

Alexis Rago  
Janet Waring



E t e r n a l  
M e t a m o r p h o s i s



# Eternal Metamorphosis

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Janet Waring

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## PREFACE

## Temple and the Wind

A few years ago while reorganising the studio, Janet and I came across pictures we had done in Italy some twenty five years ago. It was hard to tell who had done which painting. Over the years the work has changed and taken different directions in terms of subject matter, medium and technique; yet the two bodies of output have arisen contemporaneously, in the same location and with the same resources.

Over the years this divergence has reflected our different personalities and inclinations whilst many of the traits of the one have gradually, almost imperceptibly, transferred to the other. As this has happened the work has continued to move in directions that express difference.

The works touch at a point which is difficult to define in words. They are separate and yet part of a whole. The complementary nature of the relationship is a constant movement of Apollonian and Dionysian principles from one to the other, stability and equilibrium followed by change and fluidity. The rational with the primal in a constant dance.

Architecture distributes space in a primarily rational and functional way. The space contained within is typically thought of as an emergent property of the physical construction. Conscious attention tends towards focusing on the walls, windows and doors. These serve a purpose yet without the enclosed space perceived and experienced, the structure ceases to have meaning. Air and walls come into contact only at their respective boundaries yet the relationship exists as a whole.

Our works touch at an interface that meanders along the border between two worlds. They are neither separate in kind nor by degree but by what engages us as a function of our core make-up. Janet is expressing a world of the animal, primal and instinctive, on the edge moving towards the human. It is as difficult to say at which point humanity starts and the animal world ends as it is to describe this edge with any kind of precision. Her work is evidence of a communion with nature at an intuitive level.

Whilst Janet dreams of animal connections I am interested in the relationship between place and self in a world full of humankind as a latent but ever constant presence.

This is the first time we have exhibited together in a deliberate presentation of our work. It is a quest, not for answers but for connections. Nature brought us about, we are part of nature; a relationship that religion, science and philosophy all try to pin down. This causes us to need answers in an attempt to re-establish *lost* connections, it is our nature to do so.

Here at Kensal Green Cemetery, in the Dissenters' Gallery we are surrounded by thousands of souls that have gone through their own quests; scientists, poets, explorers... alongside those whose tales are undocumented. The wind that blows through the temple is the intangible essence that comes and goes over time, the spirit that gives purpose to the edifice of humanity.

Alexis Rago

ESSAY Deborah Ravetz

## Eternal Metamorphosis

*'Be a child of your time, but do not be its creature...'*

Frederick Schiller

Alexis Rago and Janet Waring Rago (aka Janet Waring) live and work together. If I look at pictures of their living and working space or hear about their lives as parents, scientists, artists, makers and as members of a wider community, everything that they do is part of a greater whole. This is worth saying because the myth of the artist who is excused from ordinary life in order to pursue their career single-mindedly is taken for granted as a working model. More and more artists are beginning to question this myth. Instead of carving out their place in the great world they live a life of making, amidst the everyday concerns of family and community, in whatever form this may take. The advantage of this is, the work has time to grow both out of their authentic concerns and in its own time. It is another form of the quiet revolution taking place in the grassroots of industrialized western culture. Furthermore, the work has a piquancy that is the result coming from such a real and personal place and its authenticity means that the personal can become universal. This way of working is not in fact new; it is a tradition to which Alexis and Janet belong.

Europe's transition from a rural to an industrialized culture, through the nineteenth century, heralded a whole new way of looking at the world on every level. This often set up a polarity in which people either embraced the new rational world or decried the loss of old ways and values. There were, however, people who didn't see the future in either of those terms. The Russian artist Kandinsky described his ex-

perience of that time exuberantly, as if a new dawn were emerging. He had been to see an exhibition of Monet's pictures of the haystacks and on entering the room he realized that the paintings irritated him because, at first, he could not see what they represented. Once he had understood what was happening, the work began to excite him. This suggestion of a liberation from representation connected at the same time with the developments he had heard in music which was also moving into new territory. Speaking of this and of his hearing about the splitting of the atom, he said it was as if life had become a place where everything could be thrown in the air and everything we had previously taken for granted was open to becoming something completely new and more relevant to the time. It was a combination of these experiences which led to Kandinsky deciding to work as a painter and eventually forming the group known as The Blue Rider. Some members of this group, especially Klee and Kandinsky, were unusual in that they had a strong sense of the past but they also loved the modern world. Their love of the modern was extraordinary because they rejected the choice between a materialistic world view and a spiritual one, believing instead that there could be synthesis.

