THE COURTAULDIAN

ISSUE 28

Tongues in Trees

ECOCRITICISM AND ART

This our life, exempt from public haunt, finds **Tongues in Trees**, *books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.*

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Much Ado About Nothing, Act II, Scene 1
Photograph by Isabella Taleghani
Cover by Finlay Thompson and Molly Thiebaud

Illustration by Sasha Dunn

Editors' Notes

Climate activists glued to a picture frame, a mashed potato-spattered Monet, van Gogh's sunflowers dripping with Heinz tomato soup — do the words 'art and ecology' bring such recent events to mind? Whether or not you agree with its ultimate effectiveness, this spate of arts-related climate activism has prompted public questioning of the relationship between the arts and culture sector and the climate crisis. The rise of such questioning is paralleled in art-historical study by the emergence of a fast-developing ecocritical discourse which aims to investigate the underlying ecological attitudes in works of art. Literary ecocriticism likewise reflects on how literary works indicate shifting cultural attitudes towards the environment throughout history. The title of our 28th print issue — taken from Act II of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* — builds on this literary precedent and suggests the natural world to be both a source of artistic inspiration and to possess its own creative agency.

We have taken a dual approach to exploring ecocriticism in our *Tongues in Trees* project. In our print issue, contributors have applied an ecocritical lens both retrospectively to past artworks, and by investigating how contemporary artists incorporate ecological thinking into their practice. Our *Tongues in Trees* exhibition at PhotoBook Café, Shoreditch, expands upon this second objective and seeks to demonstrate the myriad ways in which London-based contemporary artists engage with ecocriticism. Crucially, our *Tongues in Trees* ethos employs art historian and key ecocritical scholar Andrew Patrizio's concept of the 'ecological eye' in that this project is not limited to artworks with explicitly ecological content. Rather, *Tongues in Trees* acknowledges that an effective ecological eye is applied to all artworks, regardless of medium and subject matter, to discern their latent ecological values and inform our understanding of our ever-shifting relationship with the natural world. Above all else, we have endeavoured to provide an opportunity to explore and critique what ecological thinking means to us as individuals, to interrogate our anthropocentric worldviews, and begin to tackle the question of what it means to study the humanities in a time of human-caused environmental crisis.

Maya Fletcher-Smith
Print Issue Editor

Nature meant boring to me as a child. As a person who was born and raised in the city, being surrounded by green felt somewhat isolating and overwhelming, which was at times almost intimidating. Being aware of the climate crisis and many different repercussions of human activities that constantly seek capitalist growth made my attitude towards the environment more sentimental, yet distant.

Although broad, the theme of ecocriticism in *Tongues in Trees* opens the ground for a discussion on how we relate with nature and the environment we surround ourselves with. Throughout the following pages, the natural world is explored now merely as a stationary prop with which human existence is played, but instead as having manifold dimensions that link closely to our lives, identities, and how we interpret the works of art that human beings have created and are still creating.

Through the works of poetry in this issue, relating to nature becomes a way of reflecting on oneself. The articles and prose that delve deeper into the subject of ecology and its relationship with art and culture are not limited to the stereotypical, apocalyptic tone of voice commonly adopted when speaking about contemporary issues surrounding the environment. Here, nature is never limited to being placed in the passive position of victimhood, but rather seems to have its own course of life and multiple narratives.

Feelings of helplessness often halt action. At least for me, it did. As I grew older — passing the teenage years of instability accompanied by constant growth and shifts — the stillness of nature which I once perceived with boredom I begin to feel as a grounding, calming, and comforting experience. Such a reconciliation with nature comes ultimately from noticing and embracing the aspects of our identities and lives that nature is embedded in, and very much deeply so. *Tongues in Trees* asks you, with great sincerity and earnestness, to think about nature, to reconsider what it means to exist alongside or as part of nature, and question further what art history could do for and within nature.

Lynn Ha
Editor-in-Chief

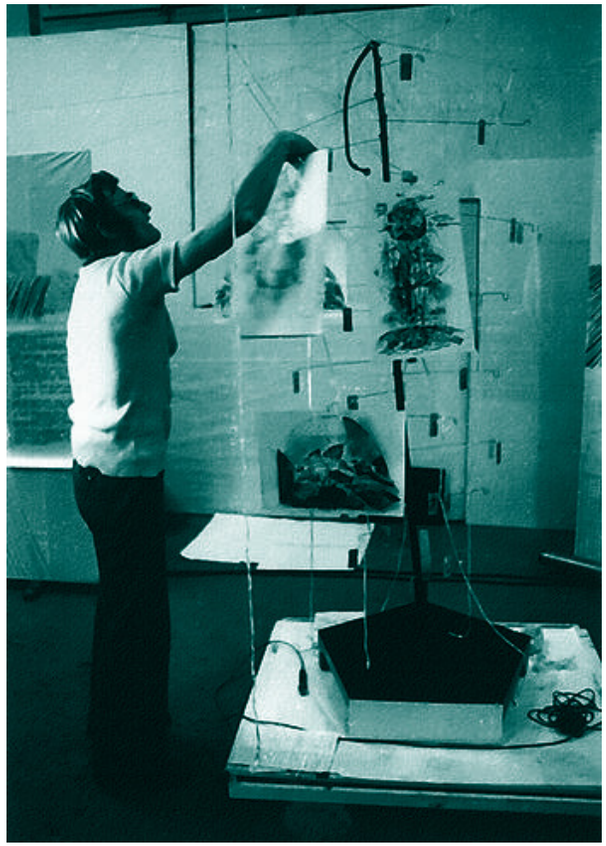
Distribution
Tongues in Trees was produced by undergraduate and postgraduate students at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London. If you are interested in supporting future issues or would like more information about the publication, contact: the.courtauldian@courtauld.ac.uk.

Contributors

Illustration by Freya Evans

Two Exhibition Models

Mihaela Elena Man



Ştefan Bertalan installing his studies of *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui (I lived 130 days with a sunflower plant)*, 1979. Image courtesy of Revista Arta Veche.

I. Spiral, seed, movement and gesture create a field of spiritual subsistence, of creative discussions — while contemplating a plant for 104 days.

An organic, long-winded action with a sunflower stem that gets transplanted from the garden into the gallery space.

II. The happening begins from seed and individual; the seed is a folded plane; by harnessing elemental forces to its movement, we perpetuate its planes and turn them into vital organs for our existence.

We break the earth's crust with/and through the apostrophe of life (i.e. sensitivity); we go on to flourish now filled with locally available luminous water (i.e. deep emotions).

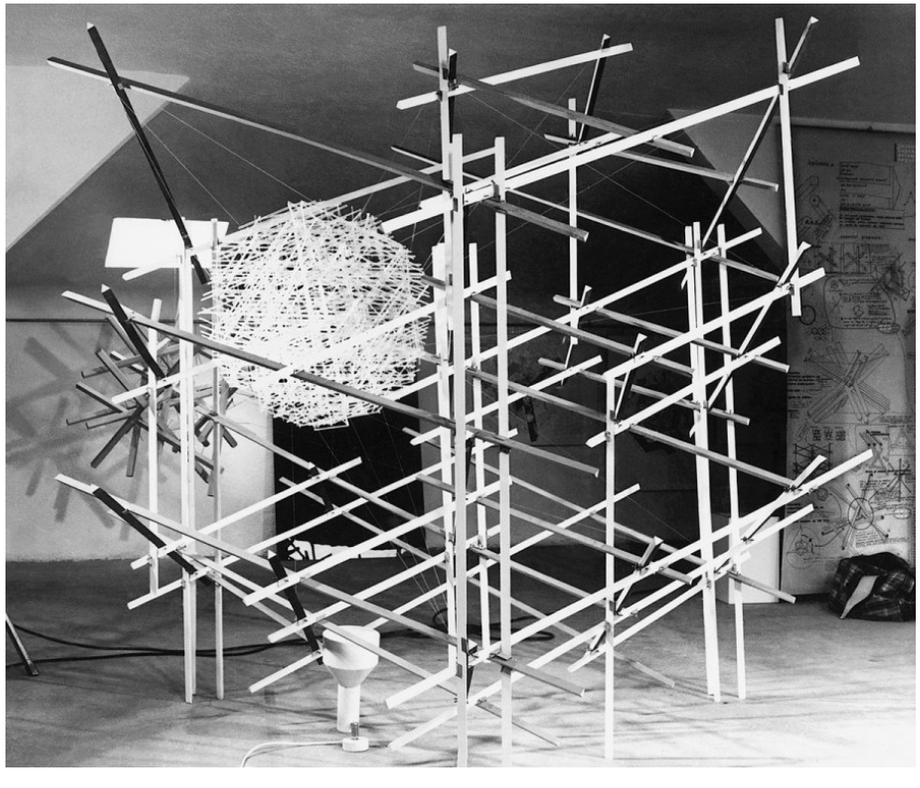
The readaptation and revitalisation of the stem — of a force field that emerges from the earth and transgresses the universe.

III. Finally, we chant a hymn to Spira Mirabilis, searching for life balance — and support.

Ştefan Bertalan's instructions for *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui (I lived 130 days with a sunflower plant),* 1979.

"Made from a dozen bars joined at different angles in a somewhat disorganised way, *Energie* — or the so-called *birds nest* — was a work based on the research on *Trigona*. I exhibited it in the 1970s at *Arta si Energie*. The exhibition closed after a while, but the sphere stayed with me. Years passed, so I eventually attached it to the balcony of my flat, in a corner where grapes and common ivy grew. And these plants began to penetrate and populate *Energy*. After a while, a bunch of sparrows built a nest inside it, right at its centre. This had a profound impact on me. And so I let the birds do their thing, but I made a mistake after a while. I began doing some interventions, and the sparrows got scared and left. They never returned, even though their entire nest remained at the core of the sphere, filled with stuff brought by the sparrows. Inside the plastic sphere, nature did its thing. Nature as a partner. But to what extent does Nature subordinate itself to our personalities and vanities?"

Extract from my conversation with Constantin Flondor, 2022.



These anecdotes are remainders of two little-known multimedia works made during a brief period in Romania when industrial design methods converged with practices of conceptual art. A nascent discipline in the 1970s, Romanian design brought architectural, artistic, and urbanistic processes together in hybrids of land and performance art. In this framework, the polyvalent makers and members of Timișoara-based collective Sigma 1, Ștefan Bertalan and Constantin Flondor, created *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* and *Trigona*. These multimedia projects became means for the two artist-architects to turn freestanding artworks into structures for cohabitation that assimilated, even if for a little while, the organic and built parts of the city.

Blending forms of early environmental art, urban development, and social engagement, *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* and *Trigona* could be understood, more productively, as *exhibition models*. On a surface level, an *exhibition model* is a three-dimensional, variable-sized rendering of an existing environment. In Mark Lee and Sharon Johnston's essay *On Models and Models of Models*, the exhibition model draws from convoluted urban histories to produce immediate spatial experiences that could 'establish new histories as a collective.' Through a grassroots study of a plant

opposite
The Sigma Group at the *Artă și Energie (Art and Energy)* exhibition, Nouă Gallery, Bucharest, 1974. Photos from the archives of Doru Tulcan and Constantin Flondor. Image courtesy of the artists.

in a private garden in Timișoara, Bertalan's *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* criticised existing urban structures for living in and posited more productive ways of urban cohabitation.

Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui was a multimedia project that surveyed the life cycle of a sunflower in the artist's garden over two seasons. First, Bertalan developed his research on the growth of the sunflower into a three-dimensional structure he wove around the flower, which bloomed, ripened, and wilted with the passing of the seasons. The web enveloping the sunflower became more convoluted as the artist-architect mapped new environmental changes with the passing of each day. Finally, after the sunflower withered, Bertalan extracted the plant caught in the web of threads to stage it in a discrete action at the Kalinderu Hall in Bucharest in 1979.

As the plant took on the form of a performative object, Bertalan turned *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* into a plea to reterritorialise urban experience in a political climate that diminished any form of social interaction with seeming anarchist undertones, including performance art. Given these circumstances, the central element of Bertalan's 'biology class' — the claustrophobic nature of the net that enveloped the sunflower — became a Trojan horse that endeavoured to perpetuate the 'dissatisfaction of an artist and intellectual who felt more and more acutely how he gradually loses his freedom to showcase ideas.' Through an emphasis on the materiality of the constricted plant, Bertalan sought to decry the authoritarian realities of late communism in Romania publicly.

For Bertalan, however, the interest in flora went further than its potential to disguise countercultural convictions. Through his close engagement with the sunflower, he also developed a constructivist ideal to adapt and incorporate the plant world's self-sufficiency into an alternative vision of urban living. In his script for *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui*, Bertalan stressed the importance of seeing 'matter, motion, colour, light and their combination as means and not as ends in themselves.' These formal means would help 'structure, energise, and functionalise the space in which we live.'

Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui harnessed a self-sufficient creative spirit that sought to bring the human and more-than-human lives of the city together. As co-founders of the Sigma collective, Bertalan, Flondor, and fellow members Doru Tulcan, Elisei Rusu, and Ioan Gaiță co-developed *Turnul Informațional* in 1970 and *Acțiune la Timiș* in 1976. Light, wind, microbiota, and water flow modulated the flexible, quasi-architectural structure of the two works that resembled a telecommunication tower and a bridge. Soon after, the production of urban forms contingent on biotic and abiotic factors became a key theme for Flondor and Bertalan. After *Acțiune la Timiș* and *Turnul Informațional*, they individually developed creative practices backed by heavy biological research that explored the meeting points between nature and humans. While Bertalan's work sought to show how the microscopic developments of a plant into principles for a more empathetic kind of urban cohabitation, Flondor conducted firsthand experiments with cross-species design collaborations through a sphere he crafted out of Plexiglas, titled *Energie*.

The beginnings of Flondor's *Energie* go back to an exhibition of Sigma at Galeria Nouă in Bucharest in 1974. For their solo-show *Artă și Energie*, the collective set up the gallery space as a realm 'woven and modelled with colourful threads and strips,' at the centre of which Flondor installed *Energie*. After the exhibition, he brought the plastic sphere home and, years later, placed *Energie* on the balcony of his flat. To his surprise, 'ivy began populating the sphere' and, eventually, 'a bunch of sparrows built a nest inside it.'

I don't find it surprising that animals occupied the sphere, given that Flondor's structure referenced the honeycomb-dwellings that *Trigona* bees make. Bees are 'among the most socially-advanced non-human organisms of which we know.' Bees construct highly populated cities that serve several divisions of their society and, as *Energie* demonstrates, several other species of animals. Yet, despite his prescient design for lifeforms that can live off of plastics, Flondor, in following his artistic instinct, kept modulating the living conditions inside the globe through minor structural adjustments, which eventually caused the sparrows to fly away with no return. Once Flondor departed from the initial studies on insect architecture, the ecosystem of the sphere collapsed.

In weaving creative impulses with visionary systems for urban implementation, *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* and *Energie* became neither full-fledged artworks nor designs. Instead, considering their process-driven nature, they became 'forms of performance developed to communicate a particular narrative in a specific context.' They became *exhibition models*. Given that the *exhibition model* becomes a vessel for social engagement, multiple opportunities to interact with and even to modify it arise. According to Lee & Johnston, 'through an in-between scale that is both tactile and seemingly inhabitable to the viewer,' *exhibition models* are endowed with the potential to rejig the spectator's agency in the making process. In *Energie*'s case, Flondor scaled down an installation work. In doing so, he accidentally let other life forms directly inhabit

the plastic sphere, which in turn morphed into a prototype for urban cohabitation. In the aftermath of its alteration, *Energie* became an *exhibition model* in that it presented an anecdote about the trial-and-error that goes into developing something not as remote as one might think from cross-species architecture. The socially-engaged nature of *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* and *Energie* enabled the plant, animal, and human worlds of the city to come together into works that challenged the assumption that humans exert complete control over the built environment.

In the aftermath of *Energie*, what lingers instead, and what I feel is of high value, is the surprising transparency with which Flondor retells the story about the 'so-called birds nest' to this day. Via the freedom of experimentation and trial-and-error inherent to making art and design, *Energie* and *Am trăit 130 de zile cu o plantă de floarea-soarelui* reveal the potential of cross-disciplinary practices to form the backbones of stories about alternative ways of living. It is in this light that hybrid experiments like Flondors' and Bertalan's become exhibition models, in the sense that they provide 'a surrogate that spurs imaginative modes of occupation.' Notwithstanding their idealisms and failures, their works attempted to bring living things closer to each other at a time when the much-needed rehabilitation of urban planning, biological diversity, and social life failed to make it on the agenda of the Romanian socialist government.

Illustration by Kiera Modi

A friend of a fig tree
무화과나무의 친구

Lynn Ha
하린

Illustrations by Sacha Lewis

A friend of a fig tree

You used to say the trees were your friends.
Like in those fairy tales, stories

And if there were power in stories,
although it is really nothing special at all

People will cheer, that there is something else to believe in
Because the moon is a stone. A stone that is bright

and is capable of squashing you to death

The juice will come out, like a trick
that could possibly dye the stone with its colour

How would you feel if it were said that
Some big stone is spinning above your head
We were all conceited, but you know what? It was merely a solid matter

By any chance, would there be a story that you secretly desire? When I ask politely, I take you to the future
Pretending we are not in the present, when we are addressing hope,

Tranquil

A polite and courteous conversation unfolding into the future

The time that we do not know

Why were you so upset
There is nothing more endearing than violence concisely displayed

무화과나무의 친구

너는 나무들을 친구라고 불렀지
동화 속의 이야기처럼

그리고 이야기라는 것에 힘이 있다면,
사실 뭣도 아니긴 해도

사람들은 대신 믿을 게 생겼다고 환호할 거야
달은 돌이니까.

