

AMANDA BATES

By Tim Saunders

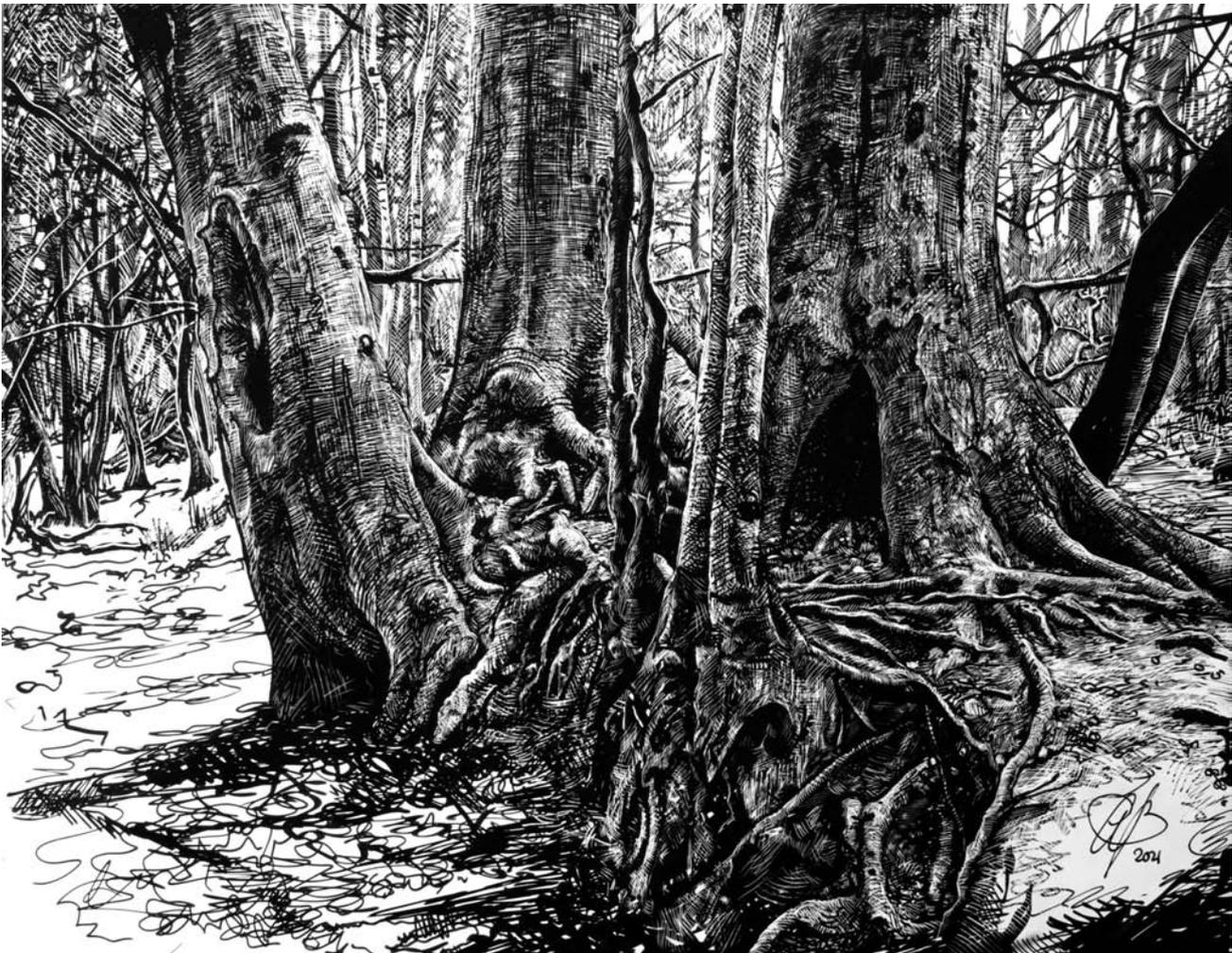
Trees prompted Amanda Bates' move from palette knives and oil paint to pen and ink. "A particular group of beech trees at Avebury were responsible for this switch," says British artist Amanda, who grew up in a house called Haere Mai, which she understands to mean 'Welcome' in Maori.



"Growing on top of the henge (earthen bank), their intertwined roots have been exposed by soil erosion, caused by a combination of weathering and visitors feet. The resultant lattice is fascinatingly ornate and well beyond the scope of my knife work. Brushes didn't seem to hold the answer either; the magic that I was reaching for didn't seem to be present in a realistic depiction. I tried several approaches, including a diversion into a stylised use of colour that took on a life of its own for a while but it wasn't until I reached back in time for my pen and its promise of crisply

rendered detail, that I realised that colour itself might be the problem. It seems to be well known among photographers that a sharp monochrome photograph will show detail better than any colour photograph could. The reason for this has nothing to do with any inherent superiority of black and white film over colour; it holds true in digital photography. It is simply that colour distracts the eye from detail and it seems that our brains can only cope with so much visual information at a time.