It is very difficult to define what is meant by spiritual in this sense. The widest definition can be described thus; Kandinsky and Klee were both concerned with the mysterious force which animates matter. They knew it couldn't be described in ordinary scientific

terms, with the five senses but they nevertheless experienced it as real and its mystery as much part of our lives as the physical world. Their concern was to make work which both came out of and made visible, the laws of that mystery. One of the reasons that they began to work with abstract forms was that



View of studio looking North

they wanted to reveal a secret with a secret. Klee even states that his work came directly from the place of the greatest mystery of all: the realm before birth and after death, the *starry realm* from which we come and to which we go. These artists were very well-educated and aware of the history of culture, from earliest mythology to the most modern forms of human endeavour such as the work of Freud and Einstein. They travelled widely and were exposed to the latest developments in all the arts. These different cultures and their manifestations were not merely arbitrary for them. They had a very particular aim, that was to find authentic art from the past and present and from every place. They saw the poten-

tial of the human being to become free. Their ideal of freedom was not the freedom to satiate every sense in a search for pleasure, distraction or power. It meant working to create an authentic self which would then in turn make a creative contribution to life. In other words freedom meant responsibility. They saw the artist's role as directly connected with this concern. Throughout their lives they remained connected to the community of artists trying to further social transformation as much as develop their own work.

Neither Kandinsky nor Klee had to fight in the trenches of the First World War. Two British artists, David Bomberg and David Jones did. At the same time as Kandinsky was experiencing his euphoric epiphany, Bomberg was embracing the rational and extolling the virtues of the machine city and the powers of technology as liberators of man. David Jones, on the other hand, was a young boy at art school with a love of Welsh mythology and a wish to be an illustrator. They are examples of the polarity set up by the changing of the times. Both ended up in the trenches and both suffered terrible crises as a result of what they experienced there. David Bomberg's response to the monstrous reality of untrammelled technology was to say, 'We have no need to dwell on the material magnificence of man's achievements but with the approach of scientific mechanization and the submerging of individuals we have urgent need of the affirmation of his spiritual significance and his individuality.' He himself became a truly honoured teacher as well as an artist. He believed that it was not possible to be a bad man and paint a good picture. The self, the life and the work were relevant and needed to be congruent.

David Jones on the other hand became a Catholic. For him Catholicism was something much more

universal than the common view of a strait-jacketed controlling religion. He saw the Christian myth as growing out of the whole history of signs, symbols and culture. He said, 'The particular is also the universal. The tree is the cross, and also the war torn relic, the chalice and the spear are not only symbols of the passion but also male and female sexuality. Christianity and folklore tell the story of good and evil in a way that embraces the eroticism of life and death. At the heart of these traditions lies the theme of regeneration.' He struggled to connect the present with the past using archetypal symbols while at the same time wanting his images to be of the modern world. All four artists whom I have described here came to the same thing: spirit and matter are not in fact in opposition but rather in relation, part of the whole. They were all active and involved with life beyond their own work and they wanted to find ways of life by which we could know ourselves, describe what meaning was for us and out of this sense our responsibilities.

Goethe said that unless we were able to come into relationship with the cycle of dying and becoming we would be condemned to live as strangers on the earth. This is what he called the *open secret*, the secret that nature teaches us, that life and death and the continual cycle of evolution and metamorphosis, which takes place not only around us but in us, is our natural element and one we must learn to live in rather than control. In the process of dying and becoming there is a middle point where the old is lost and the new is not yet found. Keats called it *negative capability*; it is often referred to as the abyss, chaos, the threshold or the desert. This space needs particular courage, the courage to stay empty so that the new is able to emerge naturally rather than be forced and unreal. In this space, the *diamond of the self* is born; new form emerges from the old in an

eternal metamorphosis. This process demonstrates connection in that the present, though different, is connected with the past from which it grew. It is out of this space that I sense the work of Alexis and Janet has emerged. I think this is true on a personal but also on a wider level. Postmodernism has denied the existence of meaning and at the same time given everything equal value. It is easy to give in and adhere to the dogma. I sense the response of these two artists is to hold the space and to sense what is emerging out of the chaos with a genuine response rather than a manufactured one.



