

## For About 100,000 Years, Nothing Happened

Inspired, no doubt, by the palaeontological, palaeobotanical, and deep-time dispositions and methods inherent in both Uriel Orlow's *Forest Futurism*, as well as his and my conversations around it—the following reflections are shared as stratified, accumulated layers of interpretation. In the face of this, I would subtly, and as gently as I may, suggest that these layers, from the most intimate to the most remote, are always all there at the same time, co-present to one another, nested within or resting atop one another. Much in the way we live in this life, but also, in other lives; in this time, but also, we have been of other times; in this body, but also—with and through other bodies.

### Reading Stones like Tree Rings

Orlow's research-led, multidisciplinary projects know no edges, and so *Forest Futurism*, in this spirit, articulates itself seamlessly from image to object, from text to film. But it appears that much of the energy that still powers it, and that organized the logic of much of the film's script, emanated from a conversation with a palaeobotanist, somewhere in the mouth of an ancient volcano, somewhere in the vicinity of the Dolomites.

It's a strange landscape, this one. We are in ancient, beyond-ancient times. A breathtaking beauty, the dance of green, stone, and a sunlight so sharp, so clear, that here and there one almost gets the sense that it is shaping matter itself, not just revealing it. Those mountains were ocean, back in the day, and wherever you turn (I remember this from childhood), you find fossilized sea creatures just waiting to tell a story. It is no wonder that a palaeobotanist, in a place like this, is its wisdom-keeper. The film, as the project, begins here: children's fingers tracing fossilized remains of ancient conifers, while they recount with careful precision ancient, dramatic climate-change events; the end of the ice age, the emergence of tree species 280 million years ago; their morphological choices, responsive to the terrain they established themselves in.

Throughout, the film's script maintains an element of factuality, grounded in the artist's conversation with the palaeobotanist. At times, the script soberly sticks with the facts. Yet something fugitive is at play in the didactics of *Forest Futurism*, unlocked through the central section of the film, where intergenerational and interspecies pedagogy take the place of institutionalized schooling. This is why the film's protagonists, a group of children, who voice the script and capture the camera's eye, demonstrate a careless ease and freedom in their actions and movements, one I found myself wincing at every few minutes, expecting disaster. Bare feet on sticks and stones; handfuls of foraged leaves eaten most carelessly. I catch myself wanting to shore them up from danger. I remember the acrid yet delicious, vinegary taste of the leaves they are foraging. Somewhere, they are stored in the past of my own childhood. It had never occurred to me then, that I may accidentally grab and eat the wrong one, poison myself.

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But these are forest-school children, they know the place better than any of us, anxious onlookers. The relationship between them and their surroundings is tactile, embodied, visceral—which is what makes it almost startling when their voices return to recount, almost formally, insights into ancient climate change, plant adaptation, resilience, transformation, and present risk. In the face of the great unravelling, heralded by their dispassionate voices, their physical presence rests in fecund and aesthetic abundance. Honoring their industrious ease, the camera follows like a faithful disciple, attending a new kind of school.

To this dyad between aesthetic abundance and didactic precision, Orlow adds a third element which, like any good three-body problem, seeds imbalance within the structuring system of *Forest Futurism*: a manifesto, presented in the form of a Greek choir-like arrangement of children's voices, placed elsewhere in the project's installation, describes a vegetal and vital metaphysics rooted in the excesses afforded by plant exuberance, as well as a human disposition that, in attending to what the forest has to teach, is better equipped to steward change with wisdom: "The forest guides us through light and shades of green" / "The forest is a toolbox of survival, evolved through a history of disasters."

### All That Remains in the Changing Seasons

The initial, palaeobotanically-inflected passage in *Forest Futurism*'s film has set it all up. We can peer into the deep past through forest fossil. Observing the emergence of new species evolved through this "history of disasters" gives us an insight into what adaptations may be awaiting in the future of landscapes and species. Climate-modelling cut-in sequences demonstrate how forest ecosystems may transform in the face of the current changes. So far, so

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good: a window into the deep past is a teacher that prepares us for the future. But if changes over several million years are now taking place within a human's single lifetime, what exactly can one see of this future, and what, on this Earth, can one do about it?

