SIMON PERITON
Interview with Jes Fernie, Associate Curator, firstsite, April 2012

Jes Fernie: The tree survey for firstsite's D-shaped lawn reads like a litany of life's challenges: 'declining', 'poisoned', 'suppressed', 'lopsided', 'collapsed', 'weak'. I understand that this was the first document that you were given back in 2006 when you started work on the firstsite commission and that it became a significant starting point for the project?

Simon Periton: When I began work on the commission, everything seemed very abstract; the building was just a partial frame surrounded by mounds of earth and there was very little to work with. The tree survey was the only concrete thing I had, and the magical arc of trees in the D-shaped lawn, which now hugs the north-facing curve of the building, seemed to be the heart of the design so I decided to focus on that. The survey is spectacularly grim, which I rather liked, and links to other interests in my work.

JF: This element of failure or at least poignant struggle against the odds is extended in your focus on the artificially-created silk industry in the 19th century, a tangential part of Colchester's history. You have chosen to sidestep the all-pervasive Romans and focus on an un-heroic, little known aspect of the town.

SP: I stumbled across this link when I noticed a collapsed mulberry tree within the grounds of firstsite and realised that the social services building adjacent to the site retains Mulberry as part of its name. The tree was defined as 'possibly historically important' in the survey which I thought was amusing, considering the weight of history in Colchester. I did a bit of research and found out that silkworms are native to northern China and feed solely on the leaves of mulberry trees. I was really taken with this obscure link between Colchester and the Orient.

Looking further into this history, I learned that there was a whole artificially-created silkworm industry in Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, because of the expense of importing silk from the East. The trees were often located in prison exercise yards, where inmates were employed to spin the silk produced by the worms, hence the nursery rhyme 'here we go round the mulberry bush' which became a euphemism for spending time in jail.

There was a four-storey silk factory by the riverside in Colchester but it never really took off and ceased operating by the end of the 1880s.

There's so much rich historical layering in Colchester, I felt quite liberated by the idea of looking at something that seemed fresher, little known and potentially fraught. Ideas slowly began to emerge which focused on the fantastic, romantic, fin de siècle feel of the garden, which resulted in a proposal made up of three lanterns and a lamppost.

JF: I've noticed that Max Ernst's famous image of a street lamp, taken from his 1929 collage novel *La Femme 100 Têtes*, 1929, has been an ongoing presence in your studio since this project began. Is the lamppost at firstsite based on Ernst's lamppost and do the menacing skeletons have any relevance?

SP: This well-known image assumed increasing resonance the more I worked on the proposal. Ernst's image seemed to be a perfect, surreal metaphor for Colchester, with the charnel house on the left with the skeletons partially robed in, what could be, Roman garb.

I wanted to counterbalance the super-cool, hard-edged feel of Viñoly's architecture and give visitors an opportunity to enter a secret garden, a sort of imagined landscape that could link to childhood memories. When ideas began to emerge of a lamppost, I remembered Ernst's image and of course was very excited when I made the moth connection (although Ernst's moths aren't silk worms – that's my artistic licence). I toyed with the idea of making a lamppost that moths are drawn to and where they meet a grizzly end, like the insectocutors that you see in restaurant kitchens, but I thought this cautionary tale about the repercussions of interacting with contemporary art might be a bit too dark for a brand new gallery.

After an extensive international search for a lamppost that we could use, I finally found the 'right' one in an architectural salvage yard in Kent.

- Silkworm cocoons
- Gas lamp detail, St. Peter's Church, Colchester

We made a cast of it, but none of the heads was quite right. I wanted a quintessentially Victorian frilly top, like the one in Ernst's image. Quite serendipitously, I came across an article in *Parkett* magazine which was illustrated with a Sigmar Polke painting that directly referenced Ernst's collage. The article gave the provenance of Ernst's lamppost as the Bois de Boulogne, the ancient forest on the outskirts of Paris – the decorative motif on these lanterns was identical, so I based my lamppost head on that design.

