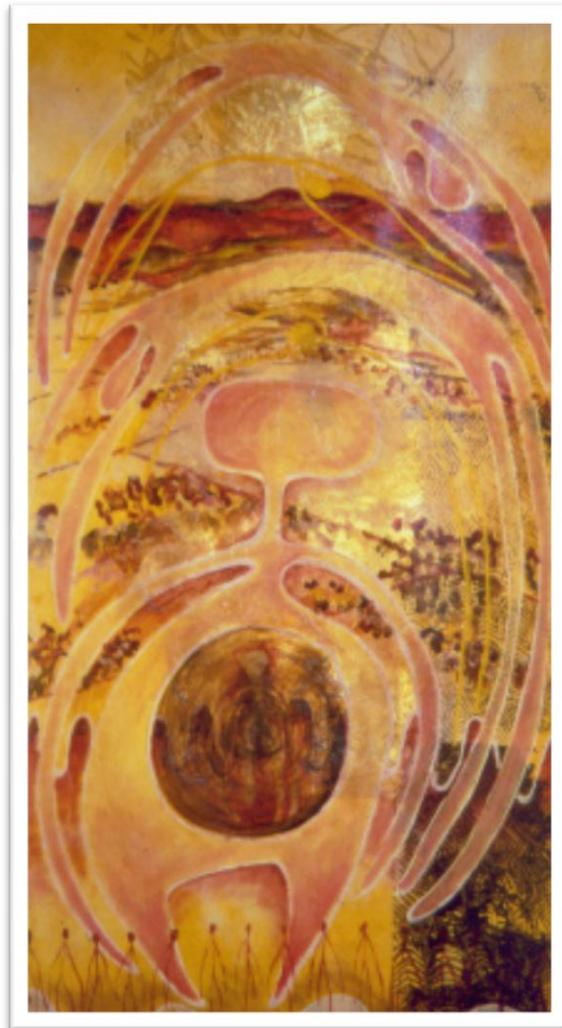


*We Shimmer We Shine*

**Trevor Avery**

**Copyright© Trevor Avery 2014. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.**



Johnston P., 1993, *Shimmer – 6*

## **SHIMMER yinar dhenewan**

I walk along the beach right where the sand meets the ocean. The sun beats down on my body as I listen to the waves ebb and flow. The water is cold as it flows around my feet. I lave the water line and walk a little way up the sand. The sand is hot under my feet. Almost too hot. My body shies away from the heat of the sand. I lie my body down on the sand. The sun beats hot on the top of my body. The sand beats hot underneath of my body. My body fights the heat. Slowly the temperature adjusts. The sun is no longer hot on my body. My body and the sun are the same heat. The sand is no longer hot under my body. My body and the sand are the same heat. The sun, my body and the sand are one.

We shimmer. We shine

My body lies merged with the sun and the sand as I listen to the ebb and flow of the ocean. The sound takes over my whole body changing from a soft whisper to a booming and raging. The noise is too much and I listen inwards to the blood in my body. I think of the times that, as a child, I held a shell to my ear to listen to the whispering secrets of the ocean. As an adult I am told that this swishing sound the shell offers is the sound of the flow of my own blood in my body. I listen now to this sound. I know it is the blood inside my body now. I no longer need the shell of my childhood to listen to the secrets of the ocean. My own blood can tell me that. I listen as the blood in my body ebbs and flow. The whoosh and the rush is all that I hear. The external sound and the internal sound conjoin. Is it the waves or is it my blood? The sound of my blood flowing through my body and the sound of the ebb and flow of the ocean merge into one sound. The ocean and my blood are one.

We shimmer. We shine

The waves of the ocean crash to the shore with a regular beat. The ocean swirls and whirls around, pushing the waves up and forward. Crash! Crash! Crash! Now I hear the beat of my heart. My heart beats to the crashing of the waves. Is it my heart or is it the waves? My heart and the waves are one.

We shimmer. We shine

Another time I walk on this land that holds the body of my mother and my grandmother. I walk on this land in my body. My body and this land are warmed by the sun. The sun beats on my body. The sun beats on this land. This body, this land, my mother, my grandmother sweat in the sun - we merge. My body, this land, my mother, my grandmother are one in the sun.