환하고 너를 눌러 죽일 수도 있는 무게의 돌

즙이 나오겠지, 돌을 물들일 수도 있을 만 한 계략으로

어떤 큰 돌이 네 머리 위를 돈다고 하면 너는 어떨 것 같니
우리 모두 우쭐했지만 뭐야? 그건 그냥 고체였지

혹시 몰래 욕망하는 이야기가 있을까, 공손하게 물을 때 나는 너를 미래로 데리고 간다
희망을 이야기할 때 지금이 아닌 척 하는건

한적한

미래에서 펼쳐지는 공손하고 예의바른 대담과

우리가 모르는 그 시간

왜 그렇게 화가 났던 거야
간결하게 전시되는 폭력처럼 사랑스러운 건 없어

A friend? Have you ever held a hand
Come on, come here,

A finger got bitten, and the two joints falling, *thump*
And also goes the shame of ours, falling along

Hence it is our duty to die, by coming back again to our place

With the small finger that is remembered
that should be remembered

We burn the incense of cinnamon

In fact, there are things, living in the earth
So how easy is it to pronounce the word *wash, to cleanse*
and the hypocrisy of *ventilation*

But in my opinion, it seems like we could end it
How wonderful is it,
To put this solid matter, that we did not start, to an end

Preservation and study
The fact that we lock living things up so easily

Could we not lean onto the apocalypse, like a consolation, like a happy, warm porridge?

The show will come to an end soon, and because that always makes people sad
They need to bring out God,
need to spit out, irresponsibly, that *the end is another start*
need also a role like a clown in a circus

So how many sacrifices there had to be made, for the stories
to reach us, without us having to buy them

친구라니, 너는 손을 잡아 본 적이 있니
착하지, 어서 이리와 하고

콱 물려버린 손가락 두마디가 쿵
하고 떨어지면서 함께 떨어지며 깔깔거리는 수치

다시 제자리로 돌아오면서 죽어감은 우리의 몫

그렇게 기억되는
기억되어야할 작은 손가락과 함께

우리는 계피를 태운다

사실 흙 속에는 뭔가 살고 있지 그러니까
세탁이라는 말 환기라는 위선은 얼마나 쉽게 쓰일까

그치만 내 생각에는, 우리가 끝낼 수 있을 것만 같아
우리가 시작하지도 않은 고체를 우리가 끝장낸다는 건, 얼마나 근사한 일이니

보호와 연구
너무도 쉽게 가두고 씻긴다는 것

따듯하게 행복한 죽처럼 종말에 기댈 수는 없을까

곧 쇼는 끝날 테고, 그건 항상 사람들을 슬프게 하니까
다급하게 신도 등장시키고
무책임하게, 끝은 또 다른 시작이라는 말도 뱉어보고
서커스의 광대 같은 역할도 필요하고

그러니 우리가 사지 않아도 되는 이야기는
얼마나 많은 것들을 죽인 힘으로 여기까지 올 수 있었니

Thrown Soup or Green Fountains: Climate Activism in the Art World

Matthew Biedermann

Illustrations by Freya Evans

Green is in Vogue — literally. The colour seems to have garnered as much traction in the fashion world as the infamous cerulean blue in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Starting with the saturated, bright green ensemble which opened Bottega Veneta's Spring/Summer 2021 show, green has demonstrated an enduring presence, appearing prominently at Fendi's New York show this September. Jonathan Anderson, the creative director of Loewe, even included 'living' garments in his Spring/Summer 2023 show, where bright green chia seed sprouts adorned trench coats and sneakers. On the cover of *Harper's Bazaar's* art issue, Cate Blanchett, shrouded in a metallic green Louis Vuitton sleeveless dress, celebrates 'our fragile natural world.' Commenting on this green-tinged trend to the *Financial Times*, Joanne Thomas, the director of colour at the trend forecaster Fashion Scoops, said that, "It's like a safety blanket, a comfort blanket. If we're dressing in the tones of the earth that we're trying to protect, even while not doing a very good job of it, that offers us some sort of comfort."

The art world has adopted this same green safety blanket in their attempts to grapple with the climate crisis, providing its members with a soothing sense of success against climate change without realising any tangible results. There has been an intrusion of green-washing from the corporate world into the cultural sphere, clearly on display at this year's Frieze London — even before physically arriving at Regent's Park. Immediately after purchasing tickets to the fair, the Frieze website prompts the fairgoer to indulge themselves in eco-activism, requesting they 'vote now to help us decide how much support' goes to the 'three brilliant sustainability projects' that Frieze has curated. When I purchased my Frieze tickets, InterEarth, a biomass sequestration start-up, was in dire straits with only 25% of support, while the rainwater harvesting Justdiggit and the marine carbon capturer Platform Earth were neck-and-neck, capturing 37% and 38%, respectively. Here, Frieze

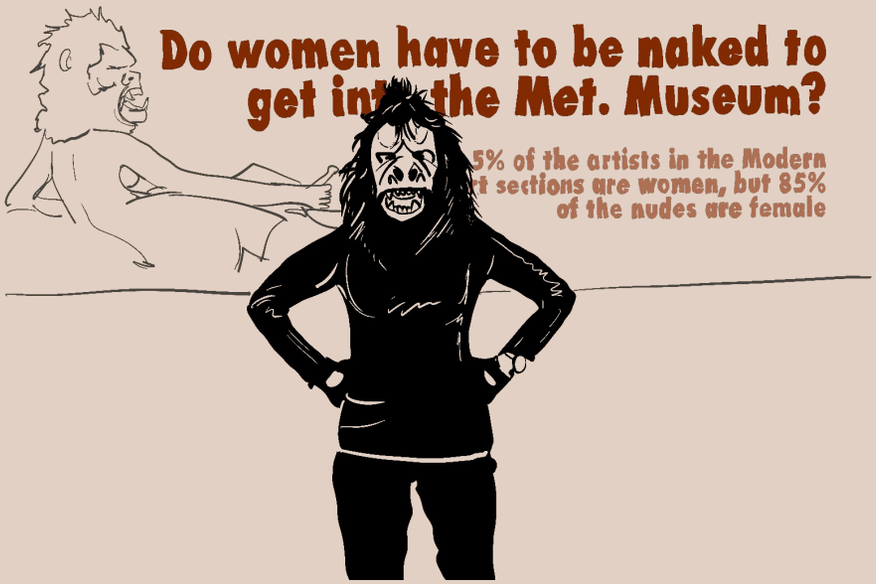
Fountain in English Gardens in Regent's Park near Frieze London entrance
Photograph by Matthew Biedermann

has one-upped the fashion world. Instead of merely providing a visual stimulus of green to elicit an environmental essence, Frieze makes us participate in climate action, adjudicating which project is most deserving. Lest the fairgoer forget their contribution towards preventing the climate crisis, the fountains abutting the fair entrance greeted them with bright, green-coloured water, serving as reminder of their benevolent support for sustainability.

The comforting effect of this green-tinged performance dissipated slightly on the fourth day of the fair, when fairgoers were confronted with the front page of the fourth issue of *The Art Newspaper's* free Frieze edition, abundantly available in print throughout the venues. Pictured were climate activists Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland at the National Gallery, kneeling below a tomato-tinted van Gogh *Sunflowers*, hands glued to the wall. Confronting the gathered onlookers head-on with provocative glares, the duo betrayed both their purpose and association with the rallying call 'Just Stop Oil' emblazoned on their white tee shirts. These two protesters immediately begot global infamy, the outrage against them cross-cutting generations and classes, while indulging the most conspiratorial of pundits.

The condemnation by the younger generations, the self-proclaimed woke TikTokers and Tweeters — ostensibly environmentalists — served to be the most poignant critiques of this climate action. The popular Syrian artist, satirist, and socio-political activist Saint Hoax posted a scene of *Scary Movie 3* to their TikTok account with the caption 'planet earth after the eco-activists threw that can of soup at the van Gogh painting,' suggesting the futility and inherent narcissism in their action, which garnered 1.1 million likes. Comments on news footage of the action ran the gambit from bemoaning the loss of art and culture (the painting, under glazing, was cleaned and returned to view within hours of the attack), second-hand offence at the choice of attacking an artist as well-liked as van Gogh, and snide remarks on their wasting two cans of soup, to ad hominem attacks on the protesters, mocking their 'posh' accents and short, dyed hair. Even more surprisingly, a conspiracy theory gained traction on TikTok, started by the user tanfaradd, who claimed that the action was an example of 'controlled opposition,' funded by Big Oil, via Aileen Getty, a scion of the Getty family who donated several million dollars to Just Stop Oil. This theory argues that because the action elicited such a negative reaction against climate activism, it must have been concocted by fossil fuel companies to mitigate interest and involvement in climate groups. The user hraaaghhh perpetuated this conspiracy with a TikTok viewed 1.1 million times, stating in her caption that: 'if I think about it too much I seethe with rage I was honestly about to cry until I found out the painting was undamaged… hate big oil real.' Let us leave aside the absurdity that Aileen Getty, a decades-long supporter of charities such as the Elizabeth Taylor AIDS Foundation and her own Aileen Getty Foundation — tasked with 'responding to the climate emergency and treating our planet and its inhabitants with kindness and respect,' — would secretly be working for the interests of the long-defunct Getty Oil and other fossil fuel companies even, as neither she nor her family have had financial ties to the industry in decades. When juxtaposed with the way climate action is typically handled in the public sphere, as seen at Frieze, the fury and outrage that this 'Just Stop Oil' performance provoked reveals the limits even self-proclaimed climate activists have when confronted with the climate crisis.

This climate action performed by Phoebe Plummer and Anna Holland is an example of activist performance art, continuing a long tradition of subaltern artists subverting the institutional power of museums to create poignant societal critiques. Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Garden* instillation outside of the 33rd Venice Biennale (1966), critiquing the economic structures of the art market, and her Happening, *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead at MoMA* (1969), critiquing the staleness of the institution's collection, demonstrated the power of art institutions as a performative medium. The activist group Guerrilla Girls perfected this medium, protesting the lack of women and other minorities in museum collections through protests, actions,



and poster campaigns. These two activist performances achieved a sort of success against their institutional foes and the status quo, as demonstrated by both Kusama's and the Guerrilla Girls' inclusion in prestigious collections. Whilst the goals of their activism surely have not been completely met, they have been able to shift societal norms.

Plummer and Holland seek to achieve the same with their National Gallery performance. Interviewed by the editor-in-chief of Frieze, Andrew Durbin, Plummer explained their performative attack on *Sunflowers*, saying:

Such a beautiful piece of artwork was poignant because, when people saw it, they had that gut reaction of, "I want to protect this thing that is beautiful and valued." Why don't people have that same response to the destruction the fossil fuel industry is causing to our planet and our people?

Plummer and Holland sought to explore the immense (cult)ural value laden upon works of art, where the thought of their harm or destruction produces an almost primordial response of shock and fury, and compare that emotive reaction to the relative lack of empathy the Earth receives, even as it is also being destroyed. The reason the reaction against their work was so negative is that they are revealing society's complicity and lack of action over the climate crisis, as real action requires actual sacrifice that people are presently unwilling to give.

Think back to the three sustainability projects offered by Frieze. First, we are granted participation, and thus the comforting blanket of doing good, by

default. It is an unexpected toy inside a Happy Meal, given after the ticket was purchased at no extra cost. The selected projects as well belie the institutional biases of the organisers and attendees of Frieze. All three projects revolve around mitigation and adaptation, using technology to decrease the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, rather than attempt to decrease the amount of pollution going into the air. The difference is continuation of the status quo versus a real, paradigm change in the way societies operate. The former provides a comforting blanket, never mind that 'the scale of technology required to make a significant impact on global emissions is far out of reach' for carbon sequestration projects such as these, as the *Financial Times* has recently reported.

Plummer and Holland react against this siren-call of the status quo, revealing that individual change and sacrifice are necessary in dealing with the climate crisis. Performing inside a museum, they make the double point of exhibiting the ways institutions like museums function to maintain the status quo. As the art historians Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach state in their 1978 article 'The Museum of Modern Art As Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis' in *Marxist Perspectives*: 'As an institution MoMA appears to be a refuge from materialist society: a cultural haven, an ideal world apart. Yet, it exalts precisely the values and experiences it apparently rejects by elevating them to the universal and timeless realm of spirit.' MoMA, a stand-in for any museum, uses ritual to disguise its role in perpetuating the interests of the status quo in the same way as Frieze's sustainability projects. It is even more poignant that the performance take place in the National Gallery, which was condemned as a reactionary institution bent on maintaining class boundaries by a parliamentary select committee in 1836. The report stated that 'the British National Gallery had been managed by the same gentlemen who put the interests of their class ahead of national needs.'

A more contemporary parliamentary report echoes the ways in which the powers continue to place their own interests ahead that of the world. Two days prior to Plummer and Holland's performance, the House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee released a long-awaited report on the United Kingdom's ability to reach its 2050 net zero goals. The report found that 'without changes to people's behaviours now, the target of net zero by 2050 is not achievable.' The climate emergency is happening now, and individual action accounts for more than a third of the UK's planned emission reduction scheme. Yet there is no impetus to alter our daily routine when the power structures currently in place, and benefiting most from the status quo, continue to operate under the illusion that nothing needs to change. Our faux iconoclasts shattered this illusion with their two cans of soup, emphasising the peril we place ourselves, our society, and our culture in as we continue the wanton destruction of our climate through the burning of fossil fuels.

Relating to Nature: The Sublime in Landscapes and Literature

Abigail Spencer

Illustrations by Finlay Thompson

In the cultivated and complacent undergrowth of a London park, untamed, distorted rocks sequester a vastly unexpected melancholy; multitudes of heretofore unreal meaning project terrific murmurs. Polychrome castings strike against an archaic form, mutual obscurity of modernity and classicism which antagonises time.

The Sublime is in many ways an expression of a profound human experience, an unknowable centred upon a thrilling terror, at least in the Burkean sense of erotic empiricism. In the 1757 text *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke resolves the conflict of a pleasurable and fulfilling terror by claiming that sufficient distance from pain and danger produces delight. The seven key features which contribute to Burke's Sublime are as follows: darkness, obscurity, privation/deprivation, vastness, magnificence, loudness, and suddenness. Burke's idea followed that passions surpass reason with a tendency to melodrama. Histrionics of this type were particularly *en vogue* at the time, as the romantic and gothic novel genres were being received excitedly by an increasing audience. This unpaintable and indescribable subject matter has been explored extensively throughout history, but it is in two specific eighteenth century examples that I wish to observe it. The first is Joseph Wright of Derby's *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* c.1776–80, and the second is *A Sicilian Romance*, a gothic novel by Ann Radcliffe. In the seventeenth century, when Burke, Wright, and Radcliffe were at work, the Sublime had a vastly more profound set of meanings than the diluted contemporary understanding of the word. That is not to say, however, that contemporary artists have not frequently attempted to relocate the Sublime in our capitalist, industrial, and technological systems.

As an early work by a pioneer of the gothic genre, the aesthetic description of *A Sicilian Romance* is less fully integrated with its narrative, which provides an effective insight into Radcliffe's understanding of Edmund Burke's writing on the Sublime. The dramatic ends to which Radcliffe employs the Burkean Sublime are immersive and varied. Particularly in her early works, you can almost observe the seven aspects being ticked off in her descriptions like a checklist. The protagonist of Burke's Sublime is a dramatised victim and sufferer whose identity is put at risk by the Sublime experience. Radcliffe's cast of characters all encounter the Sublime during the narrative to diverse effects, reminding us of both the relevance of the Sublime to feminist literary criticism and the power nature can have over us. The sinister patriarchal pursuit of the villainous Duke is temporarily paralysed by his encounter with the Sublime, whereas Madam de Menon's search for the beloved heroine, Julia, is enabled and empowered by it. Julia herself seeks contentment in her meditations on the Sublime surroundings, stuck between stages of female subjection and the attainment of freedom heightened by the Sublime. Radcliffe understands Burke's masochistic theory that the Sublime is that which threatens self-preservation. Her descriptions of landscapes are reminiscent of Salvator Rosa's rocky caverns, with emphasis on a lack of orderliness and symmetry to create thrilling responses. If Radcliffe can employ the Sublime as a catalyst to create and overcome female subjection in her narratives, it holds to reason that it can have a potent and worthwhile effect on society's complacency regarding the destruction of our environment.

The Sublime is also a constructed and idealised reality, particularly in eighteenth century landscape paintings like *Vesuvius in Eruption* which includes the islands of Ischia and Procida, not actually visible from the painting's perspective. Wright's theatrical landscape of a natural disaster is not based on true experience because his time in Italy did not coincide with the 1779 eruption. In the 1770s, when Wright visited the area around Naples, Vesuvius' pre-eruption cycles of activity are described to have involved frequent small spewings of lava which could have inspired the scenes of Vesuvius that Wright was so fond of painting. The *chiaroscuro* of the luminous glowing lava and darkening landscape show the use of contrasts so typical of the Sublime; the tranquillity of the sea juxtaposes the violence of the volcano to emphasise the power of elemental natural forces. Wright uses formal and compositional devices to transport the scene from a depiction relating to actual topography to an imaginative state that epitomises the intensely dramatised effects of the Sublime in nature. The use of a natural disaster as source material for a visual recreation of the Sublime strongly leans into Burke's idea that distance from danger and terror produces delightful, profound responses.

