

Life in the Outer Hebrides

In the last few days I have been thinking about what kind of influence on my art practice came about through the sense of place and the reality of living in a completely different culture. What had that rare time meant for the muse, inspiration, content, and intention of my work as an artist? As I began to think back and remember my years in the outer Hebrides specifically, I was reminded that before moving there from Paris I had lived in quite a few other cultures for considerable periods. After I ran away from home at the end of my junior year of high school I enlisted in the Marine Corps a few weeks past my 17th birthday. I had my 18th birthday on board a troop ship in the middle of the Pacific Ocean on August 1, 1966. Subsequently I lived in Okinawa, the Philippines, and of course for over a year in what was then known as the Republic of South Vietnam. My exposure to these places was not exactly a cultural tour, yet what delighted me more often than not was the actual human scale traditional culture of the places I had to serve in - not the job at hand which was in every aspect as bad as it gets. All told I was overseas from July 1966 until January 1968 when I was wounded in action and medivaced back to the US.

After my release from the hospital and my discharge from the service I fully intended to leave America completely behind, making a decision to go to either Australia or New Zealand to escape the derangement of America. I did not make it that far as I found a

culture or more correctly a subculture inside of America itself. As I have written elsewhere I found that property was incredibly cheap in the state of Maine so I bought 4 acres of land and an old shingle mill where I lived with my partner Janet for three years without running water and electricity and all the modern conveniences. It was a grand juncture of healing and a period of substantial learning about simple **things** – carrying water, chopping wood , goat husbandry, growing organic food and so on. More than anything it was a time of great healing and also a time where my previously unnoticed or unattended desire to express myself through visual arts emerged and blossomed. By then I had recognized that the terrible narrative of war that I had been plunged into at such an early age was at it's core a grand folly generated by capital, finance and the xenophobic lust for commodities and had little to do with the honor sacrifice and preservation of democracy as I had naïvely believed as a youth coming of age in cold war America. In Maine the simple and rarefied subculture of communal living based on a subsistence lifestyle divorced from commodification and business as usual offered a new vision of the natural world in all its beauty and simplicity. Folks in the back woods of Maine at that time were in fact living with methods, practices and traditions that were often 50 to 70 years behind the times. We learned so many useful practical and elegant ways of doing simple farm work that had somehow remain obscured behind the machinery and noise of the dominant culture. The practice of art emerged in my life at that time from the tactile hand skills needed to survive from day to day. Ordering wood carving tools from the bible of backwoods culture called the Whole Earth Catalog I went on to

teach myself how to carve wood. Even though I enjoyed this practice very much, it was not what I needed to express the visceral emotional and psychological wounds that I was forced to deal with so directly in order to survive psychically and find a way back to some sort of peace within. After the three years of subsistence living was up I decided to go to college under the veterans rehabilitation program that was being offered to disabled veterans at that time. Of course college is where I fell in love with filmmaking, photography assemblage sculpture and all the rest.

In 1975 and again in 1976 while I was still attending college Janet and I spent two long summers, a total of almost 7 months living in the highlands of Guatemala amongst the Ixil, the native Mayan culture in that part of the altiplano around Nebaj. In fact we rented a house for as little as \$30 a month and submerged ourselves as much as possible in the lives of those wonderful people.

I can recall one very strange night during the second year's visit when the Mayan men invited me to join a raucous Cofradia ceremony which involved a lot of drinking of a corn liquor called *cusha* and all night dancing between men. When I was first ushered through the gate to join them I was somewhat shocked - not that the men were so drunk or even that they were dancing together but each and every one of them was weeping copiously without let up. I'm not certain what I learned that night, but before I left I spent at least a couple of hours dancing drinking and yes weeping until I was carried to the doorstep of our Hacienda in the wee hours of the morning.

The film entitled Sabda emerged from my seven months in India on two separate journeys. For the most part I lived and worked around the indigenous cultures of India - the outcast and untouchables of the caste system. I think this is somewhat evident in the film itself. Of course there was a huge and momentous spiritual dimension to my time in India, but I was never one to discriminate between body and soul, clearly they must be the same on a very basic level.

