I close my eyes to know it

Meg Doughty

Ecocritical contemporary art slips into the mists of the atmospheric often. Allusions to environments have to be multi-sensory to evoke the richness of the bubbling quantum foam from which it all springs. The atmospheric and the bodily are closely woven. Prickling hairs on the back of the neck, eyes and nostrils widening to let in as much information as possible, goosebumps, and a racing heart are all cues for a body knowing before a consciousness does. One of my favourite passages in *Far From the Madding Crowd* describes a storm. It's a threat to the livelihoods and half-truths the protagonists have been sharing.

Manoeuvres of a most extraordinary kind were going on in the vast firmamental hollows overhead. The lightning now was the colour of silver, and gleamed in the heavens like a mailed army. Rumbles became rattles.[1]

These opening lines describe the immanence of a potentially life-altering phenomena for the characters; weather. They are farmers. The storm's vivid sights, sonics and symbolism wrap around the characters' relationship, describing that more. The roiling skies are confused, the fear they create is decisive. Lightning illuminates the landscape, yes, but it reveals Bathsheba and Gabriel. Embodied beings are subject to their environments, we sense first, are impressed upon, and draw conclusions later.

Sense-perception is not selective, sensing all the time means being shaped by space. Architects, like Juhani Pallasmaa, wield this in their work. In his book, *The Eyes of the Skin*, life-enhancing architecture attends to all senses.[2] Sight, alone (any sense, alone), is not representative of being. Being is dynamic because sensing is. Historically, sight and hearing have been privileged in the arts. The cross-modal works here dissipate divisions between disciplines to allow for people as holistic sensory beings, rather than distant voyeurs.

Heaven opened then, indeed. The flash was almost too novel for its inexpressibly dangerous nature to be at once realised, and they could only comprehend the magnificence of its beauty.[3]

When I was little I could smell when my mother walked into a room, or if my brother had put his head on my pillow. I have sensory processing sensitivity, a high receptivity to stimuli, that has soaked me in the immediate aliveness of being. Pallasmaa reminds us, it only takes eight molecules of a substance and a nerve ending for people to sense a smell.[4] Touch, taste and smell are intimate, occurring within bodies.

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[1] Thomas Hardy, Far From the Madding Crowd, 296.
[2] Juhani Pallasmaa, The Eyes of the Skin, 11.
[3] Hardy, 299.
[4] Pallasmaa, 54.

Essential oils often steamed in my home, in baths, diffusers, on my mother's skin.

The sky was now filled with an incessant light, frequent repetition melting into complete continuity, as an unbroken sound results from the successive strokes on a gong.[5]

Look for the latin names on oils so you know they are proper ones, Mum told me. Lavender smells like being soothed when you can't do it yourself, bad ones smell like soap. *Permission to Pass* smells like making, like the skin of the women in my family, sweet and warm with a thunderous spine. Like votive oil, it is gold and requires devotion. I close my eyes to know it.

A coastal forest whose edge I can stand at, feet on slick stone with wet wood one way and the ocean the other, make up *Negative Space*. My hands are cold but there is something to be warmed in its middle — if I could reach it, something promising richness. My father loved the sea and to swim; something warm and unreachable in him, too.

When I turn to walk away, *Cave* is an old door in the earth that knows me well. It is in my hands like reading in the sun, and in my feet like the passage under and the pathway through.

No one knows where I am in *High Pass*. It is breathing and clarity. Alone up here, it is me, fragrant leaves and possibility. Giddy birds loop in my eye-line calling me free, free, free.

Descending to a deepening, a complicating, *Heart Beats* layers secretly. It takes me to my solar plexus to read the blood in my eyelids and show me hot flowers. I want to ask what it knows.

20hz steadies. A ritual burning, recollecting many. It is somewhere sacred, like a campfire with friends, like a hot-stoned temple in the dark.

Works Cited

Hardy, Thomas. *Far From the Madding Crowd*. 1874. Croydon: Transatlantic Press, 2012.

Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester : Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Academy; John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Permission to Pass by Jen Alexandra. *Negative Space* and *Cave* by Steven Junil Park. *High Pass*, *Heart Beats* and *20hz* are a part of *Osmic Resonance* by Jo Burzynska. These artworks form *Scented Translations*, a multi sensory exhibition at CoCA Toi Moroki curated by 2026 Emerging Curator Holly Neave.

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[5] Hardy, 300.