

Entwined: plants in contemporary painting

Inherent in the word ‘entwined’ is of course, the visual appearance of plants: in our mind’s eye, the word evokes the patterns and shapes of tendrils, the curls of stems, and their spiralling as they twist and grow, enmeshed, and tangled. In turn, this imagining of the way plants look, inevitably evokes visual cultural memories for there are many, rich traditions of depictions of plants: scientific, aesthetic, painterly, embroidered, printed, and designed. It was for these visual associations that the word first came to us when we were in the early, planning stages of this exhibition. However, it is also apposite for other important reasons. In this exhibition plants take centre stage; they are not reduced to metaphor, parergon, or backdrop. In a small way, this emphasis invites us to try to adjust our anthropocentric view of the plant world. This exhibition is a provocation to view plants as more than commercial, edible, decorative or useful. This may seem paradoxical when, entwined plants are also emblematic of interdependence, with each other, with human and with other more-than-human beings. All these lives are entwined in ways that both enrich and constrain each other. This exhibition enquires whether attending to plants, through paint, might simultaneously reveal how we are interconnected, thus eroding at the human/nonhuman binary, yet simultaneously attune us to the radical differences between us.

Informed by ideas from the environmental arts and humanities, we thought too of the way that plants exemplify the many and multifarious entwinements so key for our contemporary era. In particular, the way in which a consideration of plants cuts through disciplinary boundaries: art, design, science, ecology, politics, and history. Indeed, we are privileged to have had the opportunity to work

with scientist Nathan Smith from Kew Gardens. The entwinement of art and science might even echo the dense network of relationships inherent in Darwin’s renowned ‘tangled’ bank. However, as the editorial to the 2009 issue of *Nature* celebrating Darwin argues, that bank is now unravelling due to the threat to biodiversity. Many of these painters explore the ecology of a post-industrial, semi-wild landscape. Some ask whether all that we may be left with will be complex but impoverished remnants of plant-life, not just quite yet perhaps, but soon. What might it mean to think about plants today, but more importantly, what might it mean to paint them? Here, in these painted plants, we cannot escape the entangled, embodied practice of painting which results in works which are precisely entwined between the represented and the real. In all the works on show, a viewer is acutely aware of the interaction between the physical materiality of the body of the artists, the material of making and the material of the plants and the environment in which they grow.

If the works in this exhibition are anything to go by, contemporary painting is clearly thriving. The widest range of ways that painting, both as practice and object might engage with and interpret plants: real and imagined, wild or cultivated, growing in context, or shown in isolation, even as cut flowers, is quite extraordinary. The vitality of all the possibilities inherent in contemporary painting is here: from meticulous direct observation, to swooshing brushwork, from playful invented worlds and gestural abstraction, to works which know of photography and film, from barely stained canvases to the heaviest and thickest impasto. All the works invite their viewers to look closely at and consider plants and our relationship with them. They do

this through the widest of ranges of approaches to paint. How might this deep exploration of plants help us understand our place in the world now? What does it mean to understand a locale through an intense study of what is growing close at hand? Of course, there is a provocation to slow down, to give attention to detail and specificity in all the works. This reflects our renewed relation with nature: those places we have come to value so much, where we go to catch our breath and connect to the more-than-human-world. This visual feast explores why painting plants matters now, using approaches from lyrical abstraction through to forensic observation of plants in crisis. This last reminds us, that while painting might be thriving, the subjects of the exhibition, the plants themselves, may not be.

So, with this in mind, we can see that some of the paintings’ apparent beauty belies darker and melancholic attributes: plants as symptom of loss, as metaphor for migration, the legacy of colonialism or as a contemporary take on the traditional idea of memento-mori. For, as we know, this invitation to look slowly and the focus on the specificity and minutiae of plants comes at a moment of wider global trauma both in terms of global warming and its corollary, alarming biodiversity loss. So, this focus on the fragility of more-than-human life, specifically the endangered nature of plant species, is not new. It might be seen as a reinterpretation of the tradition of the memento mori, or vanitas, those paintings which reflect material decay and the futility of worldly, *human*, life, using flowers as a metaphor and symbol of this once was commonplace. Many of the artists consider this but with a contemporary twist: Narbi Price’s ongoing series of cellophane wrapped floral tributes might

