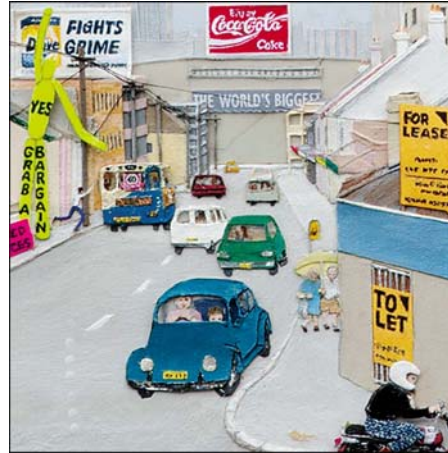


BELONGING

An interview by Kevin Steinberger



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Thirteen years have passed since *Window* was published. It is a long lag time between companion titles. When did the notion of *Belonging* form and how did the ideas evolve?

About four years ago, a friend was talking about a street she particularly loves in inner Sydney. This street of terrace houses has been closed to traffic. Its windows, walls and pavements are filled to overflowing with plants, growing from window boxes, from breaks in the pavement, from pot plants, creeping up and covering walls of the houses. A couple of seats have been placed among the plants. It's a very narrow street but full of character ... a place where neighbours sit and chat and children can safely play.

Apparently an elderly woman who lives in this street of tiny terrace houses with no front or back yards (and which was originally totally bare of vegetation) started putting pot plants outside her home to cheer the place up. Gradually other residents started to do the same until the pavement overflowed with plants as it remains today.

I kept thinking about this story and how its possible for one very ordinary person to spirit a whole community to work towards making a run down neighborhood a happier, friendlier place to be. A place where they eventually love to be. And so the very first seed for 'Belonging' was born.

In the past 'home' meant not only the building in which a person lived. One's 'Home' also included the street, the landmarks and the special places in the neighbourhood. But now our street spaces are usually so full of cars and their noise and their dangers, people no longer use their streets in the ways they used to. Often people have never even seen or met some of the other people also living in their street. In evolving my ideas for 'Belonging' I became conscious of the worldwide movement 'Reclaim the street' in which street residents collectively decide they want to stop or dramatically reduce their street traffic so that their street can once again become a place for social interaction, for children, community and plants.

Throughout the world, there is a drift to uniformity, everywhere and everything looking and feeling the same. In 'Belonging' I try to show an alienating cityscape (that could be anywhere) reclaim its Australian character. Australia is still wonderfully rich in its variety of native plants and animals. 'Belonging' celebrates using local indigenous plants to give a sense of place and regional character. And through the use of local plant species, the local native birds, animals and insects that had long since left are attracted back. This community then becomes a nurturing home not just to people but to the larger community of life.



Detail: 3x4cm

Finally, throughout the creation of *Belonging* I was very conscious I wanted to include ideas that are within anyone's grasp. Anyone can collect seeds or cuttings and plant and propagate them, and if a local council is approached, they are often willing to supply the plants for street planting and are often open to restricting street vehicle access. The main idea I'm hoping to communicate is the wonderful potential for positive change simply through individual and community effort.

***Belonging* shares the same format and narrative structure as *Window* so the two books are indeed companion titles. Was that your intention?**

Yes. 'Belonging' is designed to stand alone but I like the idea that if you know the story of 'Window' you might recognize that Sam and Tracy, the two main characters also feature in 'Belonging'.

I always felt rather uncomfortable about 'Window' being a negative statement, In 'Belonging' I try to balance this and sow the idea that if one doesn't like a place, rather than move to bush or wilderness and in the process reduce and change yet more bush and so help start a new cycle of development; to take a place that is already developed and without necessarily removing buildings, put back some of what originally made the place special but which was taken away in the process of development.

***Window* depicted the ugliness of urban sprawl and still remains representative of much residential development occurring on the fringes of our larger cities. To what extent does *Belonging* reflect urban renewal in Australia today?**

I'm not qualified to know where urban renewal is at in Australia today but what I am familiar with is a blossoming of street and garden planting which is giving new heart and personality to otherwise depressing and anonymous streets.

***Belonging* celebrates community however throughout the book are allusions to individuality, such as billboards urging *Be Unique* and *Realise Your Dream*. Could it not also be said that the people in the growing community of *Window* were seeking to 'realise their dream' of a home. How and why are these communities different?**

The numerous advertising billboards at the beginning of the book are intended as irony and initially provide the main colour in the cityscape. These cliched advertising slogans can be found in cities almost anywhere in the world and take away from any sense of place. By the end of the book, the billboards are hidden by the colours and individuality of the growing vegetation.

The community in 'Window' have a home: but in my mind we could call any place home whereas the word 'belonging' implies an emotional connection. If one wants to really belong to something one has to work at it and contribute to it

The community in 'Belonging' have become involved in changing their surroundings for the



Detail: 10x7cm

better... they are self empowered and by the end of the book a sense of caring, of pride, a sense of place and sense of community has developed that doesn't happen in 'Window'.

***Belonging*, with its myriad detail, repays many readings. There are some very potent little images that develop significance as the book goes on, such as the neighbour passing a pot plant over the fence to the little girl as a cement truck drives by to a job. It must surely be a mammoth and time-consuming task to imagine and marshall all these little images to create the sum effect of the book?**

Yes, my books are slow to develop but, particularly as this is a wordless book, its in the often tiny visual detail that one can 'read' the story of 'Belonging' and evolving these details is something I enjoy!

This is part of an extended review of 'Belonging' in Magpies Magazine, Volume 9 no 3 July, 2004