

Through the Trees Helen Kuumbi



'Through the trees' is a series of mixed media works inspired by my close relationship with the local community woodland, Pigshill and Clarrick Woods, in South East Cornwall. The collection has been inspired by my work managing the woods as a volunteer. In each artwork, trees look out across the open countryside from their hilltop sanctuary.



Working with this special area of ancient woodland has challenged my conception of land ownership, an idea that I have explored through my painting, drawing and ink-making.

- *Do the woods belong to the community, the estate that acquired through succession, or is it its own entity over which no human should claim ownership?*

The land binds all living things that comprise the whole; from the soil mites to the oldest oaks and the creatures who roam and forage beneath the boughs. The woodland itself is a complex, living system composed of many

individual biotic elements; the survival of the whole is dependent upon these individuals as much as they are dependent on the myriad of relationships within it.

- *Can we separate a woodland into its components and claim ownership over the resources, and indeed the land on which it stands, or should we see it as something very different – as a whole, as a being?*



I see myself as a steward of the woodland, but sometimes conflict arises around decisions and often at the root of this is a difference in an understanding over the beneficiary of the work; the local community or woodland itself.

- *If it the beneficiary is the woodland, do I give it personhood, autonomy, and rights of its own exist as this wild space?*

In this series, I wanted to subvert the idea of the freedom of the open

landscape. The dark vertical stems of the trees evoke notions of bars and oppression. The viewer may at first assume themselves a person inside the woods, I painted from the perspective of the woods themselves. They gaze out over the human-altered landscape where they have been denied, unable to colonise and imprisoned on the hillside.

The choice of colour strategy; strong, close and unnatural, addresses a common perception of the open countryside as a wild, open space and yet the much of the agricultural landscape is considerably deficient in spaces for nature. The landscape is composed of many layered washes of artificial pigments, such as the countryside is a layered with human influence. I handed over control when painting the trees; allowing drips to find their own trail across the canvas to create the organic paths. This reflected the idea of the growth pattern of the trees in their environment.

The woods are being managed with aim of restoration, the objective is to return it to a sustainable system that does not require human intervention to flourish – an independent state of being, the freedom to simply exist as a woodland. Through the trees is about oppression and restriction, but also reminiscent of peaceful protesters standing for freedom.