We've all counted the rings of a tree; each ring is an adaptation. Each year a loss, a creation, a gain. It's a small moment of alchemical revelation, to a child, to understand time as something that can be traced with a finger (time as space, time as touch). Yet it is precisely through the generations, elders and children, that we humans experience our own tree rings: time as something that exceeds the length of a life; the connection between generation are just another weave, bearing witness to the change of a season.

Seasons are a powerful metonym for paradigmatic change, and in *Forest Futurism*, the kids' summer ease cuts to scenes of melting ice and snow at the end of winter, echoing the descriptions of ice ages that have come and gone within this geography, over millions of years. With each thaw, new emergences in non-human form have taken root in the soil, adapting to sodden and rocky ground alike, according to need.

If we think of animals and plants, we often witness a kind of preparation, an evolutionary dance between weather and choice, where the very first hints of a changing season prompt the withdrawal of nutrients from leaves; the springing up of shoots and buds; the storing of food and fat; the creation of burrows and nests. In the face of transformation, more-than-human beings may not know what lies ahead, but doubtlessly they know how to prepare for it. That, of course, is what makes heartbreaking news, when entire species' migration or pollinating rhythms are thrown off-course by a false start or a protracted end in today's disturbed, fickle, angry weather.

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As we witness the children in the film interact with the forest, it is difficult not to see in them, and through them, and in ourselves, a signal of the end of something; the change of a season, brought about by environmental breakdown, and happening so quickly that we have failed to develop the emotional, cognitive or narrative faculties to tell the story as it happens—to bear witness to it mindfully. But isn't this what art, what culture, is here to do? To encode and store, to prepare and remember. To equip and digest, processing, in much the same way that matter does to matter, time through inexorable time.

### This Place That Is and Is Not, the Outside

As the artist himself noted when discussing *Forest Futurism*, the forest stands in for a place of lawlessness in many a Western tradition. Encoded in fairytales, and reified with the organization of governance from the Middle Ages onwards, highwaymen and -women, secret witchy loners and societies, strange semi-human beings, erotic excesses—all site themselves in the clearings and shaded hiding spots created by and within forest ecosystems. The forest, in these stories, is where evil parents abandon their unwanted children; dangers lurk in abundance. Mythologies hold leafy figures, green knights, fairies, goblins, monsters, all made bright by luscious color and lascivious behavior.

In this vision, the forest is also the place where the organization of the state breaks down, or is unable to hold itself together. In fact, as James C. Scott reminds us in *Seeing Like a State* (1998), the establishment of state control and the management of forest ecosystems develops side-by-side. It is as though the city-state builds and holds itself up by externalizing the chaotic abundance of the forest. In the outskirts of the citadel, forest landscapes become

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“the rural”: a patchwork of monocultural tree plantations for extraction, and vast expanses of food crops and pasture. Living in the UK, it is almost impossible to even find a forest anymore (one that wasn’t artificially replanted to adorn the aristocracy’s backyards in the Victorian age, that is).

In the face of this—the coordination of the establishment of “law” and the taming of the forest—the children in *Forest Futurism* embody anarchic self-organization: they work, eat, run, rest in these landscapes in ways that suggest that they are following more-than-human practice far more keenly than any human-imposed management of the landscape. *Forest Futurism* suggests an alternative, reparative relationship between humans and more-than-human beings, one in which power dynamics purposefully break down, and it is no longer clear which Earth being is acting as the custodian of which, exactly.

To that end, the film’s multilingualism extends beyond the evident presence of German and Italian in the script—to encompass a kind of “forest literacy” displayed by the children, an interconnection that is all the more compassionate and moving as one of the last scenes in the film unfolds. As it nears its closing, a girl listens out for the inner flows and rivers of a tree, ear to trunk, in a return of the haptic that recalls the touch-led knowing of the root fossils at the beginning, that tracing as though roots were tree rings. A splendidly mysterious way of telling time by making touch, of bearing witness to the changing seasons.

The question presents itself to me unprompted: “What is she listening for?”, and I recognize that in this question there are two, very different, worldings taking place. On the one hand: what is she listening for—as in, for what reason? What is the scientific, utilitarian, mappable, and catastrophically human explanation for this gesture, in

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this place? But on the other hand, a rogue thought also asks, what is she *listening out* for: what is coming, in these changing times, that is such that, only in intimate closeness, it may reveal itself to us, if only imperfectly, and impermanently?

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