In viewing the unbound power of the natural world in Wright's painting, I wonder if the modern audience can regain some of the awe and acute feeling invoked by nature's magnificence that can so often be eclipsed by the technology and ceaseless pace of contemporary society?

Ugo Rondinone's *yellow + blue monk*, recently displayed at the Frieze Sculpture festival in Regent's Park, interrogates dialectics of openness, time and states of looking in an attempt to discern a contemporary Sublime. The series was begun after the death of Rondinone's partner to an Aids-related illness in a reflective reaction exploring the 'spiritual guard rail of nature,' which provides a space for solace and introspection. Like Julia's response to Sublime surroundings in *A Sicilian Romance*, Rondinone gives us the space for contemplation where time, the outside world, and our own thoughts can coexist thanks to the transcendence of nature. The sensory experience emphasised by pure colour, form, and mass allows internal visualisations and meanings to shift into focus in a manner that Rondinone convinces us mirrors the wonder and awe of the natural world. In his own words, 'In nature, you enter a space where the sacred and profane, the mystical and secular vibrate against one another.' Rondinone's contemporary Sublime is focused on metaphysical contrasts, unlike the *chiaroscuro* of Wright, and it revolves around reactions routed in reverence more than in terror. *yellow + blue monk* is unstable, it changes as we look, matter is transfigured by our perceptions, prompted by the natural ancient origins of stone and juxtaposed with the contemporaneity of artificial polychromy. It reflects the instability of the term Sublime in contemporary society, its conflict with capitalism, and the spiritual and religious dimensions.

Joseph Wright of Derby and Ann Radcliffe explore the Sublime in a historically situated eighteenth century sense, however, both can remain useful when looking at contemporary culture. Radcliffe's narrative demonstrates the practical effects that Sublime experience can achieve and Wright gives us a dramatic visual encounter with a Sublime landscape, reminding us of the unbound power of nature. Sensations beyond comprehension have perhaps been pushed aside in recent centuries in the wake of technology and capitalism. Ugo Rondinone demonstrates to us that these feelings can be recaptured and once more approached by art in a reflective process on the reverence of our ecological world.

Art in Retreat

Megan McNally

Illustrations by Sasha Dunn

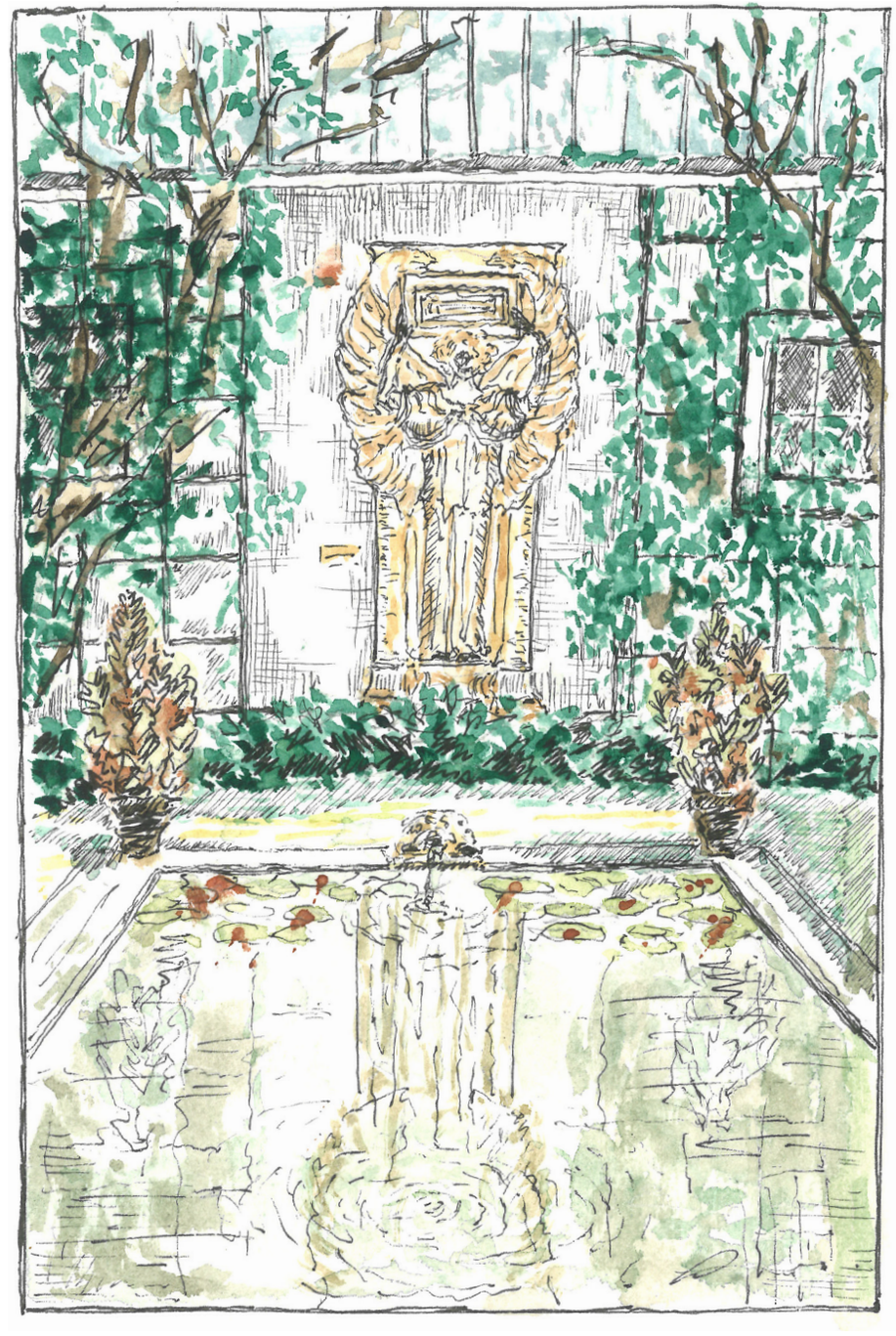
If you make art long enough, or spend enough of your life writing about art, you will probably one day attend a retreat. You know the kind: fifty miles from nowhere, little log cabins all in a row, communal dinner at seven, and you better hope you packed enough Tampax.

Where I am from, in northern New England, is perhaps the archetypal setting for such retreats. The implication is that creativity needs something to fuel it which only comes from the natural environment. Maybe that something is secrecy, or merely privacy. Conversely, maybe it is community, that is to say a curated community, which is what you get from an artists' colony. Or maybe it is simply space.

Indeed, personal relationships and their social constructions represent the kind of paradox of the artist's retreat. Does retreating into nature entail retreating from other people, or entering into a new kind of community? Does isolation serve creativity, or stifle it? In other words, did we come here to enter into the wilderness of the soul, or to sing songs around the campfire?

For answers, we might look to the town of Cornish, New Hampshire, on the Vermont border. Here two of New Hampshire's noted artists, the sculptor Augustus Saint Gaudens (1848-1907) and the writer J.D. Salinger (1919-2010) made their homes roughly half a century apart.

Born the son of a French shop owner in New York, Saint Gaudens travelled extensively in Europe and eventually became a premier sculptor of public monuments, the American answer to Rodin. In the late 1880s, he and his family began spending the summers in Cornish, and other artists and writers soon followed, the painter Maxfield Parrish (1870-1966) among them. Collectively, these creatives would be known as the Cornish Colony. All indications point to a sociable community, one which was on good terms with the



locals: Parrish, for example, did a painting for the nearby Plainfield Town Hall. Not only that, but it was productive creatively: in 1905, the group collaborated on a Greek Revival amateur theatrical, documented by the National Park Service on their website.

Saint Gaudens had purchased a house in Cornish in 1891, named Aspet for his father's hometown in France. The family moved there permanently in 1900. Today, Aspet is a national historic park and museum. The house is sizable, expanded to include a terrace under Saint Gaudens' ownership, but it appears dwarfed by a tree on the front lawn, a thornless honey locust of such extending limbs that it appears roughly double the height of the building.

Of course, in Saint Gaudens' day it would not have loomed nearly so large. The property's other features — rolling meadows, a shallow man-made pool adorned with gilded turtles, vine-covered trellises — are perhaps more in keeping with an ideal of cultivated nature, scenes for a picnic. Like Thoreau, who went into the woods but could still come back for dinner, Saint Gaudens made his retreat in a manner neither wholly solitary nor wholly given into the wilderness.

Given the highly visible nature of his work (beginning with a monument to Admiral Farragut, unveiled in 1881, Saint Gaudens and his studio would play a leading role in the memorialisation of the Civil War in the North) to be out of the public gaze even for the season may have been a source of relief. To Saint Gaudens, perhaps, what Cornish offered was not so much isolation but intimacy, relief from the weight of a public life among the privacy of friendship. His funeral monument on the grounds of Aspet is modelled on a piece from the 1905 Cornish Colony theatrical, likely a testament to how much he valued its community.

The desire to be far from the madding crowd was one that J.D. Salinger surely knew well. As described by Sarah Larson in *The New Yorker*, Salinger moved to Cornish in 1953, purchasing his first house from Saint Gaudens's granddaughter, Carlotta, who still lived in the area. Salinger had already published his cult novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Although he would continue writing, he stopped publishing roughly ten years after the move to Cornish. He lived there until he died.

Much of Salinger's literary output in the early years at Cornish concerned the Glass family, seven child prodigy siblings who grow up to varying degrees of troubled adulthood. Formerly contestants on a radio show about precocious children, many of the siblings bear the burdens of a public life. The great fissure in the family is the suicide of Seymour, the oldest and the wisest, which Salinger had recounted in his early short story *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*.

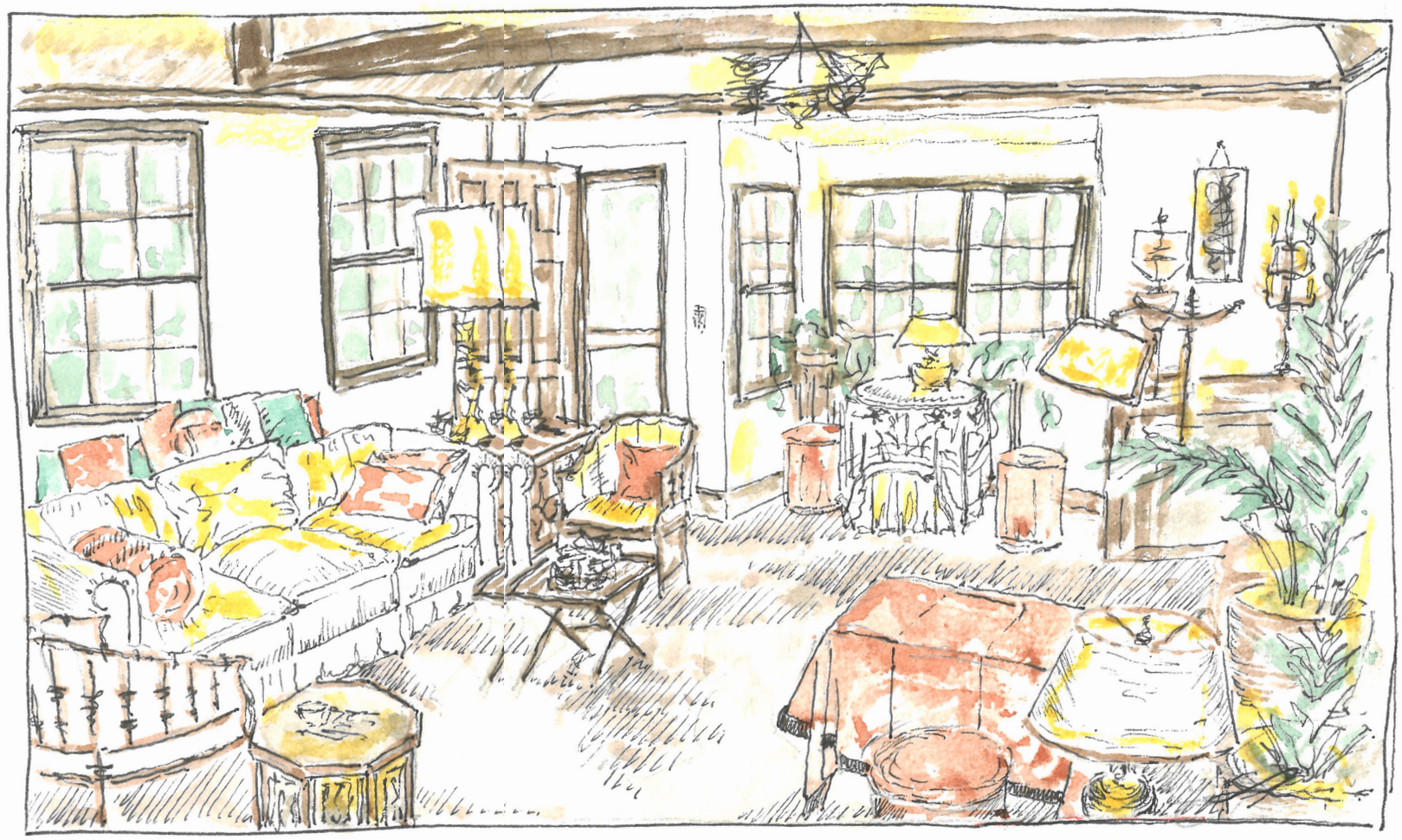
The person most obviously left behind by Seymour's death is the second eldest, Buddy, a professor in upstate New York.

He describes his home in *Seymour: An Introduction*:

Not far from the Canadian border. I live alone (but catless, I'd like everybody to know) in a totally modest, not to say cringing, little house, set deep in the woods and on the more inaccessible side of a mountain.

Like Buddy, Salinger himself utilised rural geography as a means of separation. Fans of *The Catcher in the Rye* nonetheless continued to make the pilgrimage to Cornish, but locals often headed them off, giving them wrong directions to the Salinger house (despite his infamously unsociable reputation, neighbours remembered the writer fondly to *The New York Times*). As Salinger describes it in *Seymour*, an impeachment of privacy is akin to a trampling of nature: 'a good many young English Department people already know where I live, hole up; I have their tire tracks in my rose beds to prove it.'

Buddy is unapologetic about his desire to get away from other people, and from his family: his wilderness is unabashedly one of retreat. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, it is his family whom he keeps coming back to, as he is the narrator who recounts the missing episodes of Seymour's life in *Hang High the Roofbeam, Carpenters*, and *Seymour: An Introduction*. It is Seymour he cannot get away from, nor wishes to, and although the absent brother is held up throughout the stories as a model of humanity, he too struggles in his relationships with other people. Intimacy, in all of its



brilliant promise, becomes unbearable, and events reach their peak in *Hang High the Roofbeam*, when Seymour throws a stone at a girl he loves 'because she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo's cat.' Closeness with other people promises injuries both physical and emotional.

Salinger's Cornish, then, is not the same retreat of Saint Gaudens's rural idyll. In its design, the estate at Aspet presents a landscape gently shaped by the human hand, guided and moulded like clay, softly imprinted by the company of friends. Salinger likewise found a sanctuary, but one imagines that like Buddy's upstate retreat, his was disrupted by little violences: roses torn from the stem and splayed flat by tire tracks. Still, for all his isolation, the mature Buddy of the cabin in the woods is never quite alone. Even in the wilderness solitude remains elusive. The retreat, perhaps, is merely the place where the din of the crowd fades, and the voices which matter grow louder, whether they be the tongues of friends or ghosts.

The Creative Ambiguities of Paul Klee

Sarah Rodriguez

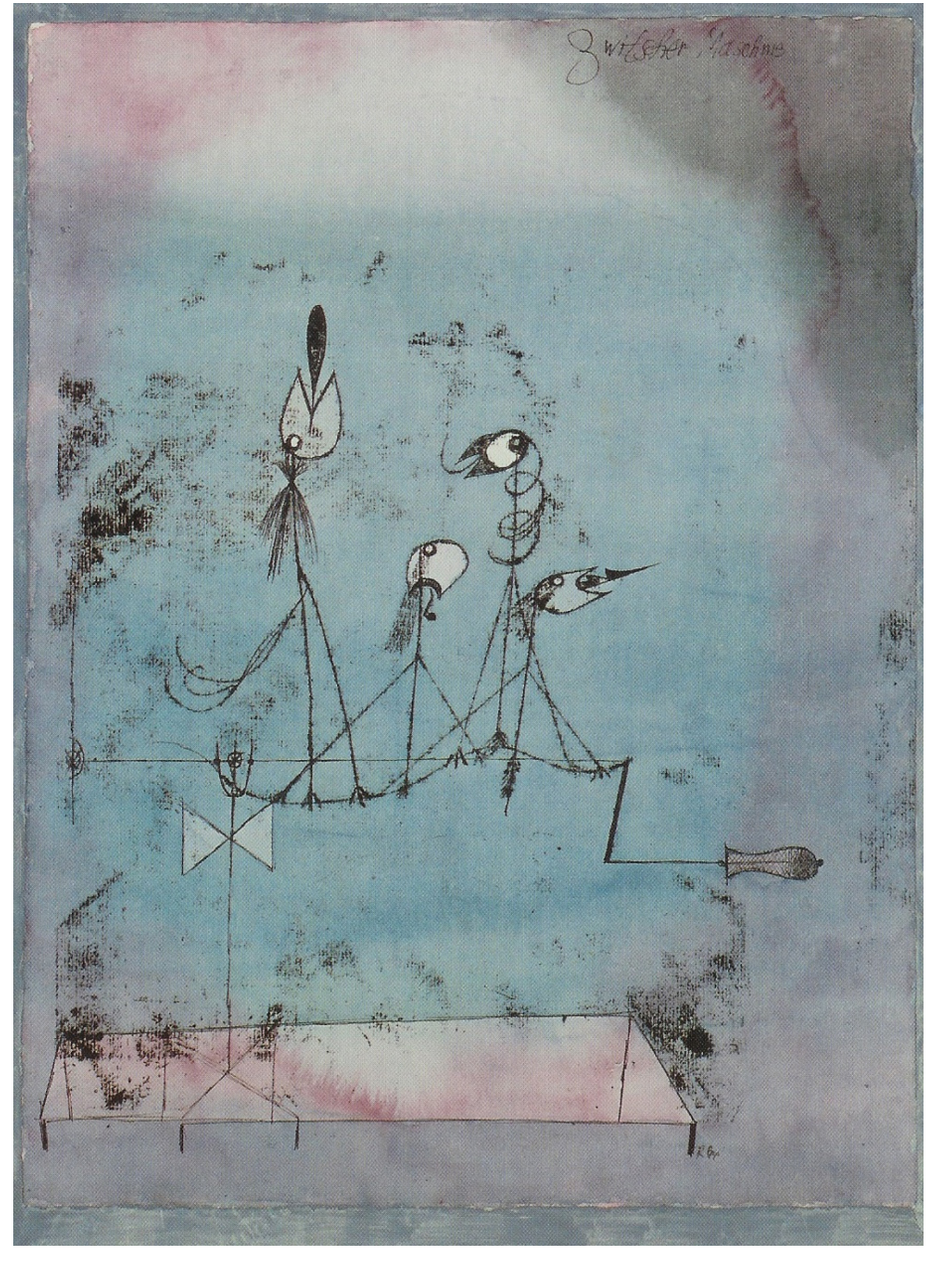
"In Klee, something has happened that none of us grasps as yet."
Martin Heidegger

A smudged ink line silhouettes four birds on a spindly wire. The wire attaches to a fragile crank. These beaked creatures — fish-like, almost puppets — appear to sing their voices out, or try; yet, bound to the machine, they cannot fly freely. They cannot fly at all.

