

## Fragments of a Whole Unknown

*Remote, untamed places in the north offer themselves up fleetingly to the curious wanderer. It is an intimate gift. At times, there's a sense that no other human has been here before. No one has scraped their boots across the exposed rocky ledges, trampled over the thin layers of soil or breathed in the aroma of sweet gale. The sky is huge, the air crisp and the seas pickled with a medley of wildlife.*

Earlier this year Liz Elton's 'Hill' was strung up fence to fence in Gallery 163's garden. Visitors watched as the wind puffed up the work like a parachute, only for it to fall gracefully back to a fine, hanging cloth. Inhale, exhale; a connection with breathing was unavoidable. Meanwhile, the littlest attendees giggled with delight. Playing around it was irresistible. Touching it was just as compelling. That's what we do as mammals. That's what we do with objects. We want to touch them. We want to examine the extent of delicacy or sturdiness we imagine with our eyes.

'Hill', like its predecessors 'Harvest' and '100 Harvests', and this latest fabrication 'Cradle', is made of compostable cornstarch food recycling bags, coloured naturally with vegetable dyes. Impregnated with seeds from native, medicinal plants, 'Hill' is in transition from "is" to "was". Its main body is intended to disintegrate, the enveloped seeds to release, creating potential for a new phase of life, unknowable to us. So instead of just thinking backwards as to the references in the work and how it was made, we are challenged to think forwards as to what the work might become.

*Autumn artichokes raise their heads above the deadened beds and when the low October sun strikes them, they shimmer silver. We walk on and glimpse back to the source of today's brightness. It blackens the foreground so the passing sheep become shifting silhouettes, while rays hit the pond water, as if solidifying its surface to become streaks of metal.*

There are distinct differences in Liz's painterly works depending on their placement, natural elements and the observers who surround them. It's almost as if they are in collaboration with their situation. When indoor light penetrates through them, their glow seems like an innate function within their fragile membrane. In contrast, when shifted outdoors, they become particularly vulnerable to fickle weather, billowing in the breeze or shredded as they struggle to loosen free from a tree branch. Their existence then becomes dotted with constant repair.

Stitched overlaps intensify colours here, obscure them there, while fine, silken threads hold them all together.

In Liz's studio, the work takes on a range of possibilities. Bunched up fabrics, dip dyed in pastels, with the occasional zing of yellow or fluorescent pink, huddle together like frocks waiting to be made. Ballet costumes between scenes. Ball dresses anticipating fittings and adjustments. Outspread in their semi-translucent state they become window coverings to hide behind and to see through. Gently rolled and cocooned in white storage material, they hang from beams mimicking caterpillars in transition.

Save for archival prints, her "is it a painting or is it a sculpture" artworks are only ever temporary. Liz explains how she is 'trying to imbue the work with a sense of our own materiality. That the material is not meant to last seems to connect with skin and flesh.' Arguably though, the archive trace *will* last. It will remain as the record of an artwork which may have literally gone to ground. However, the archive can never fully represent the work at the time of its making as it cannot bring context along with it. The surviving image of the object is only ever a ghost of its former self.

*Hardy's Gabriel Oak promised deliverance with sturdy dependability and permanence. That was two centuries ago. As wilderness dwindles and resources become scarcer, we can no longer depend upon the continuity of the lycophytes, the first notion of trees which thrived without our interference. Who we are relative to the world upon which we are fully dependent, needs reconsideration and nimble imaginations to create integrated ideas that are as palatable as they are plausible.*

Liz shows us something which is rich and momentary, beautiful and breakable, the unmonumental which seems accurate for a contemporary world of constant change. In contrast to its often rectangular format, the work only ever exists as one part of a looping continuum. We can never grasp the whole. It is not just the inside and outside which evade us, but also the before and after, the original source as well as its potential: 'Hill' holding seeds of local flora, 'Cradle' containing ancient grains. Each of these moments in and across time take different forms and each rises from one material only to return to another, which might then become another and so on and on, giving way to entirely new passages of forms. Or not. It might all just disintegrate to become a treasured memory.

Jillian Knipe, 2019