



Some - where Other

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A swale, like a bog or swamp, is a damp place, a recess between ridges where moss-ridden trunks emerge from layers of mulchy leaves and the copious fronds of ferns. Because of the ever-present moisture that hangs heavy in the air, trees are subject to rot and decay as they grow; branches are enveloped by lichen and then swallowed by the ground where they fall, metamorphosing into dank earth, home for burrowing insects and fledgling saplings. This ambiguous topography is the 'genesis of everything,' Julian Watts tells me, where things grow in mysterious ways, both compelling and repulsive. An ash swale on the land where Watts lives and works in the

foothills of the Oregon Coast Range has been his place of solace during the pandemic, but it is also plain weird where nature collapses in on itself in a constant synchronicity of incubation and decay.

Watts seeks to bring out the amorphous, layered and atrophied qualities of the wood that he acquires from forests near to his studio. He does this by first removing the rot from the pieces of wood, scooping out pulpy deadwood to find the intact, firmer material. There is no telling what is revealed once the rot is removed, but once exposed Watts works intuitively, exploring the lines of the wood as it dries to reach a sculptural form. The intention is to follow the twists and turns of the tree's growth – 'taking each moment of the tree as a decision-making process,' as Watts says – to go with the knots, burs, imperfections and insect trails; to tune into tree time. Being so sympathetic to the unique composition of each piece of wood is time-consuming and demands incredible skill. Watts 'addresses' the particularity of the salvaged wood in front of him, whether that is a knobby branch growth, a burrow, or a crack, always using the material as a guide.

Once the final form of the wood is realised, Watts adopts a distinct method of surface treatment. He introduces colour, not with opaque paint or varnish that closes the door on the variety inherent to wood grain but with chemical treatments that seep into the wood and remove its natural pigmentation. In two recent white bleached maple carvings, one free-standing on an impossibly narrow neck and another dish-like form, Watts has applied further pink stain. This makes the sculptures appear warm, delicate, almost blushing, heightening their sensory intrigue. But the bleaching also gives the wood the appearance of ceramic or marble. This is a deliberate attempt to jolt the viewer from their preconceptions of wood, a strategy to draw them into the material's complexity and depth, replete



with gaping holes where knots once were, irregular grain, fissures, cracks, and with rough edges like the ends of torn bread, candied pink. Hours can be spent poring over these details.

Watts wants to transport us somewhere ‘other’ with his manipulation of wood, away from its associations with warmth, approachability, and dependability, epitomised by anything from modernist cantilevered plywood to the pine cladding of ski chalets. To convey the spirit or soul of a tree is high on Watts’s agenda, but his work presents a stark contrast to woodworking pioneer George Nakashima’s restrained and largely rectilinear furniture. The otherworldliness of Watts’ work is closer to Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone’s surrealist imagination of wood. Using bleach as a surface treatment makes the wood appear ghoulish, ossified, even grotesque, like a post-apocalyptic fossil.

Different techniques are used in a large wall-mounted square of walnut carved with a pattern of intertwining trees and lichen, made from a drawing Watts produced during his time in the swale. Here, the walnut is oxidised with steel wool and vinegar to give an ebonised surface. Gouges of multiple sizes texture the curvilinear recesses that comprise the tree trunks in the composition, creating a stark contrast to the smooth, polished background. Cracks and splinters in the centre loom as black holes. The work presents a cross-section of a forest much like French artist Eva Jopsin’s large cardboard installation *Among the Trees*, exhibited at London’s Hayward Gallery in 2019-20.

Watts’ woodcarving draws our attention to the unsettling, mythical characteristics of the forest and reminds us of how we can get lost within its excessive materiality. Such qualities lurk within the folktales collated by the Brothers Grimm, the biomorphic images of fin-de-siècle French artist Odile



Rédon, gargoyles on gothic cathedrals, amoeboidal aliens in American mid-century popcorn horror films, and the incessant fuzz on heavily distorted, synthesised, guitar riffs in noisy, low-fi black metal. They are all references to nature's primordial power that disturbs the corporeal boundary and arouses awe and fear in equal measure, like Seamus Heaney's child narrator of "Death of a Naturalist" who runs away from the threat of being 'clutched' by a pool of thick frogspawn. Watts' incessant attention and intuitive way of working resulting in manipulations that amplify the wood's haunting presence.

Although working in a largely solitary manner, Watts is not alone as a carver in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. A trip up Highway 101 will reveal countless gift shops and roadside shacks selling a variety of mushrooms, bears, mythical wizards or even the notorious Bigfoot, all made from salvaged wood from the surrounding area. These are produced by chainsaw carvers who are as prolific on YouTube as on the road's edges. The phenomenon is a classic American cocktail of car culture, commercial tourism, the mystery and ungovernability of vast expanses of land, and anti-government politics that you might expect Watts to want to distance his work from. But after countless car journeys scouring the State for good sources of wood, Watts is keenly aware of their shared interests: establishing a mythical connection with the landscape through carving; working with pieces of local wood not fit for dimensional lumbar; and adopting an 'anything goes,' attitude to technique and embracing power tools. In the early 1990s Ghanaian artist El Anatsui became attuned to the creative possibilities of using a power-saw to work in wood after a residency in the US. Watts is similarly not bound by an aversion to power tools. He mixes technique and material to draw us into the depths of wood, albeit through abstract forms that show no hint of the verisimilitude common to roadside carvings.



In another series, Watts has arranged foraged branches and twigs into tangled, wiry, structures, stuck together with wax or glue, that burn out in the process of bronze casting. The result is not the straightforward immortalisation of wood. The remaining moisture in the branches and their fragility causes the shell of the cast to burst and for liquid metal to spill out and drip. Working closely with specialists at the foundry, Watts decided not to tidy up the drips but integrate them into the pieces, occasionally using a blowtorch to melt the metal further. The material constitution of the wood might have dissipated in the casting process, but nevertheless Watts is able to show in metal its mysterious, ambiguous and ever-changing character. This recalls the trees of the swale in their watery hollow.

We can learn from the swale and Watts's invitation, through his sculpture, to reflect upon its particular qualities. Its drippy, dreamy and abundant atmosphere has stirred Watts to create work of poise and presence that document wood's inherent variety and scale, from minute details within the grain to the monumental forests that engulf us.

