

# Snakes and Ladders: A Fertile Framework for the Future

**Anne Bennett**

Monash University, Faculty of Art & Design

## Introduction

Focusing on the good/evil binary and its symbols, my PhD studio research project titled *Separation and Division: the Ideology of Good and Evil*, investigates the moral underpinning of Western culture. I am currently working with a number of visual explorations, which deploy dualist symbols, particularly the serpent from the Garden of Eden in order to explore the complexity and contradictions inherent in such symbols and the persistent systems of order that they have served.

One example of this research, to be addressed in this paper uses the game of snakes and ladders as a starting point [Figure 1]. I will show how in my artistic project, a reworking of this 'up and down'<sup>1</sup> game of morality becomes both pictorial device and a fertile framework for future non-dualist philosophical paradigms. Set in my altered Eden this game metaphor becomes capable, of engendering complexity, resisting dichotomous reductions and disrupting their inherent privileging.



Figure 1: Anne Bennett 'On Slippery Ground # 2', 2005 mixed media collage on arches rive, 200 x 110 cm.

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Finkel (2005) *Games: Discover and Play 5 Famous Ancient Games*, The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

## The Continuing Influence of Dualism

Dichotomous thought, embraced by the Western philosophic project still deeply permeates contemporary culture. Through patterns of separation and division (with its implied violence)<sup>2</sup>, binary polarisation establishes systems of order, power relations and social control. Dualist oppositions constitute hierarchical systems, which usually privilege those defining the differences under the guise of immutability. Elizabeth Grosz points out that, because of this pervading deep seated influence '[d]ualism underlies the current preoccupations of not only many philosophers but also of feminist theorists.'<sup>3</sup> Much of their diverse and thorough investigations probe the very conception of knowledge and centre on the complexities of subjectivity and dissonances surrounding ontological dualism. That is the splitting of the self from the other and the mind from the body. But it is binary structures entrenched within the religious/political nexus with which I am primarily concerned.

## The Religious / Political Nexus

In the current global political climate, post 9/11 an examination of the good and evil binary has become of pressing importance. Postmodern sympathisers can no longer marginalise the dualistic doctrines being fuelled by fundamentalist fervour and trumpeted by populist rhetoric. Deemed merely the residual manifestations of outmoded world orders, British cultural theorist, Stuart Sim in his recent book *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma* signals that:

Even more ominously it has become evident that fundamentalism runs deeper in our culture than just matters of religion....[It is] inextricably linked with politics.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, fundamentalist mindsets 'ripple' through 'all spheres of life' whether we like it or not, permeating ethnic, national, political, social and economic discourses.<sup>5</sup>

American anthropologist, A. F. Robertson has also identified links between market structures and religious doctrine. His socio-economic analysis, titled *Greed: Gut Feelings, Growth, and History*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Jacques Derrida's and Nancy Jay's observations on the violent nature of dualist thought see Elizabeth Grosz (1994) *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, p.211.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.vii. See also p.164.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Sim (2004) *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma*, Icon Books, Cambridge, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p.5. Sims continues, flagging market fundamentalism as 'a case in point.'

<sup>6</sup> A.F. Robertson (2001) *Greed: Gut Feelings, Growth, and History*, Polity Press, Cambridge

traces the root of current economic behaviour back to dualist thinking and the binary moral constructs emanating from the Christian myth of the Fall.

The story of Adam and Eve lays out a pattern of separations: needs and desires, body and soul, nature and society, good and evil, innocence and shame, power and freedom, rules and choice, growth and history.

.... Genesis is a story about the moral agony of physical growth and material progress, and the costs of claiming the right to know what we want and to manage our own affairs.<sup>7</sup>

Robertson's research also exposes how the process of 'dignifying ...the mind'<sup>8</sup> enshrined in Western culture, has artificially legitimised the abdication of moral responsibility from intellectual thought by simultaneously 'obliterating' the status of feelings.<sup>9</sup>

Anthropologists Carolyn Merchant and Evan Eisenberg<sup>10</sup> also elucidate the ways in which such bi-polar divisions resulted in the establishment of cultural and psychological mechanisms of order still in operation today. Both Merchant and Eisenberg locate the Edenic origin myth as the source of various theological and scientific rationales, which have sanctioned and indeed valourised the continuing human exploration and colonization of the globe, the exploitation of natural resources for human consumption and the scientific classification of the natural environment.

