

PRESS RELEASE

ABIGAIL NORRIS

AMYDST THE MUTTREN TREES: THE LYTYLLE PLANT BEIST DOTH ROREN



Opening 1 March – 4-6pm | Exhibition 2 March 2023 – 4 April 2023
the ARTIST’S GARDEN
on the roof of Temple Tube, Temple Place, London WC2R 2PH

theCoLAB presents Abigail Norris’s *AMYDST THE MUTTREN TREES, THE LYTYLLE PLANT BEIST DOTH ROREN*, her first foray into outdoor public sculpture. As winner of the Royal College of Art/Yorkshire Sculpture Park Graduate Award 2022, Norris is artist in residence at ‘The Artist’s Garden’, a vast but secret half-acre raised space above Temple tube station between Strand and the Thames, brought back into use as an open-air public space for contemporary art by women artists.

Since December 2022, Norris has been *AMYDST THE MUTTREN TREES* listening to the Thames lapping at the shoreline as the easterly trade wind mutters through the treetops that encircle this huge elevated space. This wind and this river have long been a trade route carrying goods, riches and stories back and forth. Overseas trading was at its height between the seventeenth century, when the site of the Artist’s Garden was Lord and Lady Arundel’s sculpture garden, to the nineteenth century, when Sir Joseph Bazalgette built the Victoria Embankment and the current roof of Temple station over the metropolitan railway and his sewer system, which resolved London’s ‘Great Stink’.

Vessels departed from London to reach distant shores, their bulk and cargos increasing as the technology of ropemaking developed to make longer stronger rope, enabling the vessels to anchor further and further off the coastlines of increasingly remote locations across the world, extending the often deleterious reach of colonisation. The majority of this rope was made, then and now, at Chatham Dockyards Ropery in Kent. This is the very rope which Norris uses in her work: its coir uncoiled and rewilded with the visitors who sat with her, exchanged stories and prepared the constituents for an extraordinary work which encapsulates distance, time and imagination: *THE LYTYLLE PLANT BEIST DOTH ROREN*.

Norris’s first outdoor sculpture is the ethereal confluence of myth, material and time, arising from associations with the site. She makes corporeal that which cannot exist except in imagination, where it feeds on its own uncanny nature, on darkness and elusiveness. Her work is informed by readings of a strange medieval story known as the ‘Vegetable Lamb of Tartary’ which tells of a mythical creature, a kind of zoophyte being, both animal and plant that has circulated from East to West for over 300 years. The story is thought to have appeared as cotton trading emerged: sailors brought stories of a lamb being born out of a plant (the unfamiliar cotton plant resembles lamb’s wool) also known as the Borametz, which ‘arises from the earth/Upon a stalk is fixed a living brute./A rooted plant bears quadruped for fruit./It has a fleece, nor does it want for eyes,/And from its brows two woolly horns arise...’. Born of fear of this strange plant and its potential, it taps into our subconscious fear or perhaps primordial knowledge, of the overlap of plant and beast. *THE LYTYLLE PLANT BEIST* does not, however, instil fear, but feels wondrously familiar as its roots rise, intertwining with the tree branches, bearing its lamb pods. The ‘BEIST’ bears a message, it ‘*DOTH ROREN*’. Its roar ask whether our disregard of the medieval world view of our interconnectedness with the planetary systems, knowing our place within the cosmos with our bodies as ‘porous and fluid partners of the plant and the rock’ has led to our current era of instability and disconnect.

Norris has an unusual affinity with the material world. Her works are made with her own hands, slowly and consciously, embracing slow and methodical processes which create intimacy between body and material, ‘allowing the

rational mind to bring seemingly unrelated matter together, like a coagulation of ideas, knitting and binding thoughts and experience'. These processes create time in which to consider the relationships between the philosophical, psychological and historically deep and entangled relationship between animals, plants and humans. For the artist, 'the act of making is the most gentle and yet defiant act of care and repair, and anti-capitalism'. She believes that the violent encounters of colonialism, such as Clive of India's incursion into Bengal with the East India Company and the famine which took three million lives, should be treated not as past and absent occurrences, but present and tangible sites of grief. They are wounds and scars which can be transformed into sites of remembrance. In this way, the use of coir brings events and stories that have been treated as other back into the present time and place.

