



Title

Forests of the mind: spectres of deforestation in contemporary English aesthetics

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Forests of the mind: spectres of deforestation in contemporary English aesthetics

by Laura Ouillon • June 2022

The video installation *Albion* FIG. 1 FIG. 2 by the British artist Mat Collishaw (b.1966) stages the spectacular apparition of a majestic ancient tree: the millennial Major Oak of Sherwood Forest in Nottinghamshire. In a room plunged into near-darkness, the quasi-hologrammatic vision of a white, leafless tree supported by multiple crutches rotates in slow motion. The work relies on the optical illusion technique of Pepper's ghost, named after the English scientist John Henry Pepper, who popularised its use in the 1860s in phantasmagoria and horror plays to produce ghostly apparitions on stage.¹ For the journalist and critic Gaby Wood, the spectral is characteristic of Collishaw's recent practice. Reviewing the artist's solo exhibition *The Centrifugal Soul* at Blain|Southern in 2017,² she wrote 'of course his works look like ghosts: they are portraits of things that are latent in our minds, hovering until the right "philosophical apparatus" comes along and renders them apparent'.³

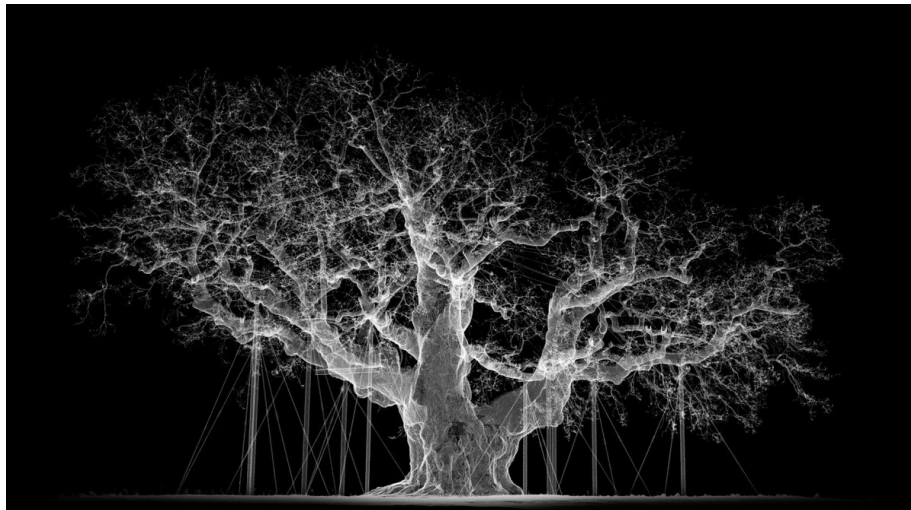


FIG. 1 *Albion*, by Mat Collishaw. 2017. Aluminium, media player, mirror, paint, scaffolding rig, stretching accessories, transparent mirror film, video projector and wood, 430 by 540 by 460 cm. (Private collection; courtesy the artist).

But what is *Albion* the ghost of? Its title suggests a nostalgic vision of England, positioning the Major Oak as an allegory of the nation – one that has suffered an escalating identity crisis in the wake of the EU referendum in 2016. However, it is also possible to situate

the work in ecocritical discourses and in the long, oft-overlooked environmental history of deforestation in England. In 2002 the cultural geographers Owain Jones and Paul J. Cloke coined the term 'arbori-culture' to refer to the 'deep currents of meaning [that] swirl around our culture(s) and brush through the branches of any tree or tree-place which is being encountered, experienced, narrated or imagined at any given time'.⁴ Experiences, histories and representations of national deforestation have been central in the construction of English artistic arbori-cultures – the cultural, emotional and artistic relationships between trees and people in the English context. This article will argue that these relationships remain crucial to the experience and understanding of contemporary tree-related works of art engaging with the English sylvan imagination, especially in the context of the current environmental crisis.

In the foreword to her monograph *Silent Witnesses: Trees in British Art, 1760–1870*, the art historian Christiana Payne posits the existence of a special relationship between trees and people in Britain. This cultural arboreal fascination, she ventures, could be accounted for by looking at British environmental history: 'Britons became attached to trees because they were relatively scarce'.⁵ Payne's suggestion is built on a contrast between British and German tree cultures in reference to the exhibition *Unter Bäumen: Die Deutschen und der Wald (Under the Trees: the Germans and the Forest)* at the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin, in 2011–12.⁶ The exhibition, which provided a rich panorama of representations of trees in German art and culture – from the Romantic paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Carl Blechen (1798–1840) to the 2010 video installation *Silberwald* by Christoph Girardet (b.1966) – was based on the premise that forests became omnipresent imaginatively in line with their omnipresence physically and geographically.⁷ Payne's remark postulates another form of environmental determinism, thereby inviting us to identify the roots of the British iconographic tree obsession with a particular awareness of their rarity and value, as well as with an original sense of lack.