We shimmer. We shine

My eyes walk in the darkness of the night beside the gravestones of my dead friends. Gone to their Dreaming my eyes see them no more. My grief erupts like the black of the night and overflows. My love, my grief and the night are one in the

darkness that creeps over my eyes like the death and genocide that lives in the land.  
My love and my grief, the darkness and death become one in the night.

We shimmer. We shine

I went on a journey to Walgett and to Lightning Ridge - desert country - Gomileoi country. The heat was intense - it was the hottest recorded temperature in the state. It hit my gut when I observed the poverty and despair of the Aboriginal people in Walgett. The clothes on the children were ragged as they were on the adults too. The houses were rundown. The place had a desolate and hopeless feel to it. The dust, the dogs and the drunkenness told me that hope was running short. The despair could be held in the hand like a solid object. As I live in the city, remote from Walgett, I do not see it daily. I hear about it so of course I know. Seeing the direct results of Australian history on Aboriginal people is a shock when you have not been to the country for a while. How do my people bear this day to day despair and hopelessness?

We drove from Walgett to lightning Ridge along that highway shimmering in the heat. The emu chicks with their mothers were plentiful along the road. I told my friend that Gomileoi women are emu women and Gomileoi men are sand goanna men. The elders who had told me this were explaining why Gomileoi look and act the way we do. "They knew you were coming," my friend said. "Yes" I said, "my sisters here are putting out the welcoming mat". The kangaroos and the cockatoos were plentiful in that grey-green landscape. The red-grey dust of the country permeated my nostrils and dried my throat. The country, the heat and the fauna took over my whole body, although I was definitely in a very modern car. I opened the car window. Was it beautiful? Of course it was beautiful, my European eye said. It held my mind, my body, my spirit just as despair had held my mind, my body and my spirit when I saw how my people were in that town less than an hour away. This, I understood, is what sustained them in this country.

The land is important. As beautiful landscape it is important, but the priority is the identity it offers. The sense of belonging is physical as well as spiritual. It inhabits skin, bone, heart and mind in the most elemental way. The land becomes almost beyond thought and awareness. Without it these people truly have nothing. To somehow immerse oneself with the land becomes, then, a primary way of filling oneself with life, in a world that offers less than nothing to an Aboriginal person I remind myself of this fact often. This is necessary because one of the problems of Aboriginality is that of over-romanticisation which in turn denies the realities of history, a perpetuation of a spiritual genocide that continues yet. Those people in Walgett had no money, no food, no education, no hope, and unless something is done, no future – land alone does not package the essential human needs that they lack. By the same token it is important for me to both define and remind myself in terms of this incredible relationship to land because it is the most elemental of Aboriginal identities – it rules all else. The balance between this important reality and the genocidal romanticism I mention is very delicate. It is in a sense a viewing of a balance between the metaphysical and the physical worlds, and there is a point where it meets, or merges. I remind the reader that this is where my visual works intention is focussed (Pam Johnston, 1999: 10-11).

This is a rare outing for a piece written by Pam Johnston that was originally composed to be shown alongside her exhibition titled “Shimmer - yinar dhenewan”, which has been with me in the UK since 1998. The exhibition was sent to me, and was placed in my care, from that time and is still with me now. It has been an ever evolving and adaptable installation in spaces across the country from the north of Scotland to places far and near. Pam and I agreed that the works would be shown whenever I felt it appropriate to do so, leaving me with nothing more than the burden of trust between Pam and myself. This is an understanding that I have always treated with enormous care.

In its essentials “Shimmer - yinar dhenewan” is a large body of work focusing on life, death and rebirth. It is composed of a number of very large shimmering golden painted pieces on paper, each one well over two meters tall and a metre or so wide. It is also made up of many smaller golden painted pieces and a good number of black and white drawings. If I say that these drawings were the “death” part of the cycle and were titled “Genocide” then I am sure that you can see what territory we are in.

