

IKON

Exhibition Guide

John Newling

Dear Nature



March – September 2020

Second Floor Galleries

Birmingham-born artist John Newling (b. 1952) is a pioneer of public art with a social purpose. This major exhibition exemplifies his strong environmental proposition, whilst pushing at the boundaries of what defines art.

Two paintings, entitled *Last Islands* (2014-15), introduce Newling's use of plants as form and material. The *Moringa Oleifera*, also known as the famine tree, is a drought resistant, tropical/subtropical tree, grown by the artist in his Nottingham studio. Impressions of the plant were made by pressing it into a sheet of metallic leaf then overlaying with watercolours of earthy tones, creating a fluid and tactile surface. For Newling, this work is a kind of cartography, "an atlas of relationships, forms and colours that are the ecology of my practice".

There is a fine line between ecology and economy in Newling's work that draws equally on free natural resources. *365 days and 50 million year old leaves* (2019) is made of sticks collected by the artist on his daily walks. Having dropped from a tree, each stick has been cut and painted to transform it into a wand. Gathered into piles, the resulting sculptures feature other objects – soil balls, leaf fossils, feather quills and an ink well – referencing a natural inscription that far pre-dates any written practice.

The organic matter underlying modern literature is revealed in *Eliot's Notebooks* (2017), a project that involved the shredding of several hundred copies of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*. Newling added water, vegetable matter, coffee grounds and urine to the paper, which

he turned in composting drums in his back garden for several months. A video reveals the process of decomposition and later construction of paper. Consisting of approximately 80% text and 20% vegetable matter, the pages could sustain plant growth if rehydrated.

The title of this exhibition is taken from Newling's book, *Dear Nature* (2018) and also a video made with filmmaker Reece Straw. Every day for 81 days Newling wrote a letter to nature.

In the film the letters, that explore our relationship with the natural world, are read aloud by many different voices. Newling describes the letters as "part truth and reconciliation, part advocacy of an urgent need, part thoughts for future social ecologies".

A growing need to protect the environment is referenced in *Blanket* (2012), a pressing of Jersey Kale leaves arranged in uniform rows. A Brassica Oleracea, the artist grew more than a hundred pots of the vegetable in his garden, regularly picking, drying and bundling the leaves in order for the stalks to grow. A strong and lightweight material, the plant is known as the walking stick cabbage, a cottage industry revisited in the middle gallery. Here Newling demonstrates his closeness to art movements, namely Land Art and Arte Povera (poor art), whilst reminding us of our continual reliance on, and the enduring support offered by, nature.

Newling's plea for a closer connection to nature is evident in his development of a new alphabet based on leaves he found at Nymans, a National Trust garden in West Sussex. Working with a designer and typographer, the leaves were pressed, photographed and then turned into a unique alphabet, forming the basis of a downloadable font. Visitors are invited to use the alphabet, shown here in a grid of marble slabs, to decipher the printed letter on the opposite wall.

The grid is an important device for Newling, particularly for extracting a language from nature. This is evident in *From my garden* (2018), a copper leaf work, containing a diversity of leaves pressed and traced to create a simple set of indexical signs.

In the final gallery we enter Newling's installation of *Soil Books* (2019). These sculptures are derived from his everyday experience of walking

from his house into his garden, picking up leaves on the way: "It's like a ritual, so that every leaf in those books – the language of the books – is from my garden." The result is book-like stacks of panels of processed soil with the leaves, pressed and gilded, on the surfaces which are, again, stained with watercolour. The order of the books is crucial, indicating seasonal change, conveying the artist's fascination with physical transformation. *Library of Ecological Conservations – Leaves and Me* (2017-2019) is a series of thirty-six letters composed over the course of three years. The geology of the relationship – between the leaves, the artist, his garden and studio – is evident and each work responds to the moments in which it is formed.

The presence of the clock in the gallery conveys an awareness of time, as do the adjacent works on paper, *Night* (2018) and *Day* (2018). This is linked to the artist's understanding of the Anthropocene – the current geological age in which human impact is evident.

He is determined to grasp "what is it to know that we have affected our environment... you can trace our evolution to a point where we subdued nature, but to our own cost, because we will make ourselves extinct".

Flax seedlings tied into circles recur in the works and carry multiple meanings. Circles and cycles are constant in many of Newling's projects. He will start with a process and the work will develop through phases of material and conceptual change often arriving back at the point it began. This process involves much learning and acquiring new information without knowing what the final works will be.

The last work in the gallery, *Reconciliation Steps* (2019), consists of a mirror and rubber stamp on a small shelf. Looking into the mirror you see the text which reads, "We have signed our names in your soil. So sorry". The exhibition extends to the public square in front of Ikon.

John Newling's exhibition is supported by the Ikon Investment Fund.

