

The Poetry is All Out There

Henry Hudson's *Sun City Tanning Series*

by Cressida Connolly

Plants make us feel better. We know as much on a common sense level and it's amply borne out by the research. Getting out into nature, tending our gardens or houseplants, even looking out at trees or grass: all reduce our stress levels, improve our concentration and give our immune systems a boost. Lately the Japanese vogue for forest bathing, or *Shinrin-yoku* - that's a stroll in the woods, in ordinary parlance - has caught on in the United States. Participants report lowered blood pressure and reductions in the tension hormone, cortisol. Environmental psychologist Roger Ulrich was the first to demonstrate (in the journal *Science*, in 1984) that plants improve outcomes for hospital patients. More recently he has led research with subjects recovering from heart surgery, randomly assigning them pictures of forest scenes, abstract paintings, a white panel or a blank wall. Those given the scenes depicting trees and water were less anxious and needed fewer doses of pain medicine. So it turns out that pictures of plants, too, are good for our health.

The summer before he became a student at London's Chelsea School of Art, Henry Hudson was on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. One afternoon he went for a hike in the company of a polymath and poet named Paul Roche, then in his mid-eighties. (Following the death of the writer Robert Graves, an unofficial vacancy had arisen on the rocky north western shores of Mallorca. Roche stepped into Graves' shoes, becoming the island's self-appointed magus, or Prospero figure.) "As we walked down to the beach he showed me plants and he knew all their Latin names and the things that could be made from them. He pointed out one you could make toothpaste out of, another that could heal a stomach ache. That was amazing, it really opened my eyes. What would have been just a normal walk down to the beach became this incredible lesson in what was all around us in the vegetation."

The benign and healing aspect of plants and forests and jungles, though, is only a part of what interests Henry Hudson. He's concerned, also, with the darker, more sinister qualities of the wild. "Nature can be very menacing. It's where the wild things are. My experiences of sitting outside in the Caribbean at night have been very pleasurable, because I've known that I have electricity and fresh water and plenty of food. But there's always the knowledge that if I was left there without all these things I'd pretty quickly die." Pinned to the walls all around Hudson's East London studio are sentences of film director Werner Herzog's: "*The jungle is obscene*", "*In the jungle I see fornication and asphyxiation and fighting for survival*". As anyone familiar with his movies will know, Herzog does not subscribe to the Romantic idea that nature is a paradise. Rather, he presents the wild as at best indifferent and more likely actively malign and cruel. "The madness of Herzog I really enjoy, the whole epic struggle of man versus nature.", says Hudson. "I love his voice, I find it quite hypnotic. For a while I used to go to sleep to it - I'd put on one of his films and just drop off." Small wonder, then, that his pictures are infused with foreboding.

Henry Hudson sees the genesis of this work in a childhood visit to London's National Gallery, when he was just six years old. It was here he first saw Henri Rousseau's great work of 1891, *Surprised!* The scale of the painting, the snarl of the tiger, the lushness of the vegetation left an indelible mark upon him. From memory you may remember this as a picture of an animal in a jungle, but revisit-

ing the work something else about strikes you at once: the weather. A large part of the drama of the painting comes from the sheer force of the wind in the trees. The storm. It is this tempest which pulls the viewer into the picture, which brings the scene so vividly to life. It's nature, but it could hardly be further from the stuffy tradition of *nature morte*. There is nothing still about this life. In the *Sun City Tanning* series, too, weather has a starring role. All the energy and theatre of a tropical storm is here, and quiet following a storm, too. "In the lightning piece there's a lot of movement and I'm very proud of that. And the dawn piece is very still and calming. It has that early morning feeling of the frogs going to bed and the birds beginning to sing."

Hudson's previous series imagined the life of a young urban adventurer. But it would be wrong to assume that in departing from the contemporary city - and from the human figure - he has abandoned the practice of narrative. Here a twenty four hour cycle becomes the proscenium in which the play of light and shadow, sticky stillness and typhoon animate the timeless spectacle of the scramble for survival. Plants, leaves, water, stars become the characters. "With *The Adventures of Young Sen* pictures I got very into showing some of the chaos and extremes of contemporary life, but this series is the complete opposite. It was almost about transporting myself into nature. I've been much calmer since doing this series, but also it's a lot more fun to make than some of the things which figured in the last series: a cigarette packet, say, or even the contours of a face. This is much more expressive, oddly. The beauty about nature is that there are so many quirks, every leaf is individual. I want every component to have its own character."

