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Liveliness: Can sympoietic painting save forms of life?

Keywords: Art, Affinity, Affine, Images, Life, Liveliness, Meshwork, Painting, Planet, Sympoiesis, Symbiosis, Vitality

Abstract

The view that images have a life of their own is a well-known vitalist projection (Hans Belting, WJT Mitchell). I extend the trope of the living painting to a systemic order of aliveness, one that emphasises painting's becoming within a vital open system through Beth Dempster's (2000) concept of sympoiesis. With that in mind I ask: 'How might the metaphor of the poietic work extend to that of the living planet?' My conceptualisation of sympoietic painting makes a case for the saving of image life and planetary life by entwining the affective and sensible. I explore how vital formations that arise by way of webs and affinities fit into a sympoietic system of understanding artistic creation and are a powerful form of non-human address.

Throughout the paper, I describe works from my *Open Studio* shown at the Queensland Art Gallery (10 October 2020 – 31 January 2021). The project presented a replication of my studio, expanded paintings and a curated exhibition of works from the institution's collection, and hosted socially engaged events. Together they provided insight into my creative practice through structural and elective affinities. By working with affinities, I make affine-like formations that are enlivened through different painterly processes. In this paper I show how affinities are fundamental to sympoietic painting, and by evoking transformation and liveliness remind us that many species also form a fabric, one now contingent on a key human thread. I argue that affinities create bonds and relations that connect us to the sensing world and, by extension, sensible solutions.

Essay

In my *Open Studio*, on show at the Queensland Art Gallery (10 October 2020 – 31 January 2021), my overarching prompt reflected the relationship between art, artistic process and the living planet: 'My work is like an ecosystem; it is very much alive – the relationship between me and my work is symbioticⁱ and the audience is activated by the affinities at play'. In my expanded paintings, I identified two distinct kinds of affinities – one that emphasised structural kinship, analogy and homology, evoking communities of ideas, and the other

elective affinities that spoke to material transformation and attraction. According to American philosopher Donna Haraway (2019, p. 116), words and images that contain kinship affirm kin-making and 'relations of becoming'. A subsequent question arose: how do affinities create bonds and relations that connect us to the sensing world and, by extension, sensible solutions for our planetary future?

In recent times, German art historian and critic Isabelle Graw has argued that the trope of the living painting – a medium that is permeated by misplaced ideas of autonomy and self-expression – extends to a 'second-order aliveness' (Graw 2019, p. 23), one that emphasises the effect of its making; that is, a movement, or effect embodied in painting that suggests its becoming. Here the metaphor of the living work, extends to that of the living planet through an emphasis on generativity and becoming, and arguably by affinity with other human and non-human beings.

In thinking about ways of working with affinities in order to understand generative aspects of painting, the notion of 'sympoiesis' and its emphasis on liveliness and collective materiality can help us understand what painting offers in the present. Sympoiesis, in contrast to autopoiesis, is Beth Dempster's (2000) idea of an ecological sympoietic system, which is organisationally ajar, evolutionary, unpredictable and adaptive. As a heuristic that stresses collectivity and collaboration, sympoiesis views planetary life as a process of 'making with' others rather than making within an isolated system. If I were to rewrite the prompt for my open studio, I would substitute 'symbiosis' with 'sympoietic' to capture the fact that paintings are collectively produced and *continually* producing; their becoming involves complex interactions between beings, materiality, systems, and concealed histories.



Figure 1: Madeleine Kelly *Open Studio*, installation view, Queensland Art Gallery (10 October 2020 – 31 January 2021).

The painterly significance of sympoiesis suits my purposes, with the word 'poiesis' being a doublet of 'poetic'. Moreover, the etymology of the word poiesis, from the Greek 'to make', suggests making with and becoming with others. As Gary Iseminger (2004, p. 128) argues, 'the function of the artworld and practice of art is to promote aesthetic communication'. If we reflect on the extractive activities on earth over the past fifty years, it is not hard to conclude that our attitude to the planet ought to be more like art that searches for affinities through an aesthetic–poetic framework that connects communities.

My aesthetic has developed from biological and semiotic imagery, including Peruvian textiles, which encode symbols, motifs and meaning. In images generated within grids or patterns, affinities are born by virtue of the generative structures they share, which are often visible in weavings. These ideas crystallise in the curated exhibition component of my open studio, *Threads 2020*, which features Annie Albers' prints. Threads 'weave knowledge' and speak to interconnection, including humanity's entanglement with consumable energy and vibrant matter. The structural affinities within organisms and textiles, enabled by superstrings, contain the central characteristic of 'continuing poiesis: recursive production of structure and pattern of organisation' (Dempster 2000, p. 8).



