have locked up inside them.

Despite its aesthetic rôle, scenography is a highly technical field. It is also subject to the theatre director's own desires. An impatient imagination may be disappointed with this field today. I learned this when I studied Scenography with a disgruntled old scenographer in Paris. Nevertheless, I like to see the field as an exercise of fantasy. And that is how I convey it to the children.

Projects such as this one have to do with work I'm myself emotionally enraveled in.

This theatrical vision can be the source of artistic ambition. I was in New York City in the 80's at a time where the worlds of art and business were tightly entwined. I was studying French literature, and the city distractions were slowly eroding my monk-like interest in scholarship. I was in my office, and the vision of a fantasy world took over me, in the shape of a theatre, with lights and colors. At that time a lawyer friend of mine, a playwright at heart, was writing a book about his childhood in Paris. I was one of his first readers. His wealth of imagination is enormous and I believed firmly in his talent. He now lives with his wife and children, in Sweden, and has become a quite well-known writer. At the time, he was a central actor on the stage I was dreaming of, his dark lanky figure sauntering into the theater decor. A free figure moving to its own rhythm.

The children's backdrop is to represent a made-up world. For this, I show the children how to make mixes to obtain colors such as magenta, blue purple, turquoise, marigold, etc., and much to their delight at the end, they add some glitter glue.

I make them some little boxes out of thin wood. We make backdrops. The theatrical moment occurs when the figures they have made find their places inside the box.

Then we make the actors for the stage. They are also from another world. We use some use blue (cobalt) and green (chrome) clay in addition to the white clay. Bruno makes a football man with a portable phone, another a flying train, some, a flying cat, and others make creatures with no recognizable traits from the planet earth. We are at the end of the year, and they have learned to go all the way.

The theatrical moment occurs when we place the different characters and props in the box.

Then we write the titles of the show in calligraphy on a piece of nice paper. They say, « le voyage du bateau orange » « il pleut avec des paillettes bleues », or « le carnaval de paillettes des Etats-Unis », as if they were remnants of extravagant 80's parties in New York City.

The crates have little openings on them in the corners where we put little lights to illuminate the stage. This will be fine for a light show I'm planning for the September exhibit.

And strangely enough, I realize that these images have much to do with what I saw in my dream. For instance, Manon makes a gate leading into her theatre out of clay, and Thomas' landscape also had a surprising similarity to the seascape that came to me at night.

Our different visions come together.

All subjects and materials that I'm using at the time get transferred into the classes. Only one organ is playing. This is how the children end up always as interested as I am.

We seem to follow the same path, the same movement of thought.

May 1998
Monet Magnetism

I take out my pieces of roofing slate from Brittany, excellent surfaces for painting.

I have the children paint Monet's lily pads. I have some real lily pads from Giverny in our pond, which were given to the landowner by the Monet family. I feel they carry some of the magnetic pull of the great artist. Or maybe it's just that Monet taught us how to perceive the magnetism of lily pads.

I tell the children to look at them long and hard, like oriental artists. This is how they can receive the vibrations. What does get painted then is not only a copy of nature. Again the stone serves as background for the composition; the different hues of blues and greys make it look like the uneven water. The stone heightens the beauty of the children's painting, of leaves and lilies.

June 1998
Vibrations from hand to hand

Nearby there is a show going on of Rosa Bonheur's work, a famous animal artist of the 19th century. I bring a lot of pads for sketching the animals, which she painted in oil or sculpted in bronze. This is such a good way for children, who often find museums dismal places, to appreciate art in museums. Children are motivated when active.

The works of art we see as children become part of our unconscious. When I come across the ones I most saw as a child, in retrospectives for example, even though I may have no conscious memory of them, I feel an unexpected surge of happiness.

The artist makes an interpretation of an animal, and the child chooses a painting that he or she is sensitive to and makes a personal interpretation of it. The works children choose say already a lot about them and what they wish to convey. They learn the powers of expression. For example, the animal is lifting up a paw to express something, or is drooping downward because of suffering. By drawing the scene, a child will feel the artist's intentions.

We have experienced drawing from nature, and drawing from the great art of the past sends the artists' vibrations through the child's hand.

Stained glass poetry

One teacher teaches poetry in a wonderful way. The children make a beautiful poem together about stained-glass windows they see at the village stained-glass studio. This year I bring in color to the calligraphy exercises and use this poem to show how to do this.

We add colored inks into the pen one at a time without washing it. Each child who participates in the poem changes the color once. We start with the weaker colors, yellows first and little by little arrive at the darker colors. It is fun to watch how the color slowly changes from red (the previous color) to blue, the color you add, making a purplish hue in between.

Communion with mother earth

We make clay sculptures in a class at school of Fontainebleau forest animals, with red, brown and white clay. This they do with a great amount of enthusiasm and communion with mother earth (in other words, mess).

The teacher, the same one with whom we had the bark project, is quite unimpressed with the grand result. The view of 30 some muddy shapes, some of them beheaded, be-winged or be-tailed as they dried, somehow is self-defeating. There is over-all anarchy invading the school atelier.

However, I have a plan for these sculptures. I make a rather large box out of scrap wood from the local hardware store, where I'm no. 1 client. This is to become a forest for the animals. We also have a lot of bark left from a former project to make trees, etc. This is a way to give a rôle to each sculpture. The owl is on top of a tree with its wings spread out, another on top of a rock. The flatter sculptures (sculpture : an extension of drawing) are glued to the back like bas-reliefs. We cut out birch bark to make birch trees in the background. It is exciting to watch the theatre being built. The theatre has become enchanted. We put pieces of birch bark in front of each sculpture with their names written in calligraphy on them. We also add the name of the animals (in case the viewer doesn't know what a dormouse or a ferret looks like).

We finish late, one of the last days of school.

I discover the value of collective work, something I've previously shied away from. Each child brings in his or her talent, the best comes out of each one of them, and nothing is hidden. What once has been a huge mass of seemingly uncharacteristic sculptures becomes a harmonious whole where each object takes on a rôle. This way we look at each animal and discover its own personality. Each one has gained a use and a beauty.

September 1998

Anemia

After a long trip to Russia across Scandinavia, I am lacking energy at the beginning of the new school year. In Saint-Petersburg, the colors in the sky and effects of light on the architecture seems to lighten the load of the general struggle in people's existence there. However, I absorbed a certain anemia that seems to pervade in the city's dilapidated buildings and roads.

This year's exhibition will honor animals and imaginary beings. My friend, whom we visited in Sweden, has written many children's books about witches and trolls from Sweden, and he can make a writer's workshop during the show. This year the children will show their work at the same time as myself. And I know of a sculptor who will fill the garden with his animals and imaginary creatures.

Despite my listlessness, things seem to come together at their own rhythm. The show will be rather late, in October, so that I have enough time. This is risky : will the weather hold ? We start the year out with drawings as usual and trolls made out of earth, that I would like to put in the woods toward my workshop. The children also make small cabins and tables out of clay coming directly from the ground. The children's work also has a special place in my neighbor's workshop behind the nymphs pond. I'm looking forward to putting on the lights in their theatres.

A terrible blow

Then my friend who is to participate is diagnosed with an incurable brain tumor. He had complained of headaches while we were there. He feels like a crowbar is slamming on his head. It is hard to believe that this is the end of such a lively spirit's life. He cannot come to France, and I will have to do without this extra attraction.

The only way I can find motivation is to work for his honor. A part of me is handicapped, but now it is for sure I cannot stop now. I will exhibit the illustrations I made for his first children's book as meager compensation. There are also projects I give to the children which have to do with the spirit of the show and his books.

The forest's sculpture gallery

Toutes les formes, tous les aspects, toutes les formidables fantaisies et toutes les terribles apparences du rocher étaient rassemblés dans ce cirque où les grès d'animaux de rêves, des silhouettes de lions assyriens, des allongements de lamantins sur un promontoire. Ici, les pierres entassées figuraient un soulèvement, un écrasement de tortues monstrueuses, de carapaces essayant de se chevaucher ; là deux sphinx camus serraient la route et barraient presque le passage.

Edmond et Jules de Goncourt

I take the adolescents in the car to some gorges. On the way to these gorges there is a clearing in the forest with a series of rocks that look like strange creatures. They draw them. I'm preparing a book of rock monster drawings for the show. These monsters can be found everywhere in the Fontainebleau forest, which is an immense sculpture gallery.

Drawing rocks is not easy, because it involves a lot of shading. Some of the more scientifically-oriented students, like Benoit and Régine, do not like the shading, because they have more categorical minds, and are less sensitive to subtle greys. Here again, I tell them to imagine feeling the rock when they draw. Our hand trembles when we draw the crevices in a rock, as if we were caressing it.

Sometimes smooth and sometimes bumpy, our drawing picks up on nature's own texture and calligraphy.

Unity in the mind

There is a quarry of soft rock nearby that I use for my older students. I would like to introduce them to direct sculpture, which is so different from modeling.

I'd like them to make some imaginary faces, or at least bizarre ones, to put in the garden for the show.

To begin with, I ask them to make faces in clay. They spend already a lot of time doing this. They are used to drawing faces, but not seeing the three dimensions in them.

From the clay model, we approach a cubic block of soft stone, within which we will try to extract the same thing. I encourage them to write all over the stone, where the nose is, the eyes, the mouth, ears and so forth. The nose is usually the tip, so they chisel around this peak toward the eyes and mouth. A couple of the sculptures lose their precious noses in the process, and have to dig deeper, but this is how you learn the nature of the stone, how fragile it is, what its limits are.

It's difficult, and takes a long time. Of course, it cannot be ready for the October show, but it doesn't matter : it is the spirit that counts. It takes on a more literary or virtual role than a visual one. It fits with the theme and everything comes together in its own hidden but complete way. Unity can be found in writing.

And maybe because the world is getting too filled up, we find ourselves engaged in virtual creation. It is almost sufficient today to have ideas and conceive them on paper or on the computer, without actually realizing them in their destined materials, be it steel, wood or mud?

Ethereal conceptions, like dreams, are another type of nourishment.

Sculpture and surgery

D'Alembert : Je voudrais bien que vous me dissiez quelle différence vous mettez entre l'homme et la statue, entre le marbre et la chair.

Diderot : Assez peu. On fait du marbre avec de la chair, et de la chair avec du marbre.

Diderot, Entretiens avec D'Alembert

My friend has an operation today. The tumor is on the left side of the brain, and taking parts out of it can be more dangerous than if it were the right side. It is a coincidence that I should be working on a head in clay at the same time. Half of this head is brown and white which I make into an assembly of real animals. On the other side, which is to represent the right side of the brain (however, I do the reverse, while not thinking), I make a medley of imaginary creatures in green and blue clay. I finger the cold clay, make it warm and apply it. The forms come easily in the sunlight, for which I'm so grateful. I manipulate the clay at the same time surgeons perform my friend's operation as well as other brain surgeries around the world.

The result is medusa-like, and I'm not too sure I like it, but our brains do have that aspect.

I'm thinking a American plastic surgeon I met in Russia. He was studying sculptures in all the museums around the world before he was to start his practice. He is fascinated by sculpture in marble which seems so pliable compared to his own medium, the human flesh. He also has to literally build faces, where parts of them have been blown off, by grafting other parts of the body onto the faces with the help of blood vessels. It is much more difficult than shaping clay or chiseling away stone. And the result unfortunately is never perfect. Marble is much easier, as if this can possibly be, and there is always at least hope for aesthetic perfection.