My contacts with Pam Johnston began in 1997. It was during the time that I had moved from London and was living in the Highlands of Scotland. Those contacts with Pam became more established over the years and would have continued to the present day, with new ideas and the work still being developed in 2013, had fate not intervened and taken her from us prematurely.

It is striking how persistently the artistic relationship between Pam and myself has endured. The story began through a mutual artist friend, Mary Rosengren. It was 1997 and Mary had returned to the UK from a residency at Lake Mungo in Australia. She suggested that I contacted Pam, one of the artists that she had met at Lake Mungo. Mary felt that there was a kind of synergy between Pam’s work and the type of projects that I was developing. It was an instinctive call on Mary’s part, and because she and I had a very similar critical outlook I made contact with Pam.

There then began a conversation that was to last over fifteen years with Pam visiting both the Highlands of Scotland and later the Lake District of England, home of Beatrix Potter and William Wordsworth. So just what was the context for the “synergy” that Mary detected between Pam's work and mine? What was it that drew our two apparently diverse cultural arenas together?

I had curated and organised an exhibition called “River Deep, Mountain High” that included the hugely important artist Jimmie Durham. Jimmie agreed to take part as I had inadvertently stumbled across that fact that one of his ancestors was from the north of England (Avery, Trevor: 1997). The exhibition that finally emerged as “River Deep, Mountain High” was not the exhibition that had been first intended. The Highlands had developed a benign mythology that related to its part in the colonisation of North America. The fact that an element of the extremist Survivalist movement in the US was also re-imagining Scotland as the mythical home of white purity gave the project a certain frisson. Although a new generation of Highlanders saw themselves as somehow spiritually related to the Native American peoples it was pretty clear that this was at best a kind of wishful thinking. The exhibition had to reflect this in some way, and had to include some of the complexities of these relationships.

Gerald McMaster, curator of Canadian art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, suggested that the Europeans who colonised North America had a peculiarly intense dream of possession and plundered the land feverishly whilst being blissfully blind to the native peoples who lived there. It was a comment that still has great relevance today and can clearly be equally applied to situations across the globe (1995). I have always maintained that this blindness to the 'Other' continues and indigenous peoples are denied a voice. I have also always maintained that their voices should be heard above those of the mainly white administrators who exhibit their work in, and through, those hallowed galleries where voices are filtered and nuanced, even neutered.

Pam was intrigued by my involvement with Jimmie Durham and with First Nations artists and communities in North America. I think she approached me with a large amount of curiosity and not a little trepidation. Given her background and experiences with the art world (and I experience it) she had every right to be cautious.

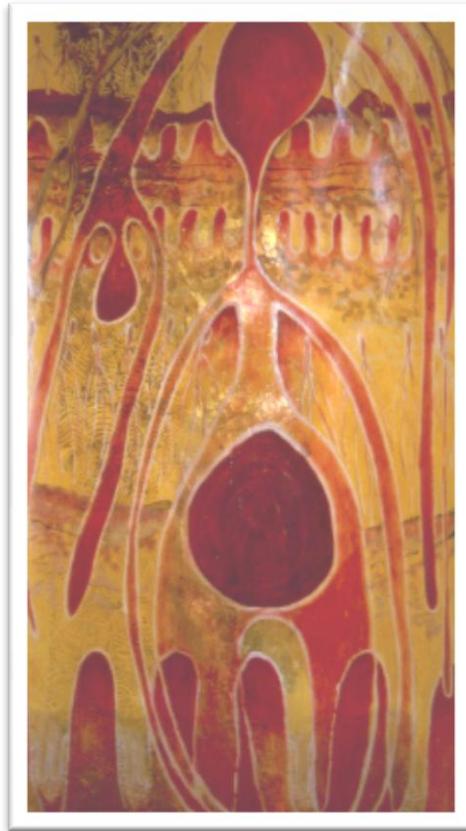
For myself, I felt it was important for artists such as Pam to be given an unconditional platform to speak. Whatever text and words I produced in relation to her work were always carefully crafted and previewed by Pam before being published or shown.

