

SURFING IN ORIGINAL WEATHER

Original Weather: A Collection of Art & Poems, Laura LeHew, editor, Uttered Chaos, Eugene, 2011

“Originality lives at the crossroads, at the point where world and self open to each other in transparency ... Originality summons originality: a work of art that contains the mind of freedom will call forth freedom in others.”

(Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the mind of poetry*, 1997)

The genesis of this collaborative work by nine Oregon poets who composed to mixed-media drawings by Robert Tomlinson, Portland artist/photographer/art activist, is itself an “original” story. For the genre of *ekphrasis*, this book raises the bar and runs riot. From its unplanned conception to its publication, the 50-page work emerged organically. In the spring of 2010, Tomlinson and Eugene poet/publisher Laura LeHew, met at the Montana Artists Refuge, in Basin, where both were recipients of residencies. When she saw Robert’s series of numbered drawings on paper, she asked whether she could write a poem to one of them. A lifelong poetry fan, he gladly assented. Brainstorming, they came up with a name for the collaboration: **Original Weather**.

Laura invited eight local poets to join her in writing poems for the entire Basin series:

Karen Clausel, Lydia Foster, Quinton Hallett, Kella Hanna-Wayne, Colette Jonopulos, Nancy Carol Moody, Kathryn Ridall and Charles Thielman. Laura designed and published the handsome volume, which includes all 18 of Tomlinson’s images, in faithful color. The book debuted at the Oregon Arts Alliance gallery, which Robert was directing, with an exhibit of drawings and framed poems, plus readings. The “official” launching, at which five poets read, took place on May 22, 2011.

Original Weather was shown at Eastern Washington University from 1/26 – 3/15, 2012, and travels to Grants Pass Museum in October 2013. The drawings & poems are also booked at the Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, Great Falls, Montana.

From Retreat to Collaboration

Commenting on the inexplicable nature of inspiration, Mozart once wrote: *“When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer ... it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly. Whence and how they come, I know not; nor can I force them.”* (from *Nine Gates*, “*The Question of Originality*”)

Although inspiration can flourish in self-imposed solitude, new portals are accessed when a group of minds responds to images such as Tomlinson’s. Individual boundaries dissolve and unconscious messages are transmitted through collective waters of memory and shared labor. Creativity becomes an epidemic. As Jane Hirschfield observes in her essay, “*Originality summons originality*”. Though that may not be the goal, it occurs when participants

*“make the unknowing
noplan leap unforeseen*

into new form” (Karen Clausel, *in such times as these*, after Basin 11)

Possibilities multiply and expand beyond personal “Rorschach projections”, as Clausel calls them.

In *Floating*, after Basin 1, Colette Jonopulos evokes this process:

*“in this place of dimensional floating ... where light draws us closer to our own essence/
where we might discover our own plasticity ...”*

The Basin Images

From eighteen images, each poet picked one or two with which to deeply engage. Tomlinson’s semi-abstract drawings, made with oil stick, chalk, pastel, pencil and acrylic on black cover stock, are complex, with recurring patterns and shapes (loops, specks, dots, ribbons, wedges, embedded panels, scribbles) and recognizable icons (fetus, boats, fish) providing abundant “subjects”. Miniature textured squares show up out of context, like stray thoughts seeking integration. Forms pulsate and shimmer in earthy and neon colors, luminous like Paul Klee’s underwater seascapes. Others resemble graffiti or petroglyphs. Full of movement, drifting and sifting like snowflakes or confetti against mostly dark fields, or floating in carnelian, ruby, blood or rust tones, they hook the eye, churn memories and invite storytelling. Though drawn flat and free of perspective, some appear three dimensional.

In *As the City Hums* (from Basin 3), Charles Thielman, a painter himself, celebrates the morphing of raw visual data into other forms, whether language, music or clay:

“... tongue gathering

vowels like agates

*that can be tumbled
into greater beauty, given light.*

*... all that you perceive
becomes driftwood fed to a kiln”*

Common Threads

The theme of waters run amok, or as source and taker of life is echoed in many of the poems.

Nancy Moody’s *After the Churn* (Basin 4) and *Aerial View* (Basin 17) reveal aftermaths of extreme storms, in lines that brim with anxiety:

“this watery whirl, wrung into particulate

*flesh-heap, bone-dump, spawn of wreck and batter –
what is no longer/amasses in the shallows....*

how swiftly they row in, the boats of sadness”

*And “... the rooftops afloat
like rose petals*

like blood"

In Quinton Hallett's *Hovering Like Patience* (after Basin 6), a foundering ship is backdrop for

"Extinction

...getting overpopulated by the hour/The splayed anthem of evolution/stalls"

Kathryn Ridall's *First Word*, after Basin 16, evokes an oceanic genesis of language using the *pantoum* form:

"...

stylus of sap and light

into basin of salted gas

bestowing a new alphabet

letters swirl in the sea"

Sharing Original Weather

Some of these drawings and poems were generated in the months after the Haitian earthquake and Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Sensitive radar receives these shocks, seeking context and meaning beyond newscasts. Poets and artists create a net of refuge and connection. Even in these times, Nancy Moody asserts, there is "hope", though "dressed down for the tumble/
in garbage-bag black, reverts to fetal,/leaves the lights on just in case..."
(*The Way Things Are, Mostly*, after Basin 7.)

Once triggered and set loose by Tomlinson's fathomless images, each poet journeys in the world's endless phenomena and inward, for soul retrieval. These writers couldn't be more diverse, yet each has moved beyond her/his usual channels, picking up spray from the other travelers' boats, bobbing in collective waters with non-human creatures, iconic objects and earth elements, noting and dodging survival threats from the unsettling original weather of this century. There's a charge between the luscious covers of *Original Weather*. This book is not a collection so much as morphic field embedded in a miniature gallery with poems for frames! This book is a pleasure to dip into again and again.

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