Jung's thoughts expressed in 1919 inhabit her work rise from The Artist's Garden, "*a universal belief in phantoms or ethereal beings who dwell in the neighbourhood of humans and who exercise an invisible yet powerful influence upon them. These beings are genuinely thought to be the spirits or souls of the dead*".

Exhibition

Public Opening | 1 March – 4-6pm | Tea, cake and conversation | All Welcome

Open daily from 8am with seasonal closing times at dusk, free and open to all

The Artist's Garden, Temple Station Roof Terrace, Temple Place, London WC2R 2PH

Norris welcomes visitors to the Artist's Hut every Tuesday and Wednesday (strikes permitting) from 11am – 5pm

Temple or Embankment Underground Station

Entry via stairs on Temple Place, a few minutes' walk from the Strand, next to Somerset House.

Notes for Editors

About the RCA/YSP Graduate Award

Established in 2015, the RCA/YSP Graduate Award offers vital support at the critical transition stage from being a student to independent artist. This builds on YSP's long-standing commitment to supporting artists at every stage of their career. The award is bespoke to each recipient and establishes long-term relationships and opportunities. Helen Pheby (YSP) and Claire Mander (theCoLAB) selected Abigail Norris as recipient of the award.

About Abigail Norris

Following a 20-year career in filmmaking, Norris (b. 1970) embraced a lifelong ambition to study an MA in fine art sculpture at the Royal College of Art, where she graduated this summer. Tipped as 'one to watch', Waldemar Januszczak in The Sunday Times, described her work as "a powerful lament to the despoliation of nature". Norris's work is unashamedly raw and jarring, exploring themes around loss and repair. Her work centres around concepts of death, transcendence, absence, and presence; with a subplot to interrupt the habitual assumptions of everyday life. Moving between figurative and abstract forms, she explores the entangled relationship between humans and other living beings and she continues to develop a large scale body of work 'In the Nightside Garden'. This is a metaphorical garden that is fertile. Within the garden exists all that is absent and othered from western culture, it is a place that subsists in opposition to the hierarchical philosophies of Enlightenment and to that of the Great Chain of Being. It is a place where Schelling's philosophical stance 'the human mind is nature manifested into consciousness in order to observe itself' holds as a central theme. This is a place for interspecies kinship, magical realism and where psychosocial hauntings appear as animals, hybrid beings and mythical creatures.

About the Artist's Garden

The Artist's Garden was a neglected public space, reclaimed as a platform for women artists and launched in 2021. Built by Sir Joseph Bazalgette in 1870 as part of Victoria Embankment to resolve the 'Great Stink', it is thought to be on the site of Lord and Lady Arundel's seventeenth century garden where they displayed England's first classical sculpture collection. The 1,400 sqm space is invisible from street level and reached by well-worn steps at the top of which a massive space opens up, offering spectacular views from the Houses of Parliament to Tate Modern. The Artist's Garden opened in October 2021 with Lakwena's 'Back in the Air: a Meditation on Higher Ground'. Growing organically and overlaying the first, the second major commission by Heywood & Condie, 'Through the Cosmic Allotment' explores plant human communication through landscapes installed in four greenhouses exploring aspects of our cosmic understanding of landscape.

'The Artist's Garden' is realised in close partnership with Westminster City Council and this commission is supported by private philanthropists. With thanks to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Royal College of Art, WSP UK, and with kind permission of LUL/Transport for London. The Artist's Garden and its collaboration with RCA/YSP will continue until the end of 2025.

For more information, images or to arrange an interview please contact info@thecolab.art and visit www.thecolab.art