

A gift relationship with nature is a "formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon, natural increase. We tend to respond to nature as part of our selves, not a stranger or alien available for exploitation. Gift exchange is the commerce of choice, for it is commerce that harmonizes with, or participates in, the process of [natures] increase."

-Lewis Hyde, quoted in *Braiding Sweetgrass*

My husband, TJ, and I moved to Norway for a job, but it was the environments that drew us there in the first place. We have lived in our tent, travelling for weeks from Oslo to Oslo, from Narvik to Kristiansund. We've never owned a house, and we've given away nearly everything we owned several times to start anew. We've learned new languages and cultures and things about ourselves. What's been a staple in our lives? Being outside. Sunshine, rain, snow, heavy packs, sore feet, uneven terrain; rainbows, reindeer, shared adventures.

For two years during the COVID pandemic, we lived in the tiny town of Folldal. We could see moose, hare, and Northern Lights from our back door. It didn't get dark in summer and you could see a million stars in winter. We slaved away & lived with the rhythms of the celestial seasons, eating homemade food and spending every moment we could outside. Mountains in Rondane National park were visible from the old farmhouse we rented. We've seen reindeer herds in our long-distance treks through Rondane. But the landscapes aren't all pristine: Folldal was once a mining town and the hillsides still bear the scars.

Where's all this going, & what does it have to do with my artistic practice, you ask. Finding time to learn from, and reflect on, life around us has kept me grounded. I started my practice as a landscape photographer, noticing the little things. Now that I look back on it, I've been looking at relationships for a long time. Mine, to the outdoor world around me. Other peoples' to my artwork. Local culture to other cultures.

The science of ecology works on a set of relations between beings, and humans are part of it. And we're taking a lot more than we're giving, in connection with the rest of the living world. In the last few years, I've come to appreciate indigenous wisdom and to inspect history as it's been written through colonial eyes. I try not to appropriate that which is not mine for the taking.

Environment. What does this word mean? Miljø/milieu? The world around you? What are the biopolitics of it today? What paradigms do we learn or un-learn, re-map? Do we need a new manifesto? How can we share knowledge about the plants and animals that we see as commodities in the western world? Can we write theory so all lifeforms thrive?

A way for me to sort ideas, to reflect and analyze, to learn & discover, is to go for a solitary walk in a place without humans, or as close to that as I can find. It's a method to think about what's happened. Or not happened. Or what I should / could do next. Even better if I can sit in a quiet place outside and draw. What I see. What I want to see. What I think others should see, what others might miss. The first flower of spring, paw prints, reindeer.

It's a way for me to sort through the culture I've jumped into or run away from. It's meditation, it's therapy, it's time and space away where I don't have to think at all about anything other than what's beautifully around me now.

It's a way to slow down, to get away from idolising a bigger, better life with more things and more recognition. Or a way to give myself space to cry about what's been lost. Or found. To document what life looks like right now, and the wonderful swathes of colour on a grey day. To marvel at the flowers, the bees, the changing colours of leaves or hares. To find the ways I'm moving forward as I keep learning.

Where am I going with all of this? Maybe north, north of Tromsø for Sámi knowledge, so I can finally learn about indigenous culture in the nation I call home. Maybe walking near lakes in Lian with a group of people to learn what they see and hear in the world around them. Perhaps it's shaping cardboard into trees, marking up an interactive outdoor 3D installation. I could be working with local artists & gardeners to build a community where art and wisdom come together, where wonder opens eyes & builds bridges. No matter what, I'll be outside as much as possible, and the artwork I create will come from my hands and heart.

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-Marie Preston
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