View of studio looking East

When I look at the work of Alexis I am struck by its variety. Whatever he sees or touches he transforms into his own forms. He makes sculpture which is geometric and organic. He crafts bowls, takes photographs and makes books and prints. He is exuberant in his use of art and craft, including music and even his own body in his pieces. I have the sense that whatever he sees or touches he needs to make into something. It

is this aspect of Alexis' work that made me first think of him in connection with David Jones. David Jones said that it was only the human being who took nature and was creative with it simply for the sake of making something. He believed this is what was meant by sacramental activity. For him, all human creativity, from the earliest marks made on the earth to the most sophisticated art forms, was sacramental activity. When David Jones returned from the war and finished art school he went to learn the craft of woodcutting and printing. It was his way of saying that the activity of art needed discipline, rigour and a deep respect for the materials and tools of making. Alexis' training as a scientist and subsequent art studies in Florence give his work the same quality. The materials and the process are equally important, in David Jones' terms, man, matter, the body and the spirit, this interplay is what is special about being human. He even says it is what makes the angels love us that we transform matter with our play.

Janet also has a scientific background but living with Alexis in Florence she built her own visual vocabulary by learning about image making and materials in that extraordinary place, where ancient skills were still being passed on to apprentices at a time when all the values of the old artists' workshops had long since fallen away in conventional art trainings. There is a sense of her individual path, gathering and gleaning all the skills and knowledge needed. She was not limited by a conventional route. She is interested in science and poetry, old ideas and new. Her paintings seem to belong to two different families. There is the collecting and gathering of creatures like a poet-scientist recording the beings that inhabit her imagination. Then there are the freer and more intuitive paintings which are worlds in themselves. The colours seem to be layered almost like glass, some transparent and clear and some opaque and worked

into with marks and texture; they are small but the use of a horizon line means they have a sense of large spaces; some are four-legged creatures, some are birdlike and some are landscapes and they are all on the point of becoming as if in some alchemical workshop of creation. They glow from within and because they have a human scale they seem to be for someone in particular, like a small personal icon.

Ancient cultures saw nature as a being; modern culture sees it as something to exploit and control. I sense that for Alexis and Janet, although they are embedded in modern culture, nature remains both a being and a responsibility. This connection with nature means that they are constantly struggling to be of their time and yet true to themselves. They don't cave into the postmodern assertion that there is no meaning and therefore glibness is good enough, nor do they flee back to seek refuge in old meanings. Exploring their own values, working with their materials with a sense of rigour and discipline, they are rooted in their unique lives. What they make has quality in its substance both inwardly and outwardly. This process, these choices, reveal evidence of a new emerging meaning. This meaning can be seen in countless disciplines, in politics, in the arts, in social reform and education, where individuals are turning to grass roots solutions, developing what is called *the politics of the heart*. They are not opting out; they are returning to themselves and to their own communities. They are, I believe, the future. Like the artists before them, they experience the present in connection with both the past and future. They belong to the group of people choosing to live individual lives again rather than the life of the mass consumer who is numbed and caught up in the collective hallucination that, we can not choose another path.

Deborah Ravetz

ALEXIS RAGO

## Extinct Possibilities



Anthropic Principle



Maiden



Prophet

There is no point that does not connect with some other through the intermediary of travel whether it be physical or imagined, in the past or future. Each sculpture is a transceiver connecting points by invisible lines. The space in which these are drawn is truly wonderful. Each line is the trajectory from which other ideas spring into being.

I used to love visiting old-fashioned museums and seeing objects of varying kinds placed together without explanation, witnesses to another story, dots on a faint line of the one great narrative.