## **The Appropriation of Christian Edenic Iconography and Dualist Symbols**

Traditional Christian iconography provides a visually rich, familiar and value-laden harvest of symbols. Etched into popular conscious Edenic symbols are evident in popular culture, often underpinning savvy marketing campaigns<sup>11</sup> and satiric political cartoons. The spectre of Albrecht Durer's and Cranach the Elder's portrayals of the famous duo, Adam and Eve astride the tree of the knowledge of good and evil hovers in collective memory. Cartoonist John Spooner<sup>12</sup> apes their familiar posturing to expose the political opportunism sprouting from the call to reintroduce the concept of 'intelligent design' into school curricula. Drawing certain parallels, printmaker Rew

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p.37.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter heading, *ibid*, p.37.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, p.48

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Merchant (2003) *Reinventing Eden: the Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, Routledge, New York, London; and Evan Eisenberg (1998) *Ecology of Eden*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

<sup>11</sup> The Valtur advertisement, *Leggo Anno 4*, numero 119, Firenze, mercoledì 23 Givgno 2004 stands as one example.

<sup>12</sup> John Spooner 'Intelligent Design', Cartoon, *The Age*, October 2004.

Hanks' <sup>13</sup> 'engineered Eden' cleverly grafts the myth of creation with the history of colonisation and technology of cloning. Michael Archer (the inaugural Director of the Australian Museum) plays the role of Adam. While Queen Victoria, proffering a test tube Tassie Tiger embryo, understudies for Eve.

A number of other significant contemporary artists, in their reappraisal of the socio-political-environmental consequences of dualist modalities have re-deployed the image of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This ideologically laden symbol is dualistic. In addition to the good and evil binary, this symbol also traditionally infers the up and down hierarchy of Heaven and Earth and of male and female relations.<sup>14</sup> It also serves as a paradigm of knowledge and for the rules (and penalties) for accessing this knowledge (and attaining self-consciousness and self-determination).

Bill Viola frequently makes use of religious iconography in his quest to collapse mind and body distinctions. In his 1997 computer generated animation, Viola sequences the life / death cycle of a tree. Titled *The Tree of Knowledge*<sup>15</sup>, Viola equates knowledge to self-awareness of the human condition.<sup>16</sup>

In the installation (an aviary), titled *The Library for the Birds of Antwerp*<sup>17</sup>, Mark Dion exposes issues of power and control. At its centre stands a dead tree, supported by various trappings of knowledge such as books and specimen cages. He refers to the Tree of Knowledge at the heart of 'Man's' fall from nature into culture and into the top branch of the next tree. Making reference to Darwin's 'phylogenetic tree', which posited human sapiens at the apex of the evolutionary hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> Dion presents another 'stuffed' Eden in his sculpture *Tar and Feathers*<sup>19</sup>. A dead tree trunk also bears sterile fruit in the form of lifeless, bitumen-coated vermin.

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<sup>13</sup> Rew Hanks 'We Don't Have To' c. 2002, Lino cut, cited *The Art of Success: Sulman and Salon des Refusés* honour for TAFE NSW, online, TAFE N.S.W. News Article 27 March 2003. [http://www.tafensw.edu.au/news/sulman\\_salon\\_2003.htm](http://www.tafensw.edu.au/news/sulman_salon_2003.htm) [accessed 10/12/06].

<sup>14</sup> See 'Tree' 1996, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Penguin Reference.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Viola 'The Tree of Knowledge' 1997, four stills from an interactive computer installation, photos Kira Perov, cited *Art in America*, March 1998, New York, p.77.

<sup>16</sup> See Rutledge, Virginia 'Art at the End of the Optical Age' (interview with Bill Viola), *ibid*, p.75.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Dion 'Library for the Birds of Antwerp' 1993, installation, cited Thompson, Nato (ed.) 2005 *Becoming Animal: Contemporary art in the Animal Kingdom*, MASS MoCA, MIT Press, North Adams, Massachusetts, p.17.

<sup>18</sup> See Norman Bryson 'Focus: Mark Dion and the Birds of Antwerp', *ibid*, pp.88-97.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Dion 'Tar and Feathers' 1996, installation, cited *ibid*, p.32.

