

LUCY VOELCKER HORTUS HEART

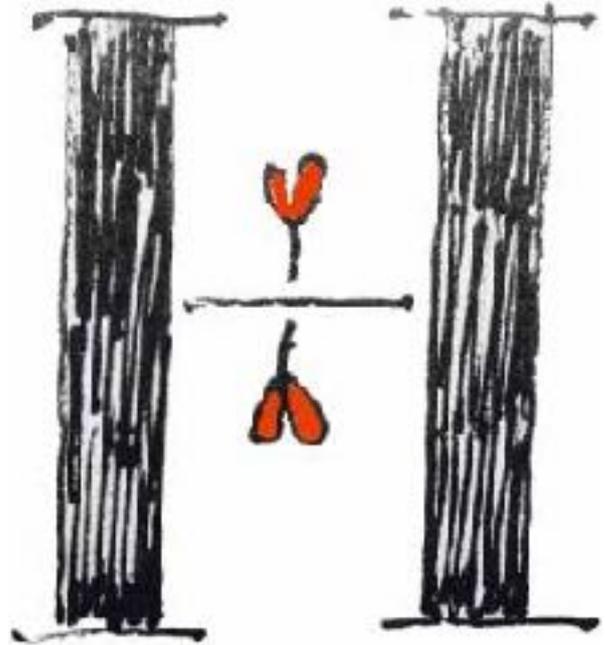
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*from The Garden by Andrew Marvell
The mind ... creates ...
Far other Worlds, and other Seas;
Annihilating all that's made
To a green Thought in a green Shade.*

As an artist, always connecting with the earth for inspiration, Lucy Voelcker's work has evolved over the years. 'It has not been a limp journey!' she says. 'It's one of dedication and commitment in response to my devotion to Nature.' Once she observed Nature, she says; then she was drawn to environmental issues. She became consumed by fears for the planet. Throughout these chapters her relationship with the Earth has become grown and expanded. Lucy gradually moved away from her work in fine art, both as a practitioner and as a teacher. In hindsight, the works themselves seemed to have become an intervention between inspiration and response. Lucy was always a closet Dreamer-with-the-Land, sensitive to its spirit, though, 'I could not even say the word 'Spirit' out loud till I was 50!'

Lucy has found that working as a gardener, developing a small-holding and acting, with her partner Kai Lange, as a custodian for a 25-acre slice of Gloucestershire countryside, have crystallised this meditative and spiritual engagement with nature and have celebrated a deeper and more satisfying re-connexion with the earth. Lucy no longer paints, and she is now much more fully concerned in sharing, mostly in one-to-one 'fire sessions', in supporting other people's individual journeys into Nature & Spirit.

As a biodynamic farmer and gardener for over thirty years Kai Lange has long been touched by what the land offers to us. 'Besides healthy food,' he says, 'we are nourished by beauty, colour, sound and smells which hold us in a dreamlike spell. When we listen to nature and the land, we are moved to engage and become creative. As the potter transforms the clay, the woodworker the tree or the basket maker the willow, so the creative gardener and farmer work with landscape, with soil, plants and animals. Our creative dialogue may enrich nature rather than exploit. If our hands engage in this way with the land, the land will touch our hearts and connect us to the essence of life. I invite others to learn from biodynamic practice; develop their sensibility; and discover a feeling of deep belonging.'



'Meeting plants,' Lucy says, 'and dreaming with them has opened me up to something beyond what you say. It is important because in our culture we are such consumers, materialists and governed by mind, by thinking.' In her work and practice, Lucy is not looking at plants with the thought of what she can get out of them. She meets them with respect and as fellow sentient Beings with whom we share this precious living Earth. 'We honour them and seek that they might share their wisdom with us.'

I spoke to Lucy and Kai on a rather overcast summer afternoon in their garden at Horsley. Running steeply below us from a broad terrace was a rich and delightfully higgledy-piggledy collage of flowers and plants, buzzing with 'industrious' bees and insects. A family of goats fidgeted around the perimeter of a small pasture to one side, each one occasionally poking a charming head through the fence at the top of the wall, having climbed on to the roof of their accommodation in the way that goats do. Along the terrace, the border between indoors and outdoors seemed deliberately vague. From a large living area, big windows opened to the terrace, and a light fence divided the terrace from the garden. The view was of trees and distant contours.

Some years ago now I encouraged the PTA at the school where I worked to buy one her large abstract paintings for the newly enlarged sixth-form library. I remain convinced that the quality of the painting, its calm colours, its hints at imagery which never really resolved into anything secure, contributed to an appropriate atmosphere for reading and study. But Lucy has moved on from producing such works and is now focused on sharing with others the kind of drive which led her to paint in the first place.