Queen



Emperor



King

Earth is a very special place, it has continually tricked chaos away from its inexorable march and permitted life to always find a way. A burgeoning of possibilities is brought about by a conspiracy of natural process and chance.

Biology and its method has informed much of the way I work. When I started this series of sculptures I envisaged soft-bodied animals fossilized, preserved as durable yet fragile icons of extinct possibilities.

*above and opposite:* 2007 - 2008, fired clays of different types, 19 - 37 cm high.



## Sacrament

I made the chair. I use the chair.  
I made the bowl. I use the bowl.

2008, Chair and bowls, 90 x 60 x 58 cm

## Oracle

The vase contains the voice of Dania reciting her poem which contemplates the end of the day. A tolling bell and cicads can be heard in the place where the idea for the vase was conceived; the Roman amphitheatre in Fiesole, Florence.

2008, terracotta, iron, wood, and audio recording, 52 x 41 x 41 cm



## Glimpses

Places of invisible incidents seen through the circumference of a primitive technology.



*Eden*, 2008, silver gelatin print of pinhole negative, 122 x 138 cm



*Dodona*, 2008, silver gelatin print of pinhole negative, 122 x 153 cm



*Delos*, 2008, silver gelatin print of pinhole negative, 122 x 172 cm



*Cumae*, 2008, silver gelatin print of pinhole negative, 122 x 160 cm



*Breath of Life*, 2008, pigment print from pinhole negative, 50 x 63 cm



Joanne, 2007

*Quadruped Ascension*, 2007, oil on aluminium, 20 x 20 cm

JANET WARING



*Biology of a Wall*, 2007, canvas, paper and oil, 50 x 50 cm



*Biology of a Wall II*, 2007, canvas, paper and oil, 50 x 50 cm



*Metamorphosis*, 2008, canvas, paper and oil, 50 x 50 cm

Simple laws of nature apply to my paintings; they are where the internal and external worlds meet. The edges are where the subject distils and becomes something which can be named according to an aspect of its being.

I supposed to discover on a wall, as if in an archeological find, images placed there from time immemorial by an unknown hand.

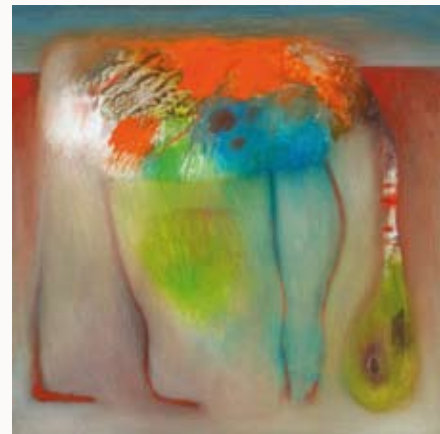
The quadrupeds are projections of solitariness, The horizon is an apparent edge that can never be touched; a sacred interface.



*Quadruped and Horizon I*  
2008, oil on aluminium, 20 x 25 cm



*Quadruped and Horizon II*  
2008, oil on aluminium, 20 x 25 cm



*Quadruped and Horizon III*  
2008, oil on aluminium, 20 x 20 cm



*Zoomorphic Landscape*, 2008, oil on aluminium , 20 x 20 cm



*Zoomorphic Landscape II*, 2008, oil on aluminium, 20 x 25 cm

Wherever I am there is always a bird.



*Arkbird Aviary / Altarpiece*

2006-2008, oil on aluminium, 15 panels, each 25 x 35 cm (132 x 110 cm overall)

## Background

Alexis Rago and Janet Waring, born in Rome and Leicester respectively, are honours graduates in biology and botany from the University of Manchester. Alexis then studied at the Institute for Art and Restoration in Florence and Janet took a Postgraduate Certificate of Education at Leicester University, subsequently moving to Florence where she undertook her art studies. They married in Florence and established their practise there for a decade; their son Florian was born in 1988. In 1991 they set up studio in a former Methodist chapel in rural England. They have exhibited widely in private and public galleries both in the UK and abroad, undertaken private and public commissions, initiated arts projects, had images published for worldwide distribution and worked in the educational sector with a wide range of clients. They are co-curators of Eternal Metamorphosis.

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