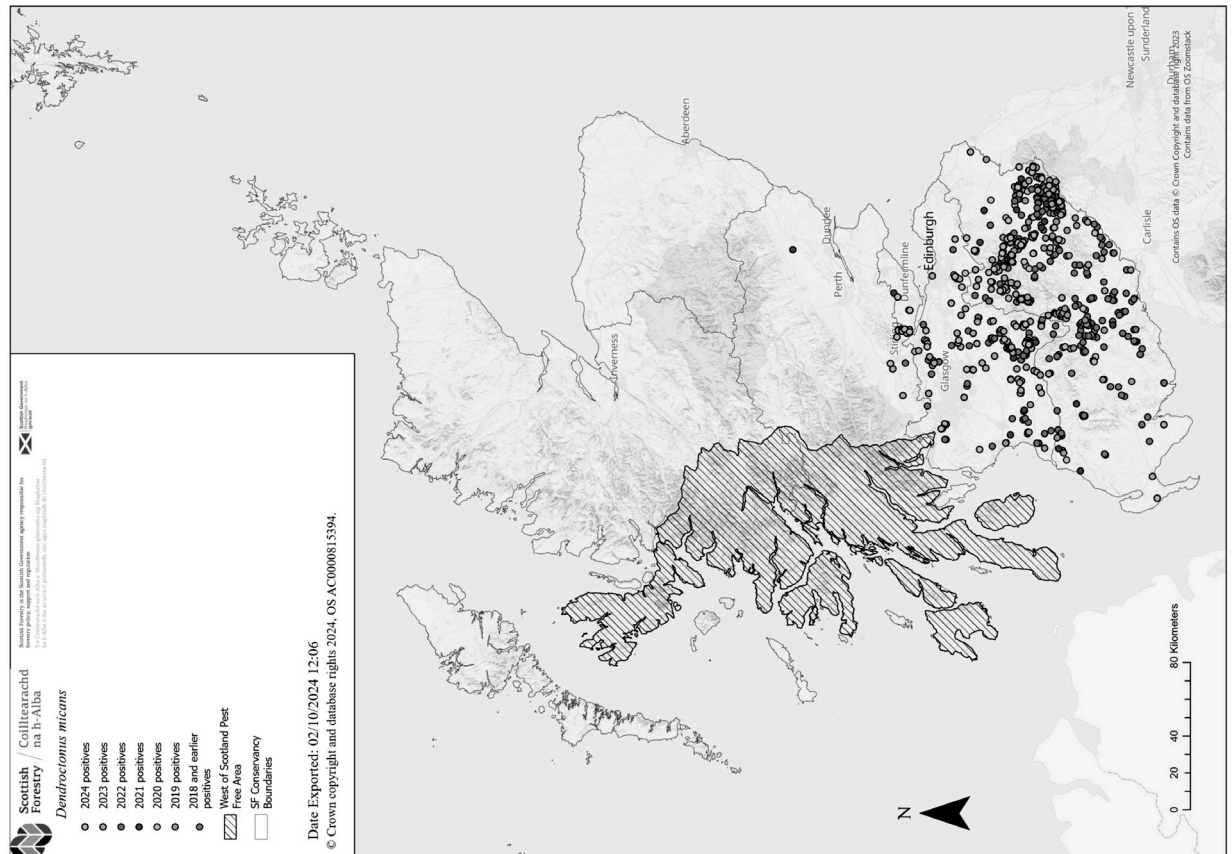


Xylo

Patrick Jameson, Ragnar Jonasson, John Nicol
Glasgow Project Room (7-16/11/24)

*'I would sacrifice anything come what might
For the sake of having you near
In spite of the warning voice that comes in the night
And repeats, how it yells in my ear'*

- Porter, C (1936) 'I've Got You Under My Skin' Chappell & Co



In 2011, the great spruce bark beetle (*dendroctonus micans*) finally made it to Scotland, having arrived in England in 1982. The non-native species preys on healthy spruce trees by tunnelling into the living bark to lay its eggs. The larvae then feed on the bark and grow, forming cavities or 'galleries' that weaken and threaten the integrity of the tree. It is perhaps a comfort (likely cold) to share in the story of a sister species that faces an ecology problem of its own making. The tastes and pursuits of *d. micans* (which include being climate change accelerators through their destruction of forests that act as natural 'carbon sinks' capturing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere) are managed through a twofold approach including annual surveys to monitor for new infestations, and a systematic breed and release programme using *Rhizophagus grandis*, a predatory beetle that feeds on the larvae and 'frass' (shit) of the bark beetle. On the surface, the thought of a group exhibition in a gallery showcasing practices that work with sustainable material, seems like a good thing. But like all good things, once you scratch the surface, you find something else, tunnelling away, busily threatening to bring the whole fucking tree down. Xylo at the Glasgow Project Room showcases new work by Patrick Jameson, Ragnar Jonasson, and John Nicol, three Glasgow-based artists working with wood as material and support.