He was in Saint Petersburg for a few days longer, and I told him not to forget the Russian Museum, where they have the greatest collection of Ilya Repin's portraits of the Russian people. The faces are either composed or twisted in all different ways, yet hardly slip into caricature. They are real. It doesn't seem like people outside Russia know enough of the richness of this artist's work.

I hear that the operation has gone well. My friend is all there, except that he cannot read, but that loss already has occurred before the operation. He is especially weak, an atypical condition for such an ebullient and witty personality.

Confluence

After brain surgery, set out on a journey to a far-away magical land, a land that people claim is impossible to reach and does not even exist, pray that the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge and struggle and fight, lions, tigers, bears and shooting stars. Do not fear monsters, witches or hobgoblins, for you will overcome many such wonderful heroes and worthy enemies as these on your path. If your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine emotion touches your spirit and your body, you will never encounter the the magic and terror of overcoming impossible odds. If you do not carry these battles, victories and scars within your soul, if your soul does not set them up before you, you will have missed the whole purpose of the journey. Alan Jolis

Faces and heads, portraits and self-portraits become a primary concern in my classes. Once the children have made serious studies of each other or oneself, I ask them to sway from the model. They twist the faces the way they wish and add on some traits of fantasy. First in drawing and then in clay. Here they can experience the invisible bridge between what is real and what is imaginary. It sometimes takes on the form of humorous caricature, and sometimes morose bizarrness.

October 1998

Virgin forest

Today I'm directing a Land Art project in the grounds of a small castle in a neighboring village. We are asked to make Land Art pieces within the tall trees and use up the space. But it has been rainy and windy lately, and I don't feel I can count on good October weather. I have to think of an alternative idea.

I drive by the forest I gather some of its riches, interesting-shaped wood, leaves and other elements. I also dig out some white clay from the earth that can be used as glue. And thumbtacks from rose bushes. The two librarians, who gave me the project, also gather as many objects as possible. I have crates full of organic material, and some large pieces of twisted wood that stick a little too far out of the windows of the car.

And then, as it is customary in this region, it is pouring down rain on the day of the project. We get very few people to come. There is a total of only 7 children that turn up, one of which is just accompanying her brothers and prefers to play Nintendo while we work. During this time only 150 meters away at the cinema, Godzilla is jam-packed with people.

Anyway, these kind of things don't discourage me in the least. In the half-lit former dining room of the castle, with dirt all over the place, pieces of wood scattered in every corner, the damp woodsy smell, we have succeeded in reconstituting the feeling of a leavy canopy. The 10 some people gathered here are looking at me, and I feel a half second moment of silence and emptiness, the same feeling certain teachers have upon arrival in a classroom. We're starting totally from scratch. We are in a virgin forest.

I explain the project quickly and in few words. No longer that two minutes later, we are all at work, including the Nintendo girl, who has now forgotten she brought the game with her. She feels needed. The ideas come quickly, because the material is plentiful and suggestive. One piece of wood looks both like a goose or an elephant, so we have to choose. Someone makes a little man with a tree mushroom head, a snake with wings, a huge dragon, some little gardens on pieces of bark, a wolf, just to name a few. We work as if there is little time left, and I don't grieve over the small turn-out. We have become a dynamic intimate group that knows how to work well together in little time.

When finished, before even cleaning up, we exhibit them on the library floor with labels made in calligraphy on birch bark.

This project is now over, and I've started worrying about rain for next week's show.

Catastrophe

I spend the week, fatigued, sloshing around in the mud preparing the show. They say it'll be nicer over the weekend.

The sculptor, however, is not participating to the fullest. Like many artists, he has show overdose. But I love his work so much, that I end up contending with his lack of enthusiasm. We hope to put in his most marvelous piece in the show, a huge rock troll-like character that digs with enormous hands in the earth.

Then I think of something: this white marble sculpture, made by a student of his, an electrician, with its thin neck, light bulb head, and stylized drapery becomes a « phantom ». I have this « immaterial » object facing another one of a man, made out of a medley of soldered pieces of metal, like screws and so forth, looking very afraid. The student made this phantom for the benefit of an association of blind people who feel sculptures.

The work I put in the show is quite varied. One room is devoted to imaginary creatures. There is a niche with a painting depicting the birth of stars and many small figures in terracotta and bronze with red curtains to open like in the children's theatres. In the other room, there is last year's work in animal art. There are lots of tigers in pastel and oil. Tigers find their place here because they are gradually becoming mythical as their numbers in the world diminish, in a way almost (unfortunately so) part of the imaginary horde.

The stained-glass makers of Chartrettes, the Millers, put in a beautiful rooster out of metal and colored glass. Often when I go to their place, I look at their hens and roosters, when they walk in the sun. The light shines through the red cones just like their sculpted stained-glass co-fowl.

Christine Lassara-Vinois who makes etchings of an otherworld, some Fontainebleau forest-like humans, half-humans and animals sharing a nebulous fantastical background. And Manuela Zervudachi displays her symbolic pieces, a tarot piece of the devil, some moon babies and a Noah's ark in terra cotta with animals coming out the stomach of a man's body.

I'm still setting up the show on Saturday morning. We are to go get the big troll with the help of four people and a truck. It is windy and I just put up the poster down at the entrance. Of course the wind blows it over right away. I don't know what makes me think that I would be saved from these natural forces. I go down to fetch the pieces of glass and walk slowly up the hill, feeling all my weight, a beaten slave of Art. Just as I feel like falling over from exhaustion, there is a huge gust of wind and the terrible thing happens. The board behind the phantom and the scared creature slams down on these sculptures, and the phantom is decapitated and the man defingered. I scream. There is nothing I can do except cry, be unhappy and say, at least it didn't happen to a child. And this was a sculpture for the blind, a good cause... Later, Maximilien, a three-year older, knocked down my head, half imaginary creatures, half real ones, but I am almost happy to be punished. My suffering and guilt have been a bit alleviated.

Despite the eerie catastrophe of the beheaded lightbulb ghost, and a general sense of disorder, the rest of the show goes quite well. In my own mind, there is at least literary unity. Also, one of my students, Bérangère, a 13-year older, sells an etching, the irresistible light show in the little theatres consoles me somewhat, along with the infallible humor of fellow villagers.

There is live jazz music, and a big tent, which we put up when the rain stops for good and lots of coffee, cookies and wine. I have a good turn-out despite the mud. If the art is good, it should be able to take anything ! Good nature replaces professionalism.

And I can't help thinking of the Torajan funerals in Indonesia. There are booths and tents set up for the families and sacrifices of bulls and pigs. The family of the deceased are smiling with the coffin above looking out over the carnage, and the visitors are all sloshing in the mud.

November 1998

Drink deep... Alexander Pope

Then we move on to autumn leaves. The adolescents become specialists in leaves, and really achieve the exact colors after lots of testing. We take as many different colored leaves as possible into the workshop and analyze the colors in them before concentrating on painting one or two of them. To test their color, they make a brushstroke onto the leaf where that particular color is. The poor leaf itself is in the end more painted on than the leaf of paper.

The children are now able to say there is a little purple in this leaf mixed with orange, etc... This is something everyone can learn and it changes your way of looking at things in general. Now you can't just sit back and enjoy a sunset without analyzing its contents. Innocence is forever lost...However, now you delve deeper into nature.

I don't know how it happened, but my four year old boy, who doesn't attend my classes and who hardly says a word, takes a walk with me and says the parking posts on the side of the street are purple mixed with brown. Osmosis, I suppose.

House of Rainbows

A child is symbiotic with a rainbow, the shape of harmony. Children may add a rainbow in a drawing to bring instinctively all the elements of their drawings together. This may even be a way to bring the dispersed elements of their lives together.

A rainbow may mean an inaccessible other world. You cannot touch a rainbow, but in a drawing you can. The colors diffused in such a way are out of the ordinary, fairy-like, a gate-way to imagination.

Today in class we draw a rainbow the way they really are. We use watercolor pencils. The children draw the seven colors and brush water on them in one sweep. The final gesture makes it happen : one large smear with a tissue in the direction of the curve, and all the colors fuse lightly..

My friend wrote a book called « Mercedes and the House of Rainbows ». It talks about the writer himself and his perception of his early adolescence, the end of childhood. The rainbows symbolize the writer, who brings together his childhood into an artistic unit.

When we look at rainbows and see their beauty as if for the first time, we may be experiencing an initial impulse to create, just like Swann when he looks at paintings in Remembrance of Time Past and experiences the *désir de créer*. When there is a rainbow, we see the contrast between the darks and lights in the sky, the different greens the lights produce on the foliage, and it is almost a perturbing sight. It is ephemeral and we cannot possess it, so we feel we have to make something of it.

We can see the rainbow as a bridge between life (here, contemplation) and creation.

I would prefer to paint a naturalistic rainbow. I'm thinking of Theodore Rousseau who was able to paint so magically the particular lighting from our region, but my students Charlotte and Thomas go beyond this order. Both use the colors in the wrong places and end up with something surprisingly beautiful. The colors produce a drama that goes even beyond the prismic perfection of a rainbow : human creation. This is when art steps away from science.

One of the most essential attributes about studying from nature is that the students have something to break away from.

Andrée paints an elephant with a spring green foliage and a rich dark blue background. Coincidentally, later in the day, the same almost imaginary coloring comes out facing the evening sun. I call her on the phone to look.

The teaching has become a usual day-to-day existence. During class, I think about how the time rolls smoothly, and each lush moment feels tangible and sensual.

Nature aesthetics

Instead of class today, I decide to take all the students to the Salon des Artistes Naturalistes at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. I've been participating in it in the last two years. I'm happy about finding a school of artists many of whom share my aesthetics.

There are a lot of sculptures of animals which the children, all armed with pads, pencils and erasers, can draw from. They are insatiable, and don't stop drawing, animal after animal. And then we go the zoo.

The artist being honored at the Salon is Pompon. His animals, the most famous being a polar bear at the entrance of the Museum and at the Musée d'Orsay, have something to do with the Art Nouveau movement of the beginning of the century. He was able to capture the essence of the animal with the fewest details possible. He observed animals at the same zoo where the children go today. His almost equally famous walking black leopard, the perfect materialization of Rilke's poem about a black leopard, shows the resignation of the caged animal whose only opportunity is to walk back and forth all day long.

My etchings are next to Pompon's work. Antoine says to his mother, one of the escorts, « I can't believe it. Pompon copied on Anna ! » At least in the eyes of a child I have success... This is enough.

In my own work, I try to grasp the quality of the free animal. Maybe this is an impossible task, because art and wildlife are essentially opposites. However, they share the same spiritual quality, as both are connected to the unknown. It may be something in the eyes of a lion, an unviolated wisdom, that humbles us human beings. We can see this when we travel, and fortunately in the many beautiful wildlife photographs we have today.

I try desperately to grasp the phenomenon of the beauty of wildlife.

I cannot help using the beautiful Wildlife photos for my work as well as for my students. Sometimes the photos are so beautiful, they look like paintings. It suffices to copy them well, and our paintings become as beautiful as the photograph. In this case, the merit belongs mostly to the photographer. But it is not easy to give life to the body and eyes of the animals. Not all good copiers can do this. You need love in your paintbrush. Nevertheless, it is never said enough, drawing from life is always better, because the life of the animal is transferred directly onto paper. Even if the result has an unfinished look, the energy of life is impregnated in the artist's hand, and nourishes work for many times to come.

