

Elizabeth Magill

# On Painting a Tree.



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Some trees appear more visually attractive or more handsome than others. The Scots pine is a beauty and a super tree to paint. To transport its shape onto canvas, painting its branches whilst thinking about a multitude of connections found in nature and biology. The word *dendriform* comes to mind.

For a number of years trees and their branches have found their way into my paintings. Alongside their visual impact they also represent other things. Perhaps foremost, it's my attempt to suggest a solid or fixed form against my fluidly prepainted canvas. Compositionally too, they act as indicators by structurally eluding to what I call a some thing as opposed to a non thing.

Early on, where I grew up, I was surrounded by trees, they must have etched their way into my mind, developing like black and white photographs in darkroom trays. To some extent I liken this memory to a visual canopy wherefrom I viewed the world.



Trees are at the top of the plant kingdom. Scientists have discovered that they communicate with each other, their root systems like buried brains transmitting information, enabling them to survive and thrive. They are so important to planet Earth having far too many attributes to be able to list or do justice here.

For many decades and in different locations I have been taking photographs, originally on analogue film. I have thousands of 35mm slides collecting dust in carousels. From time to time I try to organise these transparencies, revisiting their tiny formatted windows with their enlarged projected views. I think of this collection as an artwork in itself and a task asking for attention to try and collate or make presentable. It feels quite separate or at odds with my painting practice. But my relationship between image and painting has been ongoing and important, long enough anyway to try and articulate.



The pictorial information contained in the photographic image seems to suggest some kind of concrete entity. I see it like my previous description of trees in my work, as something seemingly fixed or solid... whereas painting is more slippery and open-ended. It's a conundrum, containing many signifiers and imbedded with a host of silent implications.

To paint requires resilience, enormous belief in one's efforts and I guess having some technical ability can help. But even after decades of studio time, this activity still fills me with a sea of uncertainties. To be able to add or make something of relevance to an already rich and saturated language can at times feel overwhelming, other times it's a joy, to be the maker, critic and the stranger to what is produced.

I've been preoccupied with this messy practice for so long that to find myself still in doubt, unnerves me. Yet when a painting works or resonates some *truth*, then it all makes sense, but what resonates or makes sense is so elusive. Maybe by bringing my photographic images and painting together they hold a balance of intention. Perhaps it comes back to this duality of thought, two separate and often conflicting positions held simultaneously, like cognitive dissonance.



Attached to these preoccupations are notions around land and landscape and lately our pressing need to own up to ecological loss.

As an area of illusionistic distance, landscape developed in my work from my need to suggest a space expansive enough to absorb and work through ideas. Perhaps an exterior view shaped from an interior one, or vice versa an inner landscape shaped by an outer one. Somewhere within these loose constructs are notions relating to pictorial history and what it means to assemble and make a work of art today.

I often refer to my own personal history, where I spent my childhood years, a place that happened to coincide with a period of conflict or trouble in the North of Ireland.

A location designated an area of outstanding natural beauty... two different attributes of the same place.

Scenic and troubled. I find my biographical position enables me to reflect on wider global situations where people and the lands they occupy are constantly changing and in flux, shaping each other in subtle and profound ways.

*‘Sometimes a landscape seems less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place... landmarks are no longer geographical but also biographical and personal’.*

wrote the late John Berger in his last publication, *Landscapes* published in 2019.



Once covering all of Ireland, trees were hugely significant to the ancient Celts and especially the Celtic Druids who considered them sacred. They believed different trees served different mystical purposes, helping them through their lives.

This apparent worshipping was one of many factors contributing to the deforestation there as invading tribes felled what they perceived as objects of pagan ritual. Today, this island is sadly one of the least wooded countries in Europe.



Parallel to my painting life in London I've been managing some farmland in the Glens of Antrim. The fields narrowly extend from the North Channel coastline to the Garron Plateau, elongated and stretching up the mountainside it's locally known as a 'ladder farm'.

Along with my partner we have transformed several grazing fields by planting five thousand bareroot trees, mostly oak, rowan, birch and alder. It's a relatively recent undertaking, a small but not insignificant nod in the face of where we are ecologically.

Each time I return, I love to see their growth.



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*Elizabeth Magill studied painting at the Belfast College of Art and the Slade, London. Magill's work is represented in collections worldwide, including The Irish Museum of Modern Art; The Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin; The Arts Council of England, Northern & Southern Ireland; Ulster Museum, Belfast; Southampton City Art Gallery; The British Council, British Museum, Government Art Collection, London and the National Gallery of Australia. From 2017-19 she toured a one person show from Limerick City Art Gallery, RHA Galleries, Dublin, Ulster Museum Belfast and The New Art Gallery Walsall.*

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