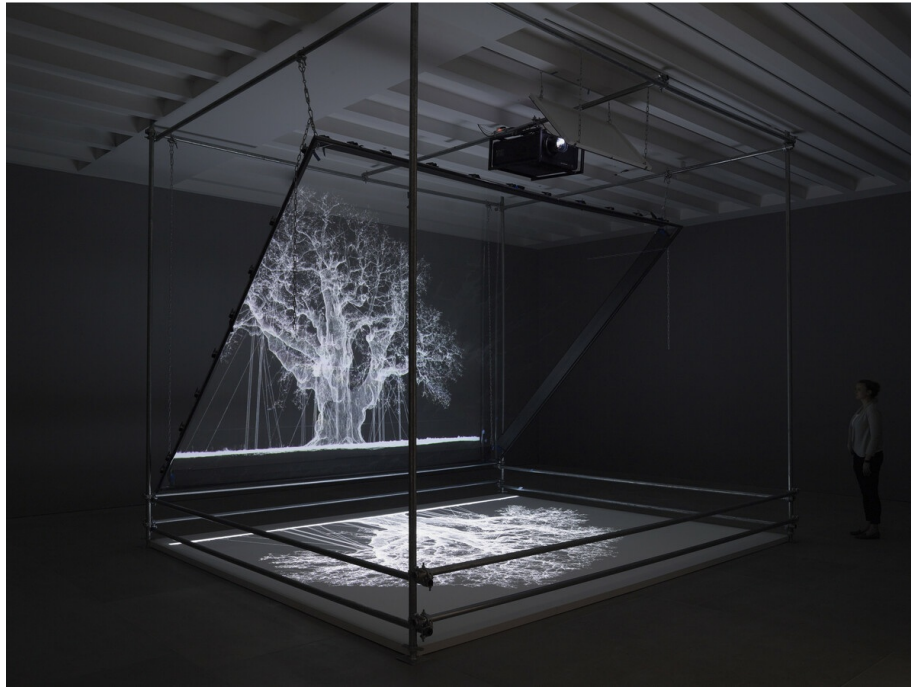


FIG. 2 *Albion*, by Mat Collishaw. 2017. Aluminium, media player, mirror, paint, scaffolding rig, stretching accessories, transparent mirror film, video projector and wood, 430 by 540 by 460 cm. (Private collection; courtesy the artist).

This article, which focuses on the English context, does not aim at establishing a firm causal relationship between the natural and cultural histories of forests in England. Rather, drawing on Payne's idea, it will explore some of the ways in which the natural environment – its management and exploitation – has informed artistic imagination and production in England in recent years. It outlines the state of English woodlands today, followed by a short environmental history of England, which will accumulatively demonstrate that trees have not been 'relatively scarce',⁸ rather that they have become scarcer and scarcer. This leads us to reflect on the English cultural relationship to forests as marked by both a sense of lack and loss, and to discuss the peculiar form of environmental melancholia that imbues a number of contemporary tree-related English works of art, in particular portraits of individual trees.

Living reminders

Insisting on the importance of deforestation in contemporary English aesthetics might come as a surprise to some readers, given the well-known historical significance and celebration of trees in English cultural and artistic landscapes.⁹ Ancient trees, in particular, have occupied a distinctive place in English culture. In Bill Bryson's collective ode to rural England, *Icons of England* (2010), Clive Aslet lauds ancient trees as ones of the most essential

'icons' of Englishness. Indeed, for the former editor of *Country Life*, 'England would be nothing without its ancient trees'.¹⁰ Remarkable examples include the now more-than-two-thousand-year-old Ankerwycke Yew in Berkshire FIG. 3, said to have witnessed the sealing of the Magna Carta by King John in 1215, and the Major Oak FIG. 4, beneath which, according to popular lore, Robin Hood and his Merry Men would meet.



FIG. 3 The 2,500 year old Ankerwycke Yew, accessible from Magna Carta Lane, Wraysbury. 2019. (Courtesy Grahame Larter, SurreyLive; photograph Laura Nightingale).



FIG. 4 Major Oak, Sherwood Forest, Nottinghamshire. Date unknown. (Photograph Malcolm Hunt).