December 1998
Fragility as strength

There is strength in the light and unimposing. In shadows of leaves, printed on paper or painted lightly so as to look like they are moving ever so gently.

Fragility and retraction from external aggressions are part of nature's make-up and can be expressed in art. These sensitivities, which are found in all living things, can, through art, become forces which struggle inwardly and painfully against the global cut-throat, competitive attitude, ugly and doomed to lose in the end...

The forces of fragility and struggle are at the core of my work.

Tiger stripes

*Le stelle come gli alberi e fruscolano come gli alberi.
Il sole per terra come una manata di catenelle e anelli.
Il sole tutto come tante piume cento piume mila piume.
Il sole su per l'aria come tante scale de palazzi.
La luna come una scala e su in cima s'affaccia Bella che s'annisce.
Dormite canarini arinchiusi come due rose.
Le 'ttelle come tante rondini che si salutano. E negli alberi.
Il fiume come i belle capelli. E i belli capelli.
I pesci come canarini. E volano via.
E le foie come ali. E volano via.
E il cavallo come una bandiera.
E vola via.*

Useppe's poem in La Storia by Elsa Morante

I'm thinking about regularity and irregularity of nature. I believe we are most fascinated by nature when we see a certain pattern in it, something regular, almost a hidden code. Often you see patterns in nature that reappear in mollusks, or leaves, or insects, or turtles, or a part of the human body.

And in art, it seems to me to be the opposite. I am most fascinated when an artist takes into account the irregularity of what appears regular. Leaves or tiger-stripes, for example : the irregularity and richness comes if the artist is feels each one at a time while drawing. For nature's details never repeat themselves exactly.

Like musical phrases. When a composer repeats them, the musician plays them differently, softer maybe or louder, or slower toward a dénouement.

January 1999

Pioneer spirit

Today we make aquatints. The technique is complex, but I'm happy to explore new ground.

I give each student a metal plate, and they make a drawing that would go in it. I let them use some triangular plates as well. Then, within the drawing, they are to make different tones, from white to black. Aquatint allows you to achieve different shades, because the different parts are placed in the acid for shorter or longer times. Varnish protects the parts that are to be kept lighter.

I'm very much in demand with all this. My workshop is a realm where routine has no place, like love. I find myself never repeating the same thing, because I need to enjoy every minute myself. It's pioneer spirit.

We make new discoveries, as usual. We don't use black ink, mostly blue and green. Céline makes a dolphin springing out of the water. Thomas, a view from the airplane of a coast line, Aurélie a tiger and Audrey some snow falling, just to mention a few. Some of the drawings become almost unrecognizable through the aquatint procedure because there are no lines, only spaces, and the kids sometimes apply the varnish too thickly over their drawings. The tiger, for example, has become a striped teddy bear without eyes. Sometimes, they become almost abstract. In etching, there is always a finished look.

Invisible protection

To protect myself from the acid of human relationships, I sometimes imagine brushing on protective varnish and building invisible fortifications around the garden.

Vision of light

We move on to two-plate color etchings. We make drawings with two complementary colors, like blue and orange, purple and yellow, or geranium and yellow-green. Each color represents a zinc plate which we will etch separately and then print one on top of each other.

With these colors, and then yellow-orange and blue-purple or red-orange and turquoise or red-purple and yellow-green, we can produce both a sense of drama and harmony, a perturbing paroxysm. I show some etchings where this harmonious unity is achieved by using two copper plates of two different complimentary colors. For example, there is one with leaves in purple, and a background of yellow with some yellow leaves that range from yellow to gold to purple in infinite tones. The light looks like it pierces the leaves where there is no purple at all, only yellow, and the leaves that are purple look like they're in the dark. And there are the different shades of the two colors that when brought together in different degrees make infinite shades of browns and burnt colors. This is analogous to the infinite shades between black and white.

There is a special spiritual moment, when we print the two plates one after another on top of the same paper, and watch how the two colors work together.

I find the transparent remnant of color on the unetched portions of the plate to be the most fascinating aspect in metal plate etching. It seems that the powerful transparency of the metal (a pleasure only for the eye of the artist and / or printer because the copper plate is rarely exhibited, especially not when it is inked up), is transferred onto the paper. The copper becomes pure light rosé wine. A little like oil painting when you wipe off newly applied paint, and a transparent color appears.

Here is a vision of light, a vision of another world.

Forest tapestry

Sometimes in the woods where there is many trees of one type and one light suffused throughout, I see a vast harmonious tapestry of a mixture of only two or three colors. This unity can be achieved in color etching, because all the colors fuse together. The colors are fewer yet the combinations of them are infinite. Blending colors together throughout the whole surface does not always work as well in painting.

The same hands

As I wait for the varnish to dry on a copper plate, I play the piano.

The music fills the empty space, and even after the piece comes to a close, some of the chords linger there, suspended, like shadows of leaves on a white wall, swinging with the wind.

In silence, our heart, no longer our ears, listens to the resounding music.

The playing permeates into my drawing, because they are the same hands. Painting and music then have a hidden yet real connection. It has to do with senses and nerves.

I have just finished a large picture of a wave that I saw off Chile's coast. I always thought that music was superior to painting in its power to express emotion. In painting waves, the emotion is as enormous and as pure as in music.

Inside a skull, there is the imprint of the principal veins of the deceased's nervous system, like the veins of a leaf. Our thoughts, as well as our creation, follow the same movement.

Monotype experimentation

After two-colored etchings, we move on to monotypes. This relaxes us after heady multi-colored etchings.

I give them each a medium-sized copper plate, and they paint directly onto it with a paint-brush or their fingers in an abstract way. There is a beautiful palette of messy colors available because of all the printing we've been doing. Then we take three sheets of paper for each painted copper plate. We make three prints without reinking the plate. The first one has very strong colors, almost too vivid. The second passage seems to be always the most interesting. Some of the colors become transparent and luminous. There are also some vivid colors left, which make a good contrast with the lightened areas. The third passage is always a little too weak, but often very harmonious.

March

It's always my fault

We are participating in the village carnival. The theme this year is Brazil. We have the idea of a large mural on wood of the Amazonian forest with the Amazon flowing through it. I go through all the « Terre Sauvage » and National Geographics for scenes of Amazon vegetation and the river, waterfalls and animals.

Then I show all the animal pictures to the children so that they may choose. They start by making drawings. We proceed by preparing the wood and paint up a transparent verdian green background all over. This stinks terribly, so I let the children out as quickly as possible into my own Amazonian forest.

Manon says, « I've had enough ! » I take this objection personally. I say, « no complaining is allowed in my workshop ! » I push and shove away complaints like snow in a driveway. I look for the spirit of initiative, mixed with an almost contradictory serenity. I boycott anything that blocks the way. In any case, if the student lacks motivation, it is never their fault, it is always mine.

We make drawings directly onto the wood. Then we take out the paints and they get to work. This takes quite a bit of time, because the piece of wood needs filling up. Many make giant butterflies, parrots, monkeys, crocodiles, a true favorite. The more ambitious make jaguars, margays, tamanduas, tapirs.

During the ski vacations, other children come in to help out, ages 4 to 14. The more experienced styles mix well with the naïve ones. Paul, a 3 year older, makes a butterfly and other creatures in the foliage and I ask Sarah, a 13-year older, to make a parrot with its wings beating. It gets more and more teeming with life. The green background brings constant unity to the piece. The sky is a deep blue, the Amazon, a murky, muddy abyss with crocodile eyes popping out and anacondas (about 3 or 4 of them). There is a giant toucan on top keeping watch over the canopy and countless birds of paradise. There are two waterfalls with plants falling over it, and a snake eating a bird, not to mention the numerous frogs, flowers and carnivorous plants. To top it off, we make a rainbow.

The children are amazed. The rich oil paint enhances their representations. It is quite an extraordinary picture.

Sometimes I think all I need to do is to give a child the opportunity and context within which to create. I'm thinking especially of the talented children who already have considerable technique. I give them a minimum of instruction, --enough to keep them from stylizing too quickly--, because it is best they find their own path and mode of expression.

Originality only arises when the students listen exclusively to themselves. Sometimes the students simply need a place to go, which is like an annex to their own private territory, in order to make themselves useful and find a voice. I can get them started with minimal words, and wait for them to blossom.

One of my art teachers, Charles Stegeman, would show us how to lay down a palette of pure colors and then leave us alone. His teaching would someday be reduced to asking us daily questions such as, « are you happy ? » I suppose he meant we should neither depend on others nor good weather to be happy. This taught us to be autonomous. He would come around and say one or two things. The few words he used, such as when he would show the multitude of lines in what appears to be a single line around a knee by drawing himself in the margins, were always heavily laden with meaning.

Good teachers are not even guides, they simply exert a certain influence on us, and this sets off our own natural internal movement and processes.

Apart from its practical aspects, art cannot be taught. From this point of view, apart from supplying my students with tools like a waitress coffee, sugar and a spoon, my usefulness paradoxically lies in my uselessness.

Columns and trees

I try to prevent the children from making stylistic drawings. I have seen children draw very well, with a definite style already. But they hardly look at the model. They are too much into their drawing, into themselves, and not open to nature around them. If this continues, it is difficult for them to progress.

Good stylistic work has its origin in nature. I'm thinking of Pompon, for example. All successful abstract, imaginative work emanates from the observation of nature. This requires years of apprenticeship. In Gaudi's columns in the Gruell crypt, you can understand everything. The columns imitate a forest. Stylistic work, if that is the tendency of the artist, should come only after much observation and artistic development.

Many start too early with stylistic work. They form a physical habit to stylize too quickly. It is hard to change that, because it becomes an automatism.

If their knowledge of nature, their very source, is too small, it reduces their possibilities.

The wild and the cartoon

I have a dream of a painting, one that covered a full wall in someone's living room. There are some lionesses drinking in an orangish evening sun which contrast with the still blue water. The technique is superb. Then as I approach it, the painting undergoes a strange metamorphosis. The lionesses transform themselves into fantastical creatures, a little cartoonish, with pointier snouts and ears. This industry-like stylistic transformation has a tendency to obscure visions, where we mutilate nature, erase the real thing, through interpretation upon interpretation. The dream represents a cultural tendency in today's world.

The imaginary creatures I've been doing myself are more child-like, more cartoon-like than the real ones. I follow the tendency myself, and the dream may be making me aware of this.

If this is a fight against or a reconciliation with virtual imagery, I don't know. In any case, it stands as a dialectic.

The beauty of the unfinished

Today the children make up their own Land Art ideas, after looking at « Rock » a book by Andy Goldsworthy. On a surprisingly cold day in Spring, they make drawings beforehand where it's warm in my workshop. They work with roofing slate, of which I have plenty, and ivy leaves, branches and trees. One group attempts to make a rainbow of rocks between two trees. It is Spring, but the cold spell makes it necessary for us to head inside earlier than we wished.