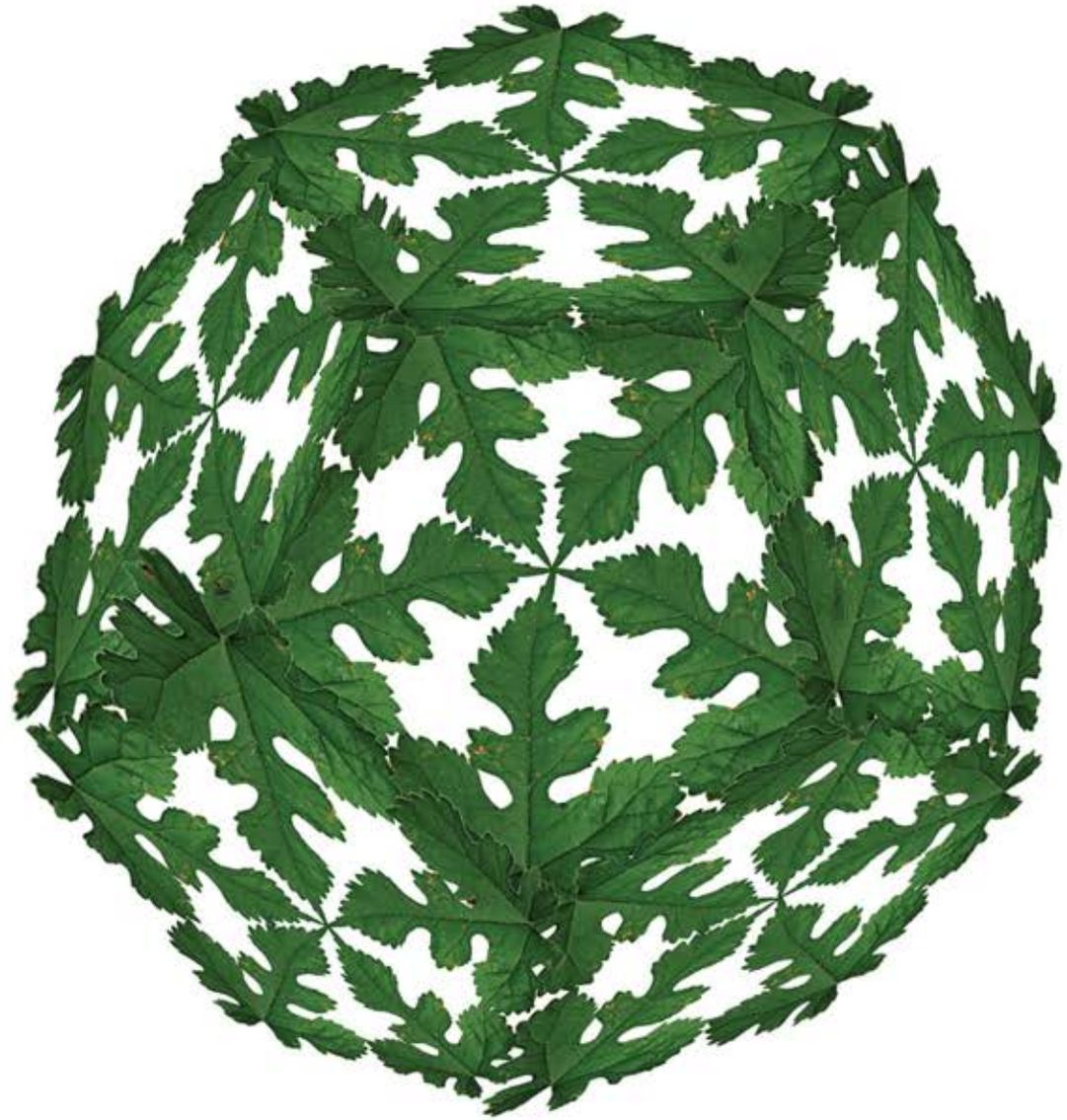
JF: And then, of course, the link to the tale of Henry IV's crazy scheme to plant fifteen thousand mulberry trees in the Bois de Boulogne in the hope of kick-starting a local silk industry – just like Colchester.

SP: Yes! I loved the fact that the story linked up with Colchester, but also that the history of Bois de Boulogne is so fantastical, involving elaborate stories of highwaymen, prostitution, murders and royal meddling. Henry's wife was Marguerite de Valois; her life inspired Dumas' novel *La Reine Margot*, 1845.

JF: The most striking thing about the lamppost is that it appears not to be there, by which I mean that it looks like a cutout in space. You make deft use of a scalpel in much of your work.

SP: I've always liked reversing things and drawing attention to negative space – you can see that particularly in my doily pieces. So I developed the idea of lighting the resin lamppost from within, to make it look like an inversion or a reversal of itself. The whole structure could act as a beacon. When I saw it for the first time in the evening it really looked like I had taken a scalpel to the landscape and carved out the shape of a lamppost, which was just the fantastical effect I was looking for. »

• Unknown, Middle Mill, Colchester, 1909



JF: The commission is made up of three lanterns as well as the lamppost. The lanterns are suspended from trees in the garden, and the lamppost acts as a notional full stop to the conversational strand formed by the lanterns. What do you see the dynamic to be between these four elements?

