

First Impression

Joanna Przybyła's new photos have a contemporary art ethos referencing trees as ghostly presences but directly challenging cool technocratic or architectonic (the art of constructing systems) Conceptualism that dominates most contemporary art. She does this by breaking an unwritten taboo. [...]

To apply words such as nature study to Joanna's work is too obvious, and misses the real import. Her so-called 'nature' photographs are forensic-like, like X-ray or infra-red night-vision, or Man Ray's solarisation or surreal rawness of Ansel Adams, Max Ernst's frottage or action painting by Franz Kline, or like Paul Klee finding polyphonic expression, taking a drawing line for a walk in trees, as reported in a letter: „A westerly wind blows over the land. A headache above my right eye. Landscape too was just as ailing, yet magnificent. Forests, a deep purple ... Lying down, I saw swaying tops of pine trees. Boughs, branches rustling, creaking and scratching. Music. In Elfenau I lay down again, feasting my eyes on birch trees. Their silvery trunks and deep Gurten forest behind. And, contrasting with forests, barren fields” – like a slightly discordant haiku from inside another palace, the Forbidden City, of Art?

The bare branches of trees that we see are almost abstract expressions where the lines have an electric energy, crystalline and scratchy. Here is something about the nature of nature, the gestalt energy of raw nature, untameable, inhuman, of totally independent character, except where each image has a vertical red line that signals human science like a historical or scientific bloodline. The thin deep dark red vertical tells us that there is no horizon, no eyeline in the horizontal, only an infinite vertical eyeline, therefore a spiritual one. [...]

Second Impression

If the gestalt of the trees is of an eerie, perplexing almost surrealist kind in the photographs, if telling us ought, it is that we continue to be fascinated by whatever questions of life and spirituality trees offer us. Religious beliefs, great thinkers and artists (all peoples) have been entranced by trees since long before recorded history and from when trees were vital to human existence. What we call the 'stone-age' might also be called the wood-age or tree-age because wood was far more vital for tools, only the evidence did not survive so well. Stones and trees remain totally essential today even in our modern technology-driven society. We need trees to breathe good air and to think and dream. There are trees alive today that are as old as Christianity, some as many as five times older! Contemporary environmentalism is dedicated to tree-planting and forest husbandry, the long view, but more for practical reasons than philosophical or spiritual ones, the latter idea more alive only in rare gardens or in the Far East or among tropical tribes. Visual profundity of trees has always drawn artists to them, whether Mori Sosen, Puvis de Chavannes, Paul Cezanne, Paul Klee, or Joseph Beuys, to name only a few. Trees are, of course, one of the first things young children paint. All religions and philosophies found metaphors and symbolism in trees, whether focused on

god(s) or on ancestral reverence, metaphors, energies, sustenance, or even direct worship. Where today we may typically use a few kinds of wood in furniture, paper and for burning, and know names of a dozen trees, ancient man would have known and used many more for more reasons, from medicine to tools to religion.

Library taxonomies and file systems use the concept of a tree, modern computer systems have tree-files. The idea of roots and branches obsesses us, from taxonomy to ethnicity. Deep-rooted meaning of trees are apparent in metaphors such as Tree of Life or ancestral heritage expressed as family trees. In Vedic philosophy, wood is a primal material of the cosmos. Christians see Christ as a carpenter, one of several metaphors for a priest (alongside fisherman, baker, wine-maker, and olive-oil producer), all variously priestly for blessings by shapers or infusers of soul-spirit. Trees offer any numbers of such gestalts. Specific trees in art range from complexities of colour, shape, architecture, chemistry, age, botanical and biological, such as the yew for its great age, or the oak for its strength and courage (or number of veins and points on the leaves). Because of an oak's ability to attract all life and survive lightning bolts, Romans connected it with Jupiter (and with Juno, goddess of marriage).

Druids and Celts are famous for their attachment to the oak for many symbolic and practical properties, including strength. Mediterranean peoples farmed oaks for the dye of the acorn and as a wood to build ships.

We are not concerned here with lesser symbolic, merely practical meanings, but with art, and thus with higher spiritual and metaphorical ones. Great art aspires to the condition of prayer and spiritual healing through contemplation. Hence, it is surely necessary for all artists to contemplate trees. The oak was often used in art to symbolise conjugal fidelity and fulfilment. Socrates called it the oracle tree. Druids ate acorns to prepare for prophesying.

Similar ideas are attached to great pines, including Scots pine. The pine cone is found on ancient amulets as a symbol of fertility. The Iroquois people saw the white pine as a symbol of Peace and recovery from adversity. Japanese gardeners train one arm of pine trees as a welcoming arm. Medieval bogomils like Heironymous Bosch saw acorn flesh as white and therefore holy. Druids believed the leaves of the oak had the power to heal and renew strength. There is a wealth of numerology about the points on oak leaves, and other geomancy such as: Why did the ancients plant oaks in sacred places in groups of 2, 5 and 7? The apple tree symbolises magic, youth, beauty and happiness. Black hawthorn represents the beginning of winter, white hawthorn the beginning of spring, both together a sacred unity. The cedar tree represents healing, cleansing and protection. Palm trees symbolise peace and opportunity.

More of the symbolism mankind has associated with trees is given below:

Ash sacrifice, sensitivity and higher awareness

Aspen determination, overcoming fears and doubts

Beech tolerance, past knowledge, softens criticism
Birch new beginnings, cleansing of past, vision quests
Cedar healing, cleansing, protection
Cherry death and rebirth, new awakenings
Cypress understanding the role of sacrifice
Elder birth and death, fairy realm
Elm strength of will, intuition
Hazel hidden wisdom, dousing, divination
Heather healing from within, immortality, initiation
Holly protection, overcoming anger, spiritual warrior
Maple balance, promise, practicality
Palm peace and opportunity
Pine creativity, life, longevity, immortality
Willow magic, healing, inner vision, dreams

In cities, public parks and gardens with trees were planned and protected to bring poetry, philosophy, sobriety and other virtues to the urban populations.

Similar potencies were attached to flowers, whether for their healing properties or more decorative as moral and ethical abstractions, or as symbolising graceful gestures of social meaning, love, fidelity, emotional comfort. At the back of Traquair are two turret rooms – one open, one closed – containing Joanna's photographs from trees. The rooms overlook one of Europe's greatest hedge mazes, where the first-order symbolism is: out of many possible paths there are only a very few true paths to get to the centre of creation and back again.

In this exhibition these conceptual ideas are not explicit, more an energy that is preternatural and God-given, a pain aesthetic or a healing vision, possible but not prescribed. If anything, the message or impression, and what makes this art, is an enduring fascination about questions barely forming, all the answers for which we already know cannot be counted. much as we might view the infinity of the universe. Enlightenment in art is to provoke questioning, in science it is in finding answers. But to understand such ancient relationships as that of mankind with trees we must consider the long view, and in doing so we must consider Traquair, and not from the vantage of great cities where most of the world's population live today. Our urbanised cityscapes are where we huddle to escape the natural environment, not to understand and embrace it, but to tame and control it, from where we only make excursions like tourists to encounter an original landscape or wild botany most powerfully expressed by trees, wherever wild forest may still be found – is something along these lines the message in Joanna's work, and her long fascination with the secret life of trees an olive tree wood?

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