

REVIEWS

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‘Joan Jonas: In the Trees II’, Amanda Wilkinson Gallery, London, 1 October 2018 – 17 November 2018

To walk into American artist Joan Jonas’s installation at Amanda Wilkinson Gallery is to be immersed in a wash of green, submerged in the colours of grass, moss, a tree seen from afar. ‘In the Trees II’ (2018) is a small, claustrophobic installation: two videos projected onto opposite gallery walls featuring Jonas as performer; a series of bird drawings mingled with occasional pine green brushstrokes indicating blades of grass; a hanging garment jutting out from the wall and elevated seven or eight feet off the ground, body absent yet still holding its crinkled shape.

For a long time the natural world and its landscapes have occupied Jonas’s imaginative world. In the past decade, Jonas has worked almost exclusively with this set of extant props, exploring the beguiling lands and seas of her summer home in Nova Scotia, as well as the looming ecological threats these environments now face. Most recently, we encountered these settings in Jonas’s 2018 retrospective at Tate Modern where the artist lured us to glacial Icelandic seascapes and the ocean’s murky depths.

‘In the Trees II’ ushers us to the forest clearing. In one of the two films Jonas can be found drawing slender blades of grass

on a white scrim pinned against a wall, roughly tracing the lines of a video of grass which has been projected onto the cloth. Within the film, Jonas, wearing a white dress, also finds herself projected on. Her dress is drowned in the dance of grass and wild flowers as she moves between the backdrop and camera, arresting glimpses of the grass’ spritely movements with her drawn lines. The other film, smaller in scale and filmed with a fishbowl lens, shows Jonas in a woodland clearing performing various actions for the camera. In one particular moment she holds a large piece of paper to her body and paints a tree, dipping her long brush into an unseen pot of paint hidden in the grass as if she were drawing the paint out of the earth itself.

The earth is bleeding, and this ode to the trees is a darker tale than the luminous green light might suggest, one which intones through its beauty a story of absence and loss. What is at stake is what is here to be lost, and what is here to be lost is that which we find projected and hanging on the gallery walls. Jonas has memorialised the trees and the birds in anguish of the current state of the natural world – its vanishing and growing evanescence. ‘We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN’.¹ So reads the title of an article in the *Guardian* describing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s (IPCC) alarming report

on global warming, released only days after Jonas's installation opened. The article continues: 'there is only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5°C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty'. With a fate held by half a degree, forests will blaze and seas will rise. These greens will turn a fiery red and then blacken into ash.

Time in the gallery has moved on and Jonas, covered head-to-toe in grass and flowers, dances amongst the foliage projected onto her body and the wall behind her. We watch, immersed. If we look to our right, we find quivering blades of grass alive in the framed drawings of birds, reflected in the glass and thus returning the birds to their habitat. The grass escapes the projection and finds its way around the room where the garment hangs like a spectre. It haunts, a bodiless soothsayer warning through its hollow core of future losses. 'Hers are [...] specters approaching from the times that lie ahead', Marina Warner has written on Jonas.² Of course, it was the prescient soothsayer Tiresias who warned Oedipus of a terrifying truth, a truth he denied and to which he turned a blind eye.

The title of another of the artist's recent projects might grant us insight into who once held that crinkled shape in place: 'I Know Why They Left' (2019). We have this assumption confirmed in the smaller video as we see the garment cloak the artist in its rigid folds; from the forest clearing to the gallery – artist as seer? Jonas has rejected such labels throughout her career, but maybe now, now in a world where we find a manic denial of the realities of climate change, it is the artist who can present these impending realities, who can warn and begin to hold power

accountable. We need an 'instrument of verifying reality' to hold denial in check, the Italian psychoanalyst Franco Fornari argued in the 1960s.³ Jonas and her spectres begin this vital work.

The garment looms over our shoulder wherever we stand in the small, rectangular gallery space. We are implicated in this reality, and whether we take heed of this warning is, as with those befallen in the tragedies of old, on us. Again, time has moved on in the gallery and in one of the videos Jonas is now behind the scrim, her presence barely noticeable. She hovers, waiting. We too wait, sequestered in the small space and surveyed by its sentinel. Jonas is veiled, protected from whatever is happening outside. A short time passes. She lifts up the veil and peers outside. Is everything still there? Yes, it seems so. For the time being at least.

- 1 Jonathan Watts, 'We have 12 years to limit climate change catastrophe, warns UN', *Guardian*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/08/global-warming-must-not-exceed-1.5c-warns-landmark-un-report> (accessed 18 October 2019).
- 2 Marina Warner, 'Joan Jonas: The Taste of the Clouds', in Jane Farver (ed.), *Joan Jonas: They Come to us Without a Word*, Cambridge, MA, 2015, p. 30.
- 3 Franco Fornari, *The Psychoanalysis of War*, (trans.) Alenka Pfeifer, Garden City, NY, 1974, p. 160.

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'Sixty Years', Tate Britain, London, April 2019 – present; '100% Women', Richard Saltoun, London, March 2019 – February 2020

2019: British museums and galleries are celebrating women artists, again. Tate Britain's