

A simple stroll in the English countryside tells us all we need to know, as if we didn't already know it. Nature is in retreat, squeezed and overwhelmed by the Anthropocene wave. For every fifty turtle doves that spent their spring and summer in Britain half a century ago, now there are only three and falling. Our insect population has collapsed by as much as

70 per cent over the same period, with the nocturnal snowstorm of moths reflected in car headlights now appearing more like a spasmodic drizzle. Wildflower meadows sprayed, poisoned and ploughed into the history books. It's not as though we weren't warned what we were doing and the potential longer-term implications. The siren was sounded as long ago as 1962 by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*: 'Why should we tolerate a diet of weak poisons, a home in insipid surroundings, a circle of acquaintances who are not quite our enemies, the noise of motors with just enough relief to prevent insanity? Who would want to live in a world which is just not quite fatal?'

Today, rescue campaigns and reintroduction schemes proliferate, as we scramble to apply science and understanding in place of drenching organophosphates and the randomly deployed mechanical flail. Yet the more we learn, somehow the less we know. The complexities of the natural world continue to confound us. What makes a butterfly or a plant behave the way it does – can it have motivations and calculated responses? How much does chance and circumstance play in dimensions such as mimicry, deception and symbiosis? Then there's the persistently elusive and bewildering interconnectedness of it all, not least the dialogues within the natural world that we have only just started to appreciate. All this at a time when we seem to be ever more disconnected and unfamiliar with the detail of our environment; with words like 'acorn', 'cowslip' and 'kingfisher' expunged from children's dictionaries because they are deemed no longer in common use. They are now replaced by terms such as 'cut-and-paste', 'blog' and 'chatroom'.

Mat Collishaw sees and responds to this need for greater detection, interaction and insight. He grew up in Nottinghamshire, the county of Robin Hood and D. H. Lawrence, in a post-Lawrencian landscape characterised by the remnants of Robin's Sherwood Forest, with erstwhile aristocratic country estates morphing into golf courses and hotels, and the fractured legacy of former industrial behemoths such as mining. Today, attempts are being made to suture together the disparate fragments of wildlife habitat, led by scientists, conservationists and local communities eager to escape the fate outlined by Carson over half a century ago.

Intrigued by the ways in which human understanding of the natural world swerves and transitions, Mat creates art that reflects on the changing character of our attitudes to nature. In particular, his works point towards a more equable environmental philosophy, that of 'deep ecology'. It values the interconnectivity of all living beings and proposes a shift away from human-centred thinking towards an eco-centric perspective based on harmony, rather than imbalance, and which recognises the intrinsic value of non-human life forms.

Much of Mat's interest in new and different ways of considering our environment stems from an exploration of aspects of the Victorian age, ranging from what might be called the dark arts of Victorian illusion – think pre-film animation trickery – to the power and energy of nineteenth-century advances in knowledge and technology. It was the Victorians who literally fired up and drove the train that has rendered our environment into an arena of conflict, governed by the dynamics of exploitation and oppression. Yet those scions of empire and global exploration also created the vehicles to celebrate and expand the boundaries of the natural world. From the establishment of international seed banks, herbaria and centres of botanical excellence, to the Wardian cases that transported their precious cargo across oceans and continents, there was both ingenuity and ambition at play.

These myriad threads, and their implications, are explored in this latest of Mat's exhibitions, *Petrichor*. The name itself resonates with the realities of our current climate crisis: it is used to describe the smell of rain falling on parched soil, a compound construction of *petro*, meaning rock, and *ichor*, a word in Greek mythology to denote the fluid flowing in the veins of the gods. As the veins throb and the volume of biomatter around us continues to shrink, with connections within and across the natural world severed before we even know they existed, we need the artist's scrutiny and sense of wonder now more than ever. The alternative is too hideous to admit to, as Carson knew: 'One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?"'

James Parry. 2023