

BRIEF FOR URBAN TREES EXHIBITION AT OLIVIER CORNET GALLERY

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Arbour Essences in Anthropocene Dublin *Four new visions for our urban forests*

Introduction

Trees have always fascinated artists, and are often one of the first subjects children paint or draw, so they could perhaps be dismissed as a cliché topic for art.

However, new discoveries about trees, and new ways of thinking about their value to humans, collectively and as individuals, perhaps offer new paths to their artistic representation.

In this show we will be focusing primarily on urban trees, especially street trees but also park trees.

The new approaches we might fruitfully consider include the following – but please, of course, add your own! –

Urban ‘specimen’ trees

‘Specimen’ trees in a woodland are the most impressive examples – usually measured by height and girth – of any species. But perhaps we should be more aware of remarkable specimen trees in our cities, or simply quirkily attractive ones, especially in relation to significant buildings. Some beautiful/important buildings in Dublin are often sided by a magnificent -- albeit often solitary -- tree. So the artist might acknowledge these trees by representing (immortalizing) them

and titling them by the address of their famous man-made neighbour: for instance 'Gate Theatre, Cavendish Row, Parnell Square E' (I love the tree right beside it), putting these trees centre-stage and leaving it up to the artist to paint/draw/photograph a part of the building in the corner.

Trees, health and social class

There has been quite a lot of comment in recent years about the divide between the leafy suburbs and the biologically deprived inner city. So there is a class or social issue to consider here. Dublin City Council is trying to address this through, for example, the Greening Stoneybatter strategy, but not all locals have welcomed this. Complex questions arise! And a rapidly expanding field of new studies relates the presence of trees – even images of trees, for example in closed prisons, or hospital corridors – to our mental and physical health, and to reducing anti-social behaviour. It could be interesting to explore ways to represent this relationship between mental and physical well-being and trees in an urban setting.

The wood-wide web

There have also been rapid advances in our knowledge about how trees share resources and communicate with each other (and with small plants) through the underground root network, linked up through a vast maze of fungal threads (mycorrhiza). This has been popularised by books like *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. There is a short BBC account here https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=3016041345081638&_rdr In cities, trees, especially street trees, face great challenges in communicating with other trees because of distance, soil conditions – and the rapidly increasing network of an oddly parallel underground human communications systems. So we could look at the life of urban trees from a below-ground perspective.

Trees and communities: Native or alien, appropriate or inappropriate, clashing values

The recent controversies over tree removal for new transport networks, or for safety (from St Mobhi Rd in Dublin to Fethard in Tipperary) , shows how strongly communities may feel about trees that have long been in their area. So there can be clashing values about trees, as a public good, and other public goods, like a transport system, or safe pavements. Some species planted for their ornamental flowers are completely inappropriate for pavements (which they can break up with their roots), but could be good in parks. There are also debates about whether park trees, in particular, should be native species exclusively, or whether ornamental exotics still have a place in our public spaces despite the biodiversity crisis.

Trees and air quality, climate change

City authorities have long been aware that trees play a valuable role in reducing air pollution in cities. Their value in sequestering carbon and thus mitigating climate change is much more recently publicised, but now common knowledge. It is tempting to represent tree-planting as a panacea, a magic bullet against climate chaos. However, the 'carbon budget' is complex – the disturbance of the earth in planting a tree often actually releases significant amounts of soil carbon into the atmosphere, which will only be compensated by the tree's carbon sequestration when it is a couple of decades old. So again, we need to avoid over simplification in representing the way we think about trees.

Trees, death, decay, new life and interconnection

There has been a strong cultural practice of 'tidiness' in urban parks, so that dead trees are quickly removed, and only younger, 'healthy' trees are visible. But biologists tell us that dead trees are very important as habitat for insects, animals, and birds, both while standing and through the whole cycle of their return to the soil which will eventually enable other trees to flourish. Decay is the start of new life.

In nature all trees go back to the earth eventually. But the conventional urban aesthetic likes nature to be 'tidy'. Perhaps we also don't want to be reminded that death and decay are necessary natural processes. We don't even like to see flowers 'gone to seed', and this dislike has given rise to a negative metaphor about humans: "S/he's gone to seed, hasn't s/he?" Yet an enlightened vision could see the seed head as the life-giving fulfillment of the flower's cycle. And seed heads are very important food for birds, animals, and humans. Regarding trees, one of the problems with our manicured urban parks is that dead, and fallen, trees, are rapidly removed. Instead, they should be allowed (where safe) to stand -- they are great perches for predators, and ideal nesting sites for many species of bird, insect and animal. When they fall, they should where feasible be left in situ, where they become really important habitat for many insects, animals and birds, and enrich the earth where their successors will grow. This area might be a fruitful one for an artist to explore. There are areas of the Phoenix Park where dead trees are left in situ, with biologically positive, and beautiful, results. Removing dead trees early also releases carbon that would otherwise sink into the soil.

Flowering trees – exquisite beauties often overlooked.

Finally, it might be interesting to explore the hidden beauties of trees whose flowers are usually ignored – indeed, in common parlance we sometimes talk of 'trees' and 'flowers' as if they were mutually exclusive. Yet we all know that cherry trees and

chestnut trees have spectacular blooms. But what about the tiny, anemone like female flower of the very common hazel, that receives the pollen of its much better-known male flower, the yellow catkin? And both flowers appear in mid-winter, or even earlier, when we generally think nature is dormant. Some conifers, like larch, with their vivid yet inconspicuous flowering cones, offer similar opportunities for surprising discoveries

References:

There is a wealth of literature about trees that might stimulate approaches for the exhibition. Here are a handful of diverse examples, not at all exhaustive:

Peter Wohlleben

The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World
HarperCollins

Roger Deakin

Wild Wood: A Journey Through Trees
Penguin

Thomas Pakenham

The Company of Trees
Meetings with Remarkable Trees
Weidenfield and Nicholson

Duncan Goodwin

The Urban Tree
Blackwells

Richard Nairn

Wildwoods: The Magic of Ireland's Native Woodland