

Written in the Space of the Water: A Conversation with Roberley Bell

By Rachel Adams

Roberley Bell was well traveled as a child, spending her childhood throughout Latin America and Southeast Asia, before returning to the United States to attend school. Earning her MFA at the State University of New York at Alfred, Bell went on to earn numerous grants and fellowships, including from the New York Foundation for the Arts, a Pollock-Krasner fellowship, a summer Fulbright to the Netherlands, and a 2010 Senior Scholar Fulbright to Turkey. Bell's 2010 Fulbright topic, "The City as the Site of Intervention," resulted in a series of projects in public spaces. Her time in Turkey has greatly influenced her artistic practice, and she returned to Turkey in 2015 to continue her work. The project *Still Visible, after Gezi* (2016), which will be included in the exhibition *Wanderlust* that I am curating at the University at Buffalo (UB) Art Galleries (on view September 2017–January 2018), is a result of her 2015 trip.

Wanderlust, which I conceived of in 2012, has changed radically since its inception. Originally, I imagined it was going to be strictly an exhibition about walking, in which the walk was the actual work, with a lot of documentary materials. It has since morphed into a much larger project about artists who depart the studio and the confines of being inside to make work outside. Included are performative actions, investigations, mapping projects, and of course there are also walking works. The exhibition will begin with the work of Richard Long, Vito Acconci, Rosemarie Castoro, and Nancy Holt, move into Janine Antoni and Francis Alÿs, and then examine a younger generation of artists including Marie Lorenz, William Lamson, and Kim Beck, who have been inspired by some of these older artists.

Arriving in Buffalo, I continued to research artists who fall into this vein, and when I visited Bell's Rochester-area studio in 2015, we discussed a residency she had at Chesterwood in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. During her time there, she mentioned walking each

day and creating small sculptures from sticks she picked up during those walks. This segued into her mentioning her time in Istanbul and how she would take a walk each day and photograph what she saw. It was then that she mentioned the trees. I asked her to tell me about the trees, because I knew intuitively that what she had to say about them was going to be interesting.

After we spoke, I invited Roberley to contribute this work to the *Wanderlust* exhibition. As she was still developing ways to present this work, she received the residency at Visual Studies Workshop (VSW) to work on the project. We spoke at VSW about the project, and the outcome of the residency, in March 2016.

RACHEL ADAMS: Can you talk about how this project came about?

ROBERLEY BELL: In 2010, I lived in Istanbul teaching on a Fulbright scholarship. I was there working on a public intervention with a group of architecture and urban planning students. We were working with the five modes of transportation available in Istanbul—metro, tram, bus, ferry, and *dolmuş* (shared taxis)—with the intent being for students to consider subtle minimal interventions that would enhance the user's experience. While I was there I needed something to do, and as a sculptor and primarily an objectmaker it was clear that making sculpture was not what I was going to be doing, due to lack of access to space and facilities. So I spent most of my time walking, and I started photographing trees that were not iconic symbols of the beauty of nature, but rather trees that appeared compromised—yet protected, nurtured. I was photographing them but wasn't really conscious of why. I was just doing it and after a month or so started printing a few of them and hanging the prints in my apartment. The team of architects I was working with became really interested in why I was photographing these trees, what drew me to them. Having to talk out loud about it, I came to the understanding—only because I had already been in Istanbul for several months by then, in a city of, at that time, twelve million—that the trees were a stand-in for the humanity of the city of Istanbul.

These are trees that, here in the United States, we would consider "ugly," or located in inconvenient places, and we would just cut them down. There, somebody was really caring for them, and I was really taken by that and realized the trees were important to me.

When I came back to the United States I ended up putting together an exhibition of the work of five female artists from Turkey titled *AŞINA/Familiar* that was on view from October 29 to November 16, 2012, at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). The curator asked that I also have something in that show, so I put together a book of these tree images, *Visible From the Corner of My Eye* (2012), in which each of my images is paired with a found vintage photo of a person and a tree. I then put it away, and that was the end of it for me.

Then on May 27, 2013, the demonstrations in the city of Istanbul began in Gezi Park, which is a small, not particularly lovely concrete park with some trees in the center of the city. I used to walk through Gezi from my apartment to Istanbul Technical University to teach. There was something about the demonstrations that really hit home for me. Also, the demonstrations were initially sparked because the government wanted to bulldoze the park and



Tree in a House from the series *Visible From the Corner of My Eye* (2010–15) by Roberley Bell; courtesy the artist

build a mall. But it really was not about the trees. Yes, that first night it was to save the trees, and maybe even the second and third day, but the demonstrations in Gezi Park became demonstrations against the government of Turkey. I did not photograph these trees, but I walked through the park often and these trees seemed at home there.

