



Picture: Michael Potter

LYNETTE Wallworth carries stones in her pocket, not to weigh her down, but to remind her of favourite places. She usually keeps them in what she calls her fetish bag, which also includes a collection of animal figurines.

"Every day I carry something little. Even today I have a stone with me. It's an Australian thing," she insists, laughing. It helps connect her with home, and for someone who has led a nomadic existence for the past seven years she seems remarkably grounded.

Wallworth is an artist who works with video, short film, photography and sound to create wordless narratives. Often labelled a new media artist, she incorporates the newest technology to create what she terms ancient understandings.

We meet in an old church hall in South Melbourne, a cavernous space she has humanised with soft music and candles. It's where she's making an installation for her solo exhibition at the Adelaide Film Festival. The piece, one of five at the Samstag Museum of Art, is titled *Duality of Light* and like a lot of her work, it takes the viewer on a journey as part of the action.

In the centre of the room is scaffolding covered in blackout material forming a long tunnel. It's pitch black inside. There is sound equipment along with lighting effects and other wizardry, but how it all works and what happens is a mystery. Each viewer "will go on a unique and singular journey", says Wallworth, but she's careful not to give too much away. Surprise (and wonderment) are important elements in her work and she doesn't want to spoil things.

Although she says she is not religious, sacred architecture and spirituality were starting points for *Duality of Light*. "It was inspired by a Cambodian temple at Angkor that you could enter from four different directions: the ancestor entrance, the Buddhist entrance; it didn't matter, it was about spiritual tolerance. You all come to the same point, it doesn't matter how you get there," she says.

Wallworth's own journeys have also been singular. Her artistic residencies, which have included Iran and Ethiopia, are rather more exotic than her Sydney childhood in suburban Bentley North.

Was her family artistic? "Dad's father was a shearer and Dad worked in the bank," she answers, and no, they weren't particularly artistic. But they were, and are, a very close, supportive family. She has a brother and sister. Her mother knew the best way to curb young

THE FACE

FIONA GRUBER meets LYNETTE WALLWORTH

NEW MEDIA ARTIST

Lynette's chronic restlessness: "My mum would give me pencils and paper and when I was drawing I would be calm. Drawing became a habit early on."

School, St Ursula's College in nearby Kingsgrove, was another positive environment. "It was full of quirky nuns and they were very socially and politically minded and they employed those of a similar mind so we got these incredible teachers, who were able to fire up something inside that was just snoudering." Even now, the memory of her creative awakening stirs her.

Literature and art were her great passions, with an English teacher who introduced her to a far wider world of books than the official curriculum. A pivotal moment came when Wallworth was 14 and the school held an exhibition of pupils' work. Her economics teacher bought her still life in oils of fruit and a jug. "He said 'that is a really beautiful painting,'" she recalls. "His dad was an artist, and what was so wonderful was that this person took my work seriously enough to hang it in his house. It was a great encouragement."

Art school beckoned; she won a place at Sydney's Alexander Mackie College (now the College of Fine Arts) but didn't know how to be an artist. "I was too young. In those first weeks every lecturer said 'hands up those straight from school; please reconsider.'" She laughs. "They were right, it was madness. You can't benefit from art school at 17."

Her lecturers warned that only 1 per cent of students would be making work in 10 years' time. Heeding the advice, Wallworth went into art teaching after graduating in the early 1980s. She enjoyed it but sometimes her enthusiasm got out of hand. "I would get so excited talking about a work that I'd find myself on top of the desk, I'd climbed on to it unconsciously." The burning need to make art was also still there. "This made me realise it was a deep, deep passion and it wasn't going away."

The life experience she craved came when she travelled to Florence in her early 20s. As well as

CLOSE-UP

Career highlight: Peter Sellars's New Crowned Hope Exhibition, 2006.
Career lowlight: Adelaide Festival 2002, realising it wasn't going to happen [as originally planned]. I was one of six assistant artistic directors under Sellars's artistic direction. He resigned four months before the opening due to differences with the board.
Favourite artist: James Turrell. He's ephemeral, he works with light.
Guiltily pleasure: Buying lots of books and shoes.

wallowing in the art, she found a society she felt at home in. "where everyone was really comfortable talking about art. I had always felt that I didn't quite belong anywhere [but] I realised that there are different cultures that you can belong to. Having a passionate discussion about an artwork in a cafe in Florence, I realised there are other ways to live out this passion."

There was a cultural and political conflict, however, with living permanently overseas. "One of the reasons I've been so nomadic is that I'm part of that Australian generation that thought, 'I must not leave.' So I move backwards and forwards."

Wallworth's work began to encompass photography, created as part of an installation environment. She also undertook postgraduate studies at Sydney College of the Arts and as her final written piece in 1991 wrote a play, *God the Doctor and the Impossible Body*, influenced by her work with cancer patients. It was seen by the artist Ross Gibson, who would go on to be the inaugural creative director of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image.

The piece, which was part performance, part installation, stayed with Gibson and in 1998 he commissioned *Hold*, which marks the beginning of her present artistic direction. It's an environmentally potent work, where each viewer "captures" images of the cosmos and microscopic organisms beamed into glass bowls that they carry with them into a darkened room. It's all very magical, even alchemical, and utilises research Wallworth undertook at James Cook University in Queensland, incorporating images taken of one of nature's most extraordinary phenomena, the coral spawning of the Great Barrier Reef.

When we meet, Wallworth is touching down only briefly in Australia. Last month she could be found at the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, in conversation with Robert Redford and exhibiting as part of the festival's New Frontiers program.

In the past couple of years she has exhibited in Vienna as part of director Peter Sellars's 2006 New Crowned Hope Festival, at the National Glass Centre in Britain in 2007, the British Film Institute, New York's Lincoln Centre and at festivals in France, New Zealand and Australia. She's never had gallery representation but is represented by Forma Arts and Media Limited, a British-based agency for interdisciplinary art.

If the environment is a passion, so too are human emotions and the connections between people. "I'm interested in gesture, which is why I often structure works that you have to hold or touch because I think gesture is a core language for us as humans."

The quest for new experiences keeps her on the move. "No matter what I think I'm seeing and what I know, I always have to remember there's a whole lot of things I haven't seen yet, and to hold those two things in tension."

Lynette Wallworth's solo exhibition is at the Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia, February 19 to April 24. The Adelaide Film Festival 2009 opens on February 19.

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