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Michael Eigen wrote about studying sensitivity in a world that does not sufficiently value it. The sensitivity he described is a sensitivity directed outwards - towards others - and inward - towards oneself, a sensitivity that feels the substances of being. He referred to the development of caring as the moral base necessary for living together, to the need for sensitivity toward the sensitive core of other living beings.¹

When I moved from Auckland to Wellington in 2017, I imagined that I would settle in, set up my studio again and get back to a rhythm of practice. But as I set about making my first body of work in the new studio, things didn't come together as I expected. My starting point was working on pieces that related to previous research and was continuing along this particular line of academic inquiry, thinking about craft and phenomenology. Two things started to happen though - I noticed that once I finished a work, I would push it some distance away from me and try to evaluate it from an external point of view, imagining how the work would be perceived by an audience. There was a set of standards I was performing towards, and I was having questions about how the wider value system I was operating in- that I had obviously internalised - even worked. It was a sense that the academic view I had adapted created a disembodied affect. Alongside this was a deeper feeling of tension, of something lacking - I wasn't feeling at home in myself.

I didn't know where I wanted to go - but I wanted to create a gap between myself and the automated feedback loop that wasn't feeling useful. It seemed like very good timing then when an acquaintance asked whether I might be able to make something for her: an urn for a portion of her father's ashes. Okay then, I thought, this sounds important. Something I can work on.

It was strangely nourishing working on the urn. One urn became many. I tried many different shapes. I was finding that I didn't have to make meaning out of what I was doing - there already seemed to be an innate completeness in the nature of the object. The project required a shifting into a quiet space, to get the right feeling for the forms. It was also becoming symbolic on a personal level - I was having to face that I'd built narratives about myself that I had to let go of.

At this time I joined a meditation group and found much solace sitting in a room quietly with others, watching what arose. Chogyam Trungpa's teachings on gentleness, and making friends with oneself really resonated, and became a vital container for all that was coming up.

The urn commission was satisfying to work on but it wasn't coming together easily. In reality the ones I needed to make were larger than the scale that I work best at, the urns emerging just didn't seem to have the necessary elegance and dignity. But I just loved the process of making the lidded containers, making a base and a lid to match, slowly carving out the rounded surfaces. It was connecting in to a body of work I made a decade earlier. I dropped the scale, and continued on. It felt like some deep metabolic system at work, digesting everything through simple repetitive tasks. I just didn't want to leave the gentle space I had touched while working on the urns.

¹ 'Psychoanalytic and Buddhist Reflections on Gentleness', Michal Barnea-Astrog, Routledge, New York, 2019, pg 25

I kept intending to stop working on these lidded containers and get back to my core studio work. But every time I prepared a new batch of clay I just found myself going back to the containers. Something inside was like, '*this is what I want to do*'. There was always a sense of wanting more time to work on the shapes, get closer to an ideal, but mostly to maintain a space of gentleness. I was starting to think, perhaps this is the new pathway. And then, in a bizarre twist of fate, I lost most of the pieces made during this time in series of firing faults. It was at this point that I surrendered to the situation and accepted that there might be something larger at work. Even more to let go of? Maybe I have to accept that there may be nothing, just nothing, to hold onto here? 'Keep going', I coached myself 'just one foot in front of the other.' Take a breath, and start again. More gentleness.

Gentleness of action nurtures gentleness of mind, and gentleness of mind nurtures gentleness of action. From the outside in and the inside out, from the behavioural to the mental and the mental to the behavioural: If we don't want to cut corners, both of these movements must take place at one and the same time.²

And then just in the last couple of months, I felt compelled to draw again for the first time in many years. I needed to undergo a minor surgery; nothing serious but enough that I'd be recuperating in bed for a period and wouldn't be able to do clay work for six weeks. I was keen to try automatic drawing, to just let things flow, make something totally private and indulgent, and I was inspired after watching two films: one on Susan Te Kahurangi King, and another on Hilma af Klint, both artists with very singular and idiosyncratic visions. I was interested to see if it was possible to use drawing as a form of mediation. Letting the work go out in front, following behind, not being sure where something is going. This process has meant giving over to that more fully. I'm more comfortable in designing and executing, having things mapped out, having a relative grasp on the territory I'm going into. But here, I don't need to know exactly what I'm doing. It feels like being led, being shown things I need to see.

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² 'Psychoanalytic and Buddhist Reflections on Gentleness', Michal Barnea-Astrog, Routledge, New York, 2019, page 21