

# ART PAPERS



## Stephen Lee: Waving Tree

Saltburn Artists Gallery  
Saltburn-by-the-Sea, England  
September - November

Stephen Lee's "Waving Tree" comprises two large sculptural works and several smaller pieces constructed during the artist's residency at Saltburn Artists Gallery in the summer of 1997. Saltburn-by-the-Sea, a small town on England's north east coast, lies just north of the point from which Captain Cook set out on his exploratory voyages in the eighteenth century. Located at one extreme of a branch line belonging to the innovative Stockton and Darlington Railway Company, Saltburn's development was much influenced by the Quakers, who dominated the Company from its beginnings in 1825. In 1858, Henry Pease, son of the Company's founder, experienced whilst walking along Saltburn's coast a "prophetic" vision of the rising of a town and beautiful garden. Lee's constructions took their point of departure from this Utopian image as well as from the plethora of "exotic" plant life collected during Cook's voyages in the South Seas. This interest in Cook's travel and findings was complemented by Lee's temporary return to Britain, his country of origin, though he has been a resident of the U.S. for some fifteen years.

Occupying the centre of, and taking up much of the space in the gallery's main room is a large work based upon the Australian Boab tree, fabricated in the gallery itself using straw as its material, and employing roof thatching techniques in its assemblage. This piece (an upside-down rendition of the Tree of Life referred to in the Book of Revelation) was a kind of inverted echo of the sculpture that Lee and his assistants had put together in Rifts Wood, some fifteen minutes walk from the gallery. This latter work had been carefully put together in the bed of a valley, at a point straddling the narrow river that flows through it down to the sea. Placed on a tiny island, the tree was erected in such a way that any considerable change in the river's flow and depth would affect it. It would thus, as the winter approached and

the river rose, either accumulate detritus transported downstream by the flowing waters or be broken up and swept along as the rate of the river's pace increased. In this somewhat substantial piece made from willow and hazel, Lee formed an object intimately connected with its surroundings, a tree amongst other trees (even if "man-made" and the product of artifice rather than nature itself). The Boab in the gallery offers, however, much more of a clash or disruption within its place of location, a semi-natural object sited in an overtly cultural space. Hanging from this densely-packed assemblage and on the gallery walls are a number of much smaller, frail manipulations of straw, curious sproutings from the tree representing the tradition of corn dollies (tokens produced as offerings in relation to a hopefully successful harvest). The tree that Lee made down in the woods had as its satellites not corn dollies, but the actual natural landscape.

Together, these two substantial constructions not only reflect one another in their manner of placing, raising thoughts about how human beings manipulate and redirect the natural order of things, sometimes working against, and sometimes in direct connection with nature, but also evoke consideration of the curious location of Saltburn itself, a town whose neat insertion into a provocatively beautiful coastline is emphasised by its position close to what is, today, a vast area of industrial and commercial structures and plants. As one travels by rail towards the coast, one passes directly through this gloomy, mutilated landscape, one's arrival at Saltburn suggesting the idyllic release implied in Pease's romantic vision. In Lee's laboriously worked trees, further indications of the interpenetration of nature and culture, of labour, play, and thanksgiving are much in evidence. Of particular note is the utilisation of traditional craft techniques as formal means. As Lee pointed out in the talk he gave following the opening of the

show, our industrialised culture only rarely offers the individual the chance to be extensively engaged in a particular constructive task.

Artists, however, still have the privilege of completing complex (and very rewarding) exercises in making the whole of the object with which they are involved. By employing thatching and other now semi-redundant methods in his work, Lee raises questions about the retention of craft skills in an age in which the mass-manufactured and the "ready made" predominate. His thoughtful, labour-intensive sculptures do not, however, reduce down to a simple reassertion of apparently outmoded techniques. They are not part of a Luddite-like refusal of the new. What they do propose is that sophisticated crafts and methods of working can be employed today to offer insights into how the natural and human world interrelate. Lee's work at Saltburn emphasises that an emphatic concern with the given parameters of a specific place can enable forgotten or otherwise elided aspects of the landscape to be brought to attention. As Lee's sculptures slowly transform themselves into a "natural" feature of the environments in which they reside, they will continue to carry and provoke a range of meanings relating both to their idiosyncratic placing and to the place of art, technique, nature, memory, and speculation in our quickly-shifting culture.

The serious dedication to craft skills in Lee's multilayered practice should not be allowed to obscure those more extensive concerns to which I refer above. A less vigilant approach to craft would readily throw the focus onto technique alone, skills such as thatching having their own intrinsic interest. It is a measure of the success of Lee's sculpture that the attractive technical emphases he employs are but one facet of a practice that is capable of bearing fruit in many ways.

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