As a mutual colleague and friend John Holt, Senior Lecturer in Art History, Bretton Hall College, University of Leeds, wrote for the catalogue:

We white westerners have much to learn, and the irony is that those who were defined by us as primitive seem to have assumed, or have had the responsibility thrust upon them, to make the lost connections, defining a holistic view of the world from which we have strayed. It is no consolation however to be an Aboriginal artist, to be seen as the connecting dimension for a colonial oppressor. Pam Johnston may not have the shifting of the western model in mind, but her work, in all its facets, challenges the unstable and unbalanced system of western culture, thought and values. But the work of Pam and other indigenous artists like Cherokee Jimmie Durham, ask the questions that have to be asked, confront the issues that need to be addressed (1999: 4).

The text I have included in this contribution comes from the original copy of the same catalogue published in the Highlands that Pam and I "worked up" together in 1997. It accompanied the original "Shimmer - yinar dhenewan" exhibition that toured to Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Kingussie Folk Museum, and in galleries located in Wick, Thurso and Dumfries.

It has never been seen outside the UK, and even here its appearance is rare.



Johnston P., 1993, *Shimmer – 4*

### **WELCOME to Shimmer - Introduction by Trevor Avery 1999**

Welcome to this exhibition by Dr Pam Johnston or Pam Johnston Dahl- Helm or Murai Tighara or, to me, simply Pam. This exhibition has arrived here by the wonders of modern electronic communication. We have come a long way since the initial, tentative communications via e-mail over two years ago.

Pam, John and myself have had a lot of fun, plus not a little pain, in putting this exhibition together. How do you describe the show? The discomfort is with me. I am acutely aware of the pitfalls of working with words like 'indigenouness' and 'Aboriginality'.

I prefer to let people like Pam speak for themselves. I was flattered to be asked by her if I would get involved in putting this project together but felt awkward, and still do, to speak on her behalf. I have no right whatsoever to speak on the behalf of communities such as those who Pam belongs to. Those communities and peoples have the right to speak for themselves in their own terms and within their own frame of reference. More, they should be accorded that right.

As you walk around the exhibition it is worth remembering what you know, or think you know of the history of 'Australia'.

Me? I almost emigrated there when I was ten years old as part of the emigration programme in the mid to late sixties. White, working class families applied

eagerly to fly off to a new life. Illness in my family prevented us from going but I know for sure that the rights and status of the First Nations Australians never entered the equation of the pros and cons of emigration. These people were to all intents and purposes invisible. This exhibition represents a journey for my family, for me as well as for Pam (1999).

I moved from the Highlands in 2001 and exhibited "Shimmer - yinar dhenewan" again but this time at the Brewery Arts Centre in Kendal. Set against the backdrop of the Lake District, home of English Romanticism, and "Shimmer" evolved and became hugely successful in Cumbria.

Pam visited the Brewery Arts Centre exhibition in 2004 and became a magnet for artists, writers and most especially women's groups. She was provided with a studio on the top floor of the art centre but found it was not frequented too much by visitors and so she decamped to work in public view in the reception area where everyone had to pass through. Her presence proved to be a magnet for all kinds of people. The strength and depth of her skills, knowledge, experience and wisdom captivated all those who met her. More than this, she had a rare quality of being able to communicate in a way that was compelling.

She was the inspiration for the Women's Arts International Festival held in Kendal in 2007. She came over for the launch event and stayed in Kendal. She met with Patti Smith, for instance, in the bar of the art centre and was a constant presence at the festival throughout. Her refusal to be typecast as one kind of person or another was a pleasure to behold, and all those who met with her were constantly challenged about stereotypes and 'Otherness'. The challenges were always delivered with great thoughtfulness and often with a tremendous sense of fun.