But as we walk back it starts to snow, huge snowflakes, and the children are euphoric and holler out for joy. I watch Audrey, her head up to the sky, elated with the snowflakes falling on her tongue and long dark hair. The children forget their cold fingers. I'm a little frustrated that the projects are not getting off the ground, the rainbow is far from completion, and try to stifle their cries, reminding that they have come to work, not play. But then all of a sudden I'm ashamed because of Audrey's joy. I stop myself quick enough, because I realize there is an element of play in work, which ought to be there, that should be, should be, should be. It is also a rare moment for us, because we have little snow, and I don't want to be the one to deprive them of this gift from the sky.

And we look at the little stars of David on the stones with a magnifying glass.

When the children are cold enough, they come inside and warm up their fingers enough to draw the enlarged snowflakes until the end of the session.

The rainbow made out of rock, a symbol of harmonious achievement, will wait for another day.

Easter 1999
Imminence

Andy Goldsworthy works with earth and stone, as photographed in a book of his, « Rock ». One of his project interests the children particularly : wrapping large rocks with wet clay. As the clay dries and shrinks, impressive cracks form until finally, the pieces fall off the rock onto the floor. The different stages of this development are photographed. All are integral constituents of his artistic project.

The younger children are fascinated with this simple yet primordial concept.

We take smaller rocks, not much bigger than the palms of the children's hands. Some children take white and others red clay and wrap it smoothly around the rock, some more thickly than others. They love doing this, easy as it is. Then we let it dry.

Manon has put her clay so thinly around her smooth white stone, that the pieces have already flapped off, a little like egg shells. The others have incipient calligraphic cracks. The following week the cracks are more numerous, like an egg opening up.

I find out that my friend who has cancer is not doing well. He is in a hospital in New York undergoing stem-cell therapy, a drastic measure to kill the cancer cells in the brain. With this therapy all the white blood cells are used up and the body is very vulnerable to infection. He has caught an infection and they are giving him a huge amount of antibiotics. He's in a coma and may not survive.

It is just before Easter. Easter makes me think of my work on eggs, with parts of animals, their heads or their feet coming out of them, and the children's rocks. This state of being is not much different from the state of a living being imminently close to death. When a woman is pregnant, the birth is imminent. When a person is fatally sick, his death is also imminent. How abstract this feeling of imminence !

The hope is high and my friend wins in his combat for life. He pulls through as the white blood cells count goes up and beats the infection.

He has won one war. In any case he is reborn for how much time, we don't know. His life expectancy is again uncertain like everyone else's. It's like with a chick, a dinosaur, a turtle fighting through the egg shell. How much time will this new being live ?

During another class, I have the children draw an egg with its shadows. They also draw a broken egg. Then they draw an animal coming out of it, be it real or imaginary.

May 1999

Search for a renaissance

I make some bronze turtles coming out of ping-pong balls in a bed of sand. Some have just their heads peeping out with sand over their eyelids, others have are climbing over the balls in the shape of angels veering themselves toward the sea.

In the same spirit, my neighbor, Kristin McKirdy, a ceramist, is inspired by seeds ever since she came to live in outside of Paris and made her own garden. Their simple and perfect shapes, like the shape of a bean or pod, are smooth, uncomplicated and pure. They also suggest a magical and complex consequence.

Both in life and work, nature revitalizes.

Parisians love retrospective shows of artists of the past, be it 20th century or 16th century, and hunger for cultural stimulation and complexity.

There seems to be irony. On one hand, we live in a world of virtual imagery supplied by computers and media, and on the other hand we hunger for more imagery that is warm, rich, multiformed and stimulating. Is this not a sign that our intangible virtual world is fundamentally empty ? To make something complex enough (or simple enough if it contains complex thought) to keep our interest and refreshing enough to not overburden our vision is a huge challenge for an artist.

Isn't it in the nature of the human being to forget, that this very limpid complexity can be found in nature itself ? I believe if you are open enough to the richness of nature, there will never be enough time to satisfy our need for it, that a life is much too short to grasp anywhere near saturation. Each day we learn more about the universe, and the technology to perceive the infinitely small and close and the infinitely large and faraway becomes more precise. Scientists and artists have more and more territory to work in and dream about. Thanks to these tools, we can now see the rough surface of Mars, the birth of stars, and small vermins enlarged to become unforeseen monsters. This new territory can replenish a confused art world : it can serve toward a rebirth in art.

And our relationship to the universe becomes like a love affair. When you love someone so much, life seems too short, too little time to spend it with this person. When passionate about learning, the world is too extensive for one human life to apprehend the extent of its riches in a lifetime.

Certain artists, film-makers and photographers do exploit the new grounds. A stained-glass artist who makes large windows of molecules blown up, and photographers make excellent pictures of views from the sky and these become almost abstract paintings.

For if there be art at all, let it be something that people thirst for, that people need, and let it be beautiful.

The order of freedom

*Look upon your soldiers as you do infants, and they willingly go into deep valleys with you ; look upon your soldiers as beloved children, and they willingly die with you.
If you are so nice to them that you cannot employ them, so kind to them that you cannot command them, so casual with them that you cannot establish order, they are like spoiled children, useless.*

Sun Tzu in The Art of War

I don't want my classes to resemble home or school, yet there has to be discipline, my own kind. There are days when I feel lost and am inclined to write down a list of rules for the workshop.

However, I will never show them to the children. Eventhough the children will never read these rules, just having them gives me a sensation of order in the place. They are for myself. And order, like chaos, has its own pleasure. I imagine that, with these invisible boundaries, the workshop will retain its idyll. Here is a list of most of them.

I tell the children to

Never complain about work conditions. A certain amount of comfort is needed to do good work. But it should not be top priority. Try to make your ownself comfortable. The best artists don't think spend much time bettering these conditions because their desire to work overpowers the need for comfort.

Never ask me to help you draw. « I can't do it, I can't do it » is a cry too-often heard. You will find your strength inside of you. Look hard at the subject, and you will find it. Once in awhile, I will come and show you the path, in hopes that this unlocking will serve you in future times. But you cannot lean on me. I do not want to be an institution.

Never ask me « what are we going to do now ? » If you find a moment with nothing to do, stay calm, observe what's happening in the window, take a piece of paper and pencil and draw.

Don't talk about what's happening at school or between people. We are in a different place, and are protected from village and school chatter, as well as outside criticism. Talk little, people need to concentrate. Nothing great can happen when there is too much confusion.

Make no commentaries about other people's work. No teasing is allowed in my workshop. One word can discourage another. If anyone destroys the work of another, they are not allowed to come back. No one should be rejected, everyone has their own worth.

Never tell me that you're tired of doing what you're doing. In an hour and a half, you can easily keep up your interest in even a simple flower or twig. You can find infinite variations in tones and lines. You just need to open your eyes wider.

Do not ever tell me that you don't understand the work I give you. Use your instinct, your intuition. We are not in math class. Take the little I say to you, and do what you can with it. Be bold. In the same manner, I do not want to hear « are we allowed to do this or that ? ». Give yourself every right ...

Never say « I messed up ». I have never seen anyone mess up before.

Sometimes I do let these ideas leak out as we work. They seep out like a dialogue of intuitions. The children end up absorbing them, probably in this manner. Ideas are more deeply ingrained in them by osmosis.

I do not need to say nor analyze too much, because I have said it already through writing. There is a tacit understanding. In class, I am only transmitting the resonance of suspended chords.

This creates an environment of mutual respect. When something goes wrong, (for example, one child is rejected by almost everyone else, like Audrey who is chubby and makes things fall down as she passes), I intervene, and the children check themselves immediately.

Drawing class is a small utopia, even if it only lasts an hour and a half, where the creative life of the child is triggered, a silent movement. Without exception, the child finds the motivation: because they are apprentices of freedom.

I am so tempted to give up on a child that brings trouble. It's so easy, just ignore the child and hope he or she doesn't make too much trouble. Just clean up after the mess. No pressure, just pretend the child doesn't exist, and hopefully he or she will quit the class.

But I could make that small extra effort to show some interest in the child (it sometimes takes very little), there will always be progress. In art class, it's easier than math or grammar, because there are more opportunities to compliment aspects of the child that are beyond systems and rules.

I have to watch myself about Kevin and Rachel. They throw crumpled paper around, and today Rachel squishes Aurélie's sculpture. I tell her she has to leave. And I give her some special attention afterwards instead of bearing a grudge. It works. These children cannot be ignored. I find that rich imagination, the prime nourishment for our classes, is often accompanied with disorderly ways. I cannot afford to sacrifice people with differences.

Kevin and Rachel see the world in a different way. They ridicule our world of rules because they see through them. They know that the rules are part of human comedy and are not nature's laws. The study of art can provide a soul-mate to them. Their fantasy worlds finally gain value. What seem to be their weaknesses in the classroom are their forte in an art class. I cannot miss the chance to influence these children ; I cannot let go. They are potential visionaries.

This seems to be one way to temper urges to destroy.

Slipped away

Someone has taken away the sculpture of my unicorn, with a twisted vine as a horn, from on top of my workshop door, who used to greet me with its benevolent expression everyday. I'm ready to make not only one unicorn, but many more. Art is a compensation for loss, as much as handicaps and weaknesses.

Then again, as the wind blows through the leaves, I let it be, I put away my desire for the material object ; it's enough that it becomes part of my story.

This is the nature of the unicorn, it slips away, and the thought of his friendly eyes remains.

And what was white clay, modeled in the shape of a Lippizaner's head with a hole to put the vine in, and then baked, transforms into written words.

There is place for a natural way to paint. The great vice of our day is virtuosity, the will to outpass truth. Constable

I see certain children drop out when they compare their drawings too much with others'. I try to lessen the pressure, although I do not always succeed. I do think I'm able to express to them, however, that there is a protected world beyond these battles. In this sense, the study of art is also the apprenticeship of happiness.

Through their work, they can build up a sense of self that goes beyond technique and talent ; I can even go so far as to call it a kind of genius. It is the force of idea and vision. With this, no combat is too difficult to overcome.

I fight off feelings of competition or territorial sentiments. We are all of the same thread of life, we are all one organic mass. If someone else has lovely technique or talent, they should not be resented : they are natural teachers for us.

I'm often influenced by others as I am by the children. I don't think we should feel threatened by similitudes. Instead I really believe there should be a strong sense of solidarity between artists. In fact, we end up all having the same ideas, it's just that some execute the ideas better than others. We are all teachers for each other, and no words are needed. For all artists in the world, that is, artists who are in intimate contact with their subconscious, make up one world artist. And we are not in competition with each other.

We have a common mission.

We we needn't force our differentiation from each other and see ourselves as potential media stars, because we cannot differentiate ourselves from the earth's substances.

If you let your heart direct you, good technique will come according to its pulse and movement.

The fabric of art is life

I wish the order of my life to be arranged in the same way I find the light, the slight movement of the wind, the voice of a bird, the heading of a seed pod I see before me.
Barry Lopez in Arctic Dreams

Adhering strongly to nature does not involve copying exactly the way it is in its immobile state, because nature also implies movement and sensitivity. Getting to know nature's ways allows us to create within its dynamic force.

I hope my work will inspire love rather than admiration, because I cannot afford distance from the real veins of the world. It is good when a painting is well painted and simply so; like a book written in simple words.

This simplicity incites desire rather than distant admiration, because people feel they can do it too. Good technique, directed by the movements of the heart, draws the viewer in to look and love.

I'm imagining a book written as if it were hardly written, totally written without effort, within the rhythm of life, as if it were slowly emerging from the earth. And the letters rise slowly out of earth's clay. Heated by the sun, they take on the color of human flesh.

