

Notes on a Never-Ending Log

Lots of people like to read. But not many have the urge to write. The reason most readers are happy with just reading whilst, for some of us, writing cannot be avoided is a matter of concern for Roland Barthes in his famous series of lectures at the Collège de France. Barthes splits the act of reading into two distinct types of pleasure. The first, he says, is “the absolute pleasure of adolescent reading, immersed in a classic novel, the absolute satisfaction of reading”; and the second is “the pleasure of reading that is already tormented by the desire to do the same, in other words by a lack”.¹

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People like looking at trees. But not many have the urge to make them. In *Eight of Clubs* (2021), Henrique Oliveira recreates the most improbable of logs, a perfectly continuous figure of eight. The painstaking process of sculpting his tree-branch starts with several strips of bender-board turned into rings that are screwed in place to form a cylindrical structure. Once these curved bands create a solid wooden frame, a layer of paper mache is applied to them. Next, mushy craft paper is brushed with glue to help smoothen the surface, and when the paper mache is dry, the hard structure is ready to be stapled on. This is when Henrique introduces scraps of salvaged plywood to cover the paper base. Lastly, the final sheath of bark is added. This configuration is not dissimilar to the skin of an actual tree: the outer bark, the phloem, the xylem and the cambium, each layer playing its crucial role. It might be difficult to trick a bark beetle, but not me.

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Even though I like looking at trees I am no expert. In fact, I can't tell a Sycamore from an English Oak, and I suspect Henrique is the same. He explains that the bark used in *Eight of Clubs* came from Dedham Vale in Suffolk – the heart of John Constable country – but he had to check the name of the tree with his friend. I imagine this well-versed friend to be Papa Toothwort, the shape-shifting forest spirit that roams the English rural landscape where the fiction in Max Porter's *Lanny* unfolds². I can see Henrique and dead Papa Toothwort – the green man of eternal seasons – sitting together on their favourite stile or cosy tree-stump staring at a group of trees in comradely silence. One thing Oliveira and Toothwort have in common is that every once in a while they like to change the nature of things just to check if we are still awake.

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When talking about his logs, Henrique prefers the word reconstruction to representation. By closing a long cycle of change, he takes wood back to its original form – but not quite. It is precisely within the space that lies between a real chunk of wood and his never-ending log that Henrique materializes his impulse to “act under the skin of the real”. The recurring weirdness of his compositions – evocative of invasive tumours, protuberances, outgrowths and exposed viscera – is the artist's way of modifying

¹ Roland Barthes' quote taken from Kate Briggs in *This Little Art*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2018, pg. 101.

² Max Porter. *Lanny*, Faber & Faber, 2019.

nature just enough so we can experience situations that are improbable, yet strangely familiar. In *Untitled* (2017), eight floorboards bulge into a ravenous intestine – something both viscous and brittle, malleable and rigid; and in *Artefacts 2* (2017), real branches stick out from two tear-shaped nodes, like bulbous horns plucked from an animal's head.

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My nearest cluster of real trees is in Newington Green, a traffic roundabout disguised as green space on the border of Hackney and Islington. Even though many leaves are still firmly hanging onto the tree branches, in a few weeks' time, the green will turn into a categorical brown: the colour of lack, the colour of waiting for spring³. In an exhibition almost entirely made of wood it is easy to see brown as the absence of colour. But Henrique is adamant that this is not the case: "brown is also a presence, it has endless shades". He began his artistic career as a painter in 1997 in his hometown of Ourinhos, in the Brazilian countryside. His early acrylic paintings were quickly followed – as if that had been the plan all along – by a prolific variety of sculptures, wall-reliefs, public works and immersive installations mostly made of weathered pieces of discarded laminated wood. Wood has long been his pictorial material of choice, a multi-brown surface that he has never ceased to tackle as painterly matter.

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With its skilful use of discarded materials and biomorphic references, Henrique's practice has often been understood as a way of bringing attention to our reckless relationship with nature; however, when it comes to environmentalist statements, Henrique is almost elusive. His work is definitely not about prescribing or advocating certain types of behaviour or action; it is evident that his pleasure lies in the making, in giving birth to his vision. I watched as he moved around the empty gallery looking at the walls and ceiling, surveying a motley array of exposed electrical pipes, air ducts and plumbing lines, with his hands wide-open, palms facing up, as he modelled the air picturing his next timber creature.

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Every seed carries the magic of its own germination. Though they are not the tree itself, seeds already contain the tree and its whole power⁴. When the miraculous moment comes, the radicle, or the root, anchors the embryo plant into the ground and the plumule unfurls towards the sun, revealing its first true leaves, tiny little versions of the mature leaves to come. *A Plumule* – the title of Henrique Oliveira's first UK solo show – might look like the start of something, but it is only a midpoint in the endless (beginningless) cycle of life. It reveals our inescapable continuity in the shape of an eight, which doesn't grow on trees.

Words by Adriana Francisco

³ "Brown is a slow colour. It takes time. It is the colour of winter. It is also the colour of hope, for we know it will not be blanketed by icy snow forever". Derek Jarman in *Pharmacopoeia*, Vintage Classics, 2022, pg. 106.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*, translated by S. W. Dyde. <https://historyofeconomicthought.mcmaster.ca/hegel/right.pdf>