Like Dion, Australian, Fiona Hall also frames trees. Literally peeling back taxonomical layering and other systems of classification and knowledge in her sardine tin sculptures<sup>20</sup>. Hall reveals investments in power and economic imperatives but is also interested in sexual relations. Base metal immortalises base instincts. Encasing botanical specimens, which sprout from human sexual organs, Hall lubricates both mind and senses as she pricks our conscious. Hall's earlier work produced in the 1980's dealt directly with Biblical themes. Titles include *Paradise Series* 1984, *The Seven Deadly Sins* 1985 and *The Divine Comedy* 1988.<sup>21</sup> These photographs of painterly assemblages and photomontages present chaotic, wild and uncertain Edens, sometimes licentious, cavorting with dark and light.

## The Snake as Serpent

In my visual research I also have entered Eden, trespassing on that highly charged and value infested terrain. I have chosen to rework the Judaic-Christian story of the Fall because it enacts a plot of division and dualities, embodies an interplay between free will and obedience to prescribed rules and because it is Western culture's foundation myth. In contrast to many other artists who inhabit my research area, I have been focusing on the serpent iconography and its position in the formation of human moral/ religious formations.<sup>22</sup>

Snakes, the most vilified and slippery animal of them all, continue to prove an enduring and useful symbol, a contender for Deleuze and Guattari's pantheon of postmodern 'demonic' animals capable of embodying 'multiplicity'.<sup>23</sup> In the Garden of Eden, the snake was first ensnared within the good and evil binary. Framed for Man's original act of disobedience it was type cast as the 'serpent' - becoming an incarnate of 'otherness'. This cold-blooded animal regularly assigned the role of 'other' is weighed down by hot-blooded human desires and 'psychical investments'.<sup>24</sup> The simplicity and elegance of the snake's form belies its complexity and power. Of all animals it is the least human. No limbs. No eyelids. Forked tongue. An expandable, scaled skin. No tactile furred pelt here to soften its image and lend charisma. The serpent/ snake is simultaneously repellent and fascinating,

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<sup>20</sup> For example see Fiona Hall 'Citrus paradisi / grapefruit: Paradisus terretris 1988-90', National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, cited Julie Ewington (2005) *Fiona Hall*, Piper Press, Annandale, NSW, p.100.

<sup>21</sup> For example see Fiona Hall 'Temptation of Eve' Paradise series 1984, cited *ibid* p.66.

<sup>22</sup> Sergio Vega 'The Curse' Photograph cited *Cream 3: Contemporary Art in Culture: 10 curators, 100 Contemporary Artists; 10 Source Artists*, 2003, Phaidon, London; New York. In one isolated work, Argentinean artist Sergio Vega positioned the snake as protagonist. This photographic work titled 'The Curse', literally quoted Biblical text. Vega who is well known for deconstructing the way Latin America has been invested with an Edenic mythology, usually casts the parrot in the dual role of 'sacred icon - and - profane mouthpiece for the third world'. Cited Guagnini, Nicholas 'Sergio Vega', online, Winter 2001 No.74, A/K/A New Art Publications, Brooklyn, NY, Bomb magazine, <http://www.bombsite.com/vega/vega.html> [accessed 30/9/05].

<sup>23</sup> See Steve Baker (2000) *The Post Modern Animal*, Reaktion Books, London, p.168.

<sup>24</sup> To borrow Elizabeth Grosz's term, cited *op. cit.*, p173.

eliciting a sense of awe, never indifference. It remains a paradox of opposites, inherently ambivalent. Snakes, which are either 'revered' or 'reviled',<sup>25</sup> have served humans as both a creative and a destructive symbol.

Suspense and horror films trade in such ambivalent feelings. The recent cinematic offering, *Snakes on a Plane* perhaps serves a continuing human need to symbolically transgress treacherous terrain albeit at a safe distance and in the comfort of an upholstered arena sanctioned by the mainstream.

