

Forest Walk

— *”Hearken to the soughing of that spruce to which your own adobe is rooted”*¹

I’ve always been fascinated by the spruce, whether it be the endless, monotonous rows of them that lull travellers into trances through car windows all over Sweden, or their appearances as subjects or motifs in some unique oeuvre or other. **Ann Böttcher**’s sensitive portraits of spruces, meticulously drawn in the minutest detail, were the first works I came across, and I was equally moved when I subsequently encountered **Carl Fredrik Hill**’s (1849–1911) allegorical self-portrait. A broken tree or a solitary, black spruce would symbolise spiritual distress, despair, and loneliness. Few before him had depicted mental illness and existential anguish so honestly and starkly. He made the trees endure his pains along with him.

I’d like for this exhibition to highlight how we relate to the forest as the biological, alluring, frightening, and mythical environment it is. Spruces, mosses, decay, and fungus. What’s the appeal? Why is it that nothing else alive has the same powerful impact on our human sensibilities that a tree does?

Trees, and spruces in particular, have always been important aspects of Swedish culture. Until the 16th century, when we began to enjoy the comforts of highways and national postal services, the forest was regarded as an entirely wild, unfamiliar, and terrifying place. However, during the Romantic era, which coincided with the emergence of industrialism and large-scale forestry, it came instead to be appreciated as a valuable resource, both spiritualized and attractive. In Rococo art, deciduous trees were favoured as a result of the pastoral natural ideals of the time, but as the 18th century drew to a close, interest in the spruce increased, and subsequently peaked as Romantic Nationalism made its entrance on the scene towards the end of the 19th century. As artist **Ann Böttcher** put it:

”Tall and straight, strong and indomitable, it became the very image of the Swede and the Swedish. In a nation as rich in forests as Sweden, it’s only natural that trees have always been very important. The spruce has held a special, ritual role for a long time. It’s only been a century or so since the old tradition of lining a coffin’s path to the graveyard with

spruces was abandoned. The tips of the trees would be bent towards the church, to keep the spirits of the deceased from turning back. Twigs from spruces would be placed by the corner of the house, to keep evil spirits away.”

We’ve lived in and on our forests, and the spruce has always invoked powerful emotions. This interest peaked during the pre-romantic era, as exemplified by artists such as **Elias Martin** (1739–1818), and later on in romantic nationalism, by the likes of **Gustaf Fjaestad** (1868–1948). Nature and the forest took on a leading role, and the spruce was celebrated as a natural column within the Scandinavian flora. In the 20th century, apart from continuing in its role as a symbol of Scandinavia, the spruce was also used in Second World War propaganda, as a symbol of the Aryan.

The oldest tree in the world is a 10,000-year-old spruce that grows on the Fulufjäll mountain in Dalarna. Just as it was first taking root, the very first depictions of trees began to appear on cave walls in what is now north-eastern Brazil. *Old Tjikko*, as the tree is called, has survived both significantly warmer and colder climates than our present one. The most serious threat the tree faces right now isn’t actually the climate at all, but rather the many tourists who flock to the tree and trample its roots. Is it our intrusive fascination with this tree that will end up causing its demise?

Throughout her career, **Ann Böttcher** has focused almost exclusively on spruces, and drawing and crafts are core elements of her practice. In this exhibition, Böttcher will be showing a new work inspired by **Elias Martin**, which can also be regarded as a continuation of her own great work *Den svenska serien [The Swedish Series]*.

Christine Ödlund has been inspired by the exhibition’s subject, and is participating with the painting *Träsket [The Swamp]* and three watercolours. **Carsten Höller** explores the branch of forest life that belongs exclusively to mushrooms in two new vitrines of fungal specimens. **Johan Thurfjell**’s piece is in part inspired by an accident in the woods near *Tullgarn castle*, and in part by **Erik**

Dahlbergh's classic masterpiece *Suecia antiqua et hodierna*, which was first published in 1667.

Martina Müntzing's painting came about as a result of her own forest walks in the vicinity of her holiday home, *Florida in Småland*. **Goldin+Senneby** continue to find inspiration in the forest, and more specifically in the spruce. Their first series on this subject, *Spruce Time*, which was shown here at CFHILL, literally featured the oldest spruce in the world, *Old Tjikko* as mentioned above. In this second instalment, they explore the scars left in the tree after sap was extracted from it for tar production.

Jeff Olsson will be showing his personal portraits of birds in the woods. **Per Kirkeby**'s (1938–2018) works are often based on intensely executed preparatory studies of nature, as evidenced by the pieces in the exhibition. The tree trunk is a featured, recurring element in both his sculpture and his gouache paintings. **Paloma Varga Weisz** brings her own symbolic universe, based on her personal experiences, to the exhibition. Here, her vision is expressed through four wood and bronze sculptures of varying sizes, as well as a series of drawings based on her own daydreams about forests. **Per Bak Jensen** has established himself as one of Scandinavia's leading photographers, and focuses

especially on nature and woodland environments. His distinctive expression lends his works a timeless quality that is particularly evident in the two large-scale photographs included in this exhibition. **Erik Steffensen** is showing photographic works featuring his usual, characteristic open skies and natural scenes, continuing his ongoing dialogues with the greats of Scandinavian art history and the forest itself alike.

Forest Walk is, ultimately, a celebration of what is perhaps the most significant environment in our world. Once, it was a frightening place for a defenceless human to enter. Losing your way there could mean certain death by predator, starvation, or foul play. Today, we find ourselves having to face the fact that the forests are the only lungs around in our part of the universe, and that we'll most likely share in whatever fate our actions end up determining for it. Art can help us approach these issues and grow wiser.

Footnote: During the age of romantic nationalism, the spruce came to symbolise a sense of national unity. This is the origin of the title of the essay, which was taken from Låsebok för folkskolan and phrased by Zacharias Topelius:[1]