The apprenticeship of life

The adolescent, who makes the decision to sacrifice life for the sake for art, stays in the bedroom and paints all day long, in order to be closer to beauty.

Yet to constantly transform life into art is futile. Good art comes about especially when it is swollen with life.

For the sake of art, the adolescent opens the bedroom door.

The person steps out, makes efforts to become a non-artist, just a simple living soul, and will only thus bring a cornucopia of ideas back into a workshop.

In order to pierce the heart of life, in the same manner as the sultan in a 1001 nights, who goes off disguised as a humble man in town, an artist must know how to take off the status of an artist, like taking off a coat, and live.

Today I come out of an international contemporary art show, feeling disillusioned except for a few exceptional pieces of work. Then I see a grown-up kitten emerging from its basket in the street. Its lithe, furry body speaks more to me than everything I have just seen.

And as I go down the stairs in the subway in the sun, I see blurry shadows of people dancing, thin and dynamic, bursting with poetry.

Theatre is for springtime

The Spring brings a desire for theatre once again.

I'm trying to imagine now a theatre decor with white cloth panels that capture the shadows of leaves. Either I would place these panels in a park or an orchard where there are many trees, or I would paint them on the cloth (this would be more in the spirit of theatre and of illusion). In the set I'm imagining, the theatre is brought to an ethereal, uncumbersome level. At the same time, in the presence of lush vegetation, or the illusion of it, the set retains the lushness so characteristic of the spirit of traditional theatre.

We make up a story, which we will put on stage, a little box with twigs.

We make figures and accessories in white clay. This time, instead of just leaving the figures white, we add colors : ochre, red ochre, dark brown, cobalt blue and chrome green. This we add with a paint brush when the white clay is dry.

For the wings and backdrop, we make our own inks. First we make black. We take a burnt piece of wood and scrape off the black carbon. We mix this with arabic gum. Some ink turns out better than others, depending on the amount of time the children allot in grinding it up. We mix the different colored pigments or clays with gum arabic and obtain the same number of colors as for the actors and accessories. This brings unity to the Lascaux-like theatres, because the backdrops' and the actors' colors match.

All this takes up quite a few sessions. Cécile is only half into the project. I find her in the orchard, where she is picking cherries. Here work and enjoyment of nature is suffused in her mind. Initially, I'm upset, but then I let it be, because she seems even closer to the spirit of the project than the others. And then she arrives in the studio with cherry earrings to draw from.

Travelling light

Do we have to use new technology if we want to be true contemporary artists ?

Often the more you rely on equipment and material, the more you draw away from some of the simple powers of art.

Today I take the train with my drawing folder. This object disguising me as an artist attracts the attention of a man who engages in conversation with me (I am desperately wishing to read my book). He says he too is an artist. On a computer. This is after he gave up an unsuccessful attempt at drawing and painting.

I can't help but think : what if one day all the equipment were destroyed, and we were only left with stone and charcoal ? Shouldn't an artist be able to create magic even with the bare essentials?

A mere paper and pencil should suffice.

I'm imagining a grinder that breaks the virtual imagery down to organic material and then transforms it into earth. All forms we make, the virtual and the tangible, are reduced to one communal mass.

We are not gods

I like to promote a Renaissance spirit in the children. For this, a complete artist has to know how to do everything, or at best, as much as possible. A beautiful balance can be created between manual work, which keeps artists' feet on the ground, and makes them a free master of themselves, and spiritual work, which no one is superhuman enough to do 24 hours a day anyway.

I do most of my handiwork myself, and although time is short, I have a feeling of completion that I wouldn't have otherwise.

Still, water obstinately drips through my ceiling, and I am tempted to call someone. I guess there are some limits to these noble ideas.

Unsubmissive

I work with a leaf under a tree under which it fell. Andy Goldsworthy

For lack of time, the work from this year will not be exhibited, and it seems to be far from the children's primary concern.

It's wonderful to be detached from exhibiting and achieving. In this workshop, I feel we've succeeded in creating an environment free from worries over results and the accumulation of objects. We don't want to add to our already abundant imagery, nor to contribute to the decoration of our house, but to live within our work, with the resources nature offers us, without having to traipse off to the store.

August 1999

A continent

In Africa, you can still see many wild places. But they are becoming more and more rare and precious. You can see the animals only in a relative wilderness, because from the air, you can see that they are actually in huge zoos, because of cattle fences everywhere for tse-tse fly prevention. Fortunately, within that human-made confinement, there is space for real wildlife, wildlife poetry. There are dream animals like serval cats, meercats and springbok.

Before I travelled to Africa I visited these animals only in dream, thanks to many photographs. I thought the virtual world was enough. But I was so wrong. The trip intensifies and enlargens the dream's territory, as if unconscious fences of apathy were knocked down. The creative possibilities are now even more unlimited and I have images to draw from for many years to come, even if I were just to remain in a small remote studio the whole time.

Lionesses hunt around a waterhole in Nxai Pan, Botswana. The lion himself basks under a tree, dappled from the shade. The springbok need to drink from this rare waterhole. The cats approach almost invisibly in the dust, like ghosts, as the springbok arrive to drink. If one springbok should linger even the slightest bit more than one gulp, it is sure to have one of the lionesses pounce on it. Most often the springbok escape, because they are so much lighter and quicker than the lionesses. I see them kill a baby springbok after two hours, which the lion claim right away. After a kill, the springbok seem to perform a funeral march for their youngest member. They walk slowly away in single file from the water-hole in a rhythmic manner, their heads bent downward like in a requiem. The still hungry lionesses rest, too, and resume their hunt in order to feed themselves. They get tired out so quickly and come to sit next to us in the shade (we are in a car). I have models I never dreamt of ever having to draw from (what a change from the same old models in a university artroom !), only a few yards away. Actually, it is like drawing a cat sleeping on a couch, and I have come all the way to Africa for that !

The landscapes, such as the Okavango Delta in Botswana and the Masvingo valley in Zimbabwe are so rich, that art back home in Europe, where everyone is desperately seeking originality, has lost its meaning. Certain views from these countries certainly have the power to humble the artist. Art should

not be inferior to these beauties. Art, like Africa, should instead be beautiful and perturbing enough to serve as a signal that we're headed the wrong way in our own vain undertakings. In fact, after such a trip, my only concern is to preserve what we have, what we can still find in this world, not create things that are, at best, only halfway as interesting. I will not allow myself to make anything that doesn't evoke the magic I've seen.

Wild Africa has become my teacher ; she is at the center of civilization. She is demanding and cruel, but she shows me the path to follow.

We came back from Africa, and I see how tame our village is. My first thought is how I can get back to Africa as soon as possible so as to not miss out anymore on Real Life and Nature's Force.

I'm somewhat consoled when I see the poney, Ponette, coming to greet me in the tall grass with her short legs along with the cortège of guinea fowl and cat. These are the from the same family of guinea fowl I saw around the lionesses and springbok.

Ponette has had a summer of eating plums, despite my warning my neighbor to not let her get near too many of them. She shakes the plum trees and then she and the guinea fowl eat what falls down. The cat lounges in the dappled shade like a lion, musing at the crazy herbivores.

Real Life and Nature's Force can be found in my garden.

September 1999

An animal's freedom

Ponette died today after regurgitating a part of her summer's feast through her nose. Her stomach swelled to thrice its size before she finally left us. My neighbor is wet with perspiration and tears. The vet scolds us for letting us eat as much as she wanted.

She was old. And she tasted paradise, pure liberty, at the end of her life.

Rituals

I have a show of my work as well as the work of two other artists, Jean-François De Faÿs and Nubia del Toro. I put some etchings behind glass and place them vertically into wood with rich grains. I make one full print and then several partial prints, that is, I roll the press only so far onto the copper plate, and then roll back. It looks like the side of the print fades into nothing at the point where you stop the press and this can create a luminous effect. Then I do the other side of the plate. I use these prints as different panels. They look like theatre wings. They have become one of a kind. At the same time, the object is very

print-like, because there are more than one within : a visual reminder of the printer's studio, where many identical prints may be seen spread out on a work-table.

And I can put lights behind them. At night we put candles behind each panel and people played leaves of music.

The best thing, however, is when the print is exhibited in the woods : if the sun is out, you can watch the shadows of leaves fall on the glass and etchings. This to me is the ultimate ritual. I plan to build a glass shrine for this series of work.

I also have an artist book with etchings on thin Japanese paper with no backing behind them. By putting lights behind these pages, I have the same transparent, luminous effect. The pages are written with the coptic-like alphabet that no one besides myself knows how to read. That way no one understands the poem, except for those who are motivated enough to.

Lastly, I make some frames with white cloth drawn over them to put within the trees, in the manner of a theatre set. It is called a « shadow capturer ». The shadows of the leaves are reminiscent of those on sheets hung out to dry.

The study of shadows has to do with a rarified art that gives up on the realistic imitation of nature. In painting for example I'm thinking of the magical light through the leaves : how rare an artist can capture this spiritual apparition ! With these traces of leaves in movement on white cloth, I'm trying to illustrate our limits. We can do little more than catch the shadows of nature. The rest, everything else, all our attempts to capture light and color, is most often tremendously inferior to what we can see outside.

I make a series of paintings on shadows of leaves on Paris streets. Here the shadows take on the colors of the universe, as if they reflect the stars and the galaxies. You can see constellations, animals, especially birds in the leaves' shadows. I accentuate these shadows to look even more like birds, because they symbolize freedom, a surprising form inscribed on the ground. They also serve as a cross-bridge toward abstraction.

And as I paint, little flies' wings get caught as sacrifice into the oil.

For the show, I try to put some scents in my workshop, so as to create some kind of atmospheric effect (a new marketing technique). But a coincidence occurs or, maybe it is a sign that all of this is vain and superfluous: a skunk mockingly leaves its scent next to my studio in the morning of the first day.

November 1999

Complacency and action

Today after a run in the forest I come across a hunter who killed a fox. The dead fox is magnificent in its wild beauty and surrender. But I don't even have a stubby pencil or crumpled paper with me. He says they're allowed to kill as many as they like. A little boy next to the man questions the hunter. He is not sure the hunter is right: he sways between the feeling of injustice and the reassuring himself that it is alright, because-otherwise-all-the-hens-in-the-villages-would-be-dead.

Between complacency with a rational justification and action. Everyone in this world sways.

Then the hunter loads the trophy into the car. I miss my chance to even draw the dead animal, a small, violated, yet authentic token of our neighboring wildlife.

My unconscious, however, the far-off region of memory, is bursting with models to draw from.

Thanksgiving 1999

My neighbor moves today. He bequeaths me his last guinea fowl (the other two have drowned), eventhough she has already become my main companion for a few months now, following me everywhere, into the house and the studio, hopping up to a window to peck at it and keep me in view at all times.

But only a half hour later, a hunting dog grabs her wing and leg and leads her to doom.

I was just recently planning to paint the different movements and expressions of my animal companion but I missed the opportunity. Instead, I draw the dead animal with her eyes closed. Her resigned expression speaks for the Unknown.