I was on sabbatical in 2015 and I wrote a grant to go back and try to find the trees I had photographed in 2010. The trees had remained important to me and I knew the process of seeking them out would reveal something—I just wasn't sure what that would become. I wanted to go back and see if, working from memory, I could relocate these trees. It was an extraordinary experience, and it was not what I set out to do. Seeking out the trees became more than a strategy. It developed into a rich set of experiences involving encounters with strangers, the participation of my friends, and a daily exploration that became richer than I originally anticipated.

RA: So in three weeks you had sixteen trees to find with only short notes and the photographs to guide you. What was it like to work from memory? You were trying to recreate paths that you had taken five years before, and some even earlier, because you had been seeing these trees throughout your several trips to Istanbul. What was the process you undertook on a daily basis?

RB: I think that I have to give credit to the fact that I had already put a book together, because when I did, I put in a descriptor as the title of the tree. It might be, “the littlest tree in front of DEPO,” which is an art center. Or, “the leaning tree on the way to Nur’s house.” The one in front of DEPO was easy for me to find, as I’ve known that tree for almost fifteen years. To find the one on the way to Nur’s house, I went to her house, then started walking to the apartment where I had lived, which is downhill. I just kept taking different routes from her house, back to my former apartment, and I eventually found the tree. That is really how I went about it. I have to say that I have a number of friends in Istanbul who were

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Dancing Tree from the series *Visible From the Corner of My Eye* (2010–15) by Roberley Bell; courtesy the artist

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participants in this and they were certain I could find all of the trees. I set out with the strategy of having one day for each tree. Friends would look things up. I would remember things like, “I saw a yellow building,” and someone would say, “Yeah, that yellow building is the former tourist police station in Sultanahmet so let’s just go and start from there.”

It was working from landmarks and memory, and I found all but two of the trees in the process. What was interesting was during this residency I was typing up and reading the entries for the first time since I wrote them in Istanbul and realizing new pieces of information that I had not put together at the time. As I was typing one entry so visitors could read it, I realized, from what someone had told us on the street about a landmark they could see in one of the photos, that the last tree we were looking for was actually in a different part of the city than I thought. Now I know where it is and can go back another time to find it.

RA: I think what is really interesting about the notes and these stories is that all you had was a photograph of a tree, and you had some help from friends, but you also had to talk with people you met on the street in order to find it. In one of the stories, you remembered that an air conditioner fed the tree, because of its dripping, and the men you talked with were really sad because the tree had been uprooted.

RB: The tree was growing right beside an air conditioner and they would clip it, and take care of it; they even had a little hose directing the drips of water from the air conditioning unit. I used to get the tram there, so I knew the stop very well. The first day, when I went to rephotograph it, it wasn’t there. I didn’t have my journal with my notes and photograph, because I didn’t think I’d need them. I looked around, trying to understand where it went, why there wasn’t at least some evidence that it had been there. The next day, I went back with the image and went into a shop and talked with a young man who was not employed there in 2010, but he remembered the tree, and remembered that the government workers had come and chopped down several trees to put down a new sidewalk.

He was really angry, and for me, it was clear that his anger was really about the aggression of what the government had done. This was after the government got in this mode of cleaning up Istanbul, and now the streets were almost completely cleared of what was there. Standard sidewalks were filled in instead of replacing the cobblestone or broken stone that had been there, which is the reason I couldn’t even find the cut stump.

RA: Thinking about *Wanderlust*, and how now to present this work in an exhibition, I think we both realized it could be another book. Or an addendum to the book you’ve already made. But thinking about it visually, the time you have spent at VSW has been really helpful in terms of how we’re going to think about installation at the gallery. Could you talk about the process you’ve gone through since you’ve been here?

RB: What I will say about working in the VSW Project Space is that first of all, you get to come into a clean space. The only interferences are what you bring into it. I only brought referential material to this project with me. More than anything, though, what was of value here were the conversations I had with people every afternoon I was

here. Good friends, whose thoughtfulness I respect, came to see me. Curators came to see me. I was really fortunate that when I asked people, they actually came. It was just wonderful, and people came spontaneously, just knowing that I was here.