A rhythm runs through *Twittering Machine*, just as a rhythm runs through nature, according to Klee. Indeed, static as it is, Klee's drawing conjures life — conjures sound, motion, energy. His painting invites us to reach out and turn the crank handle, to animate the scene… squint a smidge and each bird's tongue resembles a musical note; the embodiment of the sound it may sing. Pastel-blue with a pale pink frame suffuses the backdrop.

Still, Klee's canvas casts a darker shadow. In it, comedy mingles with the tragic. The playful with the grotesque. Song with shriek. After all, the four creatures appear gaunt, isolated, semi-deformed. Perhaps, then, *Twittering Machine* is demonic, its birdsong acting as a bait to lure humankind into a pit of damnation. So, some hypothesise. Or, as they are composed out of the same material as the wire, perhaps the beaked creatures symbolise technology run amok, spreading so far that even the fauna of our environment have been replaced.

Ambiguous all the way down, Klee's painting does not offer definitive answers; it makes us question. Perhaps he is conveying the mechanisation of art, nature, and life more than the animalisation of the machine. Is nature triumphing, or technology? Where and how do the two overlaps merge?



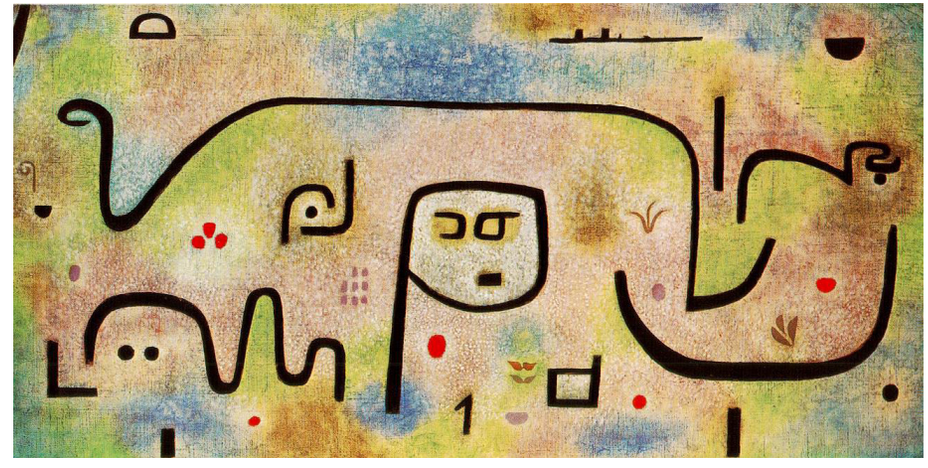
Paul Klee, *Twittering Machine,* 1922, watercolour and ink; oil transfer on paper with gouache and ink border, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In his *Notebooks*, Klee announces that he does not understand his art as 'specifically human.' His art is not, he writes, motivated by a 'passionate kind of humanity,' nor is it specifically animal-oriented or immediate. He does not love all creatures with 'an earthly warm.' In a somewhat enigmatic comment, he writes that his love is, instead, 'distant and religious.' No matter the lack of 'earthly warm,' Klee does not exalt the human or animal at the expense of the natural world. Like today's anxious environmentalists, he does not claim that we with two legs and chattering mouths are licensed to dominate the planet. What he does suggest is that we have been granted the opportunity — doubling as misfortune — to pull down the crank, to become nature's puppeteer. And still, Klee imagines all as part of 'the Whole,' to a degree seeking harmony yet pulsing and writhing with tension and contradiction.

Paul Klee, *Illuminated Leaf*, 1929, watercolour and pen on paper on cardboard, Zentrum Paul Klee, Switzerland.

opposite
Paul Klee, *Insula Dulcamara*, 1938, oil on newspaper on burlap, Zentrum Paul Klee, Switzerland.

While building up philosophies of art and nature, Paul Klee practices as a dynamic, multidimensional, duality-blurring painter: his works evocative while ever-inconclusive. Creative ambiguities seep across his oeuvre. In *Illuminated Leaf* (1929), Klee presents us with a continuously shifting view of nature and art by way of subtly outlined autumn foliage: hued beige, tawny, and pecan. In this canvas, human ideas overlay natural



imagery. One minute, you see a large leaf with smaller blobs in its interior. Another minute, you see the outermost leaf as morphed into the many leaves of a tree, the stem extending below: this tree's trunk, the interior veins: the branches. Still another minute, you see a map of nature, each shade of brown — a different topography, a new gradient.

More tensions proliferate. The painting itself appears to be at once a snapshot, a glimpse, and at the same time, as Klee hints in his *Notebooks*, an 'event,' and one set in 'cosmological space and time.' Perspectives dissolve into each other, but does harmony prevail? The ambiguities of Klee's paintings encourage the viewer to produce their own interpretations, to collaborate in parsing the meaning. Squint. Think. Let the work guide you. Hypothesise. Repeat.

How does the artist straddle the line between subject and object, or between art and nature? Klee's own comments in his *Notebooks* on the relationship between art and nature resist scientific interpretation, resist logic. In his lecture, *On Modern Art*, he distinguishes the artist from nature, and yet, he describes the artist as being almost part of nature, even a tree. 'Juices flow upward to the artist, passing through him, through the eye,' Klee writes. The artwork that results is like the crown of the tree, unfolding in space and time. The artist, then, does no more than 'gather and conduct' whatever it is that comes to him from the depths. In a sense, he operates as no more than a conduit. His 'attunement to life's elemental operations' is what matters most (1924 Jena Lectures).

Those 'operations' — something like life's 'rhythm,' its groove — is not graspable via the intellect alone — or via language either. As Klee states, through these means, 'there is no way of seeing [so] many dimensions at once.' Painting shares with nature

the capacity to transmit the seemingly intransmittable, to convey the ineffable, the mysterious. In the language of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'the unpresentable at the heart of appearance.'

This capacity to communicate cryptically, along with yet more creative ambiguities, is exemplified by Klee's painting *Insula Dulcamara* (1938). In it, a black, almost calligraphic, serpentine line stretches from left to right. Semi-concealed within the horizontal canvas, letters, some inverted, spell out 'PAUL KLEE.' Despite Klee's recourse to the written word, with his painting, he goes beyond it. Perhaps the canvas as a whole amounts to a sort of painterly signature. Perhaps, even, the whole of the canvas doubles as Klee's skin, his spirit and body.

In *Insula Dulcamara*, the paint is oil and the canvas burlap — in so being, announcing its own materiality, of a piece within the natural world. The very lack of legibility of the canvas — evocative of something primordial, even tribal — might indeed mark it as pressing forward toward something greater, unsayable, sacred.

In the center 'P,' a pale face is visible. At the time of painting, Klee was dying, and knew as much, at the age of 60 — the skin disease scleroderma being the cause. It is not improbable, then, that his own ashen-white face is represented here on the burlap. Behind the flowing black line loom bright pastel, almost spray painted colours: sky blue, salmon pink, clover green.

From a certain angle, the black line takes on the character of musical notation. In the bottom left corner, an inverted bass clef is legible; also present are jagged chords and what appears to be a smooth melody. Music was a paragon of art, for Klee, himself a gifted violinist. Scattered about, dotted patterns, staccato-like, declare themselves and plants blossom, sprout. Within the image of decay, death, and oblivion, is life, growth, melody. Within the celebration is an anticipatory grief. Within imagery of spring lurk hints of autumn.

The chief ambiguity of Klee's painting may well be whether it is more comic or tragic. I find writer Norman Rush compelling when he posits that the greatest art relocates the line between the two. Quite literally, here, within the bitter is the sweet. The words *Insula Dulcamara* amount to a Latin compound for 'island' (*insula*), 'sweet' (*dulcis*), and 'bitter' (*amara*) — the English translation: 'Bittersweet Isle.'

Originally, Klee's working title for *Insula Dulcamara* was 'Calypso's Isle,' in reference to where Odysseus in classical myth, was held captive by a sorceress. Chris Pike suggests the center 'P' figure is a 'dying ego-self awaiting release' from captivity. The painting both is and is not about Paul Klee himself, embodying fixity of identity and blurring of it, flux. The ego ossified, everlasting, and preserved, yet also mortal, amorphous, dissolved into the very fabric of the work.

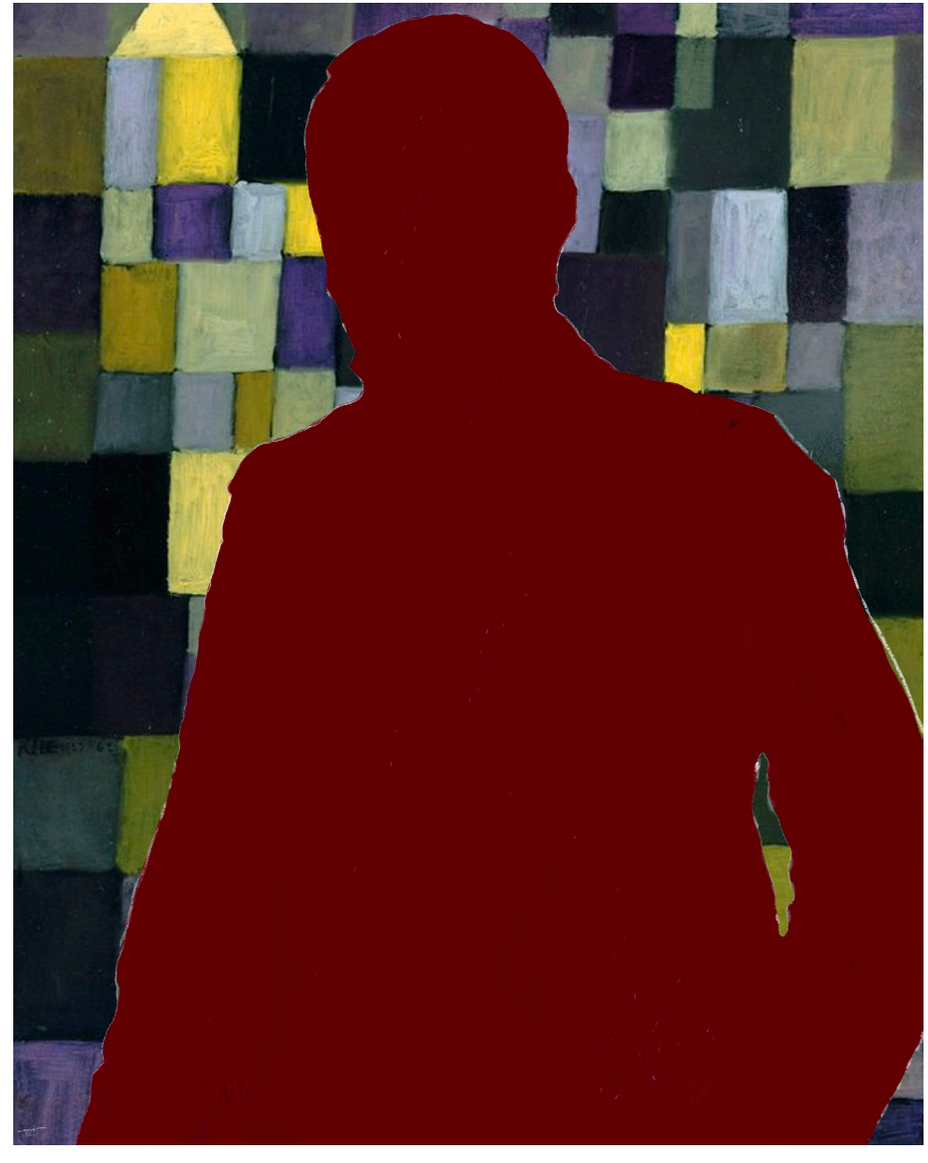


Illustration by Kiera Modi

FIVE MONTHS IN ICELAND

Pearl Jackson-Payen

Photography by
Pearl Jackson-Payen

1.
In the beginning, a movement underground.
A stirring
A coiling
A becoming unstuck.

2.
Soft red visions slowly thickening and open.
Now, walking through Reykjavík, I remember.
A lupin flower, the edge of solidness, the bellowing walls.
My love from the mountain is close.
Soft red visions slowly thicken.

3.
Part of Iceland now, I am coated in the world.
Steaming slowly in hot springs,
I remembered the stars weep too, /And tears of space.

4.
Unravelling form, physical movement, breathing it.
Snow fills the window,
Snow fills the black amnesias of me.

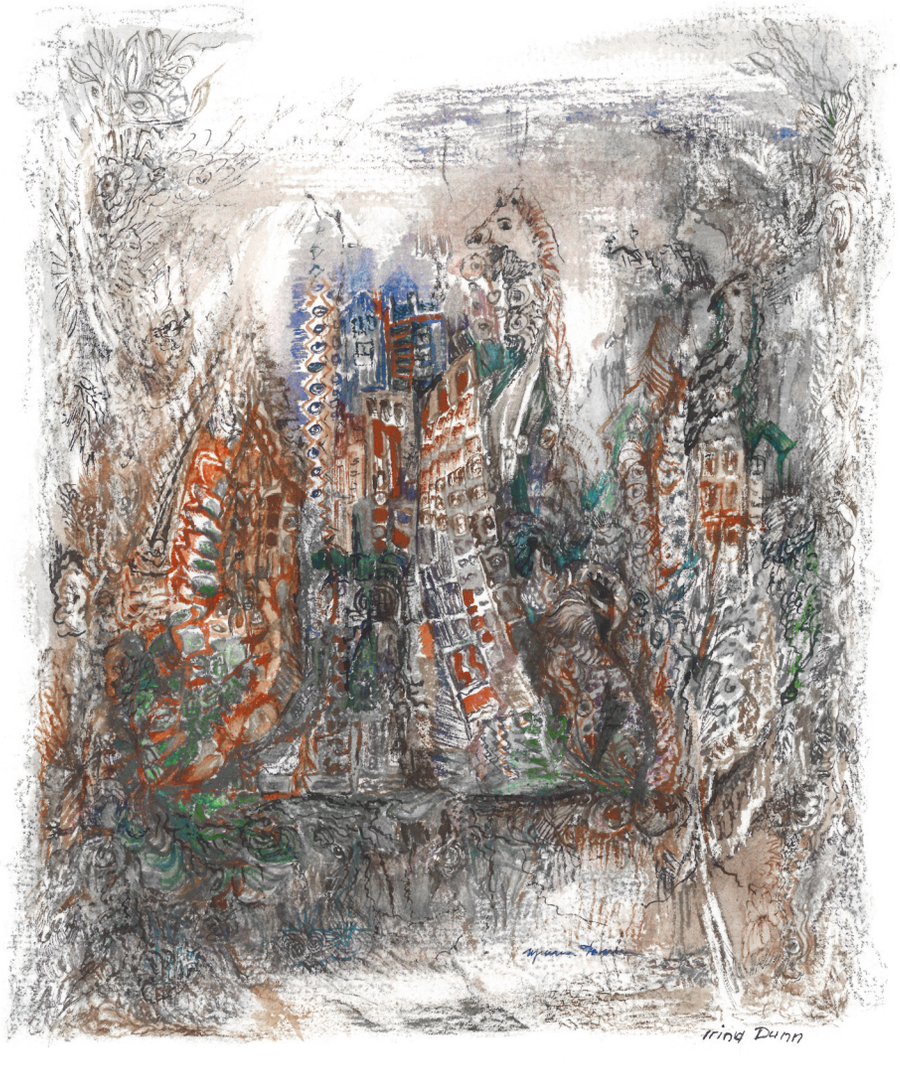
5.
Volcanic ash smothering my feet,
To think of the edge of dust, the valley of the spiralling tear.