You know an artist is on the right track when things converge. Clusters of coincidences, an inadvertent marriage of subject and form: these are good signs. And in this series the points of convergence are many. Take Hudson's highly unusual medium, Plasticine. It turns out that among of the constituents of Plasticine are aliphatic acids, which also occur in plants. Most especially they are produced in plants of the *Aracea* family: the Arums. No plants so resemble those in these pictures, with their glossy dark leaves and frankly sexual spadix and spathes. Since making these paintings he has noticed that the pictures are slightly damp to the touch, ever so slightly sweaty, just like plants in the tropics. "I think they feel fleshy, like skin. But they have malaria, or dengue fever. They look pretty, the colours are very beautiful. But if you get up close they're feverish." Geography provides another link to the artist and his medium. Henry Hudson's early years were spent on a farm deep in the rural west of England. Nothing much gets made in those parts, apart from butter. But guess what? Plasticine was invented - and for many decades manufactured, too - in a small village less than ten miles away from his childhood home.

In the devising and making of these pieces, myths concerning man and nature have been much on Hudson's mind. Among them are the stories which have grown up around artists: Joseph Beuys and his stories of desert healing, as well as Gauguin's own particular vision of his tropical island, which even then exaggerated its innocence and eroticism. Werner Herzog's wild adventures fit alongside these mytho-poetic stories. Henri Rousseau, too, sought to create a myth around himself. He claimed to have obtained his vision of jungle scenes from travels in Mexico, when in reality he never left France, only gleaning his knowledge of plants from visits to the botanical gardens in Paris. Hudson's wikipedia pages contain a section in which it is noted that he once became marooned in the Congolian forest, following a white-water rafting accident. Fact or fiction? What is certain is that Henry Hudson made his first drawings of plants during trips to the Caribbean. He also visited the botanical gardens at Kew in London. Much of the imagery of plants he's worked from, though, has come from the internet. The irony of making pictures of nature derived from images sourced in

the entirely man-made cloud of virtual technology is not lost on him. His sources are not a rule book, however. What you see before you springs first and foremost from his own vision.

This playful space between truth and fable - or more accurately between the imagined and the real - is where Henry Hudson's pictures and their implied stories take shape. In the making of them, he's been considering Shamanic forest ceremonies. The pots in this show (made in collaboration with his brother Richard, a noted ceramicist) refer to the vessels employed in such rites. Yet the pots resist definition: they are neither wholly mineral nor quite vegetal. In the paintings, too, boundaries between categories are blurred: some of the shapes in the forest derive not from plants but from images of human cells. As well as looking at the rituals of indigenous peoples, Hudson is aware of - and amused by - how such ceremonies are being co-opted into contemporary urban life. "I find it very fascinating that some people have looked at these pictures and said it'd be great to come and take ayahuasca in front of them. People in the West have this idea that they need to take this exotic thing, consume it as we consume everything. . . but if they'd only look, the poetry is all out there. I guess I'm very fortunate that I've got an imagination, that I can make art to express myself."

Artists, of course, have the gift of seeing as well as that of creating. "It's interesting to me that these pictures are broadly of the same scene: trees and stumps and the lake. Yet when people walk in and see them, they tend not to recognize that. Only gradually does it become apparent to them that these are a sequence. Which shows how powerful light is, and colour. They completely alter people's perceptions. Light and colour can change your entire mood." The colours in the series were inspired by Hudson's visits to the Caribbean. The jungle theme had begun to claim his attention when he discovered a machine which would make it possible for him - for the first time - to mix his own colours in Plasticine. He was already sure that the medium would lend itself to the wild, twining forms of plants: now he knew he could create all the colours he wanted, too.

For many centuries the expulsion from the Garden of Eden was one of the great subjects of Western art. It occurs again and again, from Masaccio to Chagall: the fall from grace, the end of innocence. You could say that Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin tried to put man back into Eden. Now, for our secular age, Henry Hudson has created images in which Adam and Eve are altogether absent from Eden. In these pictures there are no humans, no animals, no birds. It is the landscape at its most atavistic. As such, it is morally equivocal. A virgin forest which is distinctly eroticised. The plants might have medicinal or useful hallucinogenic properties, but the forest is also place of danger. We know that the tropical woodlands are the lungs of the world, yet here they are represented as a place where choking is a distinct possibility. Is this the paradisiacal garden to which we long to return, or a sinister jungle from which we must escape?

Since Werner Herzog's vision has been important to this series, it is apt to let him have the last word. In his *Minnesota Declaration*, Herzog makes the case that there's a kind of reality that cannot be arrived at through depicting things literally. He could have been describing Henry Hudson's *Sun City Tanning* series when he declared: "There is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization."