

The background is a painting titled 'Pink Landscape' by Daisy Dodd-Noble. It features a large, stylized tree on the left with a thick, pinkish-brown trunk and wavy, yellow-green foliage. The ground is a mix of dark brown, green, and pinkish-purple. In the distance, there are blue mountains and a body of water. On the right, there are two smaller, stylized trees on a hill. The sky is a soft, hazy pink and yellow. The overall style is surreal and dreamlike.

ARTIST ROOM

DAISY DODD-NOBLE

17 MAY - 17 AUG 2021

Curated by Marisa Bellani

The Columbia

ROMAN ROAD

Daisy Dodd-Noble, *Pink Landscape*, 2021. Oil on Canvas, 116.84 x 127 cm

Daisy Dodd-Noble: The Wood for the Trees

by Anna Souter

Behind Daisy Dodd-Noble's colourful landscapes, there is a sense of wonder at the secret lives of trees, combined with a painter's eye for composition. Her work places trees centre-stage, as characters in their own right; these are paintings in the contemporary figurative painting tradition, where plants (not people) are the figures in question.

It is impossible to fit a forest within a single frame. Trees constantly reach outwards, upwards, and downwards, through air and soil. Under the ground, roots are symbiotically extended by filamentous strands of fungi, which help trees to find and absorb water and nutrients. Electrical signals pulse along the strands, conveying information from one plant to another, allowing them to collaborate, share resources, and warn of danger. This mycorrhizal network – or the Wood Wide Web – turns a forest from a collection of individuals into a multispecies superorganism. If plants can communicate and share with each other, Dodd-Noble suggests, perhaps they can communicate with us.

Although she is inspired by the collaborative networks of forests, Dodd-Noble generally presents trees standing alone, dotted through landscapes born from her imagination.

Presenting trees as characterful individuals as well as networked interconnected beings, she highlights the various points of connection between human beings and plants.

These paintings remind us that we are capable of acts of empathy and care towards trees. We can plant seeds and prune diseased branches – though often we can show greater care by allowing trees to self-seed and flourish without human interference. We can meditate with trees, sing to them, sign petitions for their protection, climb them, advocate for them, talk to them. They become our landmarks, reminders of home, signposts for the rhythms of the changing seasons. We can take time to notice trees, if we choose to. It is important that we do so; we need trees much more than they need us.

But it is easy to lose sight of these little acts of empathy, which can feel insignificant or trivial among the world's other problems. The increasing alienation between human beings and nonhuman species makes it harder to care – and harder to learn.

The dangers of this care-failure were made painfully evident in 2020; the encroachment of human beings on wildlife habitats has resulted in one of the most significant global health crises of the modern era, while overconsumption has caused unprecedented forest fires from California to the Amazon to the Arctic. When we lose sight of the trees, they burn. And when we hurt the trees, we hurt ourselves.

In the West, our anthropocentric perspective means we expect to see human beings at the centre of any image. Daisy Dodd-Noble's paintings are surprising, even a little uncanny, because of the absence of human figures. Replete with personality and perhaps even personhood, the figures inhabiting these worlds are emphatically nonhuman.

Dodd-Noble's landscapes draw attention to our tendency towards what biologists such as Monica Gagliano have called "plant blindness". We generally overlook vegetal lives in favour of animal forms of life that are more like ours; characterised by movement, recognisable facial features, and a physiology arranged into organs, limbs, and body fluids.

Plants, by contrast, are sessile, lack heads and faces, and have their physiological features dispersed through their bodies rather than located in discrete organs.

It is possible to cut, twist, or eat parts of a plant without necessarily doing irreparable damage to it; pruning can even help a plant to flourish. This can be unsettling for us mammals, protective of our vulnerable skull-bound brains and our rib-protected beating hearts.

Philosopher Michael Marder argues that our overwhelming blindness to the lives of plants is partly due to their sheer proliferation; leafy beings can sprout from the smallest cracks, even in otherwise sterile settings, and vegetal cellulose is the most common organic compound found on earth. When something is everywhere you look, like in the visual tangle of a forest, you stop seeing it.

Dodd-Noble asks us to see the wood for the trees, as it were. Her colourful landscapes glow with the viridity of growing things and the hues of the setting sun. They are diffused with a sense of surreal calm, touching on the many uncertainties surrounding our relationships with the more-than-human world.