6.
O unmarked parts of space!
My heart drenched water yet again. A glimpse then of the angel. She!

7.
Wherefore this Inside shall there grow an Outside?
A fused dance flows out into the ice we haunt.

Decomposition of Civilisation

Irina Dunn



The twentieth century was in its final year when I painted *Decomposition of Civilisation*. The realisation that we were approaching a new era was thrilling and thought-provoking. I would spend hours thinking of our collective failures and achievements as a human civilisation that was getting ready for its next big move. The wheel of a bike and some of its parts represent the very man-made world we created ourselves and yet it seems to be decaying; decomposing into the very same world it meant to conquer and have under control — the world of wild and unruled nature. The living creatures of sea and land at the right side of the painting are inextricably intertwined.

Two decades ago, I felt as though we had crossed some invisible line as a civilisation — with our own unruled consumption in our 'wild' throwaway society — and like those living creatures that overgrow and take over the bike, the forces of nature are fighting back; aiming their arrows directly at the survival of our civilisation.

Genevieve Chua: What's Left After the Flood?

Kylin Lew

Illustration by Amy Brand

Singaporean artist Genevieve Chua's artworks are primarily rooted in abstraction and an exploration of form, but one series of work stands out among this minimalist landscape. *After the Flood*, a series of digital pigment ink prints hand-coloured with ink, highlights in green the mass of shrubbery that covers an otherwise monochromatic forest. These weeds shroud the forest like a thick carpet, and bright green ink drips off them and into the ground below. They are an unlikely subject matter for scenes that seem so full of other possible subjects; tall, sturdy trunks frame *After the Flood #26* on either side, and a large tree serves as a backdrop for *After the Flood #27*. Yet, the camera fixes resolutely on these shrubs and the image is constructed around them consistently throughout this series. What can we make of this?

Chua paints a picture here of resilient growth. It is quickly apparent that these weeds have taken over whatever once lay beneath. They rain down on the existing vegetation, creeping from tree to tree, and their dense tangle of vines suffocates the trees beneath. The weeds look almost monstrous, looming large as they fill up the picture frame. Chua notes that when grown in a small pot, some of these weeds will not grow

more than a few feet, but in an expanse of space, they sprawl rapidly and can grow up to about a foot a day. When pulled off, it even retains the shape of what was beneath it, fashioning a phantom of the plant that has been covered. She imagines what would be left of Singapore after a flood: an ecosystem consisting of its most resilient and stubborn plants, thriving even in poor conditions. Choosing not to celebrate the conventional idea of beauty or strength, she forgoes the tall tree for the tenacious weed. There is an undeniable tension between the weeds and the rest of their surroundings, as they compete for the same space, and the survival of one species necessitates the diminishing of another. This drama of life and death culminates in these tableaux, the image of competition and survival frozen in a moment in time. Its suggestions of a post-apocalyptic landscape also stand in stark contrast to conventional imaginings of such scenes. There is little evidence of human life or of any destruction left in the wake of the imagined flood. Chua's image of growth instead suggests an undefined point in time after the flood, when the Earth has gone on without its human inhabitants. This sense of nature as an overwhelming force that washes away the fleeting traces of human life seems like a comforting vision of the apocalypse: in this fantasy, nothing that the human race has done has significantly altered the Earth's ability to rebuild itself.

Yet, despite the work's post-apocalyptic suggestions, this appears to me like a faithful portrait of Singapore, a naturalistic or non-idealised depiction of its landscape. Of course, even within depictions of nature we have our biases: national plants and flowers that deserve primacy, or iconic trees that seem to be the first choice for an image that might be considered 'representative' of a place. What Chua has chosen, however, could hardly qualify for a spot on the Singapore dollar bill. Despite her choice of a subject that seems contrary to expectations, the image seems familiar. Having spent the first eighteen years of my life in Singapore, I have spent my fair share of time looking out of windows on the highway as we passed through the remaining patches of rainforests that have survived the nation's rapid modernisation. These scenes are often found at the margins of Singapore's Adinandra belukar (secondary forest) and it was one that I had seen many times without realising — a shroud of green, against the familiar tall trees. *After the Flood #27* even features the familiar shape of a Housing Development Board flat in the background. These government-built flats are dotted densely around the island,

Genevieve Chua, *After the Flood #26*, 2011–2019, Digital pigment ink print on photographic paper, hand-coloured with ink, 61.5 x 47 x 8 cm. © Genevieve Chua.

Photo courtesy of the artist and STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore.

housing a majority of the population, and have become quite the familiar sight in recent decades. Even though Chua's *After the Flood* images do not point to a specific locale with the conventional markers of street signs and landmarks, these features capture a quotidian characteristic of the land familiar to local eyes.

While Chua's treatment of the natural landscape as a malleable subject matter to challenge notions of growth and strength or to suggest post-apocalyptic scenes are certainly interesting sources of fertiliser for the imagination, ultimately what endears me to her work is the clear intimacy with which she relates to the land. Her ability to capture a uniquely characteristic element of a place, representing a scene that is immediately recognisable without drawing on cliché or iconic depictions certainly demands a keen eye for uncelebrated detail, which I think is what makes these works a depiction of Singapore that is unlike any other.

Genevieve Chua, *After the Flood #27*, 2011–2019, Digital pigment ink print on photograpic paper, hand-coloured with ink, 75 x 109 x 8cm. © Genevieve Chua.

Photo courtesy of the artist and STPI – Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore.

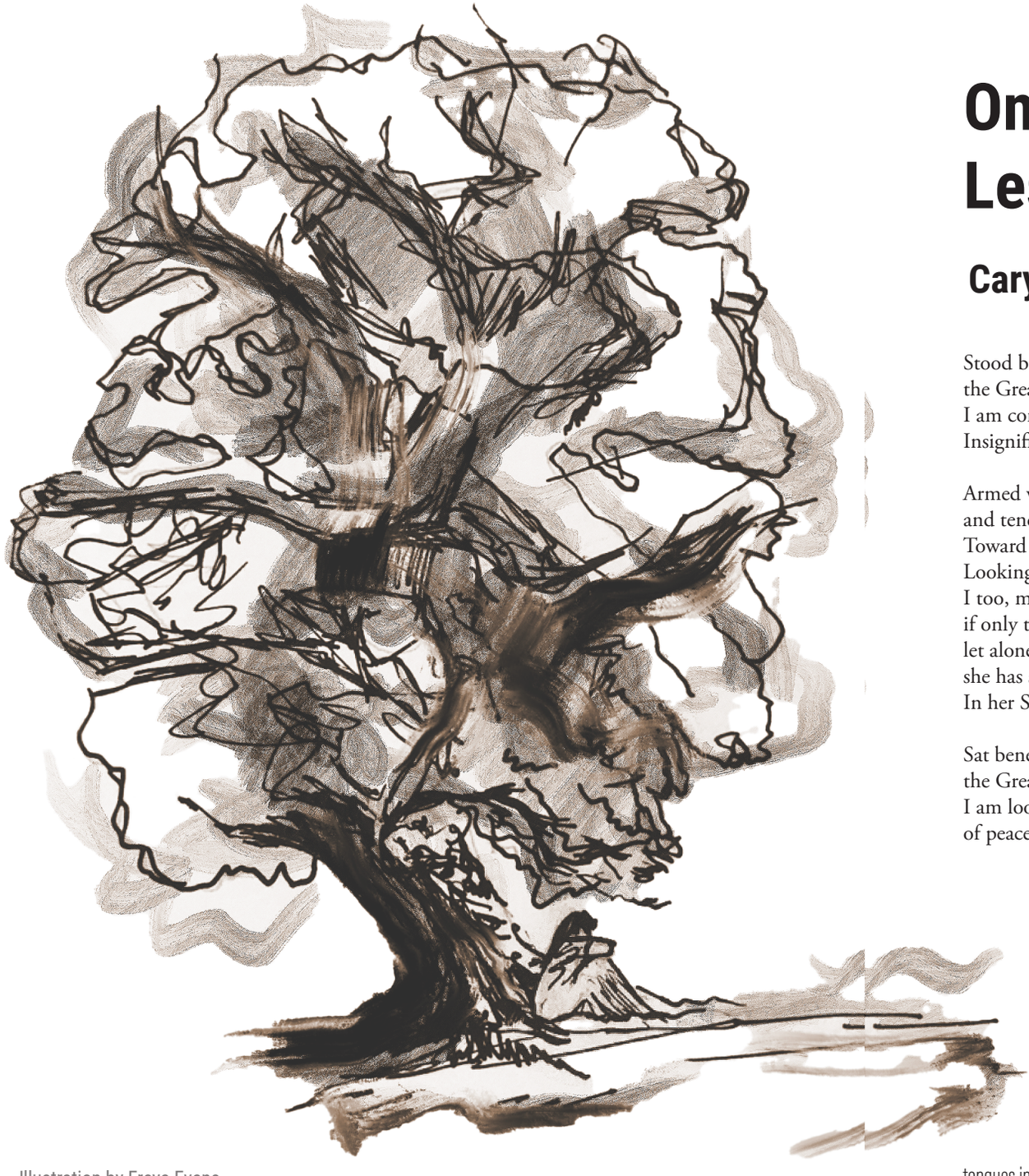


Illustration by Freya Evans

On Seeking My Life Lessons from an Oak Tree

Carys Maloney

Stood before
the Great Oak Tree
I am conscious of my own
Insignificance.

Armed with modesty
and tenderness, I make my approach
Toward her roots
Looking for a hint as to how
I too, might remain as grounded
if only through the passing seconds
let alone the innumerable decades
she has succeeded
In her Still and Silent triumph.

Sat beneath
the Great Oak Tree
I am looking for the secret
of peaceful Indifference.

In her trunk
Stands not a trace of unrest;
~~*She does not revolt like these*~~
~~*Fibres within me*~~
~~*That wear themselves thin.*~~
~~*Exhausting petty conflict.*~~
Her only movement,
a celebratory number:
we know it as the
brief union with breeze,
that passes, as surely
as the Days the Nights
Cries of Birds in Flight
the Fading of Light
the Laughter the Lives
and all of these things
that mark the backdrop
of Time

As she
the Great Oak Tree
remains unaffected
despite this fact

The white noise of the world
then becomes a soundtrack
Serenading her stance:

Unwavering, Unmatched

Fag end:
The immediate future of
my unborn children

Carys Maloney

Illustration by Grayson Wise

it was all once there
but alas
now it's gone—
that is, the lives
we could have had
so what on earth
went wrong?

well they did not stop to think
sleeping a world
over the brink
and it's a real shame
a true loss—
you really think
they give a toss?

—of a coin, as to
our making it out
even then, an
earth to hold us? sad
i largely doubt

for they are big on up
with plans for mars

if they could only first save
what remains
under these stars

then we might stand a chance—
but inconvenience of circumstance
so turn the other way
and drift on,
day to day, to month
to year to—Oh!
Well where did the time go?
Looking back at my life
Now, and what have I to show:

The children I love
Are drawing hands up above
And praying for time
Or a miracle, sublime

Their future—more bitter
Than my Glass of Red Wine.

Broken Spectre: Reforming the Relationship Between Technology and Ecology

India Harvey

The development of technology is closely associated with the emergence of progressive artistic concepts. Through the expansive and increasing technological medium, the digital art age has transformed the ways, ideas, and concepts about how art is expressed, created, and exchanged within visual culture. Thus, it is particularly within the digital art age that there has been a transformation in which artists leverage technology as tools within their artistic practice to create striking, immersive, engaging, multi-sensory and disciplinary art, film, and installation. Yet, technological associations with the ecological are often rendered negative and incompatible. Not only is the emergence of technology one of the main drivers of environmental destruction, but digital representation within art has become entangled within the controversies surrounding the environmental damage from NFTs. NFTs themselves do not cause environmental impact, however their controversy is linked to the way they are produced. As digital technology is becoming a fundamental driving force within the evolution of art in modern visual culture, a development which parallels the increasing urgency for change in our perceptions and understanding of the current ecocide, it seems inevitable that these two incompatible disciplines are becoming increasingly interlinked within art. Thus, as art and technology have a way of evolving together, they simultaneously have the potential to overlap, create, and express new ideas, with new potentials and meanings through new media. Artists can attempt to re-establish the relationship and associations between technology and ecological representations that appeals to the urgency and demand for effective and perceptible representations of the current climate crisis.

Yet, whilst art is, and has been for centuries, a powerful tool for communication, climate change requires a different kind of representation and means of communication that raises awareness of the vast and incomprehensible scale of the issue. Whilst in art history we must move away from an anthropocentric way of looking at the ecological crisis, the place of humanity must still be considered. Almost all of humanity is complicit, needless to say with an unequal distribution, and will be affected. Yet, as a species, humans have relatively short life, and even shorter attention spans. It is therefore plausible that humans may struggle to grasp the long-term scope and urgency of the ecological crisis in full. Representations of the climate emergency should seek to broaden how we perceive time and appreciate ecologies in a way that addresses the capacity and urgency in which we need to act. Humans should not act selfishly but with the wider future of our planet in mind, considering how ecology itself is the most powerful tool for perceiving the climate emergency.

It is at 180 The Strand, known for its exhibitions that emphasise the convergence of technology and art, that Irish conceptual photographer, Richard Mosse does this exactly. Using scientific imaging technology, Mosse's immersive, 74-minute video, photography, and installation, depicts three years of careful documentation in remote parts of the Amazon rainforest. By using military-grade imaging technology, cameras, and film in unconventional ways, Mosse employs an array of photographic techniques that play with the scale and complexity of the ecological biome and scale of destruction within the Amazon. Thus, using art photography and reportage, the photographer creates striking imagery that attempts to overcome the challenges of representing the climate crisis, making the invisible visible and the incomprehensible tangible.

'The scale of this catastrophe frequently unfolds in ways that are too vast to comprehend, too minute to perceive, and too normalised to see… I utilise scalar shifts to move between different temporalities of seeing — from the piercing vision of satellite cameras to the vibrant matter of interdependent rainforest biome seen by an insect or microorganism.'

Richard Mosse, *Fact Magazine*, 2022.

The exhibition opens with a single video installation. An aerial video traces a topography where mass deforestation has occurred. An estimated 99% of deforestation in the Amazon results from illegal activities, explicitly encouraged by the Brazilian government and global investment. Yet the scale, effects, and biological complexities of such ecological changes are not easily revealed through conventional photography and are often ignored within the media. Thus, just as Mosse used military-grade thermographic cameras in the war-scarred Congo, he uses advanced satellite technology to record ecological crime in the Amazon basin.

An example of this is Mosse's use of multi-spectral photography. Mosse captures specific bands of solar radiance in the infrared and near-infrared wavelengths reflected from the foliage below. The data

can reveal conditions of ecological degradation that are difficult or impossible to perceive with the human eye. It is through inky blues and crimson reds that Mosse creates striking images of unsettling beauty that combine art-photography and reportage to create imagery that is paradoxically surreal and true.

The film also confronts human sides of the issue. Through a four-screen narrative, the audience witnesses the arrival of settlers. Through deforestation for agriculture and land mining, the settlers become environmental criminals. Trees are felled, and rivers are polluted. Fire rages through forests and fireballs hurtle into the sky as trucks pick their way through the clouds of smoke, dust, and flames. Such dramatic imagery is complemented by Ben Frost's haunting soundtrack which echoes the sounds of the rainforest and its destruction. These elements are apocalyptic and play on our fictional idea of the end of the world which is mimicked through a deathly silence on the death of an ecosystem within the film.

Illustration by Wednesday Zhu, created using artificial intelligence. An algorithm generates images based off of a number of keywords subject to the artist's selection, with the result being a collaborative work between the artist and AI software.

Moreover, photographic works are placed alongside the film. Through microscopic fluorescent imagery, Mosse creates macros of the micro which depict the intricacy and scientific detail of the Amazon biome. In a way, through technology, a human invention, Mosse gives the Amazon biome a platform in which its complex beauty can be made visible. Captivated and mesmerised by its intricacy, the audience is forced into a sense of appreciation for these elements yet also a feeling of accountability for the damage humans are causing. The bright, striking imagery is contrasted with the monochromatic infrared scenes of burning, illegal mining, and forest destruction, yet parallels the sophistication of the strategies used in organised ecocide.

Yet, Mosse does not fail to recognise both human sides of ecological crisis. At a climactic point within the film, an indigenous woman speaks out to the audience, with an emotive cry:

"You white people, see our reality. Open your minds. Do not let us talk so gallantly and do nothing. White people! Tell your fathers and mothers. Explain to them."

It is the combination of these elements in which Mosse's digital technology in the art displays the many levels and scales of the climate crisis which many representations have failed to capture. Through striking imagery, highlighting natural beauty, and capturing emotionally charged sensory depictions, the photographer presents the disturbing realities of the ecological crisis and the urgency in which humans must act. Through his film we witness an event that is incomprehensible yet through multiple elements and scales Mosse allows the viewer to piece together the multiple levels of ecological and human destruction within the Amazon rainforest. This allows the audience to comprehend the beauty of the natural world yet realise the scale of destruction beyond what the human eye can see.

It is therefore through Mosse's *Broken Spectre* that it becomes evident that digital art and technology can aid representations dynamically. It is within this exhibition that the audience is immersed in digital representation, they are forced to bring together Mosse's multi-scale and representative documentation of the amazon rainforest to create a picture of the massive scale of ecological destruction. Through multi-sensory elements, the audience not only observes but participates and in turn creates a picture of the incomprehensible scale of the climate crisis. The experience Mosse delivers is provocative and thought-provoking. It captures human attention and forces them to think about their position within the evolving crisis. Therefore, through *Broken Spectre* Mosse demonstrates the potential digital exhibitions have to subvert negative perceptions of technology and the 'broken spectatorship' through which humans approach the climate crisis. Through technology, Mosse re-establishes the relationship between technology, art, and the environment.