## Signification of the Game of Snakes and Ladders

One pivotal area of my research is based on the board game snakes and ladders which is set in my own environs. My linking of snakes and the symbol of the ladder with notions of good and evil is apposite. This 'up and down game' is traditionally a game of morality, originally played by children to teach them the rights and wrongs of life. The ladders balance on labeled squares representing various virtues while the heads of snakes stem from squares denoting vice. The snakes and ladders game potentially plays out as a metaphor for philosophy, mirroring the Western moral project despite its Hindu origins.<sup>26</sup>

Christian ladder symbols also common to many cultures, strongly suggest that traditional but impermanent link between Heaven and Earth. 'The ladder indicates that mankind can ascend to heaven and the divine can descend to earth, but also implies that the link between the two is unstable'.<sup>27</sup> A ladder can only ever provide a temporary bridge between two bipolar positions. On shifting footings they are in constant danger of collapse. Recognising strong parallels with the Christian symbology of serpent and ladder, the British Raj in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century enthusiastically embraced the *Moksha – Patamu* game. Sporting a new name and with only a few minor modifications it soon colonised Victorian England's psyche. Within a decade over one hundred versions proliferated throughout the colonies. Fostering a new global information economy, it trafficked in paternalism.

Although this game ... encourage[s] good values, things were slightly complicated for young players when they read the rules [accompanying an early Australian version], which carefully explained how to play for stakes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Marilyn Nissenson et al. (1995) *Snake Charm*, Harry N. Abrams, New York.

<sup>26</sup> Originating in India, the game of Snakes and Ladders was known as *Moksha – Patamu* (Salvation and Sins). The idea was to introduce children to the Hindu notion that by doing good deeds they would eventually ascend through various levels to Nirvana. But, for boys behaving badly and girls with bad karma, the snakes would plunge them down to lower strata, the game mimicking a process of reincarnation.

<sup>27</sup> David Fontana (1993) *The Secret Language of Symbols: A Visual Key to Symbols and Their Meanings*, Pavilion, London, p.138.

<sup>28</sup> *The Games We Played: A National Archives of Australia*, Exhibition, 2005 National Archives publication, Parkes, ACT.

## Assembling Snakes and Ladders

The conventional format is made up of 100 squares in a grid, 10 by 10. The very first version sold in England in 1892 was configured as a spiral. In the Indian cultivars, the number of squares often varied, and so too the ratio of snakes to ladders. In my series titled *On Slippery Ground* 2005 [Figure 2], I too form grids of 10 x10 and vary the number of my snakes and ladders. Sometimes these reptiles and their climbing devices point neither up nor down. But by placing them in various

orientations and states of disorientation within fractured chaotic Edens I open up the possibility of new, multiple meanings. The two-way movement between hierarchical dualistic divisions is disrupted, shaky and impermanent.



Figure 2: Anne Bennett 'On Slippery Ground # 1', 2005 mixed media collage on arches rive, detail.

The depiction of the game by Australian printmaker, Barbara Hanrahan in her 1978 etching titled *Snakes and Ladders*<sup>29</sup> [Figure 3] diverges from my use of the motif in content and fundamentally in form. She placed virtuous, demure looking adolescent girls at the foot of ladders while bare breasted sexualised females got all the fun, riding snakes on a downward journey. It is a witty and engaging image but I tend to think it still contains the potential to reinforce rather than subvert the old dualistic division of women as either saints or sinners. The naughty girls definitely look more

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Hanrahan 'Snakes and Ladders' 1978, etching cited Sasha Grishin (1994) *Contemporary Australian Printmaking: An Interpretative History*, Craftsman House, Roseville, East, NSW fig. 39.

tantalizing but may not be fully immune to the virulent strain of contamination that the women in George Grosz's neurotic and patronising pastiches have suffered.