Figure 2: Madeleine Kelly *Open Studio*, installation view of exhibition *Threads*, Queensland Art Gallery (10 October 2020 – 31 January 2021).

When painting, the bundle of forms I arrange emphasises linkage, metamorphosis, multi-stability and synergies rather than boundaries, and as such these images may be regarded as affines. The multiple meanings of the word *affine* rewards investigation. In anthropology, an affine is a relative by marriage. In Euclidean geometry, an affine allows for, or preserves, parallel relationships. In Haraway's (2019) provocation to make 'kin not population', kin include affines, story tellers of earthly survival that are born not by marriage but by 'patternmaking transformation, of the Born and the Disappeared' (2019, p. 93). For Haraway, halting population growth is key, 'making many fewer new babies in situated and power-sensitive reworldings ... is an inescapable thread in the weave' (2019, p. 99). Over the past six years, the linear patterns that have materialised in my paintings have evolved from geometric abstraction and textile traditions, creating affine-like formations that vector to the natural world.



Figure 3: Madeleine Kelly 'Lie in wait' 2020, oil on board, 44 x 66 cm. Photo: Chloe Callistemonster

Affinities in the Open Studio

In my animation 'Net casting' 2020 – named after a net-casting spider I observed watching the woven scroll / empty canvas / blank screen before it – lines of paint create a matrix and liveliness unfolds through many logics and layers. Painterly notions of the biological and woven matter are contained in the motif of the web, which accordingly signifies life. Visualisations of the web, and matrix, reflexively show how images we make and circulate are a form of thinking about making. And just as the web signifies life, Graw (2019, p. 45) contends that the very materiality of art 'preserves the reference to life ... [it] brings to mind the "matter" from which everything is made ... It's materiality, one might say, is life itself'. The fascinating relationship between affines, matrix and webs implies generativity. The word *matrix*, as it is conceived by Krauss (1993, p. 192), comes from the Latin root 'mater', and, as she elaborates, the term means 'womb, or mould'. Here, the matter of the womb is derived from the maternal-feminine, the word 'mater' itself attaining meaning from the words 'origin, source, mother' (Etymonline etymology dictionary). Boon (2011, p. 90) extends this etymology to the discourse of copying, or mimesis, stating, 'we speak of "matter", of "materialism", of cosmos as matrix, of copying as transformation'.



Figure 4: Madeleine Kelly, 'Net casting' (detail) 2020, high-definition video, approx. 6:30 min.

The antiquity of these ideas in the history of Western painting is realised in the works of seventeenth-century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez. He depicted a connection between spinning, charge and vitality when he painted 'The fable of Arachne', a work that 'represents the passage from material (the process of weaving) to form (the tapestry) and to workshop (commercial product)' (Museo del Prado website). Like the twist of the chromosomal helix, prior to weaving there is the twist of spinning, of ordering the unruliness of matter into an early stage of coming-into-being. The skilled Arachne is pictured in contest weaving a tapestry that depicts patriarchal rupture – the Gods raping mortal women. For presenting their misbehaviour she was condemned to weave her web outside of human language and representation. Tim Ingold (2006, p. 15) argues that 'where there is life there is movement'; art is like 'a world undergoing continuous birth' (2006, p. 18). The spider's web is a sign of dissent, of re-weaving and re-worlding counternarratives to patriarchal history (Maya 2019). In my animation, an anthropomorphic spider generates copies of herself from her womb to point to the politics of reproduction that recognises the multiple dimensions of human life.



Figure 5: Diego Velázquez 'The spinners' or 'The fable of Arachne' 1655, oil on canvas, 220 x 289 cm.

The vital relationship between generativity and life is intrinsic to the medium of animation itself, which is always transforming, always enlivened, animation being 'the state of being full of life or vigour; liveliness' (dictionary). In 'Net casting', the relationship between the transformation of matter, ecology and painting is made explicit. An ecology of affines and matter entangles boundaries between human beings and species beings. Bird, frog and insect calls, as well as everyday acoustic noises, accompany the accumulation of shapes into patterns, and spiders and their webs; signifiers of two perceptual worlds that are superimposed and interlaced into spatial-temporal affinities.