be the closest to this tradition, Paula MacArthur's magnified flower heads loom out of the darkest of backgrounds directly referencing the chiaroscuro of a seventeenth century Dutch vase. Both Barbara Howey's fluid plant 'portraits' and Hannah Brown's sumptuous paintings of hedgerows become ever more poignant when we understand that the habitats depicted are about to be developed. Indeed, by the time the works are exhibited, they may well already be housing estates or new roads. Linda Ingham's exquisitely rendered ash leaf fragments are more than traditional botanic illustration. The are a record of the way that each blemish, scar or mark on the surface of the leaf tells the story of weather, and our fast-changing environment. The inclusion of water and shells in Judith Tucker's Dark Marsh series seeks to hint at, rather than be overly didactic about, the impacts of environmental change and reminds the viewer that while the salt marsh plants protect us, they are also vulnerable to sea level rise. An aesthetic consideration of coastal erosion is key in much of Julian Perry's work. None more that in these powerful Benacre Beech triptych, first exhibited at the 2015 Venice Biennale. These dislocated uprooted trees seem to precisely encapsulate the paradox of representing exquisitely the fast vanishing, yet glorious, biodiversity of our world. The work becomes a tangible and painful reminder of what we have already lost. All these works play with issues of time, of using past, and present to understand possible futures.

One important thematic is the way that, so many these paintings of plants seem to seek and invite connection with the natural world. Sometimes this is more overt through the very process of both looking and touching, of mark making. This is key

for nearly every work in the show but is highlighted in particular in the rhythms and compositions of Bryony Benge-Abbott, Amanda Ansell, Michele Fletcher and Joe Packer's works, where brush strokes echo movement as much as the visual, gesture and motion coalescing on the surface of the canvas. Although some of these artists do refer to seeking solace in the natural world, others are more edgy and tense in their approach and alert us to the changes that attending to plant life reveals, others consider difficult histories, in particular Bryony Benge-Abbott's invitation to consider our relation with the natural world as one that works against human imposed national boundaries.

In some of the works, including Bryony Benge-Abbott, Joe Packer, Paula MacArthur, Helen Thomas and Judith Tucker we encounter these painted plants in an immersive way, challenging the traditional landscape view or still life composition. Plants are magnified and depicted from a viewpoint such as a bird might perceive them, or perhaps even another plant. They are defamiliarised through paint, seen so very closely that the human eye seems restricted, and the plants become the centre of action. The familiar is constantly made unfamiliar not only by scale but by the utter density of growth. The uncanny pervades much of the exhibition, as does the idea of working with and against pictorial convention, questions of how we might consider ideas of the Sublime, the Picturesque and the ruin emerge. Sam Douglas' trees and plants seem to arise directly from that English Samuel Palmer tradition that was in turn inflected by the neo-romantics in the mid twentieth century. We see echoes of this in many of the works. In Graham Crowley's paintings of his semi-wild garden invoking a sense of transience, decay and regrowth, a theme

developed in both Joanna Whittle's miniature paintings of overgrown shrines and in Juliette Losq's exploration of the ever changing and fluctuating relation of plants, graffiti and the crumbling remains of buildings in edgeland sites. Iain Nicholls' evocative exploration of the encroaching plant growth along the Elsecar canal and environs are very much a conversation between medium and ostensible subject matter, as much about space, colour and light, a metaphor, perhaps?

These paintings of plants growing where they really should not, explore worth and beauty but also mess and complexity. Plants are vulnerable, yes, but they are also unruly and resilient. The plants here are not often seen as aesthetically appealing or beautiful. Paintings such as Helen Thomas' closely observed paintings of weeds engage with notions of the differences between growing and being cultivated, reminding us of how tough they are burgeoning though concrete, tarmac and bricks. We encounter these horizontally, they lie flat on plinths, reminding us of their origins on pavements and roads, but elevated to invite our full attention. Walking is an intrinsic part of Thomas' practice and is no less important for many of the exhibitors. Bryony Benge-Abbott makes what she terms 'wild drawing' walks. Judith Tucker, Barbara Howey, Linda Ingham, Sam Douglas and Iain Nicholls all walk as part of their practice. The local, our locale is ever more important, and that which is near, a connection with our neighbourhood. Graham Crowley's exploration of his garden, chime with the parallels that Michele Fletcher makes between painting and gardening. Both she and Amanda Ansell make poetic works of the nearby, works which while redolent of plant forms, are imbued with the haptic, and simultaneously informed by

contemporary abstraction and the long tradition of landscape painting.

