

# The Disenchanted Forest

***Titania: Out of this wood do not desire to go;  
Thou shalt remain here, whether thou wilt or no.***

(William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, Act 3, Scene 1)

The forest, like the sea, mountains, and sky, functions in many cultures as a deep-seated symbolic archetype. It is a place where the boundaries between reality and fantasy, history and myth become blurred, creating intuitively understood concepts and collective memories.<sup>1</sup> The works in this exhibition explore this phenomenon with regards to the Northern European forest – setting of legends and fairy tales, on the one hand, and hiding place of anti-Nazi partisans, on the other.

Our ambivalence in relation to the forest comes from its complexities and the different aspects it can show. The forest is a place of great beauty; tall, graceful trees weave a canopy that protects those walking through it from the harshness of the sun and the full strength of the rain, creating a gentle, green-filtered light. The fallen leaves form a soft cushion to walk upon, and fallen trees become benches on which to rest. The density of the trees hides the sublime power of the landscape's expanse, replacing it with the wonder borne of the dizzying upwards gaze into the treetops. In this sense the forest is a romantic, protective site, and it is here that the purest of heart may be greeted by the unicorn, or meet a tree nymph or two.

As a cultural archetype of protection, the forest figures prominently in fairy tales such as "Snow White"<sup>2</sup>: after running away from her evil step-mother, the young heroine finds shelter, safety and friendship in the dwarfs' cottage, hidden deep in the woods. This archetype was echoed in historical reality during World War II, when the European forest provided shelter and safety for partisans across the continent, from Italy to the Ukraine. Perhaps the best-documented group of forest-bound partisans was the one formed around the

Bielski brothers, in the Nalibocka Forest in Western Belorussia. This group of Jewish freedom fighters grew to over a thousand members – men, women, and children who lived for many years in organized communities dotted throughout the wilderness.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the conditions in which this and other groups found themselves were far from idyllic. The many cases of partisans captured and executed by the Nazis suggest that the shelter offered by the forest protects the sinister, no less than the innocent. On the literary plane, we may recall that the witch's gingerbread house in "Hansel and Gretel," or the devil's hearth in Isaac Bashevis-Singer's *Alone in the Wild Forest*,<sup>4</sup> are hidden in the woods. In reality, the forest is home to wolves, bears, bandits, and outlaws – a place of danger, where one can easily fall prey to man or beast. Rather than being a site of dreamy protection, the forest can harbor evil lurking behind each trunk, a false paradise where it is easy to lose one's way among trees covering hundreds of acres.

The works by Nogah Engler and Orit Hofshi presented in this exhibition evoke the Northern European experience and understanding of the forest in both its historical and mythological dimensions. They are not direct depictions of the northern woods – in fact, the physical forest has all but disappeared from most of the works, leaving only a trace, an atmosphere, a sense of foreboding and mystery. The similarity between Engler and Hofshi is not to be found in the forms and techniques of their works, but rather in the way in which they approach the simultaneous attraction for and fear of the forest – sharing the sense of the European wild as both a legendary vision, and a dark reality.

In her painting *Land Marks* (2004) Nogah Engler creates a scene of surface tranquility, power, and latent doom. The central axis of the painting, dominating the upper half of the work, is a colossal pine tree whose trunk extends upwards, becoming a column of light. The column resembles a high-voltage electricity tower, radiating rays of light that touch different parts of the landscape. A heavy mist or fog swirls around, concealing some areas and revealing others. To the left, the light cuts across snow-capped mountains,

while at right we can see the naked trunks of tall trees, their upper branches and leaves obscured by the murky green fog that is the sky. The fog partially clears to reveal pastures and waterfalls, yet the latter seem to be flowing with mist rather than water.

This image of rich green meadows sprouting fantastical red berry plants has its source in the botanically precise representations of paradise by northern Renaissance painters such as Jan Breughel and Lucas Cranach. Engler hides her heavenly vision under the fog, obliterating details. The eye rests uncertainly on swaths of white and pale ochre, searching for the respite of soft green. If the landscape of paradise ever existed, it is fast slipping from our reach, as if disappearing into the depths of a tenuous memory.

A dead stag lies in the center foreground of the painting in a pool of blood, its image duplicated on the top right, below the tree trunks. In northern European mythology, the stag represents "The Horned One", the Celtic god of fertility, animals, and wealth. Initially portrayed as a man with stag horns, "the Horned One" came to be represented in Celtic artifacts by deer and stag images in general. In English mythology the significance of the stag was even more pronounced, and in Arthurian legends the powerful magician Merlin sometimes appears as a stag.<sup>5</sup>

This magnificent animal, the king of the forest, is symbolic of the health of the land. In Engler's painting, the land appears to be dying at the hands of unseen forces, which are defined more clearly in her drawings. In these, rectangular pits, barbed wire and long, warehouse- or barrack-like structures seem to take over nature.

In the drawings, glimpses of the receding forest can be spied among the aggressive signs of civilization – a tree here, a blackberry bush there. At times the trees – typically, perfectly shaped conifers – stand in all their glory against a backdrop of white; at other times we see no more than a trunk and a dislocated branch. In one work the elements of the forest and clearing are seen through a drape of delicate lacework, suggesting that the encroachment of

suburbia on the wild has reached the stage at which one need only look through a net-curtained window to be inside the thicket.