In 2002 the arboriculturalist Jill Butler, a specialist in ancient trees, estimated that 'Britain may have far more old trees on

ancient woodland or wood pasture sites and in some traditional agricultural landscapes than most other northern European countries'.¹¹ Since then, more recent data has confirmed the particularly high number of ancient trees, especially ancient yews and oaks, in Britain, and more specifically in England.¹² The botanist Aljos Farjon has thus found that 'England has more ancient oaks than all other European countries combined'.¹³

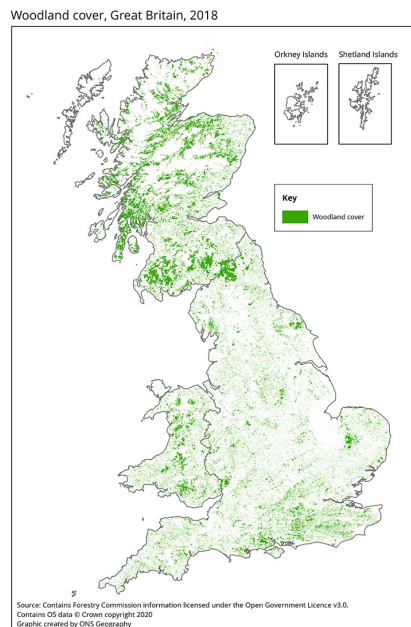


FIG. 5 Extent of Great Britain woodland in 2018. (Forestry Commission, National Forest Inventory).

The high density of ancient trees in England, as well as the cultural emphasis on this phenomenon, however, should be set against the fact that, according to the British Office for National Statistics, in 2019 woodlands represented only ten per cent of England.¹⁴ As a point of comparison, the European average is thirty-eight per cent while the global average is thirty-one per cent.¹⁵ As a whole, the United Kingdom is one of the least wooded countries in Europe today, with forests accounting for only thirteen per cent of its total land area.¹⁶ Jones and Cloke even consider Britain to be 'the least wooded country in Europe'.¹⁷ There are of course regional variations and

disparities in Britain, with Suffolk being 'one of the less wooded counties', while parts of the Scottish Highlands are particularly wooded **FIG. 5**.¹⁸ The iconic status of English ancient trees might thus be related to the fact that they are actually the last 'remaining remnants', the last relics of vaster wooded areas.¹⁹ In this context they can be construed as solitary landmarks that point towards lost woodlands of the past. They embody the contradictions of the human fascination with trees as living reminders of a long, sometimes forgotten, history of deforestation.

The loss of the primeval wildwood

The relatively scarce woodland cover in England today is the result of past consecutive cycles of afforestation and deforestation. The overview of woodland history that follows is necessarily simplified and for the sake of clarity, it will use the terms 'forests' and 'woodlands' interchangeably to allude to wooded areas. The word 'forest', however, became a synonym of 'woodland' only in the nineteenth century.²⁰ Forests first referred to Royal Forests, that

is, 'areas where the monarchy retained special hunting rights' from the Norman period onwards and did not necessarily correspond to wooded areas.²¹

The history of modern woodlands in the British Isles began during the Holocene with the end of the last glaciation, c.11000–10000 BC. During the last Ice Age only part of the British Isles had been covered by glaciers; yet 'probably almost all of southern Britain would still have been largely devoid of forest [... and] looked much like arctic tundra'.²² Ice retreat allowed for the gradual return of the forest as the climate slowly warmed up. Reconstruction of the early Holocene landscape has been made possible, mainly thanks to paleoenvironmental studies of fossil plant and pollen records,²³ as well as of insect remains.²⁴ The trees, mostly deciduous, that colonised the British Isles before the formation of the English Channel c.6500–6200 BC, are now designated as the original 'wildwood', also referred to as 'natural woodlands'. The physical distribution of this primeval wildwood remains a major historiographical debate, as the woodland specialist Oliver Rackham has explained:

Until recently it was thought that England was covered with trees – some said with giant trees, so close-set that there was barely room to squeeze between them – from coast to coast and far into the mountains. A proverbial squirrel could have leapt from Land's End to Ullapool without setting paw to ground.²⁵