January 2000

The movement of leaves

My friend died of cancer at the end of 1999 after a year and a half of sickness. First he could no longer read, then no longer write, and soon the only thing he could do was listen to music and look at the leaves outside. In « Tuesdays with Morrie » I remember that for the dying man, the movement of the leaves out his window took on overpowering beauty as his days were diminishing. In the Danish movie « Celebration », there is a scene where the main character Christian looks up at the leaves moving in the evening breeze against the dusky sky after his sister's death. I associate the leaves rustling not with death, but with the victory of nature over death, the consolation of nature. This vision is subtle yet powerful, because it represents life itself that perpetuates itself, and goes beyond the sorrowful loss of a loved one.

A rainbow

After he had given up his law practice and before his sickness, my friend enjoyed almost complete freedom to write. He permitted no other constraints.

This freedom, this unself-consciousness was a source of inspiration for many of his friends. It was a learning experience for us, a release from the internal barriers we set up for ourselves. His advent in my life occurred at the end of my university years, when I was ready to move on to something new.

And now I use this very model of freedom for my art classes.

It wasn't until his sickness that he had any real obstacle to create. Death is the ultimate barrier, but paradoxically, ultimate creation. His life and work now have unity.

Like in his book, the rainbow is now complete.

February 2000
Magic

You have to dig around, work and struggle, as if you are searching for gold. After much strenuous persistent exercise, and at an unexpected moment it does come, and then you say, that is art, that is music.

And all the dispersed elements come together.

My music teachers helped me understand these things. I suppose if sound is more abstract than vision, musicians seem sometimes closer to the essence of art than art teachers, who are also so often preoccupied with practical matters and inventories of tools and materials, putting labels on boxes, etc.

I'm making a portrait of my friend for his wife and children. I'm basing it on the image I had of him in New York City, a sort of figure from theatre, a character from the time of Gogol, the subject of his master's thesis.

I work on it for a couple of hours, not finding his resemblance. It requires intense concentration and I feel I'm turning around in circles. Then I go off into a rêverie and it comes. Perhaps an invisible force helped me.

The image that was once in my head is now in front of me, more vibrant in painting than in memory.

It is not a docile portrait: with the figure's deep dark fixed eyes, it incorporates the inner disturbing mystery we all carry within us.

His father-in-law, a Swedish businessman, says that in business the same phenomenon occurs : he may be working on a problem for days and days, and then in a moment of rêverie, the solution comes. This is the magic of art. It can be found in all domains of life.

The Piano

I remember what my friend used to say about my village. « What in the world are you doing out there ? The only good thing about that place is that piano ! ». This piano is an old one the owner placed outside among the trees at the time of our arrival in 1994. Since then, we've been watching the ivy and other plants grow on it little by little, into the keys and the wires, and consuming it little by little like in a Peter Greenaway film.

My friend was a city mouse and associated small villages with boredom. But here he was captivated by the poetry of nature's dominion over an old musical instrument of human passion .

March 2000
Revolt

I attend a Compay Secundo concert at the Zenith. During the intermission, some commercials come on a screen above the stage. The audience, inebriated with the pure authentic beauty of the Cuban music, revolt en masse against this imposition to their senses, the over-crowded world of media images.

Transient peace

I'm working on a painting about peace between the animals. It is somewhat naïve and the colors are Mexican, bright, numerous and perhaps obtrusive in a European home. My son is riding a dragon, at peace with his inner fears (like Carole who draws spiders to do away with her fear). The rest of the animals, the leopard and kid, a tiger with a deer, a condor with a chincilla, a gnou with a crocodile, a meercat with a scorpion, a hunting dog with a guinea fowl, a fox with a chicken, and my two cats (who detest each other in real life) and many more, are at peace with each other but some of them purposely have ambiguous expressions in their eyes. What I describe is real though : there is a hint of only transient peace in their eyes.

There is also true, although momentary, peace from fears, evils and human conflicts in the imagined world.

May 2000

Hard black metal and plump live ducks

Today I go with a school class to the Rodin museum in Paris. Here we are taken around by a lecturer, who shows the children some of the sculptures in the museum. After lunch we go into the garden to draw. I'm to give a short lecture on how to make a sketch. Rodin's sculptures are very difficult even for artists to sketch, and I'm afraid the children will become quickly discouraged. We look at the three figures called the shadows which are used on top of the « Gates of Hell », and how they work together. I draw a quick sketch of the main composition, with circles for the three heads and lines for the shoulders and arms. Once that is established, I tell them, then I can more easily go into the details. But that's how an adult would make a sketch. The children are not usually ready to make a full sketch. So I ask them to just draw different parts, an arm or a foot, anything, whatever attracts them most from the start. Some of them have difficulty starting out and prefer to draw the Eiffel tower which they catch behind the « Thinker » while the lecturer talks about it.

We move on through the garden. I sketch at the same time, so that they can see what it is all about. They become specialists on the Burgermen of Calais. The lecturer tells the story of these men, and the children stare with open eyes and ears. There is so much variation in body stances in these figures, that they are practically sufficient for us for the day. Everyone is very happy to draw the great key, which one of the burgermen carries, an object to draw...(the child's key to the spiritual world ?) They draw the faces from all points of view, for example at the feet of a statue looking up at an afflicted face. Some of the drawings are done so instinctively, that the full feeling comes out quickly in a child's drawing. They are a little Picasso-like. I find this is much more important than the technique, such as getting the spaces and proportions right, because it represents the child's first gesture. Rodin himself exaggerated the correct anatomy in order to express a feeling better. In general, children can do this instinctively, and are better at this than adults. They are close to their

subconscience, as Rodin was. There is a subtle communication between the artist and the children. To not perturb this precious faculty, I avoid correcting the children too much.

As we head back, we stop by to draw some live ducks, probably quite refreshing after hard and cold black limbs, fingers and toes, no matter how much they look like they're moving. I'm training the children to be animal artists.

Then, Faustine, an exceptionally imaginative child, spots some tired American tourists on an empty sculpture podium, and sits down to draw them one yard away. The children are in a great mood. They are all for living things. Then we make one last effort to draw the « Thinker », and the sky intervenes: it starts to rain down hard, and we run for the bus.

The fever to produce

Children like Picasso even more than Rodin in general, probably because he draws like them. In this way, Picasso speaks to them, and indirectly compliments the children's artwork. Some teachers have children draw like Picasso, which the children enjoy tremendously. Since they love it, the result is never devoid of interest. Here the children are imitating an artist imitating them. It is an interpretation of an interpretation of themselves. This may be far from the child's real creative thought. But the children's pleasure, however, shows how close Picasso is to their hearts.

My student Andréa makes ink pictures like Picasso. She makes animals running as if they're really running, often with a calligraphy pen. Her strokes have varied thickness, like Picasso's.

I like to show the children how masterly Picasso painted at the age of 12, and his evolution thereafter. Certainly his more simple, quick work in his later years could not have been as beautiful without this primary technically proficient background.

Picasso's career is a also source of inspiration for artists. Many artists live in his shadow. His immense production is a metaphor for the materialistic world. The richness of his evolution stimulates our brain always in search of stimulation, and his childlike vision of the universe captivates us because of its freshness.

And his enormous heart is still beating.

It has been said that thanks in part to Picasso, art is now at everyone's reach. Many who don't know how to draw an egg can now make sellable art. And artists can now make many things quickly, like Picasso who made 10 paintings a week towards the end of his life.

Picasso set a challenge for us.

As was the case for Picasso, I still believe that you have to know nature, in order to be able to capture an inner vision and a collective consciousness. For this is an even more difficult enterprise than to get the right proportions of a tiger's body.

Now times have changed and I feel we have to abandon the ideal of the prolific artist. Like in a large corporation, we hear : we need production, more production ! We consume and produce far too much, and need to find a more serene state of mind.

I'm also guilty of this hunger. Is this not also connected to the same greed that is destroying the planet ?

Whatever the case may be, it is possible to replace this excessive human activity by following another path equally as rich and satisfying if not more, into the profusion of nature.

We don't seem to realize

I read in an article about an photograph exhibit in Avignon, « La nature à l'œuvre », that artists should not rival with nature. But there was a worldly tone to the article, as if the person who wrote it did not feel it. Apart from an article I read from the New York Times, on Sunday, April 16, 2000, called « When Art should yield to nature » it seems we do not take this truth seriously enough. In this article, Bernard Holland from Windhoek, Namibia writes :

In the silence of Africa, you realize how trifling and inflated culture is, how limited the range of its voice. (...) Anyone pondering the meaning of art might give a listen to the birds and animals of the Okavango...

The wonders of nature, and our inferiority, are still yet to be discovered.

June 2000

Friends of mine give me some enormous panes of glass, remnants of their veranda. In exchange I offer to paint a mural on their new ceiling. I have an idea to make a pentagon-shaped glass house with these panes in the middle of my woods as a showroom, a kind of a temple for nature. I can put in my polyptic etchings.

A child's vision of our village

I would like to make a mural of the children's vision of our village. There will be two of these, one which shows the village the way we would like to see it, the other the way we would not like to see it become, the year 2000 being typically a year to think of these things. That is, a positive and a negative vision, which would contrast each other. The use of natural materials reflects a respect for the environment, which turns out to be consistent with the spirit of civil education. One person finds the idea a little manechian, but actually in art, all contrast is essential, because it is an efficient means to convey a message.

For colors, we would use a large spectrum of colors for the positive vision and many different grays for the negative one. There would not only be a moral contrast between the two, one at war and one at peace, there would be an aesthetic contrast.

In December 1999, there was a terrible storm in most parts of France. Countless trees fell down everywhere, along with roofing tiles, etc. that marked many people's imagination. When I asked the children to make drawings for the « negative » mural, a lot of them made broken trees. Other children make animals in cages, and hunters killing animals, wood-cutters cutting down trees, along with war images. The children are also sensitive to pollution, such as oil spills, like the one that contaminated the coast of Brittany, shortly after the big storm. Images of garbage also show up in their pictures.

As far as positive vision is concerned, they make harmonious images of nature, with a rainbow, uncaged animals, etc. For me, it is quite amazing they don't think of technological progress. It seems to me that this generation thinks instinctively of the beneficial rôle of nature. Why ? Because children want what they don't have. Computers have become more commonplace. They would love to see cows and ponies walking in the streets. So when I see the recent plans for transformation in front of the town hall, to convert a large section of grass (for the cows we are dreaming of) to concrete, the children are the first to be dissatisfied.

We take a walk around the village to make drawings of the town hall, the church, the dam, and the bridge. They also are to draw their house at home, in case they would like to add their house to the mural. It is the end of April, and the beautiful May days have not yet set in. We end up going on a cold, gray day. This doesn't correspond to the teachers' romantic vision of outdoor sketching on a perfect day. But it's actually better this way, with no sun rays, our vision is intact.

The town hall donates two large wooden panels. I make a rabbit skin glue mixture, with Spanish chalk and some natural pigments to color it. We paint the positive mural different shades of ultramarine blue, and the other, different shades of gray. The children adore painting the board, and fight over the large paintbrushes.

Next we move on to the intricate part. We start off with the main symbols of the village, the town hall, the church (a little like Van Gogh's church at Auvers-sur-Oise), the school, the river, on both murals. The children draw their ideas in pencil before applying the paint. We make our own oil paints, with pigments and oils. The children grind the pigments with a rock on the marble palette, and then make their own mixtures with palette knives. I watch the children grind pigments from all corners of the earth, red earth from Chile, almond green from Tuscany, Pompeii red, yellow ochre from Provence. They make lots of different greens and greys, enjoying the idea of « inventing » colors. Some, like a usually very neat girl named Garance, are just discovering the beauty of mess and can't get away from kneading the different colors into silky paint with a palette knife. This contact with earthly matter is probably missing in their daily lives.