The selected painters all delight in our extraordinary vegetive world, this is indeed a celebration of plants in all their glory. The works are visually rich, seductive, and gorgeous. We can luxuriate in their presence. We see how the works in the show work with and against the rich traditions of the many and various aesthetic traditions of depicting plants, from botanical illustration to decoration and design, to a reversal and reworking of ideas of landscape painting as immersive rather than a view. Whilst a visual feast this may be, we understand that this exhibition deals with darker issues also and through the focus on and centrality of the fragility of more-than-human life specifically the endangered nature of plant species, we might also consider the whole show as memento mori, but not just ours.

Dr Barbara Howey and Dr Judith Tucker
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Artist-curators

Nature and Art: Always entwined

Art and nature have always been entwined, and particularly in Huddersfield. Local historical figures such as Alfred Clarke (1848–1925) and Seth Lister Mosley (1848–1929)—the latter being the first curator of Tolson Memorial Museum—not only integrated art into their study of nature but considered it a fundamental (if not core) component. The reason is simple: art shows us things that our eyes cannot.

Nor is this merely a clichéd platitude, but rather a recognition of practical reality: there are no good ways to communicate an experience with nature. If we came across a flower, we might take a photo to show to others. Yet smell (and taste) are important identification characteristics. Besides, photos of flowers, like of the moon, are often underwhelming and fail to capture what we so readily perceive. We might press and dry the flower, yet this would cause us to lose its structure, or preserve it in spirit, which would drain its colour. We might write a description in prose or poetry, but words are so often clumsy and with different cultural connotations that we often fail to appreciate. If we are feeling particularly extravagant, we might extract and sequence its DNA. But, equal or more so than genetics, the environment defines plants as much as it does us. In short, we should reach the same conclusion as many generations behind us and reach for the paints, pencils, and chalk. Even today, if one goes shopping for a guide to wild plants or fungi, a substantial number of books offer illustrations over photographs.

But enough of art in nature—what of nature in art? Here perhaps, with tongue firmly in cheek, we might lay the blame for our current ecological crisis at the foot of artists past. For it is artists, with their varied

distinctions of landscapes and portraits, that have often relegated plants to the background; setting them as backdrops for more “interesting” scenes of foxhunts, fairs, and Greco-Roman psychodramas. In doing so, have they not drawn focus away from the environment we live in and towards more-fleeting human concerns? Of course, such claims would be made in ignorance of the rich tradition of nature-inspire and nature-centred art.

Perhaps one of the great masters of this tradition was John Constable (1776-1837). Born in Suffolk, his paintings of Dedham Vale made nature the central subject. For Constable, no two leaves were alike since the creation of all the world and his art subsequently showed nature not as allegorical or ideal, but rather as living, vibrant, and unique. Tied to the landscape that made him, the area encompassed by his art is now known as Constable County.

I mention Constable for a particular reason. Once, a number of years ago now, I was travelling up from London to Ipswich to visit my parents. On the journey, which takes little over an hour, I began talking to an older Australian couple sat on the table opposite me. The couple had recently retired and, befitting such an occasion, had decided to make a once in a lifetime trip to visit Europe. In total their visit, a first from what I remember, totalled no more than two weeks and had been intensively scheduled to fit in as much as possible. The UK, with its ancient cathedrals and deep history, had been allotted two, or perhaps three, days. Having settled themselves in London, they had decided to spend a whole one of these days traveling to Manningtree; a place which, even for Suffolk, might best be described as provincial. They had done so

because they wanted to visit Constable County and see the landscapes Constable had so masterfully utilised; a dream they had both held for a number of decades.

This anecdote tells, much better than any historical episode, the power and influence of art. It uplifts us, motivates us, and, occasionally, inspires us to travel halfway around the world. It also speaks to the importance of place and to the need we have to surround ourselves with nature.

Entwined brings together a number of artists inspired by nature, plants, and botanical forms. Their reasons are varied but a common theme is a focus on the local and, by way of its subject matter, the ephemeral. Their work, as varied as the botanical kingdom it represents, situates itself in gardens, parks, and countryside walks. Theirs are small moments captured and writ large in order to communicate something everyday and yet fantastical.

John Constable found nature to be the source from whence all originality must spring. Seth Lister Mosley found nature and religion to be closely related, perhaps even one and the same, and frequently sought spiritual communion with nature. There is much to be found in nature if we can only see it with fresh eyes. The pieces that constitute *Entwined* provide such an opportunity. Perhaps you might find your own ‘Constable County’ amongst them?

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