

## I set a Bait for the Unknown

Cecilia Danell paints the forests and landscapes surrounding her family's farm in Sweden where she grew up. Living now in Galway, she returns most years, in winter and occasionally in summer, to the studio her father built for her. Part of Danell's practice is to walk old pathways and find unfamiliar ones, slowly edging outward. This approach is mirrored in her ever-evolving technical rigour and ongoing development as a painter, retracing what she knows and venturing into new terrain with surety and purpose. She seeks out scenes, sketching, photographing and keeping meticulous notes of her findings. Last summer Danell collected much of the reference material for this exhibition, 'I set a Bait for the Unknown'. She whittled little wooden spoons, experimented with clay dug from the lakeshore, documented colours, and studied the play of light in the wet and the dry. She followed the forester's fluorescent band marks deep into the woods; picked and played with the pigments of bilberries. She recorded the actions and behaviors of humans and animals in this landscape, framing it as a place where we might like to think ourselves unobserved, despite all that we leave there.

Her paintings, particularly the larger works, seem curiously familiar, if somewhat unsettling. They are her translation of place into experience. To interpret Danell's forests as sinister enclosures, reminiscent of Scandi Noir or Grimm's Tales, would be an unelaborated or oversimplified reading. However, she is perfectly aware that she is alluding to this ominous territory. In reality, if you grow up in a forest, as Danell has done, you know it to be as complex, expansive and comforting as the mysterious boglands, mercurial seascapes or arcadian hills that have historically informed Irish literature and painting. Sensitive to the qualities of place, the artist brings the familiarity of landscape to our attention, while skillfully alluding to so much beyond the surface.

In these works, a human footprint is framed through objects and curiosities, alluding to our cruelty and negative impact upon the natural world. A commercial forestry environment is cut through with the presence of its planter; animal lures are depicted near a hunters hide; the detritus from a clay pigeon shooting range is left strewn on the forest floor. Across numerous paintings, the artist draws the viewer towards curious landmarks – including an apex-framed wooden hut, a meditation pyramid, an odd triangular rock formation, and rhythmic mossy mounds – which are situated in glades and clearings. There are definite hints of Science Fiction, the supernatural and the surreal.

While making this exhibition, Danell was reading classic Sci-fi novels and speculative fiction, including John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* and *The Day of The Triffids*, *The Drowned World* by J.G Ballard and *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatsky brothers. Across these novels we encounter life on earth drowning in water, rendered blind by a comet, and regressing after a nuclear holocaust, while an alien visitation leaves strange debris and phenomena at the edge of a city. What especially strikes Danell about these novels is "humanity's ability to persevere in the face of changing circumstances". She suggests that "Dystopia informs dreams of Utopia" and that "the outer landscape shapes the inner one."

In a large seminal painting, *The Octopus Salt-Lick*, Danell directs us towards an odd, long-stumped pine tree. A white box caps the giant trunk, resembling a surveillance device, nailed solidly in the heart of the painting. This is a lure, a salt lick for moose, which are shot from a hunter's blind nearby. The topsoil is exposed, having been worn away by the rhythmic worrying of hoofs, stimulated by the lulling pleasure of finding this salty treat. The sweep of the animals' tongues has smoothed the deeply cracked bark of this decapitated tree over time. Its limbs are now its root

system, revealed to us as the powerful tentacles of an octopus, reaching into the underworld.

Danell's paintings are organic, magically playful and densely rich; however, they are also curiously geometric and linear, working off layers of constructed plains and improvised riffs. The artist understands the weight of colours and their manual application. She has been experimenting with different coloured grounds, underpainting the canvas in washes of pink, blue and green. These ghosts of colour infiltrate the atmosphere and character of her depicted scenes. Here and there, we observe references to photography, echoing the distortion of snapshots, demarked by blue borders. Moreover, there is a filmic quality to her paintings, as if she is using the richly saturated hues of early Technicolor to destabilise 'the real'. Like celluloid film, coated with a light-sensitive gelatin emulsion, Danell's painted layers find joy in the luminous material properties of oil paint.

Diluted mineral spirits seep downward and into the warp of the canvas, resisting sections of thick impasto, rendered in seemingly effortless brushstrokes. Pushing the paint around, wet on wet, occasionally hard and dry, she senses the paint itself, its plasticity, flow and reticence, as it changes from pigment to pigment. Rather than building up the composition in full layers, she works on small sections, preserving and abstracting the drips, with this dappled under-painting becoming another colour map. Borders mark the interrelationship of colour and form, revealing contractions that echo the artist's deep reading of place. Danell has the confidence in her work to make seemingly counterintuitive decisions. She is making new discoveries as she proceeds, and these are evident in her painting. In the winter of 2019, Danell spent two months in residence at The Irish Cultural Centre in Paris, painting intensely and observing contemporary and historical work in galleries and museums. She feels that this time gave her the opportunity to read and reflect on the act of painting itself. Knowing the qualities of these materials takes time, as does becoming a good painter.

Danell usually presents her paintings alongside fabricated objects in gallery installations. As props, they help to stage the paintings, by inhabiting the space, whilst setting the scene and supporting an overarching narrative. For example, she foregrounds the presence of invasive Giant Hogweed with a meticulously rendered two-metre-high sculpture, made from fabric, wire and string. In nature, this plant loves a lake-side aspect, harnessing the power of water to disseminate its seeds as they shed. These plants are virulently invasive and cause horrible burns. A similar plant is found in *A far sea moves in my ear*, one of the largest paintings in this series. A second sculptural object also depicts an organic form, though more abstracted, fabricated in copper tubes and orange floats. It may reference the fronds of the Labrador Tea Plant, which appears in a smaller painting and reoccurs in another work.

As these paintings depict the landscapes of Danell's youth, they are imbued with the heightened tension of the places where memory and emotion intersect. However, these are not overly simplified or nostalgic landscapes – complexity pulsates within these works. Like any good pioneer, she skillfully pays attention to the uncertain, by reading what is most familiar. Filtered through the artist's prism, these seemingly familiar scenes are destabilised, yielding a deep interrogation of both real and internalised landscapes. Danell has been circling and expanding this territory with ever deepening commitment, surety and vigor for over a decade.

**Sarah Searson**