

...the rest  
is smoke  
HELEN SEAR

**Review by Rory Duckhouse**

Helen Sear  
...the rest is smoke  
Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, Venice  
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Representing Wales in Venice and presented by Ffotogallery, Helen Sear's new body of works ...*the rest is smoke* looks at ideas of mortality and temporality. Rooted in the familiar Welsh landscape, the work responds to the church of the Santa Maria Austrilatrice and the context of the Venice Biennale.

Venice is built on a marshland lagoon, it is made up of 118 islands separated by an intricate canal system and linked through a series of bridges. It is this context that Sear's work references. The video piece *The Beginning and End of Things* shows a hyper realistic warping series of trees that flow like the surface of water as you look down upon it. The effect reverses the position of the viewer as they stand in this city, built upon wood.

Wood as a material is the focus of ... *the rest is smoke*, merging the Welsh landscape with the historical location. In the video piece *Company of Trees* a girl in a red dress circles around a tree, the dress acting as a curtain. The image of the girl is interspersed with images of the landscape and trees numbered which count down from 83, the age of Sear's mother to 1. The seasons change throughout the video, moving from a pastoral spring to a snow capped winter, as the countdown gets closer to 1, the pace quickens, and the sound changes from a peaceful birdsong to industrial machinery.

*Company of Trees* looks at the human impact on landscape as the trees marked for felling will be used for human consumption, but also explores the forest as a magical space. In British folklore the forest becomes an enchanted space and Sear harnesses this in her video works. The meshing of figure and landscape layers the scene into one view, the idea of figure and foreground are eroded so we view one space, encapsulating the human figure into the landscape.

As the video counts down and the seasons change, it's hard not to consider your own mortality. Before the invention of clocks and the Gregorian calendar, trees would become markers for time, as the John Berger quote adorning the wall states "The company they offer is spatial, and it is a way of counting, of measuring. Long

before any numerals or mathematics, when human language was first naming the world, trees offered their measure – of distance, of height, of space”<sup>i</sup>.

The relationship to the Santa Maria Austilatrice is furthered in *Altar*. An artificial landscape is created using two rocks and birdseed for a series of blue tits to inhabit. As you watch the video, the birdsong from *Company of Trees* bleeds throughout the space. The space created is outside of our human comprehension, it seems as if the birds inhabit a different world, the tarpaulin backdrop separates them from a recognisable landscape, all we are shown is the artificial landscape of two rocks and birdseed for their drama to unfold. As they take up centre stage, first as one, then more appear they create this beautiful dance that is realised poetically in Sear’s video.

You can estimate the age of a tree by counting the rings on its trunk, in *Stack*, felled logs are presented with the cross section of the cut tree facing the camera. Presented on aluminium boards, the 32 pieces restore the trees to their original upright position. The temporality of the tree is revealed and its relation to human consumption is exposed. The display on the aluminium references the chainsaw used to cut it down and the strips appear as floorboards, or construction materials, potential uses for this material.

Andrea Mantegna was an early inspiration for Sear since her time at art school and *Caetara Fumus* directly references his painting of St Sebastian. One of Mantegna’s three St Sebastian paintings resides in the Ca d’Oro in Venice, another reference to the city. In Sear’s homage, the arrows that pierce St Sebastian are replaced by roots from a rapeseed field close to her home in Monmouthshire. The light box emanates a yellow glow that reveals the phrase *nihili nisi divinum stabila est. Caetara fumus* on the opposite wall. The acid yellow of the rapeseed field replaces the body of St Sebastian, with its roots overlaid onto it creating a sense of three-dimensionality. The field and roots present a sense of time, life and re-growth.

In Mantegna’s St Sebastian painting, this phrase *nihili nisi divinum stabila est. Caetara fumus* is painted on a scroll above an extinguished candle in the lower right hand corner, it translates as “Nothing is Stable if not divine. The rest is smoke”, and it is from this phrase that the show derives its title. Past its connotation to mortality, ...*the rest is smoke* also refers to illusion which is inherently embedded in photographic practice. Sear’s work doesn’t so much look at the landscape she is photographing but embeds layers onto it, layers that look at the landscape but look past its immediate beauty to talk of something else.

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<sup>i</sup> John Berger and our faces, my heart as brief as photos (1992)