For example, she offers a monthly 'Plant Dreaming' opportunity from her garden. What Lucy is inviting people to find is nothing less than the medicine of a plant, its wisdom, its teaching and its healing. If you like, its complete



meaning. And, just as an abstract painting both invites such a discussion—what does this mean?— and dissolves it—it means what it says—so do plants. They have colours, textures and smells; they have connotations and connections; they have uses; they have contexts and histories. They hide mysteries. Lucy invites us to respond, as articulately as we please, to the plant. ‘There is no need for you to be botanically knowledgeable,’ she says, ‘only to trust your imagination and willingness to explore. Together we seek to discover our own authentic dialogue with nature.’ Where, Marvell would add, ‘all Flow’rs and all Trees do close/ To weave the garlands of repose’. ‘My soul,’ Marvell writes, ‘into the boughs does glide.’ Lucy’s sessions are held without chatter. They prioritise silence and listening.



In the tract of land a little further up the valley where Lucy and Kai act as custodians with the owner, who lives there, Kai has a circular bed of vegetables and cereals, set out like a dial, and a young orchard of fruit trees planted in a Fibonacci spiral. Hidden on this land is a spring which they have cleared and which provides the purest of Cotswold waters. Every two or three days they enjoy the walk with a couple of old-fashioned hand-pails to collect drinking water for home.

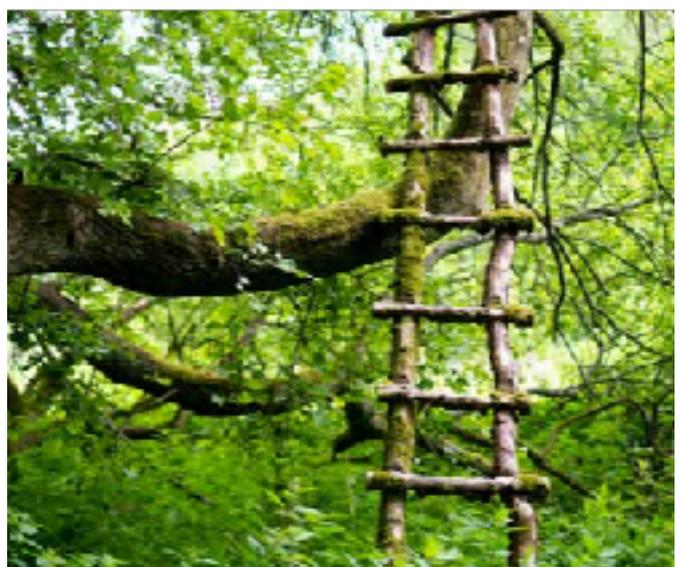


Lucy's engagement with meditative gardening is inspirational. There is something monastic about Lucy and Kai's commitment to the land. Kai's skill with the scythe, an instrument which manages the land while caressing it, is a skill which requires calm concentration and a steady speed; Lucy's love for plants includes a genuine and informed love and respect for natural medicines.

I remembered easily my visits to Spanish monasteries. I remembered the monk steadily scything and hay-making at a monastery in Olite. I remembered the fine gardens at Silos which echoed the garden of Eden as much as they did the Islamic gardens of the Albaicin in Granada, with running water and a delicious secrecy. I remembered the bee-keeper at the monastery of Valvanera, a Benedictine monastery in La Rioja which is far from any settlement and a thousand metres above sea-level. It is a place which the monks themselves say is 'steeped in beauty' and which 'revitalizes' visitors with 'clean air and silence'. The monks at Valvanera, and at Leyre further to the north, delight in their liqueurs. The Valvanera version is rich in juniper and camomile, but the monk at Leyre spoke to us at length about each of a dozen herbs or more, all kept in ceramic jars, before pressing us to enjoy a glass of the stuff.



A monk's day alternates the Divine Office — a sequence of psalms and readings — with duties and work. Horticulture plays a large part in a monk's work at these monasteries, and Lucy, travelling along different routes and following different impulses, has reached a similar destination: her 'plant dreaming' combines the meditation of a monk with a gardener's sensitivity to plants and to the places in which they grow, to the colours with which they shine, and to their responses to various weathers, and more besides.



When Lucy was ten years old she moved from the Garden of England (where she lived in the countryside and roamed freely) to the middle of Glasgow, to a tenement flat with not even a window box, or tree in sight. 'No garden. Just streets,' she says. 'It was really traumatic. It took me years to find my roots again and overcome the severance. That's just a little footnote for your benefit to help you understand that this way of life has been forged out of living and loving and grieving and loss.'

Lucy and Kai welcome visitors and their website clarifies what they offer and how to benefit from it.