Presented by Latcham Art Centre

Matthew Trueman

voices in a cool wet darkness

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Informed by a background in engineering, woodworking and visual art, Trueman's work for this show includes video, sound, kinetic sculpture, and reclaimed natural materials, which work in concert to present a more-than-human perspective on forest life cycles. voices in a cool wet darkness transforms the gallery with monumental, resonant tree trunks, artworks that move and warble, and a recent video that offers an alternative vantage point on our shared landscape.

Front cover:

Matthew Trueman, still image from *A Walk in the Woods in the Dark*, 2022.

Poetics of transformation & decay

For *voices in a cool wet darkness*, London, Ontario-based artist Matthew Trueman presents a selection of new and recent works that move his artistic investigation of the Southern Ontario landscape toward the immersive, poetic, and multisensorial. Drawing on his educational background in engineering, a career in furniture design, and an artistic inclination toward experimental video and sound, his works merge technology with natural and reclaimed materials.

Stepping into the Art Centre from a cold winter's day, coloured lights bathe the Gallery in a dim, warm glow, revealing four distinct installation areas. Past the reception desk, chipped ash and pine are piled up and spread out, perfuming the air with an earthy scent. To the left, five logs standing vertically at waist height with rough-hewn tops. To the right are four white detergent bottles, cradled atop four mulchy mounds, like birds in heaped nests. These areas outline a path toward the back of the space where wooden cogs are mounted in clusters on the northern wall, emanating from the corner of the Gallery. The final space is delineated by two eight-by-eight-foot moveable walls, that darken the south-eastern corner for a projected video. These four habitats transform the gallery into a futuristic forest glen.

Standing in the centre of Latcham, the artworks material elements sing out against the white architecture. Rich wood contrasts the walls and grey vinyl floor, but sounds literally fill the space: amplifiers vibrate standing logs; the video's drumming and synth-y soundtrack leaks from headphones; and digital chirps and trills add to the hum of the space. One kinetic sculpture even makes analogue wood-on-wood clicks as it moves. Together, the pieces create an environment where humans are not the central actors, revealing the agency of non-humans. The artworks each operate in their own way to complete their functions, similarly to how plants and animals outside the gallery use their own knowledge to contribute to the overarching forest ecosystem. This more-than-human perspective shifts people away from the centre of the environmental conversation by acknowledging the power of non-humans and encouraging efforts for their safekeeping. This view is one that many Indigenous communities embody, but it is increasingly important that settlers also participate. From a white settler perspective, Trueman's work opens a space to wonder, "what could the forest teach us that we might never learn from ourselves?"[1]

Together we glide through time, as the towering cathedral presses us deeper into the earth. At some point, we need to find our own paths, but it's comforting to cross the threshold together.

At the conceptual core of the exhibition is *A Walk in the Woods in the Dark*, a video that highlights a poetic process of transformation and decay. In many forests, like the vast Carolinian Forest that Trueman's video focuses on, these processes are slow and often invisible. However, the artist brings them to light with striking beauty. The work opens with a view of the Carolinian canopy. These woods once spanned from Oshawa to Windsor, between Lake Huron, Lake Erie, and Lake Ontario, but are now patchy and

A view of *voices in a cool wet darknesss*. Photo: Stevie Minacs.

endangered because of urban development. At the forest floor, looking up at fall foliage, the camera pulls viewers into a hollow tree, and then into the soil below. Within these subterranean spaces, root systems of fungi and trees are nourished by once-living things that have been pulled down. Overtop of this journey, Trueman narrates in a way that allows viewers to imagine themselves as a being that is returning to the earth, and crucially, as non-human. Descending underground, you could be a slug or a bird, and in a way it doesn't matter; the processes of transformation and decay touch all beings. To be absorbed by trees, to be food for something greater, is a reminder that we are entwined with nature. As often as many settlers think of themselves as outside of nature, A Walk in the Woods in the Dark helps blur the line between humans and non-humans.

20,000 years ago, a great transformation of this region by ancient, slow-moving glaciers led to the landscape we know today, including Ontario's Greenbelt, the Rouge National Urban Park and the Niagara Escarpment, where ribbons of Carolinian Forest tentatively remain.[2] Small scale transformations happen relatively quicker—a fallen tree can decay to provide a home and nutrients for flora and fauna, who in turn live, die, and contribute to the cycle that supported them—but when the conditions for decay and transformation are abruptly removed, diversity of life can stop. What happens when the processes found in Trueman's video are interrupted? And what happens to the knowledge accumulated by forests for thousands of years? To many, these are top of mind as parts of the Greenbelt are recently reconsidered for land development, even after extensive protections were put in place to stop its erosion.

Some beings have come down here to die. Others fall in by accident, tumbling down a crack deep into the earth. And others, like myself, come down here to listen. At least that's what I thought.