This model was described by Arthur Tansley in *The British Islands and their Vegetation* (1939).²⁶ The more recent view, named after the Dutch ecologist Frans Vera in reference to his book *Grazing Ecology and Forest History* (2000),²⁷ is that 'there was a patchy and changing landscape, with substantial tracts of grassland as well as woods, maintained by browsing multitudes of deer and wild oxen: the squirrel could have leapt, at most, from Loughton to Epping'.²⁸ Contemporary scholarship, notably based on studies of beetle fossils, suggests the Vera model may be more accurate.²⁹ The all-covering wildwood posited by the Tansley model probably never existed, with natural wildwoods representing about sixty per cent of Britain.³⁰ The supposedly omnipresent primeval wildwood has thus been – at least partly – a forest of the imagination, or, as the writer Sara Maitland proposes, a 'fairy story'.³¹ Yet the English cultural imaginary of the primeval wildwood has long been – and often remains – dominated by Tansley's vision.³² In the 1930s the historian George Macaulay Trevelyan also envisioned the English territory in the Anglo-Saxon era as 'a shaggy wilderness of forest trees, brushwood, marsh and down, spreading from shore to shore',³³ and in 1955 the landscape historian William George Hoskins described medieval England as 'one great forest [...], an almost unbroken sea of tree-tops with a thin blue spiral of smoke rising here and there at long intervals'.³⁴

This ‘native’ forest, however patchy or fragmented it might have actually been, is also the primeval forest of the English imagination. It was essentially deciduous. The wildwood trees have been labelled ‘native’ trees by woodland ecologists, as opposed to ‘alien’ species introduced later in time.³⁵ Although estimations can fluctuate slightly, depending on the methodologies used, the number of ‘native’ tree species always remains limited – Rackham estimates that ‘the British flora contains between fifty and seventy native tree and shrub species’,³⁶ while the Woodland Trust lists forty-six trees and shrubs on its website.³⁷



FIG. 6 Ceiling of the Central Hall at the Natural History Museum, London, painted by Charles James Lea. Completed 1881. (Wikimedia Commons; photograph John Cummings).

The contemporary diversity of trees in England is the result of a long, dynamic history of what Charles Watkins has called ‘tree movements’, or migrations.³⁸ According to the specific British distinction between so-called ‘native’ and ‘alien’ species, now such common species as horse chestnuts and sycamores are considered alien as they were probably only introduced in the sixteenth century. In Britain at large, this history of tree migration is of course inseparable from the rise of modern colonial empires and imperial environmental history. A significant increase in tree diversity can thus be noted from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards.³⁹ The ceiling of the Central Hall of the Natural History Museum, London, nicknamed

the ‘Gilded Canopy’, **FIG. 6** bears testament to this imperial botanical history. Designed by the museum’s architect, Alfred Waterhouse, and painted by the English interior decorator Charles James Lea of the firm Best and Lea, its panels feature the plants and trees on which the Empire was built, including the tobacco plant, sugarcane and the English oak, alongside examples that pertain to the history of the museum.⁴⁰

Deforestation and protests

No ‘native’ wildwood has survived. What remains in contemporary England today are about fifty-two thousand scattered patches of ancient woodlands, defined as areas continuously wooded since

1600.⁴¹ The large-scale destruction of British wildwood started as early as the Neolithic period, as prehistoric peoples began clearing the land for agricultural and livestock purposes.⁴² Extensive human deforestation, fostered by the development of new tools in the Bronze and Iron Ages, was a particularly rapid process in Britain compared with most of Europe. Rackham estimated that by 2000 BC, woodland likely already represented under fifty per cent of England.⁴³

From the Roman period onwards, English history became characterised by a high density of population and a low woodland cover.⁴⁴ The medievalist Brian Short writes of the Middle Ages as a major period of woodland decline, with the very last remains of the primeval wildwood – if any – in all likelihood destroyed in the twelfth century. From the end of the eleventh century to the fourteenth century, due to an ever-increasing population, heating and construction needs, and overall ‘pressure on land’,⁴⁵ woodland kept shrinking. By 1086, the time of completion of the Domesday Book, woodland covered around fifteen per cent of England; by 1350, maybe only ten per cent.⁴⁶ The early modern era was marked by a significant transformation and diversification of the economy of woodlands, which contributed to further deforestation.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Britain, with five per cent of woodland cover, was already ‘one of the least wooded countries in Europe’.⁴⁷ Major tree-consuming industries, such as shipbuilding and leather-tanning expanded, but also led to tree plantations.⁴⁸ They remained key economic sectors until the 1860s.⁴⁹ The main cause of woodland clearance remained cultivation. With the Great Depression of British agriculture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, woodland gained ground, but the rising demand in timber supplies during the First World War accelerated the deforestation rate once again. All in all, about two-thirds of English woodlands disappeared between 1086 and 1918.⁵⁰ At the end of the First World War tree-cover accounted for only four per cent of Britain as a whole.⁵¹ In order to secure national timber self-sufficiency at the end of the First World War, productivist forestry policies were pursued by the newly founded Forestry Commission, which led to the systematic mass plantation of conifers, favoured over the less productive broadleaved woodlands.⁵² According to Rackham, the scale of deforestation of broadleaved woodlands in the thirty years following the Second World War was unprecedented.⁵³