I teach them how to use the paintbrush which is definitely a different way from what they're used to. They cannot twirl in around in the paint and certainly cannot mix colors with it. I lend some of them my own paintbrushes the first session, and I get them back quite ruffled. Mathieu makes a superb military airplane, but not without a price to pay : the paintbrush comes back with zero bristles on it. So I do have to lecture a few times about it. Sometimes I catch them twirling the paintbrushes about while they're thinking of loftier ideas. It's a new practical apprenticeship.

In any case, without exception, they love the work. It forces them to think not only about colors and shapes but ideas. Usually they tell me what they'll draw and paint first, but many times, they take their own initiative without me looking. They are feeling at ease. The children are never devoid of ideas. In fact, everything goes so fast, that it's a challenge to keep up with the speed of their imagination.

Clothilde, who stays on during recess, says « I love to paint because it doesn't make me hungry ». She understands the spiritual food art can give.

Can we go so far as to suggest that the study of nature and art can be healing for a over-consuming planet ?

When it is time to wrap up, I have to break their flow of ideas because the boards are not big enough. It's getting quite crowded. This is not great for the « happy » mural, if we want it to look spacious and green. We now have to think of the esthetics : we have to drive toward unity and clarify details, not to mention paint over finger prints and undefinable objects. The last day is quite special. I show them how to make a shiny olive green glaze over the river. We leave some of the components incomplete, because there is so much charm to them the way they are. For example, no one thinks to color in the town hall. Its contours were drawn on top of the blue sky, and it looks ethereal, dream-like. The school only has flowers around it with horses dancing in a meadow. That's the way it was fifty years ago. They add an island in the river, which was there once and had to be eliminated for the dam. While groups of four children at a time run to the workshop to contribute to the final brushstrokes, the class spends a long time thinking of the titles of the murals, and arrives finally at two concise ones : « Village de rêve au XXIe siècle » and « Jamais ce cauchemar ici !

Here I feel inebriated with the chaos and total mess. I admit that I get some pleasure in this type of intoxication. Any attempt for organization would break the flow of activity. It is the ultimate messy kitchen. When the the teachers come in to take a look, they get spots on their clothes just by looking. One of them sacrifices an evening trying to take out the linseed oil -based blue we made from her suit. I have yet to hear the parents' point of view when they see their indians come home from school.

I lay newspapers everywhere with pigment powder and spots of paint. I read bits and pieces of news from the other side of the world, as I watch the children work.

Here I'm happy to not only contribute to their artistic education, always a breather after math and grammar (some kids hide in the workshop when I tell them it's no longer their turn and they have to go back to problem-solving), but also to present ideas about planet preservation. It seems that in this village, like everywhere else, there is a wave for more cars, more development, more trains, more air traffic, less grass in the village, even if garbage recycling is entering painfully into people's ways of life. People continue to buy wood at neighboring hardware stores that come from tropical forests. In the mural with positive elements, children make bicycles and poneys. There are even 3 windmills ! This is utopic yet refreshing. I'm quite amazed that the children choose a natural setting over a more technologically developed village : they could have put space capsules on rooftops and flying cars, for example, but no one seemed to have the idea (If I could have added my own ideas, I would have put a flying car which helps you over traffic). They seem to understand instinctively the idea of regeneration which the new century may have inspired in some of us. Anyway for the future of our ailing planet, some of these children will hopefully have some impact in their own communities.

In the child's imagination, this project sheds new life on art: art does not solely have to mean work with your hands, but it can also take on body and meaning. For anyone in search of the value of this precarious métier, this can be reassuring.

Again, I'm happy to have a greater number of students. I have enough time to understand their sensitivities, and discover their unique personalities. I enjoy particularly the special moment when the children discover the spell of art, like Axelle, a girl who is not particularly good at drawing, but whose eyes light up as I explain the different steps. There is not enough time for this enchantment to wear off. Our relationship has no time to sour. I only see their good sides.

This type of project, even though I only go to school twice a week, is all-consuming. My thoughts tend to revolve around it whatever I do.

Unfortunately artists cannot help the world directly.

However, ecological disaster creates turmoil in our minds. The inefficiency of art makes the struggle all the more poignant. And isn't this internal cry of despair the real force of expression ?

When a painter wants to paint light, it's with a desperate unstudied gesture that it comes. Just when the painter thinks it impossible, light appears on the canvas.

If art is effective in hope or despair, it can contribute to an unconscious movement in people, the motor force of all our actions. It can open us to truths and motivate us to act.

I have a job teaching medieval calligraphy in a high school in the outskirts of Paris, in a poorer neighborhood than here I am with them for two hours, starting with exercises then moving toward Rustica, Roman Uncial, Celtic half-Uncial, Caroline, and Gothic. Much to my amazement, they like the Gothic best. Good thing I slip the Gothic alphabet into my bag at the last minute before leaving. One student, Nadjibali Ali, likes to see his name in Gothic lettering : « Que c'est beau ! » he exclaims, when I prepare a model for him. After one hour, the bell rings and many are disappointed that it should stop. They are so relieved when they learn that they have one more hour. We finish the session with a decorated letter. Everyone enjoy themselves.

The teacher tells me it is a difficult class. But today, only once does she have to scold a girl for bad language. The class arrives at crystal silence after this. There is a certain spell in the air. Then she says « I'm only scolding Béatrice, not the rest of you ». They all laugh and then resume their little discussions. I think it is quite remarkable to see very athletic types enjoying themselves with their pen and ink. I notice that when I ask who wants the thicker nibs, the larger boys are the ones to choose them first. The ink spills three times.

The most important thing is to see how well calligraphy works nowadays, a rejuvenated discipline from the past, in a class of young adolescents, some of whom usually have trouble concentrating, so says the teacher.

It is curious that this same discipline was considered to be, only two generations ago, a laborious and constraining subject at school. Today it has become play.

At a moment of despair about Other People in general, I take my bike along the river and look at the swans, resting on the shore. There are five teenager-swans who look overgrown because their bodies are adult size and they still have fluffy baby wings. I watch their necks swirl, their huge feet spread over their bodies as they groom themselves, as if this scene were a resting place from human complexity. And I'm at peace.

The gift of life

I teach calligraphy in a class for the last time this year. After about 45 minutes of exercises and italic letters, I give them each a large sheet of paper and ask them to make up their own alphabet of 26 letters with the calligraphy pens, making use of the variations in thick and thin lines.

Some of them ask for further explanation, and I just tell them to guess what the project is about. I want their intuition to be at work, too.

Certain children make the letters too complicated to be reproduced, even more so than Asian characters. A good many make variations of A's, B's, and C's, which makes their alphabet a little too recognizable if they want to make a secret code. It is hard for these children to leap off entirely from the letters they're used to. They don't give themselves complete freedom. I open my arms out to show them they can go further. And many do.

Otherwise, it is in these types of exercises that I really find out about their unique personalities. I not only see this in the shapes they choose : some round, others pointy, some Chinese-like, others, Arab-like. You see it in the extent they stray from the Latin alphabet. Some write certain letters simply backwards. Afterwards they write a few things in their new alphabet, like « merci », or their friends' names, which I have fun de-coding.

In the evening I listen to Mercedes Sosa sing, « Gracias a la Vida », who celebrates the alphabet in a song written by a woman who was rejected by her lover. She gave thanks to life and to words, to sound and the alphabet, because they gave her the means to at least express this love in her song. She ends up killing herself from the weight of emotion:

Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto
Me ha dado el sonido y el abecedario
Con él las palabras que pienso y declaro
Madre, amigo, hermano y luz alumbrando,
La ruta del alma del que estoy amando.

I paint a tropical sky for my friends' ceiling, an image of all the different types of foliage I saw in my walks in Indonesian rain forests.

September 2000
Another teacher

Io ho sentito dir tante volte che il mondo sarebbe più bello, se non l'avessero guastato gli uomini, i quali, per ragione della superbia, hanno sconcertato il bellissimo ordine della natura.

Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793)

I'm getting ready for a new year of teaching. My heart is still in the Indonesian archipelago, where we travelled this summer, surrounded by turquoise, sapphire blue and ochre on a boat going from island to island. According to a legend, these small islands were made by the giant turtle goddess, who scooped up the earth from the bottom of the ocean with her claws to lay eggs on the shore.

I watch the little sea turtles come out of their ping-pong ball shells, their eager black eyes covered with sand, their arms and legs moving immediately in the direction of the ocean. The moment of hope I see in these baby turtles was worth the trip.

Indonesia has traditional magic based on human will and a certain innate knowledge of the earth's magnetism, a wisdom shared by sea-turtles. Dead people can even come to life again. In places where Islam and Western ideas have not yet exerted their influence, like in certain far-off Dayak villages in Kalimantan, on the island of Borneo, there is a harmony between the wildlife and the human's use of it. Their wood carvings seem to reflect the consummate union between two antipodes, art and wildlife, and this serves as a model for me today. Like in other cultures, for example, the bushmen of Africa, they are concerned with only taking away a little from their environment (the bushmen only eat some of the baby birds in a tree full of weavers' nests), in order to give it a chance to heal itself and perpetuate. I do not believe we cannot regain this intelligence.

I have a dream of Indonesia. We are going down a road in the evening. There is a field of wheat and three birds, a little like cranes, which I recognize as a rare species, with pastel colors and soft baby-like feathers. I barely stop to look at them, because I have to be on my way, but I do notice that they are wounded, one with its leg chopped off, another is falling down little by little. I'm tempted to pick up some of the blue feathers to take home, but think I'm being greedy and let it be. So we go on. But I'm feeling remorseful about not helping the one bird out of its misery. So when we arrive at our destination, I make the decision to go back, and imagine hugging the bird with all its feathers and pressing my hands to its heart. I have trouble getting back, because the road has become an obstacle course, and I have long ladders to go down that swivel around on platforms. I have to wait for the ladder to stop swerving before I make my way down. I think that the bird is probably already dead, but I'm determined to make it back, for it has become my duty.

This dream has a lot to do with our diminishing wildlife and questions concerning the human rôle within it. These birds have a color that is a bit industrial-like, the same color as stuffed animals you may win at a fair. Again, the dialectic between industrial and wild (I'm reminded of the lioness dream). They are vulnerable, baby-like. The wheatfield represents our cultivated planet.

The dream offers no solutions to our rôle within wildlife and the preservation of it. It merely illustrates our incapacity to help out, even help an animal out of its misery.

After visiting Indonesia, my attachment to wildlife has become stronger.

I will show the children my many pictures of orangutans and we will study them with clay. We will bring Cécile's pet turtle in and draw it and sculpt it. We talk about how orangutans, like hippos and rhinos (hippos with hippo-looking rocks, rhinos with other types of rhino-looking rocks), fit so well into their environment. I have pictures of tree ferns in Borneo, which when they become brown, look like real orangutans in the trees, their long arms stretching up the branches.

When we enter a rainforest, we become part of it, we adopt it, whatever our nationality. And we no longer will touch the exotic wood that is sold in a local supermarket.

And I think of all the protectors of our planet, like those who strive to save the remaining orangutans of Borneo, a creature so symbolic of our own human integrity.

