

## **A Human Take on Nature's Wonders** by Jack Mottram (2007)

Two shows opened at Aberdeen Art Gallery last night, and both are concerned with the natural world and our relationship to it.

First come Dalziel + Scullion, with a long, engrossing video work, *Some Distance From The Sun*, that traces the evolution of plant life over the millennia, from the primitive seaweeds to complex flowers. Botanical samples float across the screen against a stark white background, shot in close up, so that any sense of scale slips away, turning the tiniest lichens into a forest of trees. The soundtrack, by Glasgow musician Mark Vernon, gurgles, burbles and hums, an attempt to recreate the sounds of growth, of life itself.

Movement is key here. The slowly panning camera suggests both inexorable evolutionary progression and the physical movement of plants, as fern fronds unfurl and seed pods pop. It's a simple piece, but one that it is easy to become lost in, absorbed by this careful presentation of natural forms, which Dalziel + Scullion have not only documented, but transformed, allowing the plants to tell the story of their own development.

In the next room is *Unknown Pines*, a suite of six prints, showing, in hyper-real detail, a short section of tree trunk. They are, technically, superb images - every last knot and crack stands out, a weeping ooze of sap glistens and the tiniest crenellation on a scrap of surface bark demands attention. There is, if not quite a polemical edge to these works, then a political one. Dalziel + Scullion are explicitly attempting to alter the way their audience engages with the natural world.

Each of the pines is labelled with its common name and its Latin classification, but in lavishing attention of their subjects, Dalziel + Scullion look past the colloquial naming, the hierarchical scientific ordering, the imposition of human ownership through naming, and focus on the trees themselves. In effect, these works are portraits, and Dalziel + Scullion are - though I suspect they might take issue with the word - humanising the pines.

At this point, though, the duo are hoist by their own petard. Their aim is to do away with the casual, dismissive human view of nature and replace it with a closer, more personal appreciation, but, in this near-fetishistic presentation of natural forms, the pair have replaced scientific objectification with objectification of another type. If human attitudes to nature are colonial, then *Unknown Pines* is a failed attempt to foster a post-colonial approach, ultimately casting the pines as noble savages - it is impossible, of course, to patronise a tree, but these works almost manage it.

In the second gallery, David Blyth, mounting his first, long-overdue solo show, also displays a fascination with nature and its processes. His *Knockturne* is a complex, multi-faceted installation - one that fizzles with symbolism, subtly suggesting possible interpretations, only to counter them thanks to a slippery internal logic.

That logic rests on a seemingly illogical fusion of themes - the life of cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, and Blyth's stint working with a farmer during lambing season, a project that coincided with the birth of his first child. At the centre of the room is an ejector seat. It is being dragged along by 31 lambs, still-borns granted a new life of sorts, mounted and stuffed by Blyth. Corralling this flock is a fence bearing spinning wheels bound up with telephone cords, and, on washing lines woven from twigs, sheepskin Babygros - or spacesuits? - are hung out to dry.

Outsize balls of wool are peppered with needles, like organic Sputniks. On the wall, a silk parachute serves as the screen for a projected montage of footage from Tereshkova's flight, inter-cut with shots of a spinning wheel, a nod to the cosmonaut's unlikely career path, which began in a textile mill and ended in space.

Taken together, this is an almost overwhelming array of allusion and reference. Birth and rebirth are central, and there is a whiff of sympathetic magic, as if the installation is the apparatus for some arcane ritual to breathe life into the lambs and give Tereshkova a second chance to fly. But the temptation to read Blyth's work as religious, with space flight analogous to communion with the heavens, is tempered by a bathetic descent into the domestic and quotidian - it is a work about lives lived on the farm, in the mills and at home. There is, too, a harder, pseudo-scientific edge to the piece, in the matching of life cycles to cyclical orbits, and the fusion of high technology with low.

This confusion is Knockturne's great strength. Standing before it, one can never quite grasp the whole, nor can one resolve the connections between its disparate elements, but there remains a strong sense that resolution is possible, and that, given enough time, this is a work that will reveal itself.

Dalziel + Scullion and David Blyth are at Aberdeen Art Gallery until April 14 2007.