



SELENA DE CARVALHO

Is an inter-disciplinary artist based in Longley, Tasmania. She describes her artwork as “respond(ing) to human interaction with the environment, often relating to the perceived consumption of wilderness and lived experiences of wildness, focusing on the core paradox of how we yearn for the untamed, while consciously or unconsciously seeking to control it.” Selena’s success with interactive, immersive practice aims to be “experiential in the best possible sense, drawing viewers into its poetic sense of mystery and magic.” For *Partnershiping* Selena will address disturbance in Tasmania’s environment in ways that are up-close and personal.

I can remember in summers, when my brother and I ran down to the creek, the slap, slap, slap of the water dragons as they launched themselves into the river. They’d hear us well before we could see them, and frightened by the noisy prospect of our arrival, they’d vacate their sun-basking positions in the branches that overhung the water. My brother is two and a half years older than me – I’ve always been his naughty little sister. We grew up in Coramba, a small town inland from Coffs Harbor in northern New South Wales.

Dad was an architect and Mum was a women’s health psychologist. Both of them were first generation Australians– and although each of them held down jobs, they were in some ways ‘drop outs’. They’d come

from Newcastle but the peers they shared and the places we’d go were different to what I could look around me and see were more part of ‘mainstream’ family experience. Mum and Dad were way less conservative than the rest of their families. When we first moved into that home right next to the Orara river, it was a standard weatherboard dwelling. But my parents they put it on stilts and for a couple of years some friends from Indonesia lived downstairs. I can remember half the house being covered by a passionfruit vine – the warmth, the river, the lifestyle – that childhood was idyllic.

But when I was 11 we all moved back to Newcastle. It was during the 1980s – the country was undergoing

an economic crash and my Mum's sister had been diagnosed with cancer, so Mum went back home to nurse her and Dad got a job at the Newcastle University.

Nevertheless, much of my childhood continued to be spent outdoors. The move had meant there was extra family support – both my grandmother and aunty lived there, and they lived opposite the beach. We'd been going up there every holidays so I think of my childhood as spent in two kinds of water – the creek and the beach. I can remember thinking that there was another kind of terrain that I hadn't 'mastered' – the ski-fields, so I spent one whole summer training hard on my cousin's roller blades in an effort to prepare for my next imagined venture as a ski-er.

It was also a difficult transition for us and for the town itself – the local steel mill had closed and the town seemed to be full of fierce, angry people. As I became a teenager I had the increased sensation that I was definitely an outsider to the local beach culture. I ended up wondering why I'd never learned to surf. It seemed to me as though I'd arrived from an altogether different 'tribe' – I had purple hair down past my bottom and I didn't fit in with the beach idea of beauty. For me surf culture was a traumatic space, one where identities and status were fought over, but the beach itself was a refuge. So riding my bicycle further afield, I would seek out the less popular beaches and quiet.

I was a crafty teenager at a time when being interested in craft and making things was considered really dorky. I worked in all kinds of media including crochet, embroidery, silk painting and felting. I did lots of sewing that I'd sell at markets to make money. I especially loved sewing classes at school but I had a conflict with the teacher when I handed in a nightie dress that she accused me of not being my work. She absolutely refused to believe me and in the end Dad had to go into bat for me and tell her that he'd watched me stay up all night to make it. I can remember fancying some of the 70s style paisley material that were used as curtains at my high school. I pilfered a length, stitched together a suit, and did a series of photographs of me posing in front of the school curtains that remained. In year 11 you could take electives at TAFE as school subjects. Dad bought me an SLR camera, and I'd spend a lot of time taking black and white and time lapse photos.

I found my art classes really stifling – I just wanted to make stuff but there was a strong emphasis on art history, and as a result I wasn't so interested in the classes. I admit I was really naughty. One of my other skills was a proficiency at forging notes. I'd sneak off school and tell fibs about where I was going. I went to all-weekend rave parties when my parents thought I was visiting friends in Sydney. I did a lot of truanting but

somehow managed to pass my subjects.

When I was 15, I was involved in a social scene with kids who were a lot older than myself. One weekend I caught a bus to East Gippsland with my friend where there was a festival around the logging area. This was my first experience of seeing the destruction of an old growth forest; this kicked off the direction that occupied my interest for the next few years, where I continued to make journeys travelling to the forests of East Gippsland and Northern New South Wales in summer, and out into the desert in winter as part of groups that were protesting environmental degradation.

