

## **Text of Presentation for the exhibition *Big Botany*, The Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas, 2018**

Botany was a sacred word in my mother's vocabulary, and she inadvertently presented a mixed message as she conveyed its importance. Growing up in southern England between the 1st and 2nd world wars she pedaled this countryside, finding plants and flowers for her herbarium.

The narrative of her childhood was tied to memories of a mythic and bucolic rural England, one steeped in a deeply romantic vision, a world that was clearly fast disappearing by the time I was born in 1954.

By the late 50's in England DDT was doing its dirty deed; and farmers, embracing a green revolution tore out miles of ancient field hedges, which had been home to diverse trees, plants, insects, and creatures for hundreds of years. This ripping out of hedges made way for larger fields, and the eventual industrial production of crops.

The "tidying up" of the countryside also meant that "wild" floriferous verges along the roads and lanes were mown too often and usually before the natural seeding process of wild plants had occurred.

My parent's stories of this lost world fuelled a kind of malaise in me, a lamentation for a world I would never see, for an "un spoilt" England that was gone, that had held a "wildness" and plenty; that seemed by then mostly irretrievable.

As a child who was moved by the visual, my longing for this mythic world was further impressed on me early, through the few books with pictures at home. So, a strange world was placed in my mind; conjured through the images of Stanley Spencer's paintings... Beatrix Potter's anthropomorphic stories with their exquisite specificity of creatures and plants.... The wood engravings of Agnes Miller Parker for HE Bates's "Down the River" written in 1937. The drawings and paintings of the visionary artist Samuel Palmer; and Claire Leighton's Wood engravings illustrating her musings on country matters and gardening.

There were memorable visits to the Art Museums in London with my Dad, often to see the Constable paintings. It was my Dad who taught me how to see and draw as a child, and this understanding lay like a backbone to my innate love of the natural world. A longing and an unrealistic yearning for a botanical world that flourished unhindered, and untouched was born in me by the time I was 5.

However, I was lucky as despite this impression of a poverty of wild plants, walking in and observing the natural world was a large part of my family's rituals. The extensive public footpath system still offered a deep access to nature.

Flower book in hand my mother searched usually in vain, for rare orchids and cowslips on the chalk escarpments of the Chiltern Hills. Seasonally we searched for wild food, hazel nuts, mushrooms and blackberries. Identifying and eating was a large part of the ritual.

So, I learnt to walk in order to see, to love and be within the natural.....Life changes and as an adult I relocated to this continent.

One summer in Connecticut I was absolutely astonished to find huge stretches of woodland and a variety of wild flowering plants and their vast entourage of insects. There, an engagement with searching for difference and intimacy within the natural world was rekindled, and took hold, and I started to collect.

Eventually I came to live in the Midwest, and found myself in a deeply unfamiliar landscape, needing a lifeline, a means through which to connect to place, I grew any, and all plants that I could coax to life.

For 22 years I have been inspired by these 4 acres I live on in rural Kansas. Here I have built a small kind of haven, a natural refuge, a stark contrast from the surrounding fields of industrial agriculture thousands of acres of monoculture. Building these gardens has become essential, and has helped satiate the craving for botanical difference and gardening that my mother sowed so many years ago.

The relatively small acreage holds much diversity, especially of birds, plants, and insects. I have become very aware of their cycles of life. I

walk and collect natural detritus in order to see and understand. Walking locally, with no system of immediate footpaths, I walk the Edgelands, the river, the dirt roads, the places the till cannot reach, the scrappy, weedy and overlooked, but all rich with wild life and specimens, if I look deeply.

Somehow the natural world is hanging on in a ragged diversity and beauty, despite and because of its neglect.

The constant flux of the natural world is reflected in my studio practice. Studio and garden environments have combined, becoming my center. Whilst not a collaborative artist in a conventional sense; I have a vital collaboration with this piece of land.

Drawing and Painting are my means of concretizing experience. Quickening to materials and their viscosities I experiment with visual language: this allows my love of difference and variation in the plant and insect world expression. Finding meaning in the individual visual structure, order, and function of a plant, a bone an insect; then I am here.

The natural occupants of the land have become the metaphoric characters I use in my work to talk of being human, to being a part of a larger process of cycles in nature, to remind myself of my transitory existence.

These four recent oil paintings were commissioned by the KU School of Medicine in Salina. By using the inhabitants of the garden within the Seasons of the natural world I can speak metaphorically of the cycles of life, creating a meditation on the processes of living and dying, aspects of being that the medical students will have to face daily.

Summer fecundity, Fall, a time for the onset of decline, Winter, a confrontation with mortality and then Spring a time of precarious renewal.