And so now ink is Amanda's preferred medium. "It is essentially a writing medium that tells stories. I like the crisp



'Fairy houses'



'Roadside'

DEMONSTRATION



'Catch me if I fall'



'Firmanent'



'Galleon'

simplicity of pen and ink. Marks can be precise and unambiguous, allowing me to pick out details - or to give the impression of detail. I tend to follow tradition and use ink as a largely monochrome medium, usually black and white; a satisfying contrast. I like the echoes of print, of old illustrations, of handwritten or calligraphic texts that this recalls. Part of this is the narrative effect, part of it is a fondness for these traditions and a desire to remain in touch with them while developing a contemporary art practice. I like the way that restricting colour helps to define form."

Amanda starts by seeking out interesting trees, which involves a combination of online research and plenty of walking. "The best subjects are not always the feature trees that I read about, but unexpected discoveries in the hedge. I take lots of photographs. I'm quite fussy about keeping the focal length close to that of the human eye. Sometimes I take multiple shots that I will collage together later to get the required effect of presence at close quarters.

"Trees are natural storytellers, slowly recording the history of their lives. You don't have to cut a tree down and count the growth rings in order to read some of this history; it's there in the twists, scars and distortions, the same twists, scars and distortions in which we often see fantastic faces and figures.

"In most cases, I launch straight into the drawing with ink. I draw quickly, building the drawing up from the initial lines that indicate position. If I'm working on kaolin, I will block out the dark areas, knowing that I will work back into them later with the scraper tool. If I'm working on paper, I work from light to dark.

"I usually add colour, if I'm using it, to reserved areas after the main black and white work is done. I use coloured ink neat or diluted as required, with pens, fingers (smudging wet ink to thin it and so lighten the colour), and occasionally brushes. I usually do any colour mixing on the drawing surface."

There is no set routine for Amanda. "I usually draw - one way or another - every day. This might be as part of a studio drawing or it might be a sketch, either from life or as an idea."

"The tree drawings have been good to me," she says. "My work has been shown by the Discerning Eye (2020), the Society for Graphic Fine Arts (2021) and the Society of Women Artists (2021). Normally these would all have been major London shows but, due to the pandemic, only the SGFA exhibition was held in a real space."

Rather than following the conventional path of attending art school and becoming an artist, Amanda took "a couple of science degrees and worked as a technical author". However, destiny was calling and after studying A-level art at night school and a selection of art history courses at the Open University, she started painting in oils using a knife. "By 2015 I had quit my job and joined the local Open Studios," she recalls.

The hills became her inspiration. "A few years previously we had moved with our very young family

to Kingsclere, a village in the North Hampshire Downs (close to Watership Down), England," she says. "When the children were old enough for school, I was able to spend some time by myself walking the hills and painting en plein air. I was using oils at the time, applied undiluted with a palette knife." This was a useful strategy for Amanda's plein air work, and worked well for the subject, "with broad sweeps of thick paint evoking the solidity of the Downs". "Having to get back in time for the end of school encouraged me to work quickly," she smiles.

Nowadays, Amanda's inspiration comes from trees. "They are very much like people, albeit without the complications," she says. "They stand upright, as do we; they have character and personality, and often congregate in groups and are capable of communication via an underground mycorrhizal network. I find them to be a calm, comforting presence, and they are also remarkably useful, supplying oxygen, shelter, construction materials and food, among other things. They have a great deal of visual

appeal and interest; I love the intricate convolutions of exposed tree roots; the simple repetitive complexity of branches and leaves.

Thinking and reading play an important part in the creative process. "I like to know about things - their history, their users and meanings, their potential. I take great delight in coincidence and notional associations (such as that between narrative and ink). Sometimes this knowing feeds into the artwork or provides a title. It also helps me to select subjects and to find examples."

During 2022 Amanda has a number of events planned, including the Surrey Spring Contemporary Arts Fair, two lots of Open Studios and a number of local exhibitions. "I will continue to submit to Open Exhibitions and I have several thoughts on expanding and improving my practice," she says.

"I'm quite excited at the moment by the potential of finding and exploiting pattern in my work. This follows on from a side project last year on Persian design and woodland flora."

www.amandabatesart.co.uk 



'Flint'



'Deep dark wood'



'Ankerwycke'



'Inclination'