The titles of Engler's drawings – *The Way Through II* (2005), *Passing Through* (2006) and *Through There* (2006) – all allude to paths and passages, roads and travel, to a yearning to get to the other side, as if the forest were an obstacle or a Herculean task to be overcome. Perhaps this longed-for, but never reached "other side" is Cranach's paradise, a place where the forest glows deep green in the sunlight, the stag grazes in the meadow, and the waterfalls run clear.

Orit Hofshi's work *Upon this Bank and Shoal of Time* (2006) offers us another vision suspended between reality and myth. Hofshi integrates large-scale drawings made on wooden panels with woodcut prints, watercolor, and ink drawings made on vast sheets of paper. Twenty-four panels combine to create an image of a grove growing on the banks of a river, opening onto a sweeping, epic landscape. The scene flows across the different panels much like the river that cuts through it, the warm golden brown of the wood contrasting with the cool white of the paper.

On the right, the trees come right down to the water's edge. Rocks and boulders cause the river to swirl and eddy, creating soft pools and deep ripples. A solitary figure, incongruously dressed in a suit and open-necked shirt, stands up to his ankles in the water. His expression is melancholy and he appears to be deep in thought, as he stares at the water churning around his wet trouser legs. The river flows past another thicket of trees, and as we reach the opposite bank, the landscape turns into a vision of burnt desolation – dead tree trunks and scorched ground. In the distance the ruins of an abbey stand naked on the hilltop.

Despite the Romantic setting of the drawing, the figure has little in common with images such as Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer*, or even his *Monk*.<sup>6</sup> In both of Friedrich's works, the hero gazes outwards, absorbed by the awesome encounter with the sublime force of nature. Hofshi's figure, by contrast, casts

his gaze inwards, lost within himself rather than exulting at the landscape. Illusion is gone, as if he has passed through the enchantment of the forest and the landscape only to see the burnt remains on the hillside. He has reached the sobriety and disenchantment of the other side.

Hofshi's work integrates the Romantic European artistic tradition with Japanese imagery. The appearance of the land, the trees, and the ruins, as well as the figure, recalls seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings of mythological and pastoral landscapes by artists such as Claude Lorrain (see, for example, *Pastoral Landscape with Lake Albano and Castel Gandolfo* from 1639) or John Constable (*The Lock at Dedham* from 1824). The river, especially in the lower right hand corner, seems closer to the style of Japanese woodcuts by artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige.

The title of the work, taken from Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 1 of the play,<sup>7</sup> alludes to the uncertainty of man's place in this world, the import of fateful decisions, the ephemeral nature of our existence, and the fluidity of time. Time flows through the work like the river envisioned in it: the figure is of today, based on a 2006 photograph from an Irish newspaper of a graveside memorial service for Michael Collins (commander of the Irish Free Army, assassinated in 1922); the abbey ruins are of the past; and all the components of the drawing are connected by the timeless trees, groves, river, and rocks. The classical elements of which the world is made – water, air, earth, and fire – are all given expression and presence in the work.

Interestingly, the prominence given to natural elements in *Upon the Bank and Shoal of Time* coincides with the conceptual framework developed by Simon Schama in his book *Landscape and Memory*.<sup>8</sup> Schama considers the archetypal significance of Wood, Water, and Rock, finally combining all three in a chapter that addresses the vision of the Arcadian paradise. For Schama, each one of these natural phenomena embodies a wealth of historical and cultural meanings which have been explored, developed, and refined by generations of artists and writers. It is through this cultural abundance that

we are able to use collective cultural memory to discover our own personal connections with the landscape, and enhance our understanding of it.

Blending hints of contemporary reality and recent historical events with legendary and archetypal images, Hofshi's and Engler's works point to the elusive quality of a forest garden of Eden, and to the fading sense of the sublime in our world. In *Landscape and Memory*, Schama comments succinctly on the ambivalence of the European wilderness: "There was, I knew, blood beneath the verdure and tombs in the deep glades of oak and fir. The fields, forests and rivers had seen war and terror, elation and desperation; death and resurrection [...] It is a haunted land where greatcoat buttons from six generations of fallen soldiers can be discovered lying amidst the woodland ferns."<sup>9</sup> The works in this exhibition suggest that it is perhaps this very nature of the forest, haunted and melancholy in its majesty, that lends it a tinge of eerie, endangered beauty.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), for an extensive discussion on the role of trees, woods, and forests in myth and religion around the world.

<sup>2</sup> There are many versions of traditional fairy tales. The reference used for the tales mentioned in this article is *The World's Best Fairy Tales* (London: The Reader's Digest, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> See Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Bashevis-Singer, *Alone in the Wild Forest* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See Encyclopedia Mythica at [www.pantheon.org](http://www.pantheon.org), and Joseph L. Lockett on <http://www.io.com/~jlockett/Grist/English/merlin.html>, quoting Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Quest for Merlin* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, 1818, *Monk by the Sea*, 1809.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 1, Scene 7.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.