

# Out of the Wood...

Peter Reason visits the studios of sister artists Sarah and Anna Gillespie, who are both working with environmental themes



Seven drawings in charcoal and watercolour on Aquari handmade paper by Sarah Gillespie [www.sarahgillespie.co.uk](http://www.sarahgillespie.co.uk)

Look at this moth...

No, No! I mean really look, look at the shading on the wings, the delicacy of the veins, the patterning of hairs on the antennae. Look at the way this wing is ever so slightly damaged.

Now look even more carefully, spend a whole day and more with a sheet of copper and an etching tool, then more days at the printing workshop, choosing the right paper, ink...

Look at this acorn cup...

Yes, I mean really look. Start by spending days underneath oak trees, turning the acorns over, lovingly collecting hundreds of them, becoming part of the landscape.

Look at the smooth inside of this cup, the rough outside of that cup; look how each offers the same pattern, yet plays that pattern in its unique way; see how the cups from each tree differ.

What does it mean to be an artist working on ecological themes? How does an artist bring together ecological, aesthetic, political and spiritual imperatives? What are the joys and the tensions? I took these questions to the studios of the sisters (and my nieces) Sarah and Anna Gillespie – landscape artist and sculptor, respectively – as they prepared for their new show at the Beaux Arts Gallery in Bath.

Until recently, Sarah was best known for her large landscape oil paintings. But her work in this show is quite different: intimate, close-up prints and drawings of moths, a bird's nest, a hare found killed on the road, a fallen great tit. She told me that her practice now is to accept

what each day brings her. Her aim is to make herself a “lens of attention”, to borrow Mary Oliver’s words, to be completely absorbed in the minutia of what is in front of her. She recalled John Clare’s poetry, his “miniaturization of life” as Jonathan Bate puts it. And yet this can only be an aspiration; she can never be, and never would want to be, a mechanical lens. Rather the ‘lens’

is her whole self, responding to what she can actually see.

So the second aspect of her practice is to sustain her attention at the point of drawing. “This is exactly like

watching the breath in meditation,” she told me. “My brain wanders off somewhere and I have to bring it gently back to what I can see.” And from this comes an honouring of the being she is drawing, whether still living or, if recently dead, nevertheless containing a spirit of life. She finds this tremendously difficult to speak about, feeling it is easy to sound pretentious. But she tells me of a sense of “welling-up” or “over-rushing” of love for the fragility of the moth, the pathos of the tit dying at the beginning of spring. It is from this meditative honouring that the work itself flows.

Her sister Anna’s practice evolved from experiences several years ago on a course at Schumacher College. “I went to Schumacher with the question, is it valid to do sculpture at this point of time, politically? It was a really genuine, heartfelt question.” The answer came back to her on a walk along the Dart, “Yes, the work can be of service, can be part of the Great Change.”

In some of her work she gathers material from the natural world and incorporates this

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into sculptures of the human form: “I have this image of breathing in and out. I collect this amazing beauty; take these objects to the gallery, to London, and say, ‘Look at this!’ I hope that bringing an appreciation and a love of Nature will help us all.” Some pieces she has cast in bronze, the archetypal sculptural material; in others she chooses to use the material in its natural form, leaving it fragile and for indoors only.

In yet other work she incorporates small bronze human figures into discarded and found manufactured objects to make work with political themes: an early piece showing a figure suspended by one arm from a globe – the rusty lid of an oil drum – is titled *Hanging On*. For this show she is working on *Tree of Life*, a female and a male figure sitting distanced from each other in the branches of a burnt tree, inviting reflection on human relationships, gender, and their natural surroundings. Anna explains: “I can enhance my contact with the beauty of Nature and breathe it into these internal city spaces as a political act; *and* I can express my emotional despair by working with these found objects, through the man hanging on and the desecration of Eden. I can express the two sides of my feelings.”

While their work starts in meditative contact with what arises and what is brought to them, as the work develops there are, of course, decisions to be made at every stage – choice of paper, choice of ink, how to get exactly the right patina on bronze. The artistic process involves an intense interaction between presence with the world, practical skill and aesthetic choices.

Towards the end of our conversation, Anna got up and read from a scrappy piece of paper on her pinboard: “‘Homage, admiration, dwelling and the web of change’. These are Sarah’s words, but they show how our work connects.” She is making seven small female figures, which she feels echo Sarah’s seven close drawings of moths. Each figure will be covered with acorn cups from a different tree, some showing the spiky outside, some the smooth inside. “Look how beautiful they are, and all so different, inside and out! Maybe we can have the two series of seven on opposite walls, both calling attention to difference and beauty.”

The question for both of them is, does a strong ecological message follow from all this careful work?

When I asked Sarah about this she said, “I don’t let it enter my head and heart completely because I am wary of sinking into despair. It is too awful to contemplate. You have to be a bit brave and try and approach it somewhere.” I remember Joanna Macy saying that we can never know the impact of our work on the world. What we can do is choose life. And as Anna says, “My work can be part of the change.” R

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Peter Reason is a writer exploring Nature writing for an ecology in crisis. Sarah and Anna are his nieces. He blogs at [www.peterreason.posterous.com](http://www.peterreason.posterous.com) *Out of the Wood* is at the Beaux Arts Gallery, Bath from 15 October to 12 November 2012. [www.sarahgillespie.co.uk](http://www.sarahgillespie.co.uk) [www.annagillespie.co.uk](http://www.annagillespie.co.uk)



Homage, bronze, edition of 3; 70 x 45 x 63cm by Anna Gillespie [www.annagillespie.co.uk](http://www.annagillespie.co.uk) Photo © Colin Hawkins