Spinning webs and making art are poetic processes that entwine meaning and transform matter, heightening our sensibility to our entanglement with life, the lifeline the planet needs. As Dempster notes, the planet's complex ecological, social, cultural, economic and political interconnection 'requires that we use sense-making devices ... organising our perceptions of reality into something sensible and comprehensible'. In applying sympoiesis to my practice, I synthesise different life-worlds to merge the epistemology of the everyday with the aesthetic ontology of art.



Figure 6: Madeleine Kelly 'Structural affinities' 2020, gesso, varnish and pigment powder on sea sponges, gastropod shells, 4-ply panels, wooden dowels. Photo: Chloe Callistemonster

In my work 'Structural affinities' 2020, sea sponges are coloured with pigment to further activate the vitalistic potential of their forms. Indeed, they are a unique form of life, being the only animals that if broken down to the level of their cells can reassemble themselves into an entirely different configuration. Just as webs are easily broken and rewoven, their capacity to rearrange themselves and their communities encourages us to contemplate how this might extend to human societies. Incredible projective potential is found in their globular, tubular, hole-encrusted, fanned, arborescent, planar and spherical formations. In a post-humanist kind of embracing of symyiosis, the forms they configure might suggest the sea sponges are artists themselves, architects of their own complex-living systems. Yet, whereas artists breathe 'Pygmalion' life into the inanimate, the sponges reanimate the dead – they regenerate in response to an external world of trauma and change. Images embedded in these biomorphic forms remind me of ancient protean bodies, with future potential to grow into any form, perhaps to offer a panacea to the wounds inflicted on the planet by capitalism's extractive practices. Participants at my open studio observed the sponges in the cabinet. I asked them to draw their forms into gridded or isomorphic paper, creating new patterns of relations, and if the form reminded them of something else, to transform it into the resemblance. The process of redrawing further develops the sponges' amorphous forms.



Figure 7: Madeleine Kelly 'Elective affinities' 2020, wax, resin, pigment on glassware. Photo: Chloe Callistemonster

In my work 'Elective affinities' 2020, glass laboratory vessels make explicit the relationship between matter, experimentation and painting. Some are monochromatic; some display techniques of dripping, pouring or even blowing. They embody gesture and the passage of time across their forms. Figurative paintings immersed in water are anamorphically distorted and become a site to navigate and shift around, to contemplate seeing itself. Together, they point to the fact that paintings are not hermetically sealed objects they are part of a network, and their agency is distorted and magnified by their visibility. Each vessel is a nodal point in a network in which 'painting-as-medium is joined to a second synchronic kind of passage which moves out from painting-as-cultural artifact to the social networks surrounding it' (Joselit 2009, p. 128).

In his 1807 romance novel *Elective affinities*, after which the work is named, the poet-scientist Goethe notes how materials seek out one another – attract, seize, destroy, devour, consume one another and emerge. Extending this idea to romantic couples, he states 'four entities (people), previously joined together in two pairs, are brought into contact, abandon their previous union, and join together afresh' ([1807] 2005, p. 55). In my work, a dancing couple (my own chromosomal parents) is seen performing their ritual over a pair of couplet vessels. As a sympoietic system, the conduit joining the couplet vessels emphasises linkage, cooperation and synergistic behaviour. Structural coupling between artists and artifacts create new patterns of organisation, a poiesis that can produce radical sets of relations and new lenses for looking at the planet.



Figure 8: Madeleine Kelly 'Elective affinities' (detail) 2020, wax, resin, pigment on glassware.
Photo: Chloe Callistemonster

The vessels also include images from art history that mirror the act of creation – for example, a hand-painted reproduction of Jean-Baptiste Chardin's (1699–1779) *Soap bubble*, where the figure is engrossed in the Pygmalion act of breathing life into the morphing globule of soap. Its transforming surface is, as Mitchell (1996, p. 8) suggests, 'a natural correlative for (Chardin's) own engrossment in the act of painting'. The black mirrored surface on which the vessels sit connotes Alberti's ([1435], 1991 p. 61) analogy between the origin of painting and mirrors: 'What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?' Like traceable shadows, their reflections make visible the openness of artistic process, these figures are members of an open sympoietic system that extends beyond art to the world.



Figure 9: Madeleine Kelly 'Elective affinities' (detail) 2020, wax, resin, pigment on glassware.
Photo: Chloe Callistemonster

My photographic work 'Flow chart of affinities' 2020 covers the walls of the studio. Composed of shadows of laboratory vessels, words on their surfaces relate to processes, materials or outcomes that art and science have in common. Just as liquidity mediates the material inside a vessel, the vessels mediate dialectics, inspiring contemplation of the degree to which concepts or words tend to combine and reproduce.