In the desert we worked with Indigenous groups like the Arabunna elders from Lake Eyre, whose country the Roxby Downs Uranium mine affects. In 2000 they were opening the Beverly Uranium Mine in the Flinders Ranges. The method that Beverly uranium mine used to retrieve and process the yellow cake had already been banned in several other countries. The opening of Beverley was a particularly violent protest – the mine flew out the Star Force (riot police) from Adelaide and protesters and custodians were tear gassed and beaten and then herded together and welded into a shipping container. An eight-year-old Indigenous girl was tear-gassed during those events. Some of these victims continued a court case that took some ten years to settle – the first case of a protest incident where civilians took the state to court over the way they were treated – and ultimately received monetary compensation for their abuse.

By this time I was 19, and I'd finished school 2 years earlier. When I wasn't involved in protesting I was living out of a back pack. I'd gone up to Darwin to assist a friend who was working on a permaculture project for a community garden there, then I hitched down the west coast to Coral Bay, then kept going south to Perth and walked part of the Bibbulum track. Then I came back to the east coast and went down to Tasmania for the first time. I'd heard it was an amazing forested place and I really wanted to know more of Australia before I headed overseas.

I drove down with my brother and a friend in a panel van that broke down in Ulverstone on the first day. Someone helped us out, we got the car on the road again, and we headed on down south to Hobart. My friend from Darwin had old friends living at Mole Street in Hobart who were having a party the next day. It turned out to be perfect timing – at that party we met a lot of people who were to become close friends. I got everyone in the house at Mole Street to help make a 'zine' and went to the local council to use their photocopier for free so I could print and distributed them. Soon after that the Huon Valley Environment Office opened in Huonville. At the time it was a really

hostile place. There was a lot of tension between industry and environmental activists, the HVEC had had its office windows smashed several times. It's changed a great deal since that time.

I fell in love with a man I'd met at that first party and within six months I'd fallen pregnant. We moved into a little shack in the bush near the Franklin. The rent was forty dollars a week. There was no power, and every angle in the building had a lean – it looked like a fragile deck of cards, one among a number of little half-falling down shacks scattered through the bush. The shack stood at the top of a windy track, and there was donkey and a goat that lived on the property. It had a hot water system that came off the fireplace – a simple, rustic and beautiful little place – and that's where I free-birthed my daughter.

We lived there for two years, but I'd never learned how to drive and it was quite isolating. After that time we moved to Melbourne where I lived in a squat warehouse and it was there that I learned how to drive and learned how to become a parent and grew up, with my daughter, in Footscray living amongst a big crew of friends on the Maribyrnong. Last week I revisited some trees we planted there – they're now massive gums.

After that period in Melbourne we moved back to Tasmania again where I started a squat in Hobart, in an old two-story rambling house. The owner's sister allowed us to 'caretake' the place for the time we stayed there. The home was full of the things she'd collected. My daughter was 3 at the time and I had separated from her father. I decided to apply for art school, and managed to scrape together a portfolio that I'd assembled from a collection of my zines and photos and lots of scrappy bits and pieces that I'd managed to salvage from my belongings that had been dragged around from place to place. I went to the university and was accepted. The rates of the house we'd been living in had never been paid, so the state took over the property and sold it. After that I got a little place in Ferntree – an eccentric kind of granny flat where the bathtub was in the lounge room. But it was perfect for us – my daughter could hang out in the bath while I was making dinner and later on I'd work on my art for my courses.

I loved university – it was a time during which I really learned to maximize my time expenditure – I was very productive, producing a lot of printmaking, drawing, e-media productions, but I didn't do any of my theory subjects until my last year. Part way through my candidature I'd fallen in love, had another child and come back to university for the second time when I was 28. This time one of my lecturers drew my attention to the fact that, according to my grades, I was doing well. Up to this point I'd never checked my grades – I was simply trying to get through all my work and all my

responsibilities, but when I could see the fact that I was achieving, I shifted my attitude.

By the time I got round to doing my theory subjects during the last year of my undergraduate candidature, I really enjoyed the thinking and reading I'd put off for so long. I'd drive the kids around in the car until they nodded off to sleep and then I'd sit and read for ages. In between I'd moved to a place in Longley – a little village with a river that forms the heart of the place. My house is quaint, quirky, colorful and warm... and there's a good berry patch out the back.