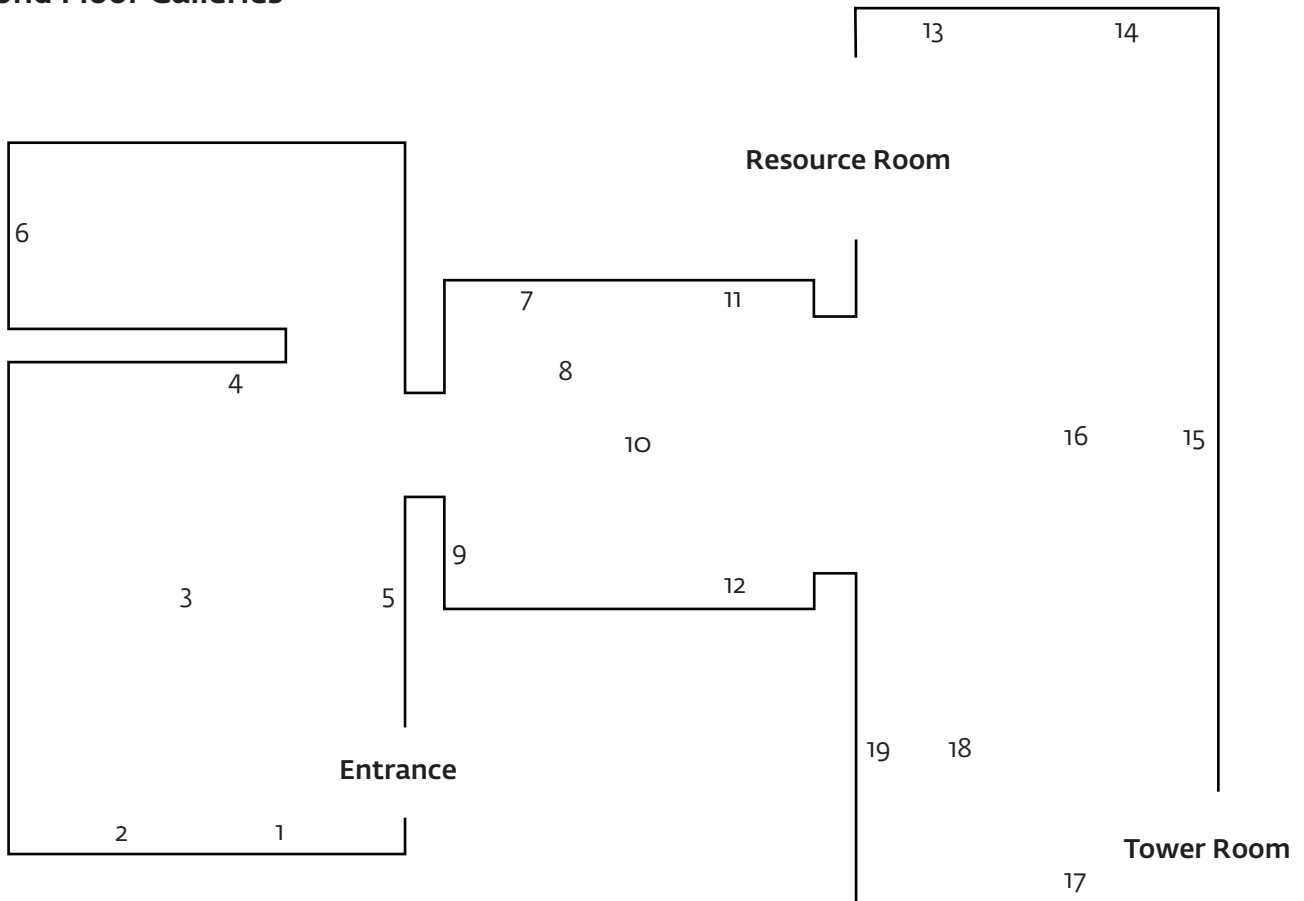
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John Newling, *Dear Nature*
Second Floor Galleries



1. Last Island, 2014-15
A becoming geology (soil)

2. Last Island, 2014-15
Turning and turning (gyres and geometry)

3. 365 days and 50 million year old leaves, 2019
Sticks and leaf fossils

4. Blanket, 2012
Pressed leaves (Jersey Kale)

5. Eliot's Notebooks, 2017
Mixed media

6. Dear Nature, 2020
Video

7. Waste Land Soil, 2018
Mixed media

8. From a Garden of Walking Sticks, 2011-12
Jersey kale

9. If Noah was a Pirate, 2020
Vinyl

10. A language from the garden (Nymans language), 2017
Engraved marble

11. Burnt Sticks, 2020
Burnt sticks, elastic bands and charcoal blocks

12. From my garden, 2018
Copper leaf and paint

13. Night, 2018
Silver leaf and paint

14. Day, 2018
Gold leaf and paint

15. A Library of Ecological Conversations (Leaves and Me), 2017-2019
Mixed media, 36 framed works

16. Soil Books, 2018-19
Soil, leaves and text, 9 soil books and objects

17. Reconciliation Steps, 2019
Cosmetic mirror, rubber stamp

18. Frank's Field, 2018
Soil, flax, paper

19. Design for a farmer's duvet (regrown 2019), 2019
Knotted Flax