



Creative by Nature Art

# Bathing in Sensation:

## Artful Engagement with a Tree



LISA LIPSETT

# BATHING IN SENSATION

## ARTFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH A TREE

**Lisa Lipsett**



When we purposely combine sensory engagement with spontaneous creative expression, we activate a very powerful way to know self and earth that deepens heartfelt belonging, and gives us a heightened sense of well-being. We reap the emotional, physical and spiritual benefits of a nature connected creative life. This article briefly explores the theory and research behind sensory engagement with nature, shares an artful encounter with a tree, and invites the reader to develop a creative tree connection of their own.

### SENSUAL ENGAGEMENT AND CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Each of us has the capacity to tune into nature through intuition, touch, listening, smell, taste and sight. By regularly shifting our everyday awareness to in-the-moment presence, through our senses, we strengthen this inherent capacity. Furthermore, drawing and painting with nature helps us to more easily make, and then sustain this shift into connection.

Getting in touch with a tree.



According to Eco-Art therapist, Theresa Sweeney, we have 54 senses that can help us to connect (Sweeney, 2013). Whether there are many senses

or just a handful, the point is we are sensuous creatures who are hard-wired to tune into the living world. Sweeney quotes Irish poet John O'Donohue to bring this point home.

*"Human skin is porous; the world flows through you. Your senses are large pores that let the world in. By being attuned to the wisdom of your senses, you will never become an exile in your own life, an outsider lost in an external spiritual place that your will and intellect, have constructed." John O'Donohue (1998), Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

Further, art-making that helps us know ourselves and nature more fully is also our birthright. We are creative by virtue of being alive and embodied. So we can connect through our senses, then access our creativity as a way to track and deepen our experience. The act of creating in nature literally awakens more of our capacity to tune into the living world and ourselves.



Beautiful forest

Our awareness is deepened, and attention strengthened when more than one sense is engaged. When art-making, we can open to double or even triple perception as our ears tune into a sound and both hands track the rhythm, pitch and tone on a page, feeling the movement and texture of the sound, feeling the temperature and texture of the paint, and seeing the lines, forms and colours as they blossom on the page. Double sensing, also known as synaesthesia, is a neurological condition described in neuroscience, but in the arts it denotes those times when we experience more than one sense simultaneously. It is this simultaneous perception that cultural ecologist David Abram (1996) says really awakens our connection to the

living world. Further, there is a boundless exchange between self and nature that happens.

“There is an intimate reciprocity to the senses; as we touch the bark of a tree, we feel the tree touching us; as we lend our ears to the local sounds and ally our nose to the seasonal scents, the terrain gradually tunes us in turn. The senses, that is, are the primary way that the earth has of informing our thoughts and of guiding our actions.” - David Abram

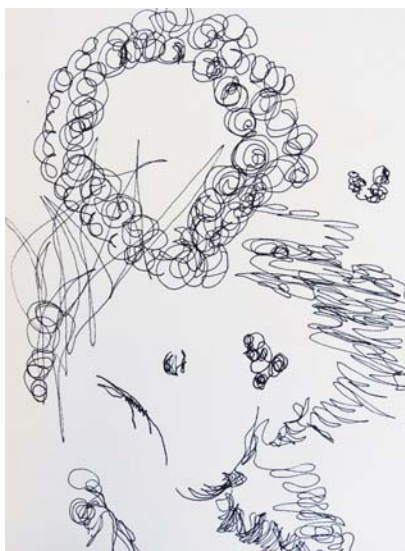
## GETTING OUTSIDE - THE BENEFITS OF FOREST BATHING

Forest Bathing or Shinrin-yoku, as it's called in Japan, is a bodily, emotional and multi-sensory experience. Participants open to a kind of forest aromatherapy, another experience of synaesthesia.

According to Florence Williams, in the December 2012 issue of Outside magazine, Shinrin-yoku was inspired by ancient Shinto and Buddhist practices, and is about letting nature enter the body through all five senses. People come out from the city and literally shower in the greenery.

Forest Bathing researcher, Yoshifumi Miyazaki, believes that because humans evolved in nature, it's where we feel most comfortable. He has taken more than 600 research subjects into the woods since 2004. In research conducted in 24 forest therapy trails in Japan, measures of physiological change related to the reduction of stress and experience of well-being have been monitored. These include salivary cortisol levels, blood pressure, pulse rate, and heart rate. Researchers have also recorded what they term mood states.