There is a healing power in art. Here the weak and vulnerable gain power.

Winter 2001

My three red chicks have reached adulthood. I bought them at a store thinking about fresh eggs, where I was assured that they were all females. But not only one is deformed with an ugly cross-beak, which prevent it from eating correctly and has it talking in nasal sounds, the other two have their first attempts in singing. At first I'm exasperated. Maybe even the deformed one is a rooster ? But I resign myself to nourishing this bizarre trio, that doesn't seem ready to supply me with any ovular compensation.

Every morning and every evening before dark they use the ladder to go up and down from their Indonesian treehouse cage. They have always a lot to say and to complain about with their quasi human vocal intonations. It's beginning to get cold, and I have to move them into an abandoned child's cabin. They don't want to cooperate. At night they sit at the window, desperate about losing their treehouse. I carry them one by one in my arms. The roosters are enormous and muscular... After a few days, they begin to accept their new warm home. And two days later, I discover four eggs ! The deformed chick has become a real hen, who lays two eggs a day, one for each rooster.

I watch the cocks fight. Their feathers on their necks fluff out, and the two males turn around and around like a rooster and his reflection. The hen finds her place right in the middle. With her thin intellectual neck sticking up, she is the referee. It's comical to watch this hen, a homely bird, walk everywhere with her two beaux, decorated in shiny oranges, reds and greens. When I bring out the food and call them « Chickies ! », they come from sometimes 100 meters away, flying. Boris, the chief rooster, the meanest one, with a longer neck than the other, even scares Oslo or other dogs away from the property. He is the butler, and announces all my visitors.

The roosters' cry is so pathetic and loud : it is a replica of the frustrated artist's inside lament. With this terrible news, it is impossible to find unity in anything I do.

But a friend's dog bites Sasha Dimitriov, the weakest and the slowest. It looks like he is only two-thirds left. Without feathers in the back, his body turns back to the shape of an egg, symbol of hope, but larger. Boris is initially very mean to him, nipping on his back until blood appears, because he is frustrated that his co-fighter is not in shape. (animals are not innocent) He gets better, and the feathers begin to reappear.

Then he is eaten entirely by the neighbor's great dane, the one with a lionness' body. We're in Africa. Between the few entrails of my rooster left behind and those of all the mice and birds my cats love to dissect, I'm getting used to the insides of bodies. The source of movement and life, we only see these intricacies when the animal is dead.

Clémentine, the hen hunches over in the corner of the cabin to cry all day. In the trembling body of this ball of feathers, we can only be certain of animals' suffering.

Boris hides in the woods until he is sure the predator is away : the rest of the day. And then his companion jumps with joy when he reappears in the evening. At least one of her men has survived ! Since then, she lays only one egg a day.

The day Boris and Clementine are also killed by the same neighbor, I spot them spending some time in my glass house, looking up to the sky. Later, not long before the massacre, I hear the rooster cry. My heart is so light, everything is so grand, and this doesn't even bother me. I take this as a measure of my happiness. Little do I know that these are his last cries.

I listen to the wind blow very hard in semi-darkness. As I paint willow leaves outside, I feel imminent catastrophes and suffering in the world.

I give some clove cigarettes from Indonesia to my friend, reminders of the clove flowers drying on cloth in the sun beside the roads. He tells me we should wait before we start with the mural. He would first like to try a parasol from the Orient in the space we've established for the painting.

I start my first classes this year in the new municipal building. It is comfortable, dry, large enough for all the students. I do not have my things strewn about as in my studio. My students don't like it as much as at my place. There are no trees outside. We see only the sky through the sky light with clouds journeying past. So I take blue pieces of paper and we paint the clouds with whites and greys.

Despite my relatively neutral position as an art teacher, where I am able to be faithful to my word, people in the village still expect a lot from me, sometimes even before they pay for the classes. I do not wish to be counted on for anything. I do not always participate, I do not always give. We are ever-changing, in perpetual movement. I am not a stone pillar. I will not stay here forever and let the moss grow on me.

I make a painting of our village from the other side of the river. I feel the love for this place where I've stayed for almost ten years. The image is pure and distinguishes itself from the idea of community.

Today, my friend is killed by a car. He is a victim of the dangerous roads that go through the forest, and drivers who go too fast. As I feel the shock of the news, I work on my glass house. There will be no roof. It has to be open to the sky. Now I am wondering about the parasol : Was he unconsciously trying to protect himself ?

May, 2001

I have a show in my garden, my studio and my glass house. During the day in the sun and wind, the branches and leaves swerving in the wind leave reflections on the glass walls and the smaller pieces of glass protecting the etchings. The printed leaves and the reflected leaves work together and render a new composition.

In the evening, I put candles behind them.

Summer 2001
Yet another teacher

We just came back from Iceland. We visited the highlands and learned the purity of the moon-like landscapes, the air and the water from the brooks.

The children will be making abstract paintings inspired from the pictures of these landscapes. Their paintings will reflect the fantastical quality of the colors of the minerals in the highlands and the glaciers.

September 2001

While working on the tropical sky ceiling painting , the radio announces that an airplane is flying into the twin towers in Manhattan. I arrive at school and a woman asks me « what's wrong with you ? » I say that I don't know, I'm probably perturbed about the latest news. She said, « Yes, but your face ! » In the car mirror I see a face completely black with smudges of oil paint.

Airplanes after airplanes flying across the village sky. I'm not used to this extra noise. They are not high above, but going through my body. I hear of a sculptor who exhibited in the twin towers the sculpture of a body with airplanes heading through it, not long ago, as if he had made a prophecy. A child spontaneously makes a harmonious and colorful oil painting of an airplane heading into a building.

When I sit out in the garden and listen to Caetano Veloso, I miss the subtle variations of his voice. The airplanes plow through the music.

October 2001

Just before I leave for New York I find two large canvas frames in the supermarket trash. They curiously have the shape of tall towers. And after the sketches I make in New York, I make some paintings of the debris in Manhattan. They have very little color, just sepia, brown and black and green for the occasional leavery.

The destruction is irregular like tiger stripes. A building here and a building far away. Some windows still have their panes closeby the area, others shattered far away. A parking lot at a distance is crunched, yet a whole church is intact nearby. And the small trees here and there, covered with dust, stand up as banners of the natural world.

April 2002

Paestum, Southern Italy

I am looking at a simple image of a diver in mid-air, a painting in an ancient Greek tomb. The diver is making his way between the passage of life and death. I'm reminded about how rare this type of exceptional art is, which encompasses both universal truth and the attitude of the time. How weak we are compared to this!

July 2002

Another show

I put my nine Icelandic paintings around in a polygon with nine sides made out of iron poles, with a bench in the middle. I would prefer to have them facing the outside, but I realize my garden is not big enough. My new Houdan hens (an endangered species : a rare black and white breed from this region) strut in front of the painting of a glacier. They look like actors in a theatre, playing over-dressed marquis, and their colors reflect the black and white glacier painting.

I hang my animal paintings within the trees in the orchard, so that they can take on shadows of leaves and light beams.

The Manhattan paintings go in my glass house in the woods. At night we light the candles in front of them, just as there were candles everywhere in lower Manhattan, in the fire stations, in front of the restaurants and hospitals. The paintings take on life in the light of the small fires, as if we are really there.

The students have their special area, too, in one of the gardens of the property. Their paintings of Icelandic scenery harmonize with mine ; their colors communicate.

Not many people come because of the lateness in the year. Among the faithful ones is my former neighbor, who spends hours in the orchard. He is a great appreciator of the association of nature and art.

Today only the crazy woman of the village comes. She made me feel so cheerful, because of her child-like reaction to everything : « Oh, the tiger ! » in front of the jaguar, and « Oh, the lions ! » in front of the lionesses drinking.

These types of exchange give meaning to life.

My Houdan hens have been eaten by a fox overnight. The theatrical moment is past.

The Icelandic paintings now find their place in an oat field nearby, facing outwardly in their polygon structure. The owner is happy to be part of the connection I'm imagining between art and agriculture, between those who cultivate the earth and those who cultivate an art form.

As I drive toward the nine-sided configuration and view it from far away, the paintings look like they're in abeyance in the sky, with a spring green frame.

I meet my former neighbour Martial in line at the hardware store. He tells me birds fly into his house to eat with him. He is buying a huge bag of birdseed (abundant provisions for times to come) and a small plant. I say « à bientôt », not realizing that it the last time I'll see him. That is, before I see his peaceful face made up for final viewing. When I find out he is dead after thermal shock in the river after losing control of his canoe, only two hours later, I sadly remember how he understood, more than anyone I know, the essence of freedom.

My neighbor Kristin, the potter, throws a round maternal urn for his ashes. It is fired at 1000°C the same temperature as in the crematorium. I make a drawing of his house on it with the birds that flock down into his window. We will throw the ashes in the river at a later date.

During the funeral, we put on his favorite music to which he loved to dance, while the people go up one by one to say good-bye to the coffin. They look like they are dancing to the music as they go up to it. One song stuck in my mind with the words, « you won't wait until you die to be my friend ».

After the funeral I tell a few people around me the story of Lalou, the black dog who had the taste of this very freedom only early in life. Someone says matter-of-factly, after I exhaust myself in emotional story-telling, « but he almost got run over a few times ». I impatiently point out that I am talking of beauty, not of whether or not this freedom works in a cartesian environment.

August 2002

During a calligraphy job, a baby swallow with a wounded tail nestles in my left hand. She will certainly die, but I absorb the last strength of innocence and fragility in its wings through my hand and into this writing.

While I copy these words, it's a coincidence that I discover my cat with a baby mouse. I take it and have it nestle in my left hand like the swallow while I tap the keys, and when I see that it is not really wounded, and the shock is over, I let it go outside.

There is a motor in the vulnerability and innocence of small animals and children.

When I look at the students' show in the municipal building I see the progress they've made, some of which have been with me for six years. There is a freshness in their colors and forms : they have not been tarnished by prejudices and other suitcases we adults carry in our work.

When I watch them work, I see they've learned to be bolder in their expression. The more timid ones, like Clément and Thomas, have developed a sphere of their own, where they produce spontaneously, without instruction. They bring objects, keys to the spiritual world, into class to draw as if they're organizing their own sessions. Some may have more facility than others, and are conscious of this, but all have developed the skill to go beyond the rules, which will be beneficial in whatever they do.

These classes for me are an unlimited source of knowledge, like the riches of the natural world.

Et tu deviens un arbre de paroles. Paul Valéry

And I'm ready to start a new year of teaching once again. I won't write down any more ideas, any more projects now.

In writing about the children and the people I share my life with in the village, the words do not stop. There is no way to finish easily, because each thought brings forth new ones, like branches bring forth branches in a tree.

I have opened up and let out an intimacy which I will close like a book.

And like a tree that meets its end, these thoughts are decomposed into the earth.

When I walk towards my workshop and it begins to rain, still with light coming through the leaves, I dream of an art so minimal, that demands no material and equipment to make, so fine, that it is the expression of nature itself.

Of course this is impossible, but I find that with layers and layers of interpretation, we are going the opposite direction. We cannot let lifeless material dominate our vision and take over our children's tissues and our real selves.

The art I dream of does not represent a return to primitive nature, rather it is for me the most refined human expression of beauty.

Chartrettes, September 2002