

Susannah Rose

Birch Encounters

My initial question when joining the LiLa fieldwork in Umeå was how I could connect my experience of the forest “where I live” in Scotland to the forest in Sweden. While researching the geography and history of Umeå, I came across information about the fire in Umeå in 1888 and the subsequent planting of over 5,000 birch trees to protect the city from fire. Birch trees contain 50% water (Sindu, 2018). The story gave me a branch to grasp onto, and the birch tree became the connecting thread between Scotland and Sweden.



My artistic practice is concerned with human and more-than-human interactions. As Ingold suggests, “dwelling in the world, we do not act upon it, nor do we do things to it, rather we move along with it” (2000, p. 201)

With the forest as a focus, my attention was drawn to the senses and how the smell and taste of a forest can connect us to subconscious memory and knowledge and invoke care. Haskel suggests:

“Aroma arrives in our bodies first, as deeply felt bodily remembrance and affect. Our brains later add a veneer of language and conscious perception, but this is literally an afterthought” (2023, p. 109).

Birch Encounters – Scotland

In Scotland, only 1% of our ancient forest remains (Trees for Life, 2023). I felt shock and grief for the loss of our native woodlands.

In our LiLa seminars, we learnt about the rich forest culture of the Arctic North through conversations with artists who still had generational links and knowledge of practices of indigenous Sami culture. It made me realise how much has been lost in Scotland – our forest culture had disappeared with the forest.

*Figure 1. Tapping for birch sap. Discovering my taskscape through interactivity. Listening for the rising sap with a stethoscope.
Image: Susannah Rose, 2023.*

As Rawlence said, “Our place has always been at the edge of the forest, with a relationship to it” (2002, p. 98).

I tapped birch trees for sap in my garden and the forest near my home – sharing with friends the gift from the tree and the new energy of spring. I felt enlivened while foraging moss from the forest floor beneath the birch trees and drying it. Walking in the forest, I collected chips from a birch tree felled by a “beaver”. I then wove a ball of birch chips and honeysuckle. Beavers were reintroduced in Scotland in 2017 after becoming extinct over a hundred years ago and are a keystone species in improving habitats. Using these bark chips felt like a positive offering from our depleted forests.



Figure 2. Birch trees growing along the edge of oak woods, I gathered moss from beneath the birch trees for the birch pillow of Scotland. Image: Susannah Rose, 2023.

Smelling the Forests – Sweden

I decided to take some of the Scottish birch forest to Sweden, burn it at the LiLa residency as a performance

and share the scent of the Scottish forest. In Sweden, I made a similar-sized ball of birch and plants collected in the forest at Högklinten. On the last day at Nordingra, we sat and smelled the burning of the Scottish forest and the Swedish forest. The intermingling of smells was an invitation to invoke memory and give thought to the precarity of forests as the climate warms and forest fires become more widespread.



Figure 3. The aroma of two birch forests. The balls of wood were collected from Scotland and Sweden. Image: Susannah Rose, 2023.



Figure 4. Smelling the forest aromas with my colleagues in Sweden as we burned the woodballs. Image: Mari Parpala, 2023.



Figure 5. Removing bark with a knife from a washed-up birch log at Rostigan on the High Coast of Sweden. Image: Mari Parpala, 2023.



Figure 6. Getting to know birch bark through play and gathering to bring home to Scotland. Image: Mari Parpala, 2023.

Encounters With Birch Bark - Sweden

During my fieldwork at Rostigan on the High Coast in Sweden, I encountered a washed-up birch log. Borrowing a knife—a new tool for me. I learnt to cut the bark from the tree, prising off the scoured flaking outer to rich burnt sienna – the colour a clue to the tannins found in birch bark. I felt like I was skinning an animal and extracting material for further use. I felt okay practising on a felled tree. It looked like it had been logged and rolled off a vessel in the Gulf of Bothnia.

I explored the bark making small sculp-

tures, getting to know the material. I gathered some birch strips and brought them home to Scotland. They were a physical reminder of the precious experience of sharing and friendship in Sweden, where I encountered a shared concern for the sustainability of our planet, forest cultures and disappearing knowledge.

I wanted to remember the birch journeys stitching together this shared concern with artists I met through LiLa. I decided to make a birch pillow of care—a place to rest and remember the smell of the forest and consider the precarity of forests as the climate warms.

Dyeing With Birch Bark – Scotland

I soaked the birch bark I had brought back from Sweden from the High Coast with beaver chips from Scotland. Adding water to a tree that was used in Umeå as protection because of its high water content. The same tree that had given me its water in the form of a “sap” in the spring.

Scouring and mordanting rhubarb leaves from my garden, I prepared the cloth. Drying it under the birch tree in my garden.

Weeks later, when heating the bark, the smell of the forest rose in steamy swirls from my jam-making pot. The cloth cooked in the stew, and I imagined myself back in Sweden.

A Birch Pillow of Care

The dyed cloth is the delicate pink of birch; it smells like



Figure 7. I used a sketchbook during the LiLa residency in Sweden, collecting sensory encounters and through material, words and drawings. Image: Susannah Rose, 2023.

a forest. I sewed the birch-dyed cloth into a pillow to rest and remember the forest and all that it gives us and the role it plays in maintaining our planet’s equilibrium. Drawing attention to how small temperature changes can have huge consequences for ecosystems. The cloth changing colour from white to pink through the dyeing process of heating the birch bark reflects this change.

The pillow is filled with moss I collected from the forest floor beneath the birch, which grows at the edge of Atlantic oakwoods in Argyll near my home in Scotland. The birch grows near the edge of the forest, between the

oaks and the open hill and farmland. I wonder if it is protecting oakwood in some way.

The birch tree is a pioneer species, the first to take root after the ice retreats. It was the first tree to take root in Scotland after the last ice age. The boreal forest will be the last forest on Earth. Human-induced climate change is causing rising temperatures in the Arctic and the treeline is moving north, shrinking the tundra. As Rawlence explained, “The downy birch dictates the terms of what can grow, survive, and move in the areas in which it takes hold. And that range is expanding fast as the Arctic heats up” (2002, p. 53). Eventually, it may be too warm for birch to flourish in Scotland.

The birch pillow of care will travel to Sweden to Umeå. A memory from Scotland of birch journeys and a sharing of stories and connections made through care for the forest.

References

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Figure 8. Birch-dyed cloth drying under the birch tree in my garden in Scotland – it has a sweet woody smell. Image: Susannah Rose, 2023.