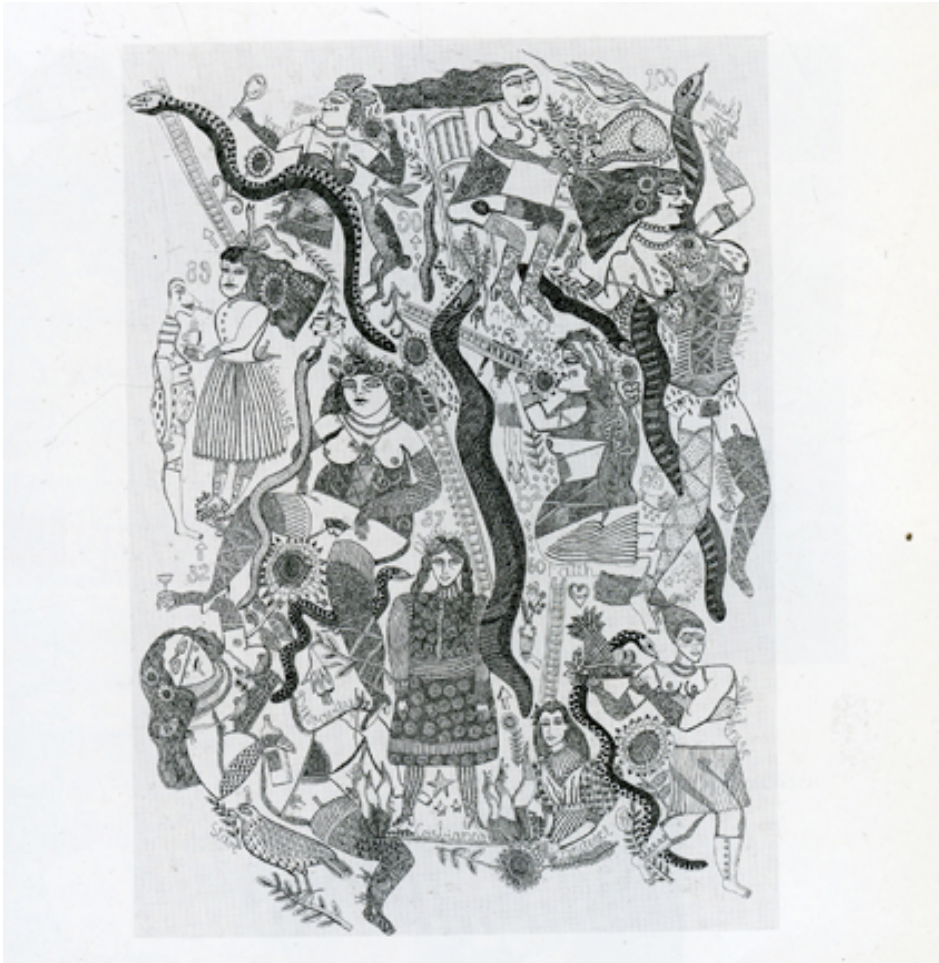


Figure 3: Barbara Hanrahan 'Snakes and Ladders', 1978 etching.

In contrast, the snakes and ladder motif in my work lays out tableaux of segments. Each rectangle frames my philosophical preoccupations with separation and division. The grids mirror those of the board game and reflect the Cartesian desire for certainty and conformity. But symbols flicker through the 'bigger picture', illusive, shifting, slippery, unfathomable, a metaphor for life itself and our understanding of it or lack of understanding of it. Each of my works is a collage, an assemblage of fragments. Two or three observational drawings, which reference my own environs as well as trigger symbolic associations, collapse into the one complex nexus. Sometimes interwoven with found papers, apple orchards near Pakenham where I live give way suburban subdivisions, wallpaper gardens and empty promises of model family life. Indigenous inhabitants such as copperhead snakes become displaced. [Figures 4 & 5].



## Slipping into the Future

Creative (studio-based) research projects have potential to engender symbiotic exchanges and slippages between text-based thought and visual imaging. With a common desire to resist the privileged position of extant metaphysical structures and cultural foundations Deleuze and Guattari's notions of 'fragments, intensities and flows'<sup>30</sup> correlate with me. Bipolar in origin, extant systems have too often been held up as immutable in order to camouflage investments of control. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'assemblage' also resonates with my work. My collages constituted of fractured glimpses and sliced segments of snakes, ladders, apple trees and fleshy fruit form precarious relations on the verge of flux.

Assemblages are provisional linkages of elements, fragments, flows, of disparate status and substance: ideas, things- human, animate, and inanimate - all have the same ontological status... It is not that the world is without strata, totally flattened: rather, the hierarchies are not the result of substances and their nature and value but modes of organization of disparate substances.<sup>31</sup>

In future research, and with increasingly evocative visualisations of the snakes and ladder metaphor, I wish to escape the mindless certainty of Eden. I tread on slippery ground entering a more complex and shifting state, which demands reflection and choice. I set forth into the future, galvanized by Elizabeth Grosz's words:

...[I]f we do not walk in dangerous places and different types of terrain, nothing new will be found, no explorations are possible, and things remain the same.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See chapter 7, Elizabeth Grosz, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* p.167.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 173.



Figure 4: Anne Bennett 'On Slippery Ground # 4', 2005 mixed media collage on arches rive, 200 x 110 cm.



Figure 5: Anne Bennett 'Assent and Dissent #1', 2006, etching and monotype collage on arches rive, 200 x 110 cm.