In *Man and the Natural World* (1983), the historian Keith Thomas thus envisaged the whole of English history as one of almost continuous deforestation, concluding provocatively that ‘it was not on Tower Hill that the axe made its most important contribution to English history’.⁵⁴ Many histories of the English wooded landscape have thus been framed as narratives of uninterrupted natural destruction since the beginning of human occupation. The

present author acknowledges that this is partly what has been outlined here too, for the sake of demonstrating the actual, overall dramatic woodland decline throughout English history.⁵⁵ It is worth remembering, however, that such environmental histories also echo a deep, powerful cultural narrative – that of the original, symbolic opposition between nature and culture, forest and civilisation. The forest has been historically regarded as ‘the negative side of civilisation and social order’ in European culture.⁵⁶ In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison pictured how, through agriculture, industrialisation and urbanisation, ‘Western civilization literally cleared its space in the midst of forests’.⁵⁷

Environmental historians have brought nuance to the binary, agonistic historical narrative opposing forest and civilisation in the English context. As a case in point, Rackham partly rejected traditional histories of English woodlands telling the ‘story of [an] unrelieved decline, neglect, and destruction’.⁵⁸ First in *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape* (1976), and subsequently in *Ancient Woodland* (1980), Rackham highlighted the early implementation of conservation and management practices for woodlands in Britain.¹⁶ Thomas also pointed out, for instance, that contrary to certain common preconceptions, ‘the [development of] iron industry, although initially leading to much destruction of woodland, had in the end the opposite effect’.⁶⁰ Cultural representations, including historical narratives, have nonetheless been profoundly marked by the foundational opposition of forest and civilisation. Contemporary artists working with trees have inherited these histories and narratives, which they negotiate in their practice.



FIG. 7 Protests on the route of the Newbury bypass. 1996. (Photograph Andrew Testa).

The 1980s marked a significant turning-point in the general management and perception of English woodlands, with the rise in global and local popular concern for the contemporary environmental crisis. As Watkins has shown, ‘threats to trees and woods [then] loomed large in the public imagination [...] and were part of a worldwide concern over loss of tropical rainforests through logging and conversion to grazing land’.⁶¹ As global deforestation was gathering pace and becoming more and more visible, public concern over English trees was raised by ‘the loss of broadleaved woodland and hedgerow trees through agricultural expansion’ in the 1960s and the 1970s, Dutch elm disease in the 1970s, the ‘acid rain crisis’ in the 1980s and the successive destructive great storms of 1987 and 1990.⁶²

Political campaigns for the protection of English forests culminated in the 1990s, when pictures of tree-climbing and tree-hugging environmental activists hit the headlines during the famous protests against the building of a bypass at Newbury, Berkshire **FIG. 7**. The 1989 ‘Roads for Prosperity’ project, launched by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and later pursued by John Major, aimed at relieving traffic congestion, which involved the clearance of large tracts of wooded areas. The current ongoing campaigns against High-Speed Rail 2 (HS2) echo the 1990s protests. Indeed, the project is already destroying English ancient woodlands and remarkable trees, such as the two-hundred-year-old Cubbington Pear tree, which was felled in October 2020.⁶³ Under pressure from diverse environmental campaigns, mass conversion of broadleaf woodlands to coniferous plantations has been put to a halt, and even somewhat reversed: as a consequence, the planting of broadleaves has increased dramatically. The overall woodland cover in England has therefore been increasing since the 1920s, although this has mainly been due to coniferous afforestation. Popular perception, however, as Sylvie Nail has pointed out, is that the decline of woodland cover has not stopped.⁶⁴

Sylvan melancholia

Reviewing the environmental history of woodlands in England is a crucial step in order to understand why it can be argued that the English cultural relationship to forests is profoundly marked by loss. Indeed, this history reads as a succession of losses – first the all-covering primeval wildwood, however fantasised, then the relative loss of ancient woodlands, mainly made up of broadleaved trees, often associated with the Royal Forests of the past. This list of losses extends further if we include the imperial history of deforestation and forest exploitation in British colonies. In the context of the contemporary environmental crisis, these past losses echo the fears of current and future further loss of woodlands, of the loss of the human relationship to trees, forests

and nature as a whole, as well as of the even more radical deforestation of the minds which would ensue. As the nature writer Robert Macfarlane and the illustrator Jackie Morris highlighted in their book *The Lost Words*, a project aimed at children in Britain, the loss of visual, imaginary and linguistic tools and resources to represent, think and know about woodlands, and more broadly nature, is already under way.⁶⁵

