

## **WABI SABI 2: MY TREES AND ME**

**A Work-in-Progress by Deborah Barndt**

**October 4 – 24, 2024, Thus Gallery, 33 Euclid Avenue**

**Wabi Sabi** is a Japanese way of being and seeing, honouring the beauty of all organic processes of birth, growth, decay, death and new life.

After my mother died at the age of 96 in October 2012, as part of my mourning process, I photographed the glorious decay of autumn and superimposed those photos with images I'd taken of her aging body. "Wabi Sabi: The Cycle of Life" was exhibited at the Parkdale Community Health Centre for the 2013 Contact Festival.

Indigenous and non-western philosophies like Buddhism, see our human bodies as part of nature. Okanagan teacher Jeannette Armstrong explains that "... the body is earth itself. Our flesh, blood, and bones are earth-body; in all cycles in which earth moves, so does our body."

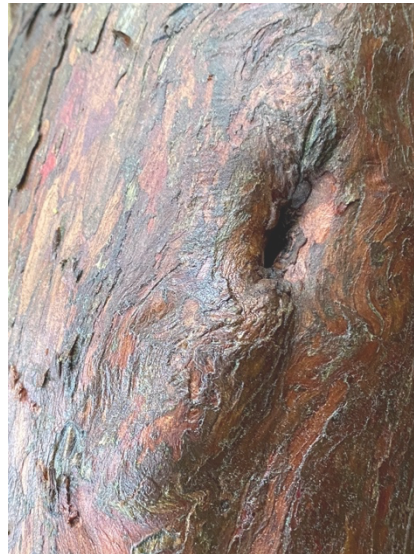
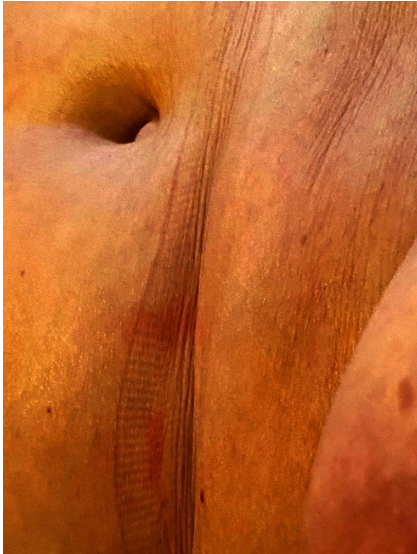
**Taya:** When community artists in the VIVA! project met in a Panamanian jungle in 2004, Margarita Antonio, Nicaraguan journalist and Indigenous women's organizer, taught us the miskitu word "taya" which means both skin and bark.

**Trees:** I have always loved trees, and the beauty of their rough and gnarled trunks, their twisty branches, each a sculpture shaped by the years in one place. I imagine the unique stories they carry of past storms, sun, and wind, of visits from animals and insects and humans.

**My aging body:** As a woman edging toward 80 years on this planet, I also carry many stories in my wrinkled and scarred skin. But can I love my aging body in the same way I love the aging trees? I live in a youth-obsessed culture which dismisses older women's bodies or considers them ugly.

Anna Halprin, dancer and performance artist, reflected in her 80s: "an aging body is beautiful in its own way.... Whenever I feel I need inspiration, I always return to nature. Maybe it has to do with rehearsing with my own returning to the earth, to my own death."

**Wild Soma:** In June, I participated in an inspiring retreat on Cortes Island in B.C.: "Wild Soma Being and Becoming: Embodied Creative Practices Toward Collective Thriving." It heightened my multi-sensory awareness of my own body, and other bodies, including the Earth Body and all elements of nature. We were asked to find one tree in the ancient forest that we connected with, and to visit it regularly, to listen to it, to speak to it. As a photographer, I caressed it with my camera and also turned the lens inward, reframing the intricacies of my ageing skin.



**Wabi Sabi 2** was born.

**My homes:** I have always had special trees wherever I lived. Since giving birth to my son Joshua in October 1985, I have planted special trees in our two homes, **33 Euclid Avenue** and **47 Wright Avenue**. For the past three months I've been photographing those trees, deepening my relationship with them, and finding in them patterns and textures that are echoed in my aging body.

This small exhibit allows me to test the ideas and the forms (size, tone, framing) with small audiences, to determine where to take this project in the future.

**Thus Gallery** is the perfect place for this experiment. Its purpose, size, and flexibility coincide perfectly with my current needs. More importantly, the gallery is the converted living room of the first house I bought in Toronto, in 1987, and where I raised my son Joshua from the age of 2 to 8, before we moved to Parkdale.

**Two special trees:** At a naming party for my new-born son in 1985, my dear friends dian marino and Ferne Cristall gifted him a red maple tree. It didn't survive the first winter, so when I moved into 33 Euclid in 1986, I planted an apple tree for him in the front yard, which now reaches the top of that house. I chose our current home at 47 Wright Avenue, because it had an 8-year-old maple tree in the front yard; Joshua was 8 at the time.

That maple tree now towers over our house, just as Joshua towers over me. I am also comforted by the trees I've planted in honor of my ancestors over the years in my backyard: the Russian Olive (my mother Laura), the Crab Apple (my father Bill), and the Saskatoon berry tree (my brother Van) all meet in their upper branches as they provide a canopy for my spiral garden ceremonial space. For many years, there was also a cherry tree, a surprise gift from Joshua's father, Antonio Savone.

**My rewilded garden:** This year I have been rewilding my garden, to invite more native plants and pollinators to help regenerate the earth. My rewilded garden is the space where I'd like my remains to fertilize new growth for the pleasure of future generations. Connecting images of my aging body with the bodies of the special trees in my life is a ritual of preparation for that.