Return

Isabella Taleghani

‘Return’ is a project that considers the relationship between humans and the natural world. Holding concerns of the unpredictable complexity of the climate crisis, I seek a return to nature. This series is a depiction of connection. Humans and environment are not viewed as two separate entities but come together as a whole. Through human-centric perceptions the natural world has been compromised; air, land, and water have become polluted. By capturing the unity of an ecosystem, through documentation and experience, I conceive a balanced outlook in approaching the conservation and healing of the environment.

God and the Sea: Early European Seascapes

Zia Simpson

Illustrations by Finlay Thompson and Alfie van Veen

Since prehistory, humans have used spirituality and the arts to explain the natural and unnatural phenomena around them, creating logical explanations where there were none. In the Middle Ages, the overwhelming dominance of Christianity in Europe saw efforts to explain natural events like weather, sickness, and climate through God's characterisation in the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. Where God was infinite in his bounty, so was the sea. Often, when God withheld resources and his favor, the sea would as well, and just as rapidly (as in John 21:1-14, Isaiah 58:11, Psalm 63:1, and Revelations 22:17). Thus, with this precedent of established connections between God and water throughout the Bible, artists began to explore ideas of God through art. The role of the sea in European art reveals the theology of God as wisdom, salvation, and power in and on the natural world.

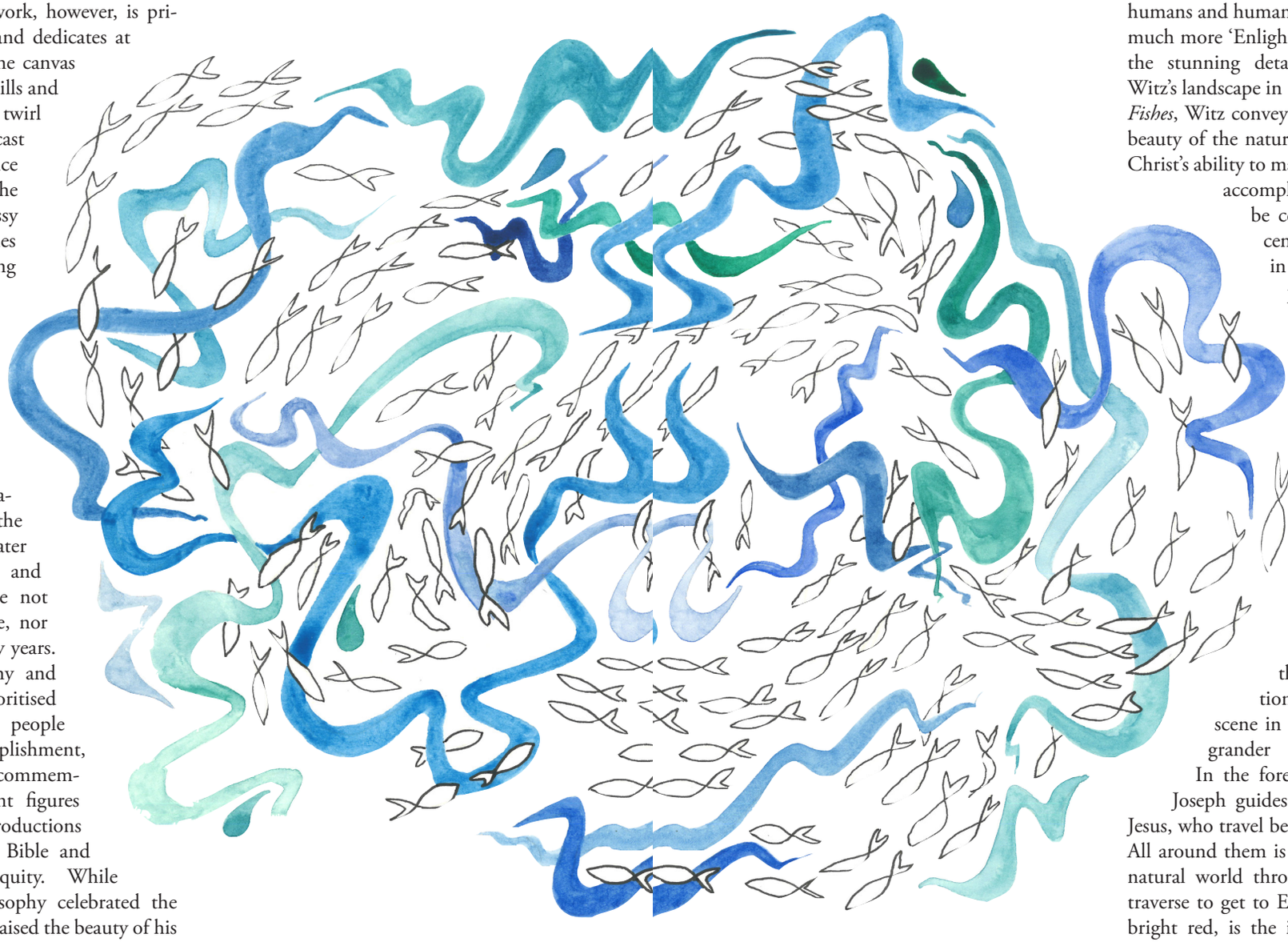
One of the first landscape paintings in Europe, *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes* by Konrad Witz depicts five apostles in a small fishing boat approaching shore

Konrad Witz, *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, 1444, oil on wood, 132 x 154 cm, Museum of Art and History, Geneva.

with looks of incredulity as they realise that waiting for them on the sand is the resurrected Christ. This scene was popular among artists around the time, capturing Christian joy at the miracle of Christ's resurrection as well as the performance of a miracle, as Christ helps the apostles catch 153 fish when there had before been none. Witz departs from many other renditions of this miracle, which usually highlight Christ's return as a man among the people through busy scenes filled with the movement of people as they reel in the fish and adulate him, such as those scenes by Rubens, Raphael, and Crayer. The sea in these other paintings is an afterthought,

merely the location at which the event takes place. Witz's work, however, is primarily a landscape and dedicates at least two-thirds of the canvas space to the rolling hills and seascape. The clouds twirl away in the sky as if cast off by the appearance of Jesus, just as the water becomes glassy and still. A few ripples remain as the fishing boat floats towards the shore, but they dissipate quickly under the power of Christ's presence.

As seen by the iterations of the Draft of the Fishes that come in later centuries, landscape and scenic painting were not the style at the time, nor would it be for many years. Humanist philosophy and the Renaissance prioritised art that celebrated people and human accomplishment, often through the commemoration of important figures and events or reproductions of scenes from the Bible and Greco-Roman antiquity. While contemporary philosophy celebrated the power of God and praised the beauty of his



creations by complimenting the beauty of humans and human creations, Witz took a much more 'Enlightened' stance. Through the stunning detail and tranquility of Witz's landscape in *The Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, Witz conveys to audiences that the beauty of the natural world and God and Christ's ability to master it are a far grander accomplishment and should be celebrated as such. The central presence of the sea in this parable and this painting symbolises the mystery and richness of the sea as a resource for men and a testament to the power of God.

Another anomaly among contemporaries, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (in the Courtauld collection) portrays a Biblical scene in the context of a much grander landscape painting. In the foreground of the image, Joseph guides Mary and the infant Jesus, who travel behind him on a donkey. All around them is the vast and daunting natural world through which they must traverse to get to Egypt. Mary, dressed in bright red, is the immediate focal point

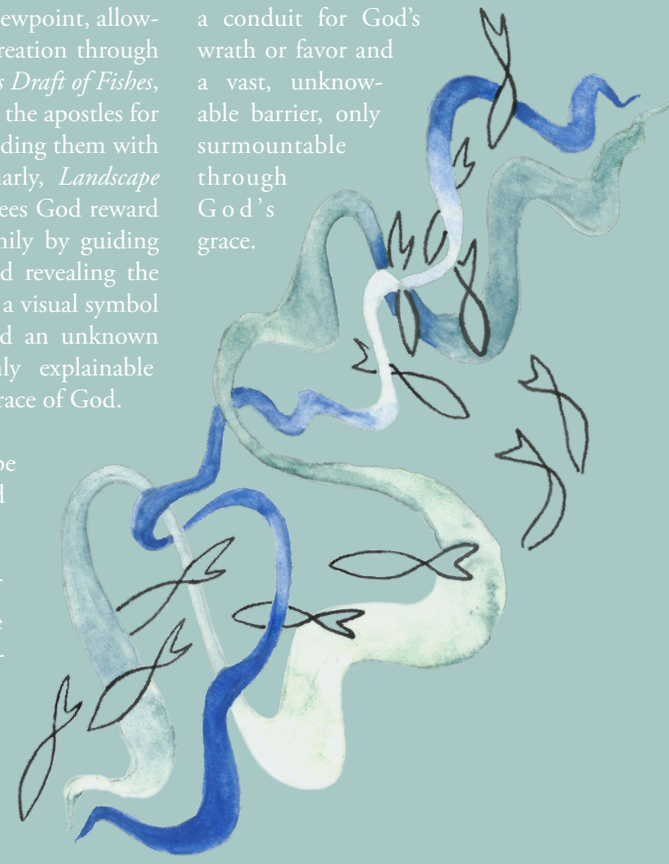
Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*, 1563, oil on wood, 37.1 x 55.6 cm, Courtauld Gallery, London.

of the image, distinct against the far-away blue of the river that flows through the valley ahead of them. This river occupies the majority of the right side of the painting and gently winds through the uncertain wilderness before them, guiding the Holy Family toward the horizon. While Jesus does not play a large role in this work, as the Holy Family passes by a pagan sculpture it topples, a detail that Bruegel includes to show Christ's divine power over the world around him and the triumph of Christianity over false idols.

The overwhelming presence of the landscape within this painting highlights the arduous and intensely challenging journey to come, a theme emphasised by the detail of another traveling group of three who balance over a ravine on a thin plank of wood in the lower left corner. Bruegel implies that it is impossible for viewers to truly comprehend the onerous odyssey that Joseph and Mary suffer, as the river that guides them disappears into the distant horizon, an unfathomable distance away. On a deeper level, the horizon over the water also symbolises the power of God in his creation of a beautiful and immeasurable world as well as the infinite wisdom in his plan for all people. The flow of the river thus functions as a symbol of the truth and divine plan that guide the Holy Family closer to their destiny.

When compared to the earlier *Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* takes themes about God and the natural world and emphasizes them even further. Bruegel's landscape is far more panoramic in its scope and scale and is painted from an elevated viewpoint, allowing viewers to see God's creation through his own eyes. In *Miraculous Draft of Fishes*, the sea is calm and rewards the apostles for their faith in Jesus by providing them with an abundant catch. Similarly, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* sees God reward the faith of the Holy Family by guiding them on their journey and revealing the way ahead. The sea is both a visual symbol of God's temperament and an unknown natural phenomenon, only explainable through the wisdom and grace of God.

In early European landscape paintings, the sea and natural bodies of water reflected religious themes regarding the power of God. Throughout the entirety of this analysis, artistic renditions of the sea have implied that the sea is naturally volatile and dangerous and that only through the grace and favor of God can humans conquer or subdue its threat as a barrier and as a weapon. Early focus on calm waters as a reflection of the will of God gave way to an emphasis on the limitations that water imposed on human desires for progress, both in terms of human innovation as well as progress towards salvation. In these works, the sea represents God. Like other natural phenomena, the sea is explained by the early modern understanding of God's temperament. It is both understood as a conduit for God's wrath or favor and a vast, unknowable barrier, only surmountable through God's grace.



Kaleidoscope Heart

Beatrice Stankeviciute

I cried until it overflowed
Lakes
Rivers
And oceans

I cried until it filled my soul
Veins
Arteries
And organs

I cried until I watered all the plants
Flowers
Trees
And forests

Like a song
Of branches and leaves
Of silent whispers of wind

I don't know why I grow the way I do
Whilst my heart lies
Tightly wrapped
Under the cobwebs of vines

I see how everything else is torn
All around
But inside I am whole

Blooming within my own self
Again

Illustration by Amy-May Brand

Accepting Responsibility:

Who Should Ecocritical Art Be Criticising?

Helen Warner

Although we all love a blockbuster exhibition for its Instagram appeal, it can be easy to see them as a bit frivolously mainstream compared to something more highbrow. That's certainly how I engaged with Olafur Eliasson's monumental exhibition *In Real Life* at Tate Modern in 2019. If you've ever seen a work or an exhibition by the Icelandic-Danish artist, you probably have an entire album's worth of photos in your camera roll dedicated to the experience — of yourself as much as of the artworks. The Instagram culture surrounding contemporary art is something which is ever-expanding — unsurprisingly — but probably more often thought of as a little bit tacky than as a tool which could insert us as individuals into the epicentre of ecocritical discourse. But thinking critically about the immersive works beyond their token value for mirror selfies has the potential to reveal a much more sinister undercurrent.

Eliasson is one of the most prominent of the many contemporary artists who engage directly with issues of current ecology. Not only does he engage with it, he necessitates that, through his work, so too does the viewer. Mimicking the urgency of the climate crisis, he doesn't allow us to be passive observers but places us into his immersive sculptural pieces, making us the performers. Through his use of mirrors and projected spotlights, we become integral to the piece, part of its ecosystem. We can't even escape this unsettling reminder of our individual role by interpreting the dark play on social media culture as a commentary on the role of humanity at large — Eliasson gives a significant majority of his work titles beginning with the word 'Your.' Being directly addressed by a piece of art creates a strange sense of cosy intimacy, echoed by the warm yellow hues which appear as a motif. But this again carries sinister undertones in an ecological context. Exemplified by the 2003 Turbine Hall installation *The Weather Project*, the effect is more like a dystopian imagining of the planetary surface after a climate apocalypse than the comforting glow from a sunset lamp.

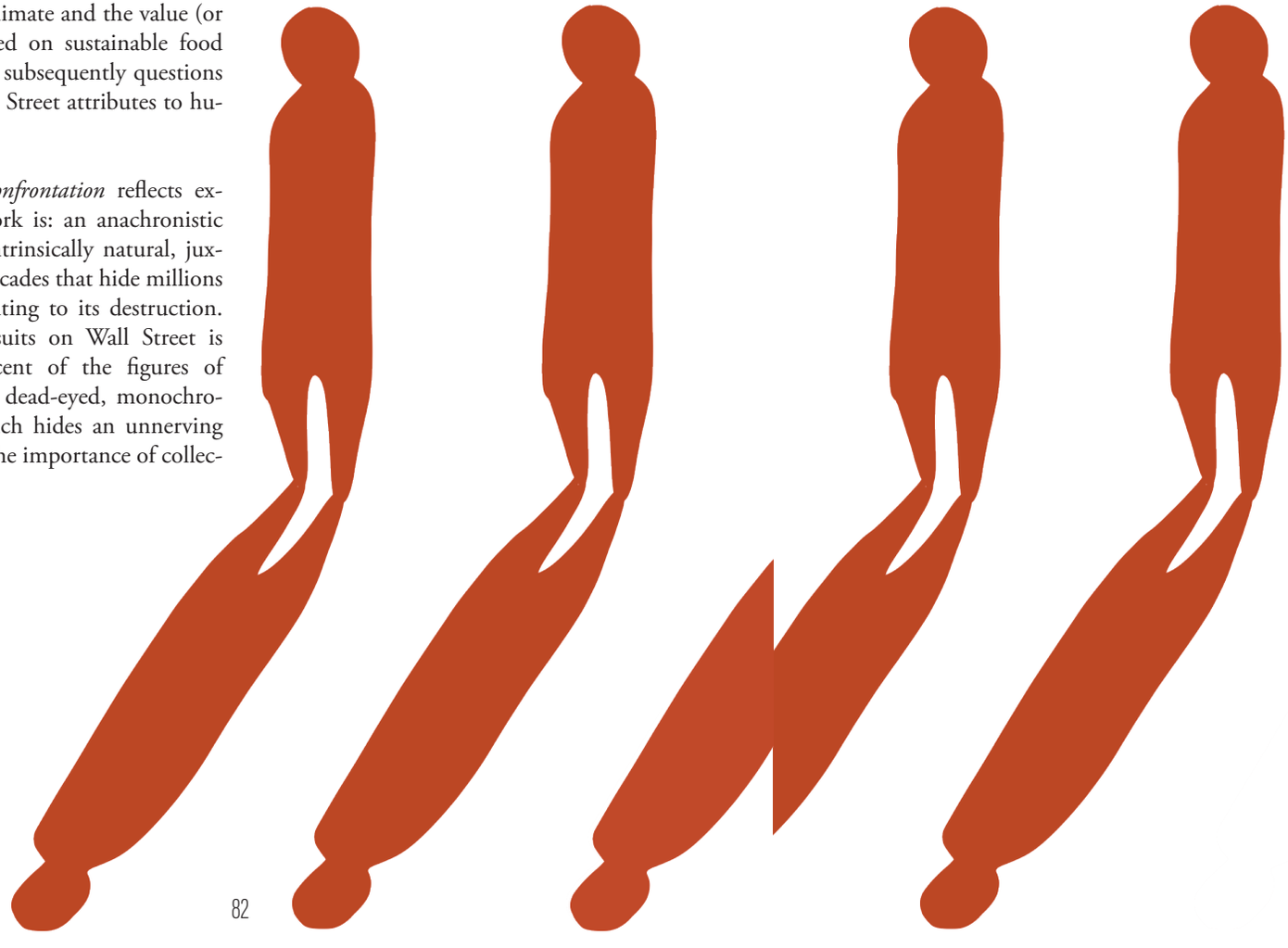
Personal responsibility is a theme also tackled by Antony Gormley's 1991 installation piece *Field*, which has had five incarnations across the globe. Gormley, like Eliasson, seems to be making a very direct attack on each individual viewer of this piece which has thousands of pairs of eyes literally interrogating us to contemplate our own accountability. Gallery space-specific installations like this, and much of Eliasson's work, for all their subversion, do beg the question — 'are these interrogations aimed in the right direction?' Should the judgemental eyes of Gormley's tiny figures not be turned on the gallery space itself? After all, Gormley exhibited *Field* at Tate Liverpool in 2004 — when Tate was still deep in BP sponsorship. Eliasson's *Weather Project* was the same year. Even the *In Real Life* exhibition was only three years after the BP era; the lingering legacies of which the art world is still very much grappling with as some institutions simply refuse to let go.