I am now Director of Another Space, an education charity based in the Lake District, and have become deeply involved with, and instigated what has become, the Lake District Holocaust Project. A permanent base, exhibition, oral and documentary archive in Windermere now tells the story of the three hundred child Holocaust Survivors who came to the Lakes directly from Eastern Europe in 1945. It tells a remarkable story of children who had lived through unimaginable horror to begin new lives in the UK in what they describe as the 'Paradise' of Wordsworth's Lake District. Pam was to have come to be with us again and 'Shimmer' was the opening exhibition in the gallery space alongside the permanent exhibition 'From Auschwitz to Ambleside'. This showing was within a short time of her passing, which gave the showing an added poignancy

John Holt has had a commitment to First Nations peoples that in many ways mirrored mine. His text for the catalogue is illuminating in the way that it is both 'about' Pam and 'of' Pam. You can hear a conversation that has taken place behind the written words, and this is indicative of the kind of legacy that Pam left behind in the UK. It is now for us to speak on her behalf but only in the spirit of trust, a trust that she laid at our door without a price tag. As John states once again:

Pam Johnston, Dr. Pam Johnston, Dahl Helm, Murai Tighara, all are manifestations of one remarkable woman. These are not contradictory alter egos, but indications of a woman between two cultures, a "culture bearer" for her people, and artist, teacher, activist and elder on the Council of Elders for her

people the Gomileoi. She has status and respect in both worlds and is an acknowledged interpreter between the two.

Pam Johnston is significant in all that she does, not least in her work as an artist. But she does not need or want to be defined as an Aboriginal artist, more as an Aboriginal woman who makes art. She is proud of her identity but does not need to be defined by it. Her intelligence, her vision and her spirit define her. Her work embraces the seemingly incompatible aspects of the spiritual and the political. Pam would not separate the two, indeed this separation of the political and the spiritual has concurred to compound the dualities of Western culture that has desensitised and severed us from the consequences of our relationship with the earth and with our communities (1999: 5).

I must leave the last word to Pam and these words are indicative of a unique sense of responsibility and common humanity that she carried with her no matter what the situation:

I have had to explain why I think indigenusness is important to the world and needs looking after – we all, all humankind, comes from something somewhere. And we all have to come from a holistic life where everything was included.

So the sacred and healing and eating and nurturing and EVERYTHING were part of the worldview. But for many this has gone and as a result there are many fractured people in the world looking for their whole selves.

The few indigenous people left are the root of what is left of what everyone used to be. And we are living, breathing and adapting cultures, dealing with the same problems and so on. We are all that is left now. If we are lost, then everything is lost because nothing is whole anymore. I can tell that this is not understood either but you have to try, don't you? (1999: 5)



Pam Johnston checking photographic record of visit to Long Meg stone circle during Women's Arts International Festival, held in Kendal in 2007

Photo Trevor Avery

## References

- Avery, Trevor. 1997. "River Deep Mountain High". Touring exhibition of Highlands and Islands curated by Trevor Avery and produced by Highland Regional Council. Exhibited at Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, Kingussie Folk Museum, St Fergus Gallery, Wick, Swanson Art Gallery, Thurso, An Tuireann Arts Centre, Portree, An Tobar Arts Centre, Tobermory.
- John Holt and Pam Johnston (eds.). 1999. "Shimmer yinar dhenewan" Catalogue for a touring exhibition curated by Another Space and produced by Highland Regional Council.
- Holt, John. 1999. "Shimmer yinar dhenewan". Exhibition catalogue "Shimmer yinar dhenewan".
- Johnston, Pam. 1999. "Shimmer yinar dhenewan". Exhibition catalogue "Shimmer yinar dhenewan".
- McMaster, Gerald. 1995. Exhibition Catalogue "Edward Poitras: Canada XLVI Biennale di Venezia". Canadian Museum of Civilization.

## Other recommended reading

- Durham, Jimmie. 1993. *A Certain Lack of Coherence*. Ed. Jean Fisher. Third Text Publication.
- Lippard, Lucy. 1997. "The Lure of the Local". New York: New York Press.
- Evely, Thomas. 1998. *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*. McPherson & Co Publishers, U.S.

**Biographical note.** Trevor Avery is Director of Another Space/Lake District Holocaust Project (LDHP) based in the Lake District of England. He graduated in 1984 with a BA (hons) degree in Fine Art and has lived and worked as an artist, curator and exhibition organiser in London, the Highlands of Scotland and currently Cumbria, which is the border country between England and Scotland. His recent work has taken him to Poland, Czech Republic, Germany, Holland, and many places in between, and he has been involved as advisor on three recent BBC television programmes related to aspects of his work with LDHP.