<https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/research/management-of-great-spruce-bark-beetle/#:~:text=The%20larvae%20of%20the%20bark,of%20faeces%20or%20'frass'>

<https://forestryandland.gov.scot/what-we-do/biodiversity-and-conservation/habitat-conservation/ash-dieback/great-spruce-bark-beetle>

Patrick Jameson makes small paintings on high-end plywood. His paintings recall fantastical architectural drawings (à la Tatlin's Tower), '80s/90s isometric video games, and the sublime daubs of Casper David Friedrich, all figured against soft transitions of intensely coloured woodgrain surface. Jameson waives the traditional preparation of a ground in his painting practice, the ground (often gesso) effectively imposing a barrier between maker, viewer and support surface. As such, the grain of the wood becomes seductively implicated as his deep-fade axonometric projections oscillate between modernist dreamscape and Ballardian nightmare. The works appear playful, but perhaps harbour a shadow side as high-minded modernism begins to babble over the co-opted life-lines of the wood. Jameson treads a fine line as he harnesses the interplay between the production of objects that act part architectural fetish and part memento mori, keening for the departed of a 'more-than-human' world.

Ragnar Jonasson has produced works in wood veneer employing techniques of marquetry and parquetry that date back to antiquity. His pictures are lyrical abstractions that have largely divorced from reality, save for a few shadows cast here and there. They have the appearance of toy-like joy machines, like Georges Braque for early learners. The upshot is a confluence of intuitive making and an appreciation for the traditions of marquetry (assemblage of jigsaw-like patterns and images) and parquetry (geometric mosaic). Jonasson's unconscious visual poetry forms a kind of conversation with his materials, his sympathetic approach to the readymade rhythm of the grain is not dissimilar to his years of DJing in Glasgow and Reykjavík, listening, adapting, modifying always allowing the music to direct. Jonasson's works invite the viewer to puzzle over the terms of engagement. As pictures, they question their own seriousness, whilst they continually slip out of reach. Are they to be taken at face value? This question lingers, as seemingly improvised forms exist as products of time-consuming and painstaking labour. Jonasson's crafted poems drift towards aporias, a set of irresolvable internal contradictions.

John Nicol uses wooden marquetry and painting to explore what he describes as 'the tropes, stigmas, stereotypes and coded language of western masculinity'. His wider practice includes painting, drawing and sculpture and his approach to using wood reflects his interest in (so-called) hobbyist art, an interest framed against the expectations and protocols of a professional art practice. The pictures he makes are abstracted fragments of images sourced from social media algorithms and personal memories. This process of abstraction often acts as a distillation of dynamic realities that move from the toxic to the nurturing. It is through this abstraction and its emerging codes that we encounter a neutralising of these oppositions. The wooden supports and frames in Nicol's work produce an ambiguous 'third-place' feeling, a set of liminal possibilities, a social life packed and ready for shipping to somewhere else - just as unavailable as here.

The reality of wood as a once-living material is laid bare across the works in Xylo with each artist electing to borrow, reveal and trade on the ready-made woodgrain. Each artist plays with surface signs and signatures of once-living things. Each line a wrinkle or stretch mark of players from a more-than-human world. Each artist integrates their own symbolic system into the grain of the wood, adopting the surface to bring fresh perspectives on the practice of thinking-through-making. There is something strangely alien (in the nicest way) about the 'body modification' that plays out across the works in the exhibition, in the ways they co-opt the alien rhythms of arboreal lives into their storytelling, via their craft.

Revealing the support is nothing new, but the process of absorbing and internalising its mute otherness through careful craft feels contemporary. The technological achievement of these works is, arguably, their vital and playful form of remembering. As mnemonic devices, they facilitate a fleeting connectedness to ways of being that are so often subdued in our technological moment - one in which we appear doomed to be over-extended through ever wider and thinner networks of mind. Working into the tissue of a living thing provides gaps and breaks in our tightly wound symbolism, our overarching narratives (a certain belief that 'x and y are most certainly doing what I think they are, I'm sure of it...'). The warped strata, the slow rings of life never really comport to will, they seem to go where they please, issuing a warning as they do. The sound of munching seems to get louder.

Conor Kelly - November 2024