On my way to the second visit in India I was in northern Wales for two weeks and was completely enamored; not only with the Neolithic sites I was visiting but the very land itself. It quickly became clear to me that the Welsh have a very distinctive language, culture and way of being. I remember seeing all these little signs in a village called Porthmadog near Snowdonia that indicated *no parking* in Welsh that were spelled out in Welsh and English "*Dim O Gwybil - at any time*" -- I was so impressed that I went and found the small building where municipal signs were made and after inquiring about the little blue red yellow signs kindly being given two of them to take with me – I still have at least one of them somewhere... During that time I visited many cairns and cromlechs all the while filming in the fog and drizzle and being astonished at all the life that was thriving between the slate gray and the unfolding green that spread out around me. Towards the end of my trek I remember quite clearly musing on what a profoundly lovely and peaceful place that I was traveling through and how one might find great peace and tranquility there.

On that same journey I spent quite some time in the Pyrenees of northern Spain where I discovered many abandoned villages

sprinkled through the hills and valleys - and of course out of this was born the genesis of Sombra aSombra which I finished a few years later while living on the Isle of Lewis after returning to Spain in late 1986. As mentioned the purpose of going to Lewis was to explore and film the wonderful Callanish stones but of course I had no idea that I would meet my daughter Adele's mother Linda and eventually move back to the Isle of Lewis a few months later. Paris had been beautiful and forlorn at the same time – I had received a Guggenheim Fellowship that year and had taught a 20 week course on video as an art form at the American Center on Boulevard Raspail. During my first sojourn in France I traveled all around Europe collecting footage for the three channel video work that would eventually be named “**try to live to see this**”.

There is so much of my quotidian life and daily wandering about the island with my video equipment that is at the heart of these three ninety minute simultaneously running films. I would return to the Callanish standing stones again and again during my time there, on summer solstices, moonlit nights broad summer days filming in real time and time lapse to capture the exquisite energy and fascinating sculptural quality of these ancient stones. When I think back to living on the Western Isles I realized that my sojourn there was also somehow like going back in time, in that many things were done the same way they were done 75 or 100 years earlier. This quality appealed to me deeply, so in many ways my life in the outer Hebrides was a life of solitude and contemplation in a natural world far away but somehow still connected at least tenuously to the modern world. The free Church of Scotland and the Calvinist roots on Lewis

particularly were a rather strange and cranky hybrid ritual for me at times. But that dour quality for the most part was only noticeable on the Sabbath when I might take long 20 mile bike rides out and back across the island trying to pass the churches when they were either full or empty but not filling or emptying so that the parking lots would be full of people projecting a kind of a cold disdain that someone should be out and about enjoying themselves on the sabbath. That was most likely my own projection as I always flee from disturbing others. Out of respect for all that I would not blatantly work in the garden on a Sunday or patch the roof or perform any work outside the house. When I first moved to Lewis the children's swings in the playground were still being chained up to keep them from being used on a Sunday. The main thing for me was that people had these austere and severe beliefs but they also had a common dignity and order in their lives which was not necessarily evident elsewhere. The Gaelic language itself was a kind of every day poetry of the voice and on a one to one basis people were always consistently kind, direct and a little shy which suits me well. In my estimation, the Calvinist restrictions were something laid on later in the history of these Isles not something necessarily integral to the people who came out there centuries ago and stayed, flourished and developed a vibrant and meaningful subsistence culture. So essentially in my life during those years there was a calmness quietude and deliberate attention to the things of the world - kestrels, peat bogs, marine life, tide pools, constantly shifting skies and wind patterns, voles, and all the magnificently venerable and weathered stones; all of this set down in patterns beyond the edge of remembered time, full of mystery and

resisting any simple explanation. My life in Paris in the preceding year had been both wonderful and difficult and included the sorrowful breakup of my first marriage, so solitude reflection and an ongoing discourse with a much simpler life was both nourishing and invigorating. From the time I was four years old, immersion in the natural world had always seemed the best activity available to me. A sprawling garden or secret pine forest were always places where I could find refuge and protect my sovereignty from the annoying onslaughts of parental and parochial demands. So in many ways living in the Western Isles was very much a kind of retreat, a simple yet bounteous hermetic going inward where much work, both the expressive kind and the internal transformational shifts were allowed to blossom in the singular protection one receives from being an outsider in a culture with not only a completely different tongue but a clear and sharply distinctive idea of itself. In some way it may sound a bit romantic but on the daily level it was a perfect place to continue becoming real, becoming human and realizing once again that the world was the only world we had, well worth exploring and protecting in all ways.