The history of deforestation goes hand-in-hand with a long history of human grieving for lost woodlands. There have been many cultural and artistic answers to the complex question: how do you grieve for nonhuman entities? Inspired by the work of the Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht (b.1953) on the concept of solastalgia,⁶⁶ the Canadian geographer Ashlee Cunsolo, in the 2017 collective work *Mourning Nature*, coined the term 'ecological grief' in order to discuss the painful and violent consequences of climate and environmental change today. One major form of cultural expression of this sense of loss has been nostalgia,⁶⁷ as the English poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts acknowledge in *Edgelands*:

We yearn for traces of the original tracts of greenwood
[...] We look for what's left of Robin Hood's Sherwood, a
few miles to the east of the M1 in Nottinghamshire [...] We
imagine the lone copse surrounded by arable fields or the
farmer's shelterbelt of woodland to be the last remnants
of a primeval forest that once covered the land, green
pools left over in the bed of a vast retreated inland sea.⁶⁸

In contemporary England, nostalgia for the lost forests of the past, starting with the lost 'native' wildwood, is still fundamentally for deciduous, not coniferous woodlands. James H. Wilks has thus noted the widespread 'nostalgia for deciduous native trees [...] which] creeps into much of the descriptive literature written since the First World War'.⁶⁹ According to the geographer Judith Tsouvalis, post-war, geometric coniferous plantations have been generally considered, by contrast, 'as dark, dead, and unfriendly places, [...] often portrayed as "alien" invaders that "march across" the countryside 'blanketing' whole hillsides', evocative of 'totalitarian state power'.⁷⁰ Overall, these new forests have tended to be 'resented' by the population, who are more 'accustomed to broadleaved trees, open spaces, and scattered pine woods'.⁷¹ The coniferous nostalgia thus seems to be a much rarer phenomenon – with the notable exception of Christmas trees and churchyard yew trees. In the Scottish imagination, conifers conjure up different cultural memories, notably revolving around the ancient, mythic Caledonian Forest of native Scots pines in the Highlands.⁷²

In the context of the environmental crisis, this nostalgia is not strictly directed towards the past, but also echoes existential concerns for the present and the future. To a certain extent, the

loss of past, present and future English woodlands is impossible to mourn, as it contributes to the ‘absolute, radical loss’ of English nature which has been discussed by the literary scholar and philosopher Timothy Morton.⁷³ In *Ecology without Nature*, Morton differentiates between the traditional elegiac mode and ‘ecological lament’:

In elegy, the person departs and the environment echoes our woe. In ecological lament, we fear that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us. Ultimately, imagine the very air we breathe vanishing – we will literally be unable to have any more elegies, because we will all be dead. It is strictly impossible for us to mourn this absolute, radical loss [...] We can’t mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it – we are it.⁷⁴

The ways people relate to trees and forests are thus profoundly melancholic, in the Freudian sense of the term. To borrow Morton’s words, the Freudian distinction between mourning and melancholia ‘boils down to a distinction between proper and improper digestion’.⁷⁵ According to this now much-debated approach of the mourning process, the trajectory of melancholia is circular, a never-ending trap for the mind. A number of contemporary English, tree-related works of art tend to evoke not so much a sense of lack, or loss, but seem to be imbued and haunted by a peculiar, unresolved form of melancholia.



FIG. 8 *Study of the trunk of an elm tree*, by John Constable. c.1821. Oil on paper, 30.6 by 24.8 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Bridgeman Images).

In *Lucian Freud Herbarium*, the art historian Giovanni Aloï argues that the 2003 reinterpretation by Lucian Freud (1922–2011) **FIG. 8** of John Constable’s famous 1821 *Elm study* **FIG. 9** is ‘replete with a melancholic essence – a memory of an English past that only survives in painting’.⁷

⁶ To Aloï, the fact that Freud created this etching a few decades after the outbreak of the Dutch elm disease epidemic, which since then has killed more than twenty-five million elms in the United Kingdom, inevitably provides the work with an additional, melancholic depth. In this renewed visual confrontation with Constable’s elm, Freud

also somehow reactivates a more general environmental

melancholia related to the broader natural and cultural histories

of deforestation in England.