The studies of Shinrin-yoku provide valuable insights into the relationship between forests and human health. In particular, Miyazaki and his colleague Juyoung Lee have found that leisurely forest walks, compared with urban walks, yield a 12.4 percent decrease in the stress hormone cortisol, a seven percent decrease in sympathetic nerve activity, a 1.4 percent decrease in blood pressure, and a 5.8 percent decrease in heart rate. On subjective tests,



Top left: Tree sculpture - side view. artist unknown

Top right: Tree sculpture - front view. artist unknown

Above: Drawing with a tree

study participants also report better moods and lower anxiety. Forest Bathing researchers also found that it is not enough to simply power walk through the forest to attain these emotional and physiological benefits, rather multi-sensory engagement was key, as was a leisurely mind set and repeated exposure. Harvard physician, Eva M. Selhub, co-author of *Your Brain on Nature* concurs. She says a drop of nature is like a

drop of morphine to the brain, since it “stimulates reward neurons in your brain and it turns off the stress response”. Inspired by these findings, other countries like South Korea and Finland are now following suit with forest therapy trails of their own.

## AN ARTFUL TREE ENCOUNTER

Deep forest art-making has always been a passion of mine. I love the silence, the sense of the community created by the many trees, and the rich oxygenated air. In that spirit, last weekend my daughter and I participated in the Opus Outdoor Painting Challenge on Granville Island in Vancouver. Though not deep in the forest, how marvellous it was to see so many people quietly and fully engaged with the rolling lawns, rippling water, seagulls, crows, mini forest and people strolling by, as they painted and drew.

During the challenge, I was immediately attracted to a round, hanging, bee hive like ring made of tree branch cross sections. I loved its full roundness, its warm amber colour and interesting pattern of repetitive shapes. I especially loved how it framed the tree behind, like a woodsy looking glass.

To begin my art-making session, I sat down on the ground facing the sculpture and began first by closing my eyes and listening, then I drew with my left hand, then my right, then both hands as my eyes slowly explored the contours and patterns of the tree and sculpture I was seeing. I became fascinated very quickly with the mottled grey bark of the tree that the sculpture hung upon. Once again, my eyes slowly tracked the ridges in its surface while my hands together and in turn tracked lines on the page. Suddenly, a large black ant crossed my page, and I tracked its movements following close behind with my pen as it meandered this way and that.

Then I moved to my wooden board and filled the amazing tree ring lines and swirls inherent in the wood with oil pastel, then layered this over with white gouache - a water-based paint that is thicker and creamier than watercolour. After, I scraped away at the surface with the sharp point of a



Top: Painting with a tree

Above: Finished painting

compass, following the lines of the hanging sculpture and tracing the shapes of the tree leaves.

There was a timeless, soft feeling to this creative session as spring's abundance of blossoms, greenery and sweet smells filled me up. My painting remains as a postcard from the experience.

## TRY THIS

Wander your yard or neighbourhood with paint kit, pens, water and paper in hand. Open to a tree that calls to you. Commit to sitting with the tree for at least 20 minutes, three times a week for a month (see Jon Young's description of a Sit Spot in the references). Also to get you started, I outline the Create Cycle and an eight-day sense-based Creative Nature Connection art practice you can follow (see Sage-ing, Fall 2013, pages 20-23). I invite you to try a variety of sensory encounters with your tree. Play with movement, paint smell and texture, listen deeply, feel into your own breath, work from your intuition, work with your eyes closed, use both hands and your non-dominant hand, and be free and playful. Where do you sense this tree in your body? For added fun, I invite you to change your perspective while drawing and painting. See here for inspiration on how to flip your world upside-down. [www.thedrivetocreate.com/2014/04/flip-your-world-drawing.html](http://www.thedrivetocreate.com/2014/04/flip-your-world-drawing.html) At the end of each session, reflect on something you noticed or wondered about. Share your experiences with someone.

Learn more about Creative by Nature Art -[www.creativebynature.org](http://www.creativebynature.org)  
This article originally appeared in Sage-ing Journal, Summer 2014

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