

and the trees, too, were melting

Sue Rainsford

We know, of course, that ‘wilderness’ is a growing rarity.

Is in perilous decline.

Taking wilderness to mean not only untended terrain but also a force beyond coercion, an entity that ‘does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself’ (Living, xiv), then even fewer sites remain that we might plausibly deem ‘wild’. Humans, with our deep-set need for forces larger than ourselves, simply require too much of the natural world: the ‘untouched’ and ‘un-urban’ become repositories for nostalgia and yearning. Whether jungle, bush or woodland, there’s an unchecked longing for ‘places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, or origin...’(Species, 91)

This impetus toward spiritual return or Jungian connection is the more subtle, immaterial residue that sits astride even the most voracious landscape. Natural spaces, then, seemingly unmoved by human desire are in fact underpinned with romantic attachment and existential crisis.

We imbue them with an artifice they can’t help but carry.

It’s this artifice that Danell calls to the fore.

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Though the exhibition consists of paintings of the Norwegian landscape and film shot in Swedish woodland, Danell doesn’t pose ‘The Last Wilderness’ as chambered forest or unreachable mountaintop.

The title came to Danell while reading Erich Fromm’s *Beyond the Chains of Illusion: my encounter with Marx & Freud*. Considering Marx and his belief that, for human history to truly begin, man must enlarge the scope of his power – his reason – over the natural world, Danell writes:

*In a post-nature future, the unconscious mind will be the last wilderness.*

Wilderness is, of course, a Jungian archetype for the unconscious.

Each is uncontrollable, at its core unknowable.

Each sees meaning in a state of flux.

They are each a place where impulses can go unexplained and urges unsanctioned.

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How best to approach a mountain?

Walk around it? Climb it? Lie down at its base?

Walking through a wood, where does the gaze land?

On the felled branch to the left or the dense entanglement overhead?

And, once inside again, what does the body recall?

The wind that stung your cheeks or the damp that filled your nose?

Such details, accumulative, peripheral and happenstance, underpin Danell's work.

Discussing the landscapes in her studio, Danell says 'I remember how I got there, how wet my feet were.' There's an accretion of flesh memory and sensory data behind each chosen site, a series of micro-encounters that occurred through Danell walking and embedding herself within a place.

Long concerned with the connections we forge to natural space, Danell's practice entails understanding a given area through and with the body prior to depicting it. As such, there's a tension between representation and abstraction: the experience of being in this landscape, of Danell's state of mind on a given day, moves and shapes the terrain itself.

Each landscape, then, is also a portrait – obliquely captured, inadvertently made.

Pursuing this understanding that first imprints on flesh and later settles in the mind, Danell's work calls to Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain*. Here, Shepherd details 'repeated acts of traverse' (xxi) that don't 'seek by some psychogeographic ruse to prise <the landscape> open' but rather aid her in 'walking the flesh transparent' (xxiii). In this way, Shepherd embraces Scotland's Cairngorm mountains on their own terms. She writes 'the mind grows limpid; the body melts; perception alone remains'(90).

Danell's flesh is not quite transparent. She is too mindful that, though such places strike us as untamed, they are nonetheless protected and apart and wouldn't exist without human intervention.

But, if not transparent, her flesh is certainly porous.

Lingering in acts of wandering and circumambulation, foregoing the picturesque for the partial and askew, Danell quickly takes photographs and later chooses a site to work from.

There are many ways to read the effect of the paintings.

The segments yet to cohere might be the confusion of an image poorly remembered, a viewpoint that refuses to come into focus, or the landscape moving with its interior agency – a creaturely movement alluded to by the dripping, downward tug of the paint.

Regardless, she enacts a kind of undoing on her selected images. Casting preliminary forms by making a charcoal outline on the canvas, followed by acrylic drips that segment and divide the foreground, Danell then hones in on pattern and detail. Through this process, the paintings become imbued with the memories and 'misspellings' that Shepherd speaks of, the misunderstandings that live in the eye for a moment but continue to resonate in the mind.

With the viewpoint often compressed and overwhelming, pressed up close to the body, we must reconsider our status as viewer.

How did we get here?

Where are we travelling to?

Why is the foreground so molten and engorged, the planes of perspective so tilted and the boundaries in flux?

Some of the technical effects are, in fact, not dissimilar to exhaustion – to the quick, half-lidded glances that see edges blur and blend.

Danell seems to be reminding us that our gaze does not have the final say and that, when considered long enough, 'static things may be caught in the very act of becoming.' (Living, 10)

Considering the implicit eeriness to the paintings, the appearance of melting that suggests an existential undoing or visual 'misspelling', I think of W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*. In this record of his walking tour along coastal East Anglia, Sebald looks down from a cliff and sees a couple naked and entwined on the sand. Caught off-guard, he reads their temporarily conjoined bodies as 'some great mollusc washed ashore... to all appearances a single being, a many-limbed, two-

headed monster that had drifted in from far out at sea... its life ebbing from it with each breath expired through its nostrils.' Even after he realises his mistake, he finds himself 'shaking as if it were the first time in my life that I had got to my feet.' (68)

This simultaneity of recognition and disconnect, this quick reconfiguring and the uncanny sense that we saw something usually hidden momentarily revealed in its true state, is captured in Danell's work. We're reminded that the eye carries its own knowledge, replete with poetic misunderstanding and errors of perception that, even once corrected, continue to inform our reality as much as the material fact before us.

The tenuous confusion that comes with these ocular glitches is prolonged in the film work. There's a curiously hyper-real quality to the surreal props and the grid sculpture, a resolute tangibility that refuses to coalesce with its surroundings. Shot in Sweden on Super 8 film, the film shows an old theatre and a wood: we see a stage with a back drop of a woodland scene, and a woodland clearing that's formally behaving like a stage.

In each instance, there's a sense of dormancy disrupted and latent properties appealed to. These two spaces whose form and function we're familiar with are made liminal, are pushed to a hazier middle ground. We're no longer certain of the interplay between original and fake. The lush tactility of the props and the stage calls to Danell's interest in old science fiction film sets: their solid, starkly fictive quality for which we so readily suspend our disbelief. Here, with the props transferring so easily between forest and theatre, we're obliged to consider their commonalities. There are acts of construction explicit to the theatre that are more insidiously at play with this patch of forest that seems to exist on its terms, but again could not exist without human preservation. For a moment, the stage, 'the fake' – resonant with trickery that readily gives up of its devices – seems the truer version.

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*Humanity on the Great Continent of Gethen lives in a strip of land between two white walls. A further decrease of 8% in solar radiation...would bring the walls creeping together; there would be no men, no land; only Ice.*

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, (172)

There's a chilled, apocalyptic quality to Danell's assertion. If, 'In a post-nature future, the unconscious mind will be the last wilderness', will we be obliged to become all the more wild in filling the crevice left behind? With this archetype redirected back inwards, removed from worldly manifestation, will our cerebral interiors instinctively grow all the more verdant in compensating for its absence?

Human consciousness, we know, is growing more and more insular. It requires ever less of its surroundings as it's offered ever greater stimulus by its personal technologies: the items we carry and gaze inside of, that see us always looking down and in rather than up and around.

We might be enlarging the scope of our reason and expanding outwards but we are also, as suggested by Danell, receding inwards.

And what will we find when we get to this final, flesh-locked point?

What will this last and final wilderness look like? Will it be recognisable? Will it be hot or cold?

Easily negotiable, or impossible to traverse?

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