Freud's black-and-white etching, an elaborate study in tonal value and texture, which manages to convey the strong physical, material presence of the living tree, also becomes a meditative piece on what is no longer there but evoked nonetheless – both present and absent, close and distant.



FIG. 9 *Study of the trunk of an elm tree, after Constable*, by Lucian Freud. Etching on paper, 48 by 38 cm (sheet). (© Lucian Freud Archive; Bridgeman Images)

Tree portraits as 'surviving images'



FIG. 10 *An ancient beech tree*, by Paul Sandby. 1794. Bodycolour on paper, 42 by 58.4 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Bridgeman Images).

Figures of trees, in particular ancient trees, in contemporary English art can be envisaged as 'surviving images',⁷⁷ to borrow Georges Didi-Huberman's concept. They come back to haunt the collective imagination, all the more so in the context of the current environmental crisis. From this perspective, the most revered individual ancient trees become fascinating, fetishised visual markers, which both point to and crystallise the overlooked history of large-scale deforestation. Contemporary adaptations of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century genre of portraiture

of remarkable, ancient trees can be construed as symptomatic of profound English sylvan melancholia. Payne has discussed the early development of this British genre in her book *Silent Witnesses*, insisting on its connection to the picturesque. She analysed works as tree portraits, for example a painting of remarkable, ancient beech tree by the English watercolourist Paul Sandby **FIG. 10.**⁷⁸ In tree portraiture, as opposed to the landscape genre, an individualised tree takes centre stage, not serving as a mere natural backdrop – however charged with symbolism and meaning – for a scene or a human subject.



FIG. 11 *The Bowthorpe Oak in Lincolnshire*, by Mark Frith. 2011. Graphite on pre-stretched Fabriano paper, 150 by 120 cm. (© The artist).

In addition to the aforementioned Mat Collishaw, a number of contemporary English artists, including Mark Frith (b.1970), Tacita Dean (b.1965) and Alex Egan, have presented massive, centuries-old trees – often leafless oak trees – as ghostly, haunting, powerful apparitions. From 2010 to 2014 Frith executed a series of delicate, detailed graphite drawings of twenty remarkable oaks, which he later exhibited at the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art at Kew Gardens, Richmond **FIG. 11.**⁷⁹ Frith's trees are almost uncanny in their isolation from any sort of material environment, which also recalls the traditional conventions of botanical art. The background is invariably a white void, onto which the textured presence of the tree is foregrounded. Frith's oaks are bare and rootless, as though suspended in mid-air – suspended in time, in their old age, and held at a respectful distance.



FIG. 12 *Beauty*, by Tacita Dean. 2006. Gouache on gelatin silver print mounted on paper, 358.14 by 373.38 cm. (© the artist; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; photograph Ben Blackwell).



FIG. 13 *Crowhurst*, by Tacita Dean. 2006. Gouache on fibre based photograph mounted on paper, 300 by 410 cm. (Museum of Modern Art, New York; courtesy Marian Goodman, New York).

For her series of 'painted trees', which includes the portraits of two remarkable ancient oaks of Fredville Park, near Dover, *Majesty* (2006) and *Beauty* **FIG. 12**, the artist Tacita Dean (b.1965)

printed monumental monochromatic photographs of trees. Her attention was especially, and nostalgically, directed to ancient English oaks and yews, which the artist preferred to the 'evergreen' trees of Berlin, where she lives and works.⁸⁰ She then carefully painted around the figure of each tree in white gouache – a patient process of slow individuation and a celebratory homage to the singular structural beauty and complexity of trees. Her interest was heightened by an awareness that many English ancient trees had, 'quite suddenly [...] started dying'.⁸¹ Photographing and overpainting the black-and-white tree portraits thus appeared as yet another manifestation of the artist's long-standing interest in loss and disappearance, as well as in recording, capturing or entrapping things about to vanish. Another work of the same series, *Crowhurst* FIG. 13, is the portrait of an ancient yew, which shares its name with the British sailor Donald Crowhurst, whose mysterious disappearance during the 1969 Golden Globe Race inspired a number of Dean's earlier works. The impressive Crowhurst Yew, said to be four thousand years old, is pictured in a dramatic low-angle shot, standing at the heart of a churchyard in Surrey. In a stereotypical Gothic atmosphere, the yew is surrounded by tombstones still visible beneath the veil of translucent white gouache paint, which nevertheless erases the shadows the tree would naturally cast on the ground. The hollow trunk, now supported by wooden crutches that Dean chose to emphasise, was enlarged in the Victorian era in order to be turned into a tea room.⁸² The portrait is that of a long-term, heroic survivor. By highlighting the other-than-human longevity of such trees, these representations can also become life-affirming symbols of natural survival and resilience despite a difficult environmental history.⁸³