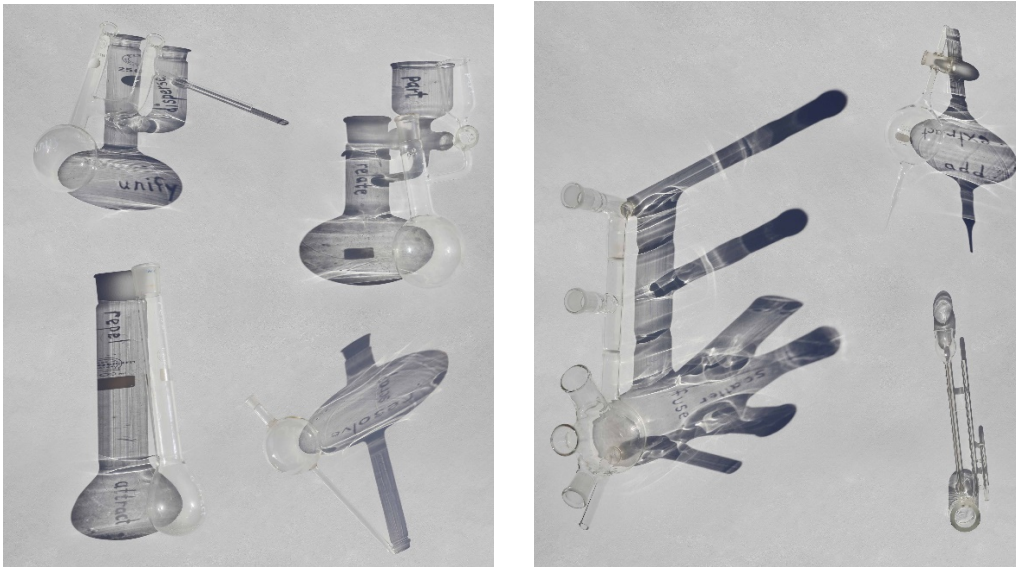


Figure 10: Madeleine Kelly 'Flow chart of affinities' 2020 (details), digital prints. Courtesy: Madeleine Kelly

Despite the fact that the virtual and artificial are becoming increasingly sophisticated at mimicking 'real' life, the materiality of painting, and by extension material artefacts, contains as Diana Wood Conroy states 'a continuing link with the primal realm of emotions, shaped by hands' (2006, p. 87). And just as brush marks charge a painting with vitality, repetitive and intricate movements are also expressions of life. Interdigital operations such as spinning yarn and painting involve use of the nervous system and point to the meshwork of life and deep ecology. These actions of a hand have an affinity with life, connecting us to life, and how critical it is to sense life, to become with life, rather than consume it. Crucially, paintings contain living labour and Graw (2016, p. 101) sees the time it takes to make works of art a statement against a 'new economy that is busy absorbing life'.

Conclusion

In my conceptualisation, the liveliness of painting, therefore, is that in which lines of affinities intertwine, one with the other, according to a continual weaving, and within which powerful affines may be seen to re-thread, pattern and transform stories, and – thanks to their effect – recompose into new patterns to look at and feel the life of systems. So, can sensing affinities form sensible solutions that save forms of life? These examples have shown how an aesthetic sensibility developed through affinities can focus attention on the sympoietic and by extension help us cultivate an appreciation of non-human diversity. Through the grid of deep co-existences that form both art and planetary life, we might discover our shared

belonging and act from that collective to form alternative patterns and forms of becoming. It is in this open meshwork that art may establish a poiesis where renewed possibilities for imagining the life of the planet without immanent extractive processes and mass extinction might be born. Sympoietic painting, and by extension aesthetic knowledge, is a way of being open to new combinations, possibilities and relations. Making with becomes connected with deep phenomenological engagement. Creative thought is itself analogous to sympoiesis in that it generates from a rich diversity of alternatives and conjectures. Perhaps the survival of the arts within universities is similarly contingent on ongoing cross-fertilisation and accommodation, kinship and the infolding of strangeness, both within the arts and without it, across knowledge and people.



Figure 11: Madeleine Kelly, 'Net casting' (detail) 2020, high-definition video, approx. 6:30 min.

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ⁱ In keeping with the idea of 'material thinking' or the inherent force and form that lies waiting within 'vibrant matter', materials 'collaborate' with the maker in a kind of sympoietic encounter where an artist may act as 'catalyst' to what Foucault (quoted in Soussloff 2017, p. 108) refers to as the adaptive *behaviour* of an image, 'its "combination", "alternation", "superimposition", and "intertwining"'.