The work of ecofeminist Agnes Denes proposes a potential alternative focus for interrogation. She gained notoriety thanks

to *Wheatfield – A Confrontation*, which eschews institutionalisation and arguably gives greater relevance to the idea of art as a tool for encouraging climate culpability. Despite being completed in 1982, *Wheatfield* speaks to contemporary thought around climate activism by directly confronting the capitalist institutions that are the willing perpetrators and perpetuators of the crisis. The field was planted on a two-acre plot of land which was, at the time, worth $4.5 billion; a powerful statement on the economic climate and the value (or lack thereof) placed on sustainable food production, which subsequently questions the value that Wall Street attributes to human life.

The subtitle *A Confrontation* reflects exactly what this work is: an anachronistic reminder of the intrinsically natural, juxtaposing the vast facades that hide millions of people contributing to its destruction. Thinking of the suits on Wall Street is ironically reminiscent of the figures of Gormley's *Field*, a dead-eyed, monochromatic expanse which hides an unnerving collective power. The importance of collective power in the climate fight is something specifically highlighted in *Field*, as it singles out and personally interrogates the viewer. There is also a potential commentary on the unequal power dynamics at play when engaging with this piece and how this is reflective of the disproportionate impact of climate change on marginalised groups and developing nations.

As well as their pieces which are firmly situated in the gallery space, both Eliasson and Gormley frequently bring their art into conversation with the external world, like Denes was doing with *Wheatfield*. This raises similar questions of audience, participation and confrontation — the viewer has no choice but to engage with the work when it is placed in their immediate reality, reflecting the inevitability of engagement with climate change. We cannot exist removed from our ecological situation, whether it be urban or rural, and these artists remind us of this by disrupting our personally insular environments. Eliasson's *Ice Watch* (2014), which consists of 12 huge blocks of ice cast from the Greenland Ice Sheet presented in a clock formation in a 'prominent public place,' similarly places a visceral, unavoidable reminder of impending ecological collapse in conspicuously metropolitan locales. This work has been realised four times, in three cities, between 2014 and 2019. As the ice melts away, viewers can touch or simply observe the inevitable as the glacial run off disappears back into the environment in a beautifully sinister reminder of the ecological reality which can often feel mystically detached from our daily existences.



Although it's tempting to be indignant at the seeming ecological own-goal of this work's climate footprint, this merely reflects back to us the instinctive need to place blame and culpability anywhere but on our own heads. According to Minik Rosing, Professor of Geology at the Natural History Museum of Denmark, Greenland loses the equivalent of 10,000 icebergs of

the size used for Ice Watch per second. The work constitutes, quite literally, a drop in the ocean. We can only hope that, despite the inevitable criticisms over the audience, platform, and relevancy of art as climate activism, enough drops in the ocean of both public and institutional consciousness will inspire change.

Questions about the direction of ecocritical action and blame in the art world have never been more poignant, given the current tendency of climate protestors to stage their demonstrations in gallery spaces. Many argue that they are vandals who are alienating one of their core support demographics by limiting their protest to an elitist space and violating innocent masterpieces. One could equally argue that confining protest to the gallery, although an elitist space historically, is a more respectful protest than gluing oneself to a motorway — which we know disproportionately affects working class people. But the cultural institution is certainly not free of guilt when it comes to climate destruction. As a representative of a capitalist system, which has historically been propped up by ecologically dubious funds, maybe it's only right that the gallery is a stage for climate protest.

The incredible nuance around 'correct' protest action is perhaps a mirror for questions over the direction of blame dealt out in ecocritical works of art. Are Eliasson and Gormley really interrogating the individual over their personal culpability? This would seem ironic given the politically charged gallery space in this context and subsequent conversations around artistic production. Maybe they aim to interrogate the art world more broadly, or the institutions through their supporters. Or maybe their goal is simply to heighten awareness — without art addressing contemporary environmental questions in such a confrontational way it would be all too easy for the gallery space to bury its head in the sand and remain a haven for climate change denial through omission. Ultimately, like the culturally/morally grey areas surrounding protest, if it inspires critical consideration of the climate issues we're living with, does that make it successful? Or does the personally interrogative nature of immersive and installation art have a similar effect of alienation?

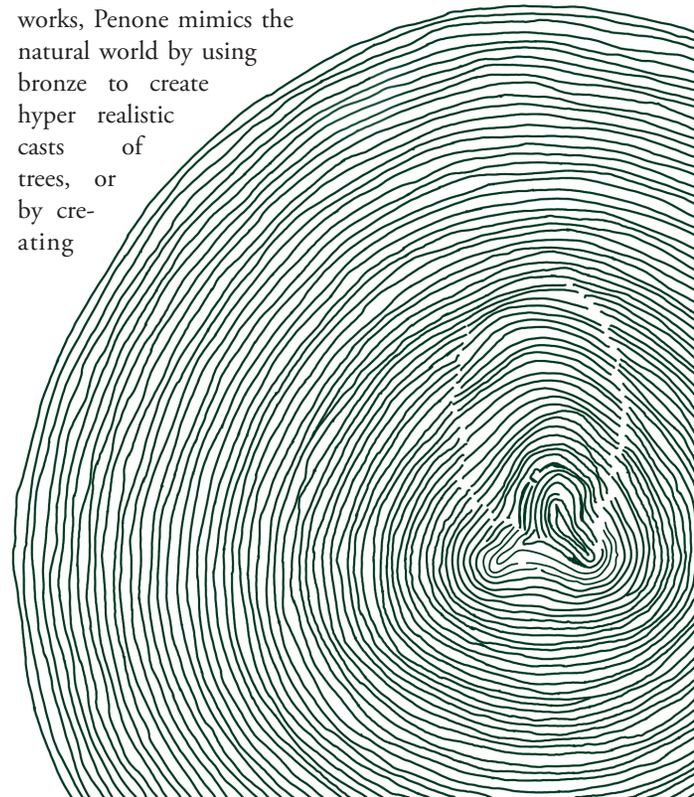
Illustrations by Isabella Taleghani

A Tree in the Wood: Reflections on a Giuseppe Penone Exhibition

Louisa Hutchinson

My first encounter with the sculptures of Giuseppe Penone was in 2018, upon undertaking work experience at his exhibition *A Tree in the Wood* at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park. The natural landscape of the Sculpture Park seemed like the perfect location to exhibit an artist whose 50-year oeuvre is dedicated to exploring the relationship between the human form, art, and the natural world. Using a vast range of materials, including wood, bronze, graphite, stone, potatoes, and laurel leaves; Penone's works encourage the viewer to envision themselves, and all of humankind, as part of the natural world, which he considers an art form in its own right.

The exhibition drew together work from across Penone's career, tracing his artistic endeavours to synthesise the natural and the artistic. When not using organic materials such as leaves or wood to create works, Penone mimics the natural world by using bronze to create hyper realistic casts of trees, or by creating sculptures which physically marry the natural and the man-made. He achieves this using a mixture of both media, treating nature itself as an art form.



From Penone's large body of work, it is the tree — both as medium and subject, which he revisits decade after decade:

The tree is a spectacular creation because each part of the tree is necessary to its life. It is the perfect sculpture.

— Giuseppe Penone

The rings of trees as illustrative of aging and the passage of time, is an idea frequently explored by Penone, particularly in his series *Propagazione* (propagation), which began in the 1990s. One such iteration of *Propagazione* had been drawn directly onto the main wall of the exhibition space, expanding onto two other walls. The works in this series consist of a starting point of Penone's fingerprint in ink. The lines of the fingerprint are then extended into concentric circles, which expand outwards, imitating the rings of a tree. This work is abstract yet figurative — it has no definitive subject matter; however the viewer automatically sees the marks as recognisable natural forms.

The artist drawing *Propagazione* at YSP, May 2018.
Photo: Jim Varney

An iteration of *Propagazione* requires much physical labour to complete, as well as time. The time and energy that goes into works like this creates a meditative relationship between the artwork and the artist, as he literally documents the passage of time as he works. This reflection of time is also apparent in the deliberately durational act of repeating the same work (for there are many iterations of *Propagazione* from the 1990s until now). This opens up an interesting dialogue for the viewer between the visual passage of time created by the growth rings, and the physical use of time to create an artwork.

The associations with identity held by the fingerprint remind the viewer of the artist's presence, and the human body which created the work. The seamless transition from something so human as Penone's unique fingerprint into the natural form of the tree rings leads the viewer to consider the identity of human beings in relation to the equally unique natural world. Much like the tree's identity being visible in the growth rings, our identity is associated with our fingerprint. Inversely, just as a human cannot be quantified by their fingerprint alone, a tree is also an incredibly complex form, which cannot be quantified by age rings alone. Penone seems to be challenging the viewer to distinguish the human from the natural world, both in simplicity and uniqueness. The very visuals of the work, which turns the human fingerprint into a microcosm within the vast piece suggests that we

Illustrations by Isabella Taleghani

are purely another natural form.

The fascination and the fear stirred by the continual mutation of nature makes me think of humanity's interference with the living things of the world and how it is ignorant of the fact that it is itself part of nature.

— Giuseppe Penone

This quotation from the artist verbalises this visual continuity in *Propagazione*, which suggests that humans are part of nature. It has also been suggested that the concentric circles represent ripples created by human touch on water, and in this quotation Penone also references this human interference with the natural world. The deliberate abstraction leaves the work open to the viewer's personal interpretation of the relationship between humans and the natural world.

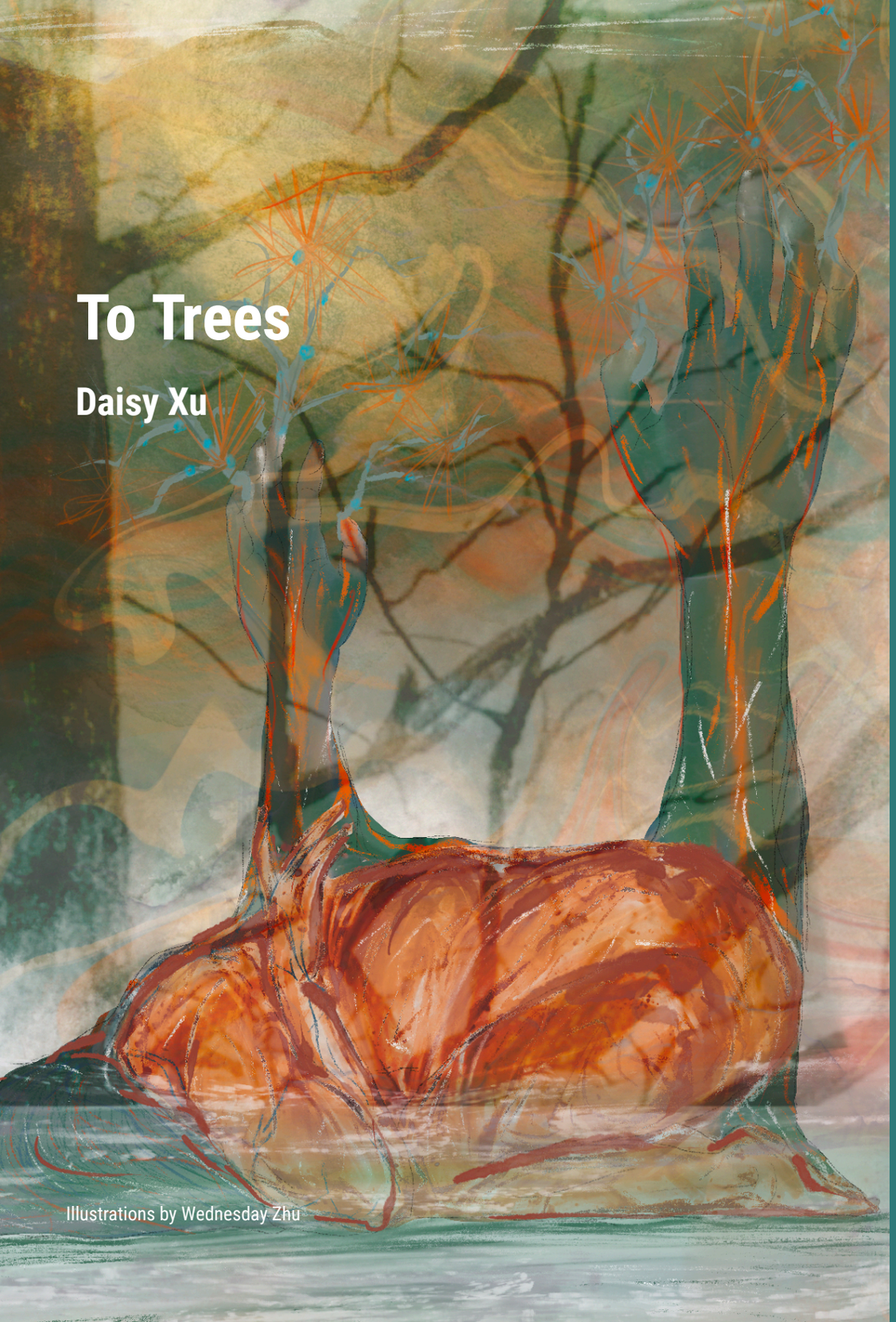
The centrepiece of the exhibition space, *Matrice*, was perhaps the most fitting example of the artist's use of the tree as a motif through which to explore the symbiosis between humans and nature.

Both halves of a bisected pine tree laid end to end spanned across the gallery space at over 30 metres long, filling the centre of the gallery, *Matrice* served as a reflection of the importance of the tree in Penone's career. The horizontal tree and its branches evoked a human spine, visually linking all three rooms of the exhibition together and leading the viewer through the space. The branches which once reached the sky now anchored the piece to the ground, centring the viewer.

Once again, in this sculpture Penone used the tree motif to contemplate the passage of time — the middle of the tree was painstakingly carved out following a single age ring, a common feature in his sculptures. The influence of Michelangelo, one of Penone's personal heroes, can be seen here. By emptying the space, Penone reveals the size and form of the tree which had previously been hidden by layers of age and growth. Where Michelangelo claimed to free the sculpture from the material, Penone sees the signs of aging and history of the material as the artwork itself

The meticulous carving which would require intense labour and time not dissimilar to *Propagazione* reminds the viewer of the decades of growth the tree has experienced. The title of the exhibition in juxtaposition with the negative space where the sapling was once encased by its own matured form, reminds us that there is in fact, a tree within the wood.

opposite
Giuseppe Penone, *Matrice*, 2015. Photo: Yorkshire Sculpture Park



To Trees

Daisy Xu

Illustrations by Wednesday Zhu

I overheard blood running in trees.
t-r-e-e- true.

Ever-growing in my veins and a scroll
Of paintings, moist dry bones. Winds.
And bones of the branches

Fragrance drained, contained. Boomed
quietly, aggressive than ever.
Trees. Proudly stand
Clutching the earth and sniffing the sun
Flows,
like a ghost in the heart

The weird weird elegance — barebones of
A tree is the only good about winter
So you may stop
And sniff this — the sweetly dormant soul
Tickled, by permeation of spring

2021.2.27

Trees Ablaze

Aubrey Prestwich

Hey, kiddo, looks like the highway's closed due to a fire. Think about other routes home, maybe Arapahoe to 287?

Oh, thanks, dad. But I prefer 93 when the highway is crowded; I'll probably just take that.

What aren't we thinking about when we acquiesce to the mundane of our commute? The strip malls blend into office parks, ceding their way to undeveloped prairie over which the mountains stand sentinel. That route will always look the same; the wind turbines gently spin in the middle distance.

I thought nothing of that brief text exchange with my father. He rarely texts me, though it was sweet that he was concerned about my route home. But a fire? In December? He must be mistaken, or it can't be serious. Besides, I took the highway to work that morning, which was an uneventful journey. Sure, the air was dry and a touch cold. The wind was annoying, but the wind was always irritating. The conditions were typical and unremarkable.

My appraisal of the circumstances was numb because I was exhausted after a string of consecutive holiday retail shifts. The festive season had not seen any snow, and the tension behind the cash wrap was palpable. Businesses in the area were still clawing their way back from the uncertainty of coronavirus-related shutdowns. It had been a challenging season for reasons unrelated to the weather. Nothing feels remarkable at that point in the working year.

But the wind picked up. The doors to the store blew open and slammed shut. It was cold and bright, and a cloud of dust stormed down the street. It hurts to be outside in those conditions: branch shrapnel skitters by with the dust. Tumbleweeds roll away in a caricature of a bygone age.