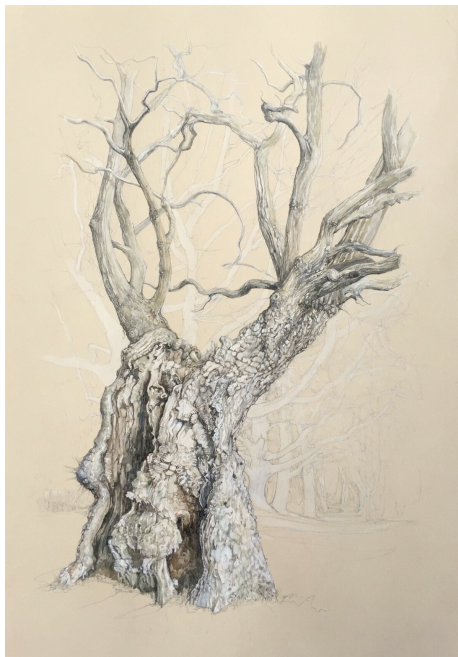


FIG. 14 *Ancient Hollow Oak, Somerleyton*, by Alex Egan. 2019.

On a much smaller scale, Alex Egan's *Ancient Hollow Oak, Somerleyton* FIG. 14 directly confronts the viewer with an arresting apparition of an old arboreal creature. Two main branches point to the sky, resembling two arms and hands raised in the air, almost menacingly, as though guarding the alleys of paler, younger trees behind it. The Norfolk-based artist is a member of The Arborealists, a diverse group of more than forty artists founded in 2013 by the English artist and curator Tim Craven to collectively explore the artistic subject of trees.⁸⁴

Pencil, watercolour and ink on
sepia toned paper, 59.4 by 42 cm.
(Private collection).

They are set to stage a group
exhibition, in collaboration
with the ancient tree expert
Julian Hight, in 2023–24.⁸⁵

‘The echoing green’

Analysing this corpus of contemporary tree portraits in reference to environmental melancholia is helpful to make sense of their shared spectral potency. Collishaw’s *Total Recall* **FIG. 15** captures and gathers many strands of thought on the ghostly presence of deforestation in contemporary English aesthetics. In 2016 Collishaw was invited by the curator James Putnam to create an on-site exhibition at the Freud Museum, London. In the study, near Sigmund Freud’s desk and his famous couch, Collishaw installed a clump of three artificial tree stumps, seemingly rooted in the richly embroidered carpet. The intrusion of the three trees, whose growth through the carpet and inside the domestic space has been abruptly, violently stopped, create both an uncanny landscape and soundscape. Each stump also acted as a record player, which emitted birdsong, including lyrebirds imitating the sound of a chainsaw. When the recordings were pressed, they were reversed, in order for the vinyl arm to move from the inside to the outside edge of the disc.⁸⁶



FIG. 15 *Total Recall*, by Mat Collishaw. 2009. 12-inch vinyl, 7-inch vinyl, record decks and resin, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist).

The work is named after the 1990 science-fiction action film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, which explored themes of

memory erasure and implantation. *Total Recall* could be construed as a reflection on Freud's theories on memory and a metaphor of the psychoanalytic process – the record player being an image of the individual psyche. Yet the work can also be envisaged as a meditation on ecological trauma and amnesia, for it stages the literal visit of a dead forest to the psychoanalyst. One might wonder: how repressed a narrative is the long history of deforestation in England, a country of self-proclaimed nature-lovers? With the songs of ghost birds resonating in the museum, the work of art set up an unexpected conversation in which trees could voice their own story, the violent, exploitative collective story they had recorded and that ineluctably ended up with them being chopped down.

Such representations of severed trees recall absent presences. In *Total Recall* there is, in fact, not much for the public to see, and what can be seen is but a *trompe-l'œil*: artificial trees made out of resin. This suggests that attention should be turned to what can no longer be seen but can still be perceived, sensed and imagined: the simultaneously lost and ever-present forests of the mind, the melancholic soundscapes and landscapes of forests past. These observations resonate deeply with the words of Elizabeth Parker, writing in *The Forest and the EcoGothic*: 'we have what [the historian and archaeologist] Richard Hayman has called "an echoing green that resounds within and around us". Although our forests may be increasingly out of sight, they are not out of mind. Far from it'.⁸⁷

Footnotes

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