Visible from the Gallery's entryway are five walnut and butternut logs, some tall enough to hug like old friends, standing vertically on a carpet of chipped mulch. *The Echo Keepers* have been mostly stripped of their bark and hollowed out by insects, perhaps animals, and natural decay, though the artist admits to gauging out the core of the stockiest trunk to drop its weight. Some have long cracks that run down their reclaimed bodies, others have portholes where branches used to grow. Out of these pour sounds that are distinct from the general hum of the gallery. They are amplifying a hollow timbre; two of the tallest logs sound like an animal is deep inside, purring and asleep, or a great insect that

is drying out its wings.

Inside three others, their fibrous cores are illuminated by videos. One screen shows water striders skimming across a puddle's surface. The artist reveals that another video is a stop-motion animation of cloud formations, which was projected on his partner's stomach before being re-recorded for the small screen. Consequently, it subtly rises and falls with gentle, living breath. But all the videos and sounds are intentionally abstract and they have long playback loops, so it's unlikely to experience the exact same thing several times.

An echo can mean to repeat, but it can also mean to reiterate or answer—a subtle difference that, in the case of ancient forests,

An installation view of *A Walk in the Woods in the Dark,* 2022. Photo: Stevie Minacs.

allows for necessary change to occur. The videos buried within these sculptures, seemingly below the floor of the Gallery, speak to a deep, reiterative process of growth that has allowed the Carolinian forests to become diverse over time. Though it comprises only one percent of Canada's total land area, the diversity of the ecosystem in Southern Ontario is greater than any other in the country.[3] Here, the echo reverberates sound and light, but also memories of things that have happened, and vague instructions for how to move into the future.

Cicadas that yearn for silence. Fish that yearn to sing. Generations of trees that leap into the sky like birds. Birds that have trained themselves to feed on memories, like plucking fish from a stream

Near Latcham's entrance, small islands of mulch have been carefully piled into nests, apparently by four Bottle Birds. The birds are reclaimed plastic bottles that once held cleaning products, but now serve as amplifiers for sound. Twigs and stick adorn and add structure to their homes. Each of the birds' white bodies contain tiny speakers that play chirps and trills created by Trueman's handmade synthesizer. This device was used to collect inputs from nature, like the sound of a nearby stream or wind rushing through a forest. These were altered by manipulating their frequencies and speeds, and the results are avian, yet technological. This transformation draws on the ways that real birds adapt their own voices. In the rainforests of Australia, a rare lyrebirds can imitate the distinct calls of twenty other birds that it studies, and even non-avian sounds like chainsaws, truck alarms, and camera shutters. In cities, birds sing at different speeds and volumes than in wooded areas to be heard over urban noise.[4] Near Latcham, the Rouge National Urban Park and wooded areas

Bottle Birds, 2022, by Matthew Trueman. Photo: Stevie Minacs.

of Stouffville are home to over 133 different birds, some of which were labeled threatened or having "special concern" by a Natural Environment Background Report, created in November, 2013.[5] The most vocally gifted among them, crows, jays, starlings, mockingbirds and thrashers can learn the songs that their parents teach them, but also the songs of their neighbours and some environmental sounds.

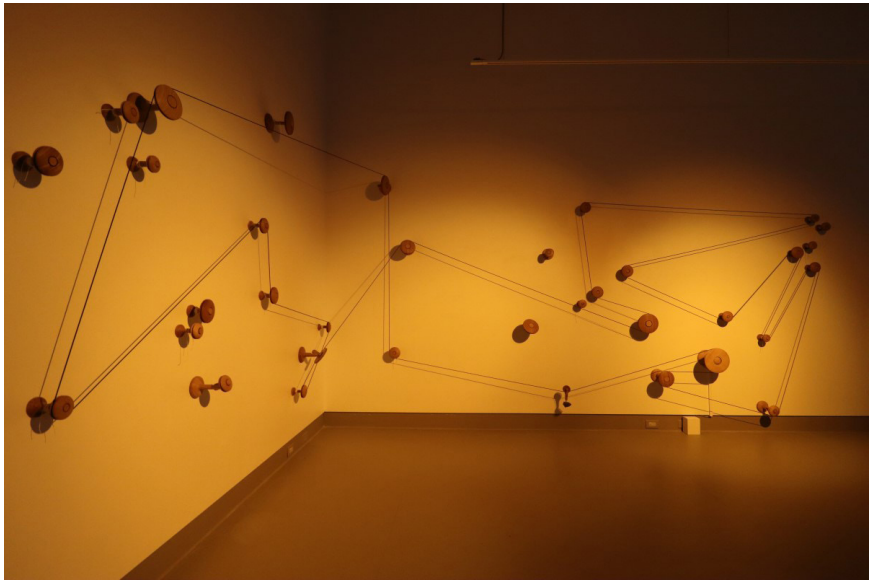
But examples throughout the world of birds transforming their songs goes beyond simple communication. For nature writer and author Jennifer Ackerman, it indicates an understanding of their surroundings and a carrying forward of knowledge through generations. During a conversation at the Aspen Ideas Festival in May 2019, on the topic of The Genius of Birds, the author spoke to the research done by a Brazilian neuroscientist Suzana Herculano-Houzel: "[She] counted the number of neurons in the brains of songbirds and parrots and what she discovered was a real surprise. Bird brains have twice as many neurons as similar sized primate brains, and four times as many neurons as similar sized mammal brains… Now what we've come to understand is this: in the human forebrain 75% of our cortex is devoted to complex cognition. That's things like working, replanning, reasoning, and thinking. About 75% of the bird brain, far from being primitive, is actually cortex-like material, capable of complex cognition."[6]