Illustration by Sacha Lewis

The winds reached hurricane force and launched the most destructive fire in state history that day. Neighbours had as little as a quarter of an hour to evacuate, some on foot. The lucky ones had time to pack cars and hitch trailers, loading spooked horses and smoke-addled dogs. The area, a semi-rural, semi-suburban expanse north of Denver, Colorado, was unaccustomed to the proximity of such danger. If a forest fire starts, it's further west or down south, never in the metro corridor. Emergency management was activated: the fire was christened Marshall. With the main route in and out of town too dangerous to use, residents had to find other ways to evacuate. Those south of the highway were stuck on 93; those north were stuck on Arapahoe.

The strength of the wind, a state record, meant little firefighting could happen. It was simply too fast, the wind too fierce. Emergency responders refocused efforts on evacuation and survival; my supervisor redoubled her efforts in finding a dinner reservation. As the fire grew, I was stuck in the store for the rest of the day, peeling stickers off heart-shaped rocks for Valentine's Day. The shop closed at the usual time. I drove past open flames where neighborhoods stood hours before. It took me two hours to complete my thirty-minute drive home.

The American West is experiencing season after season of climate catastrophe. Wildfires in California and Oregon blot out the sun, their smoke plumes stretching from sea to oil-slick sea. Mudslides follow when the rain finally pours, inundation and flooding the evil twin that compounds the tragedy. 100-year flood events may now occur with enough regularity that scientists ought to rename them.

West Coast fires like the Camp or Creek Fire may be bigger and better known, but the conditions that make them deadly are universal in the western Rockies. Drought withers away at the undergrowth, and the very ground becomes kindling. The trees are dying: fungus, blight, beetles, and borers flock to groves and feast. Because it doesn't get as cold, the pests do not die over the winter. Poor forest management has exacerbated the issue. The pests aren't being controlled. Dead trees haven't been cleared. The forest is crispy and ready to ignite.

Boulder County, where the fires took place, has experienced its share of natural disasters over the past ten years. In 2013, days of uninterrupted rainfall swept away mountain roads and flooded the creek that flows through downtown Boulder, carrying away the public library and park. Following an extensive flood restoration project downtown and in the foothills, fires occur with shocking regularity. Olde Stage, Walker Ranch, and Fourmile Canyon all went up in smoke, displacing longtime mountain residents and reminding them of their precarity. Forest fires make their way further down the hill every year, but this was a grass fire. It ignited and spread so quickly; it was unlike other tragedies residents had experienced.

Overnight, the wind died down. The fire blew itself out and a blizzard replaced it. I went to work once again, this time delirious from the stress of the fire. The scenery that never changes had vanished overnight. Later tallies would suggest that one thousand structures burned to the ground. The rest of Colorado mourned with Boulder County, mobilising to help evacuees who had lost everything.

Living with these fires reminds me of my proximity to an idyllic natural environment and its precarious placement within the human dimension. We chose to occupy this landscape. It responded to our occupation in the only language it knows: fire can cleanse the prairie and start a cycle of rebirth. We the inhabitants must become better stewards, or the landscape disappears entirely.

In April of 2022, I once again drove into Boulder without thinking, but pleased that the burn scar was blooming. I looked up, and my scenic commute was again engulfed in flame.

Sam Lee, and the Fight Against Musical and Ecological Death

Marianne Whiting

Oh grief, oh grief have I,
For the songs they go to decay,
The garden of England once bloomed it's sound assault,
Now destined for some bouquet, some bouquet,
No roses in this display

The Garden of England (Seeds of Love), Sam Lee and Bernard Butler (2019).

Folk music is a bizarre genre. It summons to mind old men in leaf-print bandanas bowing squeaky fiddles. You can imagine it played in a near-empty pub with cross-eyed deer heads and lukewarm beer (an unfortunate anecdote of mine). Although sometimes true, this eccentricity is exactly what makes folk music so wonderful. It is a bizarre genre that is too stubborn to be categorised with ease. Folk music is a bit of everything: whimsical sea shanties, lewd football chants, and fierce pro-union ballads.

Today, eco folk music is dynamic. The split between activist and musician is frequently blurred. Phenomenal artists like Cosmo Sheldrake are recording endangered birdsong to use as backing tracks, Songhive is logging the fluctuation in the UK bee population in music, and Spells Songs has sung under trees threatened with needless demolition in Sheffield.

But for all its whimsy, historically, the people singing such songs have led politically difficult lives. Folk has a long history of activism: a bloody one. From enslaved black people chanting *Go Down Moses, Let My People Go* in eighteenth-century America to Nina Simone belting *Mississippi Goddam* in 1964 in protest of segregation, music has been a potent tool against oppression. Undeniably, folk is the people's genre. But another worthwhile qualification is an absolute reverence for our natural environment. Eco folk in 2022 is bleak, narrating our current social climate as one where the human race is playing both martyr and slaughterer. This is well summarised by singer and activist Robert MacFarlane, calling folk 'deep-rooted in questions of land, protest and nature… [it is] progressive, inclusive and subversive.' Naturally, genres such as folk and roots have been co-opted for climate activism.

In November of 2021, I went to an intimate concert in Union Chapel, Islington. The mysterious star was a young, scruffy musician and song collector. Sam Lee, stood framed by a stained glass image of the Virgin Mary, began his set with *Willie O' Winsbury*. Dating back 250 years, this archaic folk song narrates the story of a king who falls in love with a man of low esteem. Lee coyly remarked, eyes to the rafters, about singing such blasphemy on holy ground. This subtle and cheeky subversiveness is everywhere within his music. Just a week after, he travelled to Edinburgh to the COP26 climate change conference and performed an amalgam song for the ex-US Secretary General and Climate Convoy. Not one to shy away from boundary pushing, Lee sang *Ornament Tree*. Bitterly, this piece scorns English lords logging on Northern Irish soil; colonialism and climate damage so often come together in politics.

Lee's music is contemporary in sentiment, but this is somewhat deceiving. Truthfully, the rhythmic heart of folk lies not in the present but in the kinship of past and future. Musicians for hundreds of years have covered, reworked and blended folk songs. Unlike almost all other musical genres, this is not just encouraged but expected. One song will have different names, characters, locations and tunes, yet all the same genealogy. In the last century, experts have taken to tracking this meandering map of folk history. 'Song collectors' or 'folklorists' like Lee are specialised kinds of archivists. Until today, roots and folk music have relied on the sturdy backbone of the oral tradition. From parent to child, from friend to friend, centuries of love letters, anecdotes, and ditties have only existed in the collective consciousness of the community.

But this strange kind of archivism is a rapidly dying craft. For Lee's personal archive, this is especially true. His expertise lies in the sound of Irish travellers (self-identified as Irish-Gypsy Travellers). Nowadays, this community is so ostracised from conventional existence in the UK that Lee is likely the first non-traveller to officially record many of their songs. This isolation has cost folk musicians dearly. Nevertheless, folklorists are diligent. As Lee wrote in his book *The Nightingale* (2021), he would arrive to document these archaic tunes from elders like Ellie and John Mungins, just to be told 'ach, both of them died this year... if you'd

had come by a few months ago.' Wistfully, Lee terms these people 'endlings'; those last, precious humans with a purer connection to our natural, sonic histories. How many songs have we lost as we have lost people? How many people have we lost as we have lost songs?

Lee's emphatic drive to rescue our past is identical to his drive to preserve our dwindling future. Singing with Nightingales, Lee's pet project, is one such reclamation attempt. As he said in an interview about *The Nightingale*, 'singing with Nightingales is letting nature do as much of the talking as I am.' In this project, he hosts immersive experiences for the public to travel to green areas to experience the bird and her song. The Nightingale is fabled for its dreamlike song and yet has been so massacred by environmental loss that its number has plummeted 90% in 50 years. Lee's interest in such an archetypal voice of nature makes sense. The gentle silencing of the UK landscape as bird species slip quietly into extinction feels eerily similar to Lee's song-collecting projects.

Lee is also a large speaker for the No Music on a Dead Planet project, a collective of musicians ranging across all genres who appear at protests and try to incite political change. Most recently, Lee filmed himself at the Just Stop Oil 'Occupy Westminster' protests in central London in early October 2022. He proudly carries the torch of optimistic, angry folk activism by attending such events. He is just one case study of many.

Folk is an endling genre. Nightingales are an endling species. Our world, too, is an endling. But, like our ever-vigilant song collectors, eccentric musicians and angry ornithologists, it is absolutely necessary to push against eco death on a grand political scale. Climate activism impresses upon all aspects of life, including obscure genres of music and their unusual patrons. There is work, heroic and humble, to be done.

We do not need to be endlings.

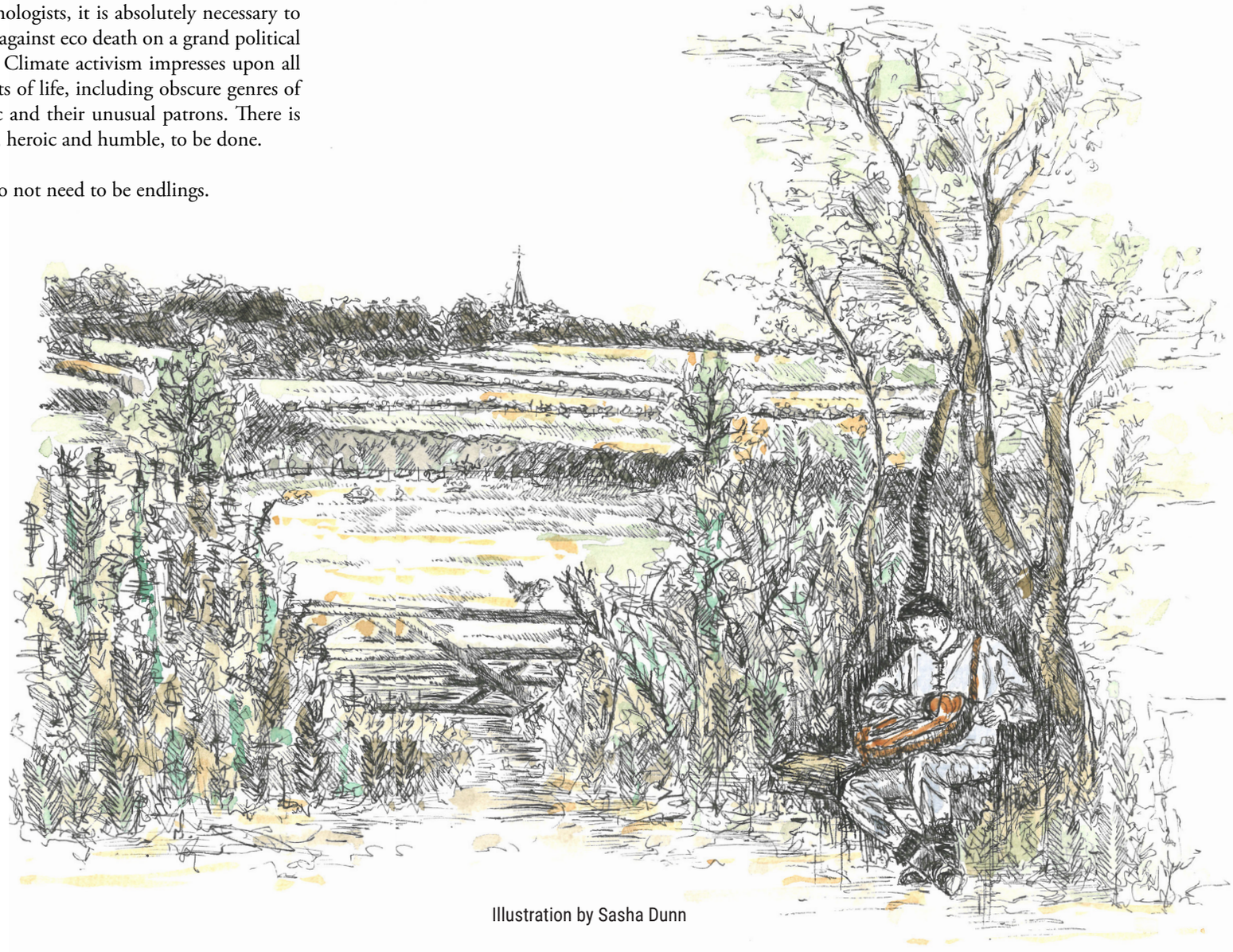


Illustration by Sasha Dunn

They/Them/Their: Naturally Not Binary

Cas Bradbeer

After graduating from the Courtauld's BA programme back in July, I started working on an exhibition of queer ecology with my wonderful co-curator Anett Kiss and the brilliant Lindsay Friend who is the director of our venue, IMT Gallery. With a focus on trans and gender non-conforming experiences, *They/Them/Their: Naturally Not Binary* brought together artworks that examined issues around representing ecofeminism, environmental justice, and LGBTQIA+ ecology.

Queer ecology is an interdisciplinary collection of terms that provide a framework for articulations of nature in terms of non-normative gender and sexuality. Within the field of critical ecologies, queer ecology combines 'the confrontational thrust of queer' (Nicole Seymour) with a critical awareness of our ecological relationships. Broadly speaking, queer ecology explores the relationship between humans and non-humans (i.e. landscapes, flora and fauna). Yet, through its practitioners, it often engages more specifically with topics such as politics, urbanism, and disabilities. In this way, the 30 artists featured in our exhibition applied queer ecology as a framework to critique cis-heteronormativity and to explore how queering spaces (both literally and figuratively) can help to stave off cultural, political, and ecological destruction.

Featured artists: Alberto Maggini, Amelia Fraser-Dale, Anna Candlin, Anya Bliss, Ayshe-Mira Yashin, Bunni, Chang Gao, Chen Yang, Emma Plover, Gideon Horváth, Heather Renée Russ, Imogen Mansfield, Jake Wood, James Chantry, Jean-François Krebs, Jenny Camp, Jordie

Photographs by Ge Zhu at the opening of *They/Them/Their: Naturally Not Binary* (August 2022).

Hennigar, Marta Ilacqua, Molly Grad, Morgan Swartz, Myla Corvidae, Nhung Đinh, Pati Starzykowski, Paul Harfleet, Ric Stott, River Manning, Sarah Jaworski, Simon Olmetti, Skye Kember and Tamás Ábel.

In a time when we face an ecological crisis and queer spaces have been closing at a terrifying rate, it feels so important to have exhibitions like this. They offer us an opportunity to reimagine our futures as queer people and as part of nature. By making space for ecosystems of queers, exhibitions can provide the connective tissue through which artists can not only collaborate but

also establish platforms to raise the visibility of their practice.

I was very keen on choosing queer ecology as a theme because nature was the most common theme among the submissions for *Crafting Ourselves*, the show I led the Courtauld's LGBTQIA+ Society to curate at Ugly Duck in February. Therefore, in the spirit of making space for queer artists to share what is important to them, I thought, 'let's listen to the queer community around me and mount a show all about this topic!'

As a queer and trans person who has been involved with environmentalist groups such as Extinction Rebellion for the past five years, queer ecology also felt like a good fit for me personally. In addition, the decision to make a specifically trans-inclusive environmentalist space was at least in part driven by the exclusion my friends and I have sometimes felt as trans people in environmentalist organisations. With my desire for inclusion in mind, as well as seeing queer artists wanting to show their work with nature, it has felt both personally and collectively rewarding to make this space for queer ecological art.

However, the show did not come without its challenges. It was difficult working with

such a small budget and losing our original venue due to landlord price-hikes a little over a month before the show! Thankfully, the wonderful Lindsay stepped in with a very kind offer to host us a couple weeks later than we had originally planned, and all the artists were still keen to show their works with us despite the change in date and location. Lindsay was truly a godsend as she provided us the space, her project management advice, and the brilliant moral support of her three cats: Princess Cordelia, Walter (aka Wally) and Madge (aka Madgy-Moo)!

Of course, it was a joy to see on display our dozens of artworks in a wide variety of mediums — video, photography, drawing, ceramics, textiles, audio, painting, AR, print, sculpture and more. Yet, the biggest highlights for me were the events we programmed in order to directly provide resources and activities for queer and environmentalist communities. I was overjoyed to hear that Lindsay agreed with this and is now framing our exhibition as the 'pilot' in their new inclusive approach, platforming critical arts initiatives that are research-led and centre community interaction. I am now in the planning stages of collaborating further on this arm of IMT's work, which Lindsay has entitled *Assembling*. Lindsay,

Anett and I adored the sound bath, embroidery workshops, live performances and talks from the artists! I loved seeing participants bring their own torn clothes or use our materials to mend and embellish in the spirit of queer fabulations and sustainable fashion. It was such a joy to see friends of mine come along to the opening and take part in Ric Stott's ritual performance in which participants were invited in turn to use a piece of wood (which Ric had taken from Hampstead Heath, historically a queer cruising hotspot, and burnt into charcoal) to draw on Ric's canvas. Lastly, I can't forget to mention the beautiful moment at the opening where a few of the artists and I took sunflower seeds we had been giving away at the show and guerrilla gardened them by a pavement in Bethnal Green. There were too many gorgeous moments like these to recount. I'm so glad to be able to look up from my laptop now as I sit in my flat and see the vibrant placards and murals co-created by all of the lovely people who came along to our show. When I look at them, I'm reminded of all the memories we shared, as well as this extract from a poem we featured in the show:

We discover ourselves beside one another, laying within the leaves, beneath the embroidered clover ~ watching the invisible stars. We slide into the spaces of one another, growing into a singular body ~ an elegant, quiet ocean.

— Imogen Mansfield, *Ithir Milis*

Illustration by Sasha Dunn

Photography by Pearl Jackson-Payen