I completed my undergraduate studies in 2011 and immediately began applying for grants and residencies. I was successful in being awarded an Australia Council Artstart grant, a Jump mentorship and a residency in 2012 in Beijing. I spent six weeks in China after which I went to Japan to see Echigo –Tsumari. I just wanted to get out of the institution and make art, and so that's what I did until 2015 when I re-enrolled to commence my Honours. By the time I re-entered university, I'd undergone experiences that had built up my skills and confidence. I'd always viewed myself as an artist, but had become more aware of the complexities of the 'art world'. I'd moved away from printmaking and towards medias like film and technology that were more immediately transportable. Even so, I was still continuing my preoccupation with a conceptual space focused on the environment and on the communities that gather together in a space of shared custodianship.

The Honours year was a really successful one – my research project involved a lot of getting back into country – connecting to a sense of place in Tasmania. The final work 'Ecological Haunts ii' received the Harold Schenberg PICA Hatched Award (\$35,000) for one student from across Australia ... this was a fantastic confidence and financial boost for me. When I'd flown over to Perth I didn't know I was going to win the award. On the day I'd installed the work I took the train to Fremantle and had had a talk to myself about devoting the day to performing an ongoing series of 'good deeds'. I'd been so preoccupied with my self-imposed regime that I'd forgotten to eat and so when I got to the event I realized how hungry and thirsty I was. I immediately bought an ice-cream (bad dinner choice) and drank a beer. I threw back the beer and was beginning to feel a bit nervous when they called out my name. I was astonished! But I had to go up there onstage a bit tipsy and holding the half-finished Choc Wedge.

But neither seemed to diminish the immediate glow on being a 'winner' – suddenly I was a desirable person to know, and everybody bought me champagne. The next day I had to get up at 4.30 am to get on the plane to Sydney to meet with Dad to celebrate my uncle's 70th birthday, carrying the burden of the worst

hangover of my life. When I arrived my whole family was there – and there I was, arriving as a shell-shocked success-story, transformed from the black sheep of the family as an overnight success story.

Since then I've gone on to begin my PhD at UTAS. Further study suits me – I guess because I'm working in a project-based capacity in the visual arts; while it's awesome and I'm well-supported, the focus offered by the PhD to delve further into my own research and maintaining one strong current is positive for me. Also, it offers me a scholarship that gives me the financial freedom to be a bit more choosy in terms of what projects I take on. And I'm aware that, in my role as a mother, I have to present a positive role-model; I've given up social media in my efforts to be that role model and if my children try any of the stunts I did I'd be onto them in a second. That having been said (in jest) the communication we have is very different – the three of us are working things out together as we go. They've been on a number of art adventures with me – we all went to Europe and camped for 2 weeks in Iceland last year, and there are a lot more to come...

I think this place chose me, more than I chose it. Tasmania, that is. I came for a visit in late 2002 and stayed. In the beginning, I tried leaving, and living in other places, but each time I found my way back here. The more that I've travelled, the more I appreciate and acknowledge how truly unique and delicious this place is. When I leave I miss the smell of the air and the way the sunsets linger in autumn, I miss the quiet and sometimes, I even miss the lilt of cover bands on a Sunday afternoon, as they waft up the hill. The perspective that distance enables.

I live in a little Village 20k south of Hobart. I call it a village because one day the Council pop-riveted the word 'village' on the sign that had previously just read 'Longley'. I know all my neighbours. This can be both a blessing and a curse. But mostly it's a blessing. The way a place is storied in the memories of those that live there, histories and news that have nothing to do with a newspaper, that's what I love about living outside the city. I pine for the stories of the indigenous people who lived here long before I arrived.

There's diversity in this small valley, and abundance too. There are still roadside stalls that operate on an honesty system, and a river that I can swim in and drink out of... but it's changing. Even in the time that I have lived here. The waterhole which used to be 'secret' has boomed in summertime, perhaps since someone shared it on Facebook or perhaps since Tasmania has become a 'desirable' location to live, (out grown its inbred, penal colony image). Tasmania is a refugium... I think my fear is that perhaps too many people all seeking some sense of connection and quiet will over-populate this fragile place. But there are interesting folks moving here too. Diversity and change, it's an exciting time to be here. There's a healthy art

scene, it's small, and everyone knows everyone, but there's something fantastic about that too. It's kind of horizontal, you can access and connect with people at all different levels of their practice. It's a place where people get behind and support new work, but also critically engage.

I love the Internet! I love that I can live where I live and still be connected to the broader flow of ideas and people remotely. But I can also see a dark side to it too, a black hole of information and potential time wasting. I guess, like anything being mindful of how I engage with the Internet as place, keeps me connected to a broader movement, while also staying grounded, being with the everyday. Remembering to get out bush and let it all drop away.

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