What this means, Ackerman continued, is that birds may have cognitive skills comparable to our primate relatives. It has been observed that many birds can understand simple principles of cause and effect, communicate in ways that resemble language and they can pass along cultural traditions, whether it's modes of song or styles of tool making, situating them on the same level as many young children in terms of logic and reasoning.

No matter how hot or cold it gets on the surface, the temperature never changes down here. Time all but slows to a stop. It's the perfect place to start something you're not sure your body can finish.

Inquiry into the Melody of the Landscape is a kinetic sculpture that highlights Trueman's background in engineering and ability for woodworking. An initial iteration of this work debuted during 2018 for the artist's Master of Fine Art thesis exhibition, Slower Than Time Itself, at ArtLab, Western University. Then, the work included plastic and aluminum containers, brass, steel, and guitar strings that all made noise at the rough wooden gears pulled nylon string. Now, the work employs an economy of materials: the rough wood, metals and plastics ditched in favour of smooth lumber crafted on a lathe. The result are gears and cogs that are reminiscent of mushrooms, some of which appear to be raising their heads toward the orange light of the Gallery. The cogs are wall-mounted in clusters, and the rope that connects many of them speaks to the mycelium root structure that not only connects fungi, but allows for the transfer of nutrients and information between themselves and other plant organisms. This mutually beneficial relationship is not unique to fungi and trees, but between many of Earth's plants.[7]

Inquiry into the Melody of the Landscape also speaks to the passage of time from a non-human perspective. Unlike the regular ticking of a clock, the artwork's sounds occur haphazardly as the nylon cord turns the gears past miniature wooden tabs. When one gear is being pressed by its wooden tab, tension builds and the cord slows for a short time, before releasing with a click and speeding up again. This slow and irregular timescale may not be suited to our current speed of life, but it does sonically refer to ideas of time that have served flora well for centuries. These systems of transferring energy and knowledge can seem invisible when they move so slowly, and when we continue to centre ourselves in the environmental conversation.



Inquiry into the Melody of the Landscape, 2017-2022, by Matthew Trueman. Photo: Stevie Minacs.

Endnotes:

1 Trueman, Matthew. "A Walk in the Woods in the Dark." Matthew Trueman Artist Website, 2022, www.matthewtrueman.com/#/a-walk-in-the-woods-in-the-dark. Accessed 15 Jan. 2023.

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4 DeWeerdt, Sarah. "It's Not Just Noise That Makes City Birds Sing a Different Tune." *Anthropocene | Innovation in the Human Age*, 2 July 2016, www.anthropocenemagazine.org/2016/05/not-just-noise-makes-city-birds-sing-different-tune. Accessed 15 Jan. 2023.

5 Natural Resource Solutions Inc., and Katharina Walton. *Community of Stouffville Secondary Plan Amendment. Phase 3 Lands Natural Environment Background Report.* Proj. No 1433, Natural Resource Solutions Inc., Nov. 2013.

6 Lichtman, Flora, host, with Jennifer Ackerman, guest. "The Remarkable Brain of the Bird." *Aspen Ideas To Go*, The Aspen Institute, 21 May 2019, www.aspenideas.org/podcasts/the-remarkable-brain-of-the-bird.

7 University of California, Davis, and Annie Chen. "Underground Fungi-Plant Communication Network." *The Aggie Transcript*, 24 July 2020, aggietranscript.ucdavis.edu/the-wood-wide-web-underground-fungi-plant-communication-network. Accessed 15 Jan. 2023.

About the Artist

Matthew Trueman is an artist based in London, Ontario. He works primarily in sculpture, site-responsive installation, and video exploring Western culture's relationship with the landscape through technology. Trueman received his Master of Fine Art from Western University. In 2021, his work was included in the group exhibition Written on the Earth, for which there was an accompanying catalogue, at McIntosh Gallery (London, ON). His recent series of site-responsive installations, Instruments for Landscapes: Black Rocks, was the recipient of the 2019 Environmental Award at Ocean Alliance in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Trueman has had previous exhibitions at DNA Artspace (London, ON), McMaster Museum of Art (Hamilton, ON), Thames Art Gallery (Chatham, ON) and Museum London for Nuit Blanche. His photographic works have been published in So Long South Street by Huron and Erie Press.

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Latcham Art Centre inspires the community to engage with visual art through exhibitions of contemporary art and education programs including classes, workshops, artist talks and tours. It is funded by donations, sponsorships, membership and fundraising events as well as annual grants from the municipality of Whitchurch-Stouffville and the Ontario Arts Council.

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