

## *Outfallers*

Josephine Baker

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Lois, the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's story "Death by Landscape", lives in an apartment crowded with landscape pictures. The paintings, sketches and drawings are different from usual landscape representations, however. They are tortuous views of outdoor scenery - a stony river shore, a pond half-seen through the branches, and intricate tree trunks - with no vistas, only endless foreground. As the narrator recounts: "There's a tangle, a receding maze, in which you can become lost almost as soon as you step off the path". While there is no apparent danger, nor presence of humans, or even animals, Lois is overcome with unease: she senses that something or someone is looking back out. If there's one thing reassuring her, she doesn't have to worry about strange noises or animals entering the house, the narrator explains. "The building has a security system".

What constitutes a landscape, as well as the limits - physical and mental, geographical and emotional - that define our relationship with it are recurring investigations in the work of Josephine Baker. For her first solo show at Nir Altman gallery, *Outfallers*, the artist presents a series of new sculptures and drawings, which resemble aspects of landscapes that are both distant and familiar. Baker digs into the tradition of the English garden - a landscaping style that presents an idealised view of nature - and into the processes of shaping and taming the natural world by re-assembling materials and meaning into sculpture.

At first glance, no groves of trees are in sight. In their place are a series of trellis-like sculptures made of steel reinforcement bars reaching out of concrete containers and connected by ventilation pipes. The porous soil of rolling lawns leaves spaces for the muted colours of building materials and cliffside debris. Cables grow like ivy, while security lights fill with water. The idyllic vision of a garden mutates into a logistical ecosystem - one which shows no image of human life but that nonetheless pullulates with it. For, even if humans are not pictured, each element traces back to their bodies and actions: from the materials commonly used in construction and communication industries, to the human-sized sculptures standing before us.

Though the journey starts in a garden, it does not end there. Hand-sized aqua-resin objects lead us to a pond, and an ocean, resembling frogspawn or organisms from the abyss. Fossils of tiny fish are embedded in the bases, and fragments of coral decoratively scattered within. Their presence, emulating the debris of urban and oceanic wreckage, act like residues of deep time, remnants of deep-sea life cycles, and point to the complex debates on sea-mining of 'precious' resources to meet today's technological demands.

Baker awakens us from the pastoral dream of the landscape as a tamed aesthetic vision. By conjuring wilderness through the tools of civilisation, she brings us closer to observe how these two spheres enmesh. And she does so by subverting the symbolic

communication systems with which we apprehend the world. Baker combines objects that spark resemblance and new associations, turning the language of material into a poetically coded reality. Roofing materials, such as felt and rubber joined with a pair of garden shears, give birth to a hybrid creature; the waterproof membrane of its wings bowed as if providing shelter. Meanwhile, another has its jaws wide open and spiky glass wings, filled with earth from the Jurassic Coast in southern England, splayed in mid-flight.

Even though everything is still, stories flow across the room. Baker's piping system and live wire occupants are as much a natural ecosystem as a cultural image, albeit a rather slippery one. A series of drawings, *Contiguous Zones*, recalls pipelines and outfall drainage systems, from which the show takes its title. These are depictions of cables being searched for and cut through by other zoomorphic tools. Where do these tubes lead, what messages do they carry? And what might they spill?

If *Outfallers* hints at the complexity of ecological systems and the (mis)management – if not the very definition – of natural resources, it is most of all an invitation to look closer. To navigate through the endless foreground and the layers that make up our complex landscapes and realities. Like in a metaphor – a means, according to Hannah Arendt, by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about – Baker invites us to see the similarities in dissimilarities, and to look for more than what immediately meets the eye.

Text by Giulia Civardi

Josephine Baker (b. 1990, London, UK) completed her undergraduate studies at Central Saint Martins in London in 2012, and her postgraduate in 2017 from the Royal Academy Schools, London. Her recent exhibitions include: *Clear out the wounds closest to the sun*, V.O Curations, London, 2021 (solo); *Wallwerk*, Nir Altman, Munich, 2021; Drawing Room Biennial, London, 2021; *The Land Lies*, ChertLüdde, Berlin, 2020 (solo); *well, well, well...*, Sundry, London, 2020; *Islands*, Kupfer, London, 2019 (solo). She was a 12-month resident award holder at British School at Rome 2017-18, and was shortlisted for the 2019 Mark Tanner Sculpture Award.