Being able to talk out loud is always a value, but what I also realized is that I’m trying to communicate something about not just the city before and after its transformation, but also the experience of this transformation. It is about more than just time, the city, and its transformation in five years. It is about the whole process of the walk, and rediscovery, and understanding. How do you visually communicate that to someone without bringing everyone into a room, and talking to them for an hour first?

It’s really come down to a hurricane of information, where the original image taken in 2010—in the company of the vintage portraits (which I feel are a strong metaphor for the humanity of the city)—is what’s really so important to me. Something I didn’t mention is that, when I was working on these photographs in 2010, after realizing that maybe there was something in them, I also started to collect vintage portraits in Turkey in which the photograph of a person, or group of people, was taken in the presence of a tree, and the tree is as important as the people in the photograph. For me, those vintage pictures became the key to understanding this metaphor that I had for the tree as being the humanity of Istanbul. More than just this sense of the tree as a living thing—but that in a city that doesn’t have the space for what’s there, there’s room for these trees to exist, and someone’s not going to cut them down, unless it’s the government.

Being able to have these conversations here in the Project Space at VSW has been so helpful. It has helped me change the sense of hierarchy, in terms of scale, of what information is most important to me. I also realized that when finding the trees in 2015, the landmarks—the things that I remembered about the area, about the city, that led me back to find the trees—were of equal importance. In the presentation of this work, I have to give those landmarks the same weight as the 2015 photographs. My stories are also important. They started out as nightly journals written on a piece of tracing paper placed on top of a map that I drew of the city of Istanbul. I would write everything that happened that day—the people I met, the questions that we asked, all of the stories. I wrote in the space of the water, because the map of Istanbul has three land masses—two on the European side, one on the Asian side—so I was always writing in the spaces of the Bosphorus Strait and the Haliç estuary (which Westerners call “the Golden Horn”).

I’ve come to realize that the stories are perhaps the most significant part of the project. Now, I’m going to do something to transcribe them, so with the installation of the visuals of the trees, you have those stories, also.

RA: Can you talk specifically about some of the trees? For instance, the one that is coming out of the plywood construction?

RB: The one with the orange wall—that one is actually a very stoic wisteria. There’s serious construction going on all around it right now, and somebody has built a protection barrier around it. After I returned to the US in 2011, and was working on the book, I realized

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that I knew the tree, but it had a different colored wall behind it. I went back through all of my files of trips to Istanbul, and realized that I had been there four times before—and that I had photographed that tree for the first time in 2005. I had also photographed the one at the DEPO art center for the first time that year.

The protection barrier around the tree, I think, really shows how concerned someone is about protecting something that we in the US would just cut down. There is one tree that you have to look very closely at—it's in front of somebody's front door. I've witnessed people having to squeeze a baby carriage between the tree and the door, but they haven't cut it down.

RA: Some of these photographs go back to 2005, and 2010 is when you initiated the project out of the conversations with the architects. Why did you start photographing the trees to begin with? Do you know?

RB: This is something I talk about with students all the time—when you're walking around with an idea in your head, there is something, in some way, in the world around you, that equals what it is you're thinking about. You and I might walk down the same street, but we're not going to photograph, make note of, or recall the same things, because we're walking around with different ideas. This interest in nature within the context of the urban environment is long-standing for me.

Something that is interesting about Istanbul is that, historically, the culture of the garden and the public park is not like what we have in the US, or in the Western world generally. In Istanbul, to go to my public space, my outdoor space—I'm not even going to call it a "green space"—I would go just across the bridge from my apartment to the courtyard of the mosque. That is where I would sit, bringing a cushion with me, and read. It was my

Wishing Tree from the series *Visible From the Corner of My Eye* (2010–15) by Roberley Bell; courtesy the artist



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outdoor space. The sense of that publicness, or the way in which public space is used with some sense of nature within the urban environment, is really what interests me.

RA: What might it be like if you go back to Istanbul again in a couple of years? Is it important to keep going back and trying to find these trees? Do you feel like the project is finished now?

RB: I have to say that I know I will return to Istanbul, and I am certain that, because of the location of some of the trees in relationship to what I do when I'm there, I will be curious. I don't know if I will go off in search of some of the trees that took a full day to find,

although now I have good notes. I don't think that part is really important. But the wisteria is on the way to Karaköy Güllüoğlu, the best baklava store in Istanbul, so I guarantee I'll walk by that one.

RACHEL ADAMS is the associate curator for the University at Buffalo Art Galleries. She holds an MA in Exhibition and Museum Studies from the San Francisco Art Institute. Upcoming exhibitions include *Lydia Okumura: Situations and Wanderlust*, an exhibition that was recently awarded a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

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