SP: The lamppost could be viewed as an end point or capital letter to the installation as a whole, which is the word or phrase. I see the lanterns as a growth of the building or the building programme and the lamppost as the payoff. A surreal twist to the end of a very long, protracted process.

The positioning of the lamppost came out of conversations I had with the architects who were trying to create a light source in that area of the lawn with a very small budget. In a pragmatic way, I thought that if I created a light piece there I could help solve a problem for the building project. I also worked closely with the landscape architects on a planting scheme for the area around the lamppost, which would attract insects, particularly the Buddleia Davidii (Black Knight) and various nectar plants such as the bluebells and honeysuckle.

The lanterns were originally going to be made of the same gold alloy that the building is made of, but it proved to be too soft. We ended up using resin, but two of the lanterns have a golden-green shimmer that relates to the building material but also has the colour flip of an 80s two-tone suit which is another interesting cultural collision.

JF: This 19th century garden was designed as a shield for East Hill House from the increasing industrial activity in the town. You have had an opportunity here to weave a narrative in three-dimensional form. After working so much in two dimensions, how do you feel about creating a physical environment that will be in place for years to come?

• A lamppost in the Bois de Boulogne, Paris http://photoevery-where.co.uk/

SP: There is certainly an extra layer of responsibility that permanence brings to the piece. I'm very conscious that this work will be looked at for years rather than once in an exhibition. I wanted to make something that could be appreciated by regular visitors as well as those who see the work only once.

JF: While there is clearly a fairytale-like element to these sculptures, they could also be considered to be malevolent, alien creatures. The lanterns, in particular, are bulbous, knotted, chrysalis-type forms, whose variously-implanted wings include a skull and crossbones motif. This tension (noted as 'twilit romanticism and perverse allegory' by Michael Bracewell in a text about previous work) is present in much of your work. What compels you to keep digging at these extremes?

SP: I have always been drawn to the dark, slightly sinister side of fairytales and am aware how the edge of many of these stories has been worn away over time. But I'm not at all interested in making narrative art or telling 'a story'. I often refer to alternative cultural structures such as folk stories and myths in my work and I'm interested in alternative cultural viewpoints such as punk and hippie narratives. I am sceptical of, but fascinated with, attempts to create overarching narratives (the postmodernist term for this scepticism is 'incredulity towards the meta narrative'). I think a lot of my work is an attempt to negotiate my position in relation to these narratives.

The wings in the lanterns are taken from a 16th century engraving of a fly, which I've used in a number of other works. The image is of Beelzebub which literally means 'lord of demon flies'. I found it in a book about psych-edelic mushrooms and mushroom cults which is another world that I'm interested in, linked to red and white spotted mushrooms (hence the name Fly Agaric), Siberian shaman and Father Christmas, but that's another story!

• Unknown, Silk winding equipment, 1872–1873

JF: And the skull and cross-bones motif?

SP: I didn't intend to keep the skull and crossbones but they tied into Ernst's skeletons really nicely and became a way of steering clear of the overly twee, which can be a danger when referencing the romantic.

The lanterns have a historically-romantic lineage but I also view them as futuristic, outtakes from a science fiction film perhaps. They are cocoon-like objects which echo the elongated shape of the mulberry, but they are also alien forms that tap into our sense of foreboding about the unknown. I like the idea of referring to a collective idea of past and future. I think this positioning in relation to history mirrors the lineage of the gallery as well.

JF: The title of this work was a long time coming. Titles assume an important role in much of your work, don't they?

SP: I'm interested in the effect that a title of an artwork can have on that work and how it is viewed. I came to realise that the installation at firstsite is really more of a constellation. Consequently all the individual elements have names but the overall work has a title too: *Bombyx Mori*, which is the Latin term for the silk moth (literally silkworm of the mulberry tree). The lantern titles refer to the first metamorphic stages of a moth (*Cell*, *Larvae* and *Cocoon*). *Polaris* is the title I have given the lamppost and references the lodestar supposedly used by moths as a navigation tool. It is thought that moths are attracted to light because they use celestial navigation. In a sense, the lamppost is the lodestar of the work as a whole, with the lanterns making up the constellation.

• Unknown, Silkworm tin from Bursa, Turkey, date unknown

Fernie, Jes:[6] 'Interview: Simon Periton' in *Bombyx Mori*, published by Firstsite, London, 01/08/2012

• G.G.Baines, *Dammants Silk Mill*, St Peters Street, 1878. Courtesy of Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service