Although Dodd-Noble's trees stand proud as characterful individuals, a subtle analogy could be made between the Wood Wide Web and the networked digital cultures out of which these paintings emerge. Reminiscent of digital renderings of imaginary worlds for video games, Dodd-Noble's landscapes have roots in those online realms that are inextricable from our everyday lives. The conjunction of natural and virtual suggests that technology and ecology are not necessarily mutually exclusive fields.

The paintings have both a vivid flatness and a luminosity to them, as if shown on a backlit screen. The aesthetic is achieved through thin translucent layers of oil paint, built up to create fields of colour that are simultaneously both deep and shallow. Dodd-Noble uses her formal training in painting to imbue each image with perfect renderings of light, shade, and colour, giving an uncanny reality to these stylised, fictional scenes.

Her canvases are like screenshots; carefully chosen freeze frames from an endlessly panning or scrolling image. In her practice, Dodd-Noble repeatedly questions where one space ends and another begins, using horizon line, canvas edge, and the formal rules of painting to define her invented locations. She composes her images through left-to-right and up-and-down gestures.



Linked to a shared generational immersion in online cultures, these gestures evoke actions from virtual spaces, such as swiping and scrolling, dragging-and-dropping in image-editing programmes, or directing avatars in video games.

The emphasis on the vertical and the horizontal further evokes a tension between portrait and landscape formats – and points to the elision of format and genre in Dodd-Noble's paintings. These are portrait-landscape hybrids, in which trees are elevated to the status of figurative subjects. The distance between background and foreground is erased in the flatness of the picture plane, suggesting equality between pictorial elements and, implicitly, between human viewer and nonhuman subject.

There is a sense of clarity and contentment in these works, with blue-green leaves set against soft peachy skies. It's as though the human beings have walked out of a 16th century Venetian painting, leaving behind the luminescent background, which is then itself brought into sharp focus; as though the Virgin and her child have got tired of their throne in Bellini's *Madonna of the Small Trees*, and the green embroidered backdrop has fallen, and the poplars are transformed from framing elements to main locus of attention before the viewer's eyes.

From Ovid to Tolkein, from Indigenous foundational myths to science fiction, stories of plant-human hybrids, talking trees, and interspecies metamorphosis point to the significance and longevity of the close relationships between humans and trees. Dodd-Noble places the relationship between human and tree at the heart of her work, while also allowing plants to flourish in their own right.

In the ongoing climate crisis, we undoubtedly need trees to survive. Daisy Dodd-Noble suggests we start by noticing them. By spending time with them. By learning to see the wood for the trees.

- Anna Souter, writer and researcher, 2021



Daisy Dodd-Noble, *Two Trees with rainbow hills*, 2021. Oil on linen, 182.8 x 137.1 cm



Daisy Dodd-Noble, *One green island two pink islands portrait*, 2021.
Oil on linen, 180 x 140 cm



Daisy Dodd-Noble, *Purple forest*, 2021.
Oil on linen, 182.8 x 137.1 cm

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Daisy Dodd-Noble completed her MFA in painting at New York Academy of Art (NYAA) in TriBeCa, New York. The academy is focused on progressive representational and figurative art, and requires students to learn traditional methods and techniques in the service of creating vital contemporary art.

Dodd-Noble takes her inspiration from nature, particularly trees, and her work explores the idea of escapism. She is passionate about the environment and interested in consciousness and our connection with nature.

Her work was featured in When Life Doesn't Give You Lemons, an online group exhibition organised by Tchotchke Gallery in 2020, and was recently on display in a year-long show curated by Lolita Cros at The Wing, London. Dodd-Noble continues to be an active member of the New York Academy Alumni and participated in the NYAA's online summer exhibition last year.



Portrait of the artist, 2021. © David Owens

ABOUT THE ARTIST ROOM

The Artist Room is a newly launched space at The Columbia, which combines relaxed hospitality and emerging artistry. An intimate, elegant and natural light-filled lounge bar, it provides a unique platform for artists to showcase their work outside of the traditional gallery space, with all purchases supporting the artists and the ongoing arts programme at The Columbia. The Artist Room showcases the works of a rotating artist in focus and each presentation will be accompanied by a digital catalogue, which will include a selection of images and informative texts about the artist and their practice. The Artist Room displays will be changed on a quarterly basis, instigating a dynamic and ongoing programme of emerging artistic talent.



Artist Room, The Columbia.© Martin Eito, 2020

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