

## A conversation between Catherine Dormor, Susie Olczak and Cecilia Vilela.

**CV:** Good afternoon, everyone. It's wonderful to be here with Susie and Catherine to discuss Susie's exhibition *To Tide You Over*. Before we begin, I'd like to thank Frances Coleman for generously hosting both the exhibition and today's event.

*To Tide You Over* explores how water connects and transforms landscapes. The works trace water's movement through natural and engineered systems, from Chile's Atacama Desert to London's waterways, considering adaptation in the face of shifting environmental conditions. This afternoon we'll explore themes of flow, repair, extraction, adaptation, and the role art can play in engaging with damaged histories without claiming to resolve them.



Figure 1 *To Tide You Over*. Susie Olczak. Coleman Projects.

To begin, I'll introduce our speakers.

Susie Olczak is a multidisciplinary artist whose sculptural practice explores contingent making and adaptation in relation to climate change. She studied Fine Art, Sculpture and Environmental Art at the Glasgow School of Art before completing an MA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art. Her work has been exhibited internationally and across the UK, and she has undertaken residencies in Finland, Panama and Chile. Recent exhibitions include Tremenhoe Gallery, White Conduit Projects, The Lightbox and School Gallery, Folkestone.

**SO:** Catherine Dormor is Pro Vice-Chancellor and Head of College for Creative Arts and Technologies at the University of Westminster, where she is also Professor of Textile Practices and Feminisms. She is an artist, writer and academic whose work explores textiles as language, method and material, with a particular interest in repair and reparation as collective practices.

**CD:** Cecilia Vilela is a London-based independent curator and writer. She is part of the curatorial team for International Circle Latin America at the Centre Pompidou and runs the independent project space 92 Webster Road in London. Her work focuses on ecology, language, displacement and geopolitics through participatory and socially engaged practices.

Susie, thank you for this beautiful exhibition. One of the first things that struck me was its sense of movement - movement that isn't immediately visible. Water feels like the natural place to begin. Earlier we were talking about trees and plants as living systems. Could you say more about how those ideas inform your work? Then perhaps, Cecilia, you could relate that to the exhibition in the neighbouring gallery 92 Webster Road.

**SO:** I've been interested in water for a long time. It's everywhere - within us and throughout our landscapes. When we think about trees and plants, water is fundamental to those living systems. I hope this exhibition helps reveal some of the ways water underpins the natural world.

The sculptures incorporate living plants, so they're continually changing. Every time I come to the gallery, I water them, and the water flows through the sculptural forms. Sculpture is often thought of as static - you make an object and place it in a gallery. Here, I wanted the works to function as living systems.



*Figure 1 To Tide You Over. Susie Olczak. Coleman Projects*

**CD:** Trees feel particularly important in this context. We were talking earlier about the role they play in cooling our cities, which seems especially relevant during the current heatwave. Looking at the rubber plant in the gallery, it's interesting to think about how it depends on water to grow, yet also produces latex, a material we extract and use for countless purposes. Could you say a little more about the installation? Listening to this discussion of movement and living systems in Susie's exhibition, it strikes me that your exhibition also begins with biological systems before expanding into broader geographical and geopolitical questions.

**CV:** The installation also centres on a living tree that requires water throughout the exhibition. But rather than focusing primarily on the plant's biological processes, it uses the tree to examine the wider systems that shape society. For those who haven't seen it, the exhibition, *Voyage*, is by the Ecuadorian artist Adrián Balseca. For more than a decade, Adrián has researched the extraction of rubber from the Amazon. In this site-specific installation, he traces a historical connection between London and that history. The work begins with the story of a British botanist, Henry Wickham, who removed rubber seeds from the Brazilian Amazon and brought them to Kew Gardens. From there, the plants were propagated and distributed across British colonies, enabling large-scale rubber production. Adrián uses this moment as the starting point for exploring the intertwined histories of botany, colonialism and extraction. The installation begins with the plant itself, but gradually opens onto the scientific, political and colonial systems through which the way we know the world and knowledge about these plants has been produced.



Figure 2 *The Voyage*. Adrián Balseca. 94 Webster Road

**SO:** I really like the phrase you used, "the way we know". I think both exhibitions question how knowledge is formed and whose ways of knowing become accepted.

**CV:** Exactly. We often equate knowledge with scientific knowledge, as though it's the only valid way of understanding the world. But it's just one form of knowledge among many. Plants themselves embody other ways of knowing and coexisting that aren't always recognised.

**CD:** I think that's an important point. Living systems hold knowledge too. Water is a good example - it seeps through boundaries; resists control and continually reshapes its surroundings. We try to manage it, but it always exceeds our attempts to contain it.

Returning to the exhibition *To Tide You Over*, what struck me was that you explore the tree as a system rather than as an object. You're not trying to represent a tree literally. Instead, you draw on its internal processes - circulation, movement and exchange - to create sculptural forms that operate according to similar principles. They feel tree-like without becoming representations of trees. Is that a fair reading?



Figure 3 *To Tide You Over*. Susie Olczak. Coleman Projects

**SO:** Yes, I think so. Across the exhibition I'm interested in imagining what these systems might look like rather than reproducing them directly. We know what trees look like, and we've seen images of mycelial networks, but I'm more interested in their underlying architecture. That feels particularly important when we're thinking about how the world might change, and what future landscapes could become.

**CD:** What interests me is the relationship between water and material transformation. The water flowing through a tree isn't just water - it carries nutrients and the building blocks

that become the solid trunk. I see a similar process in your ceramics: clay begins as a fluid material, is shaped, then fired to remove the water and become solid.

The rubber tree works in much the same way. Water carries the compounds that produce latex, which is then extracted and transformed. That movement between flow and solidification appears throughout both exhibitions - in the sculptures, the rubber, and even in the video installation, where the fixed wooden structures are set against the movement of the river.

I'd be interested to hear you both reflect on this relationship between liquid and solid states, and what it might tell us about communities and wider geopolitical systems.

**SO:** One of the challenges today is that we have access to more information than ever before, yet it's becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish reliable knowledge from misinformation. At the same time, we're connected to invisible systems that span the globe. That connectivity has enormous potential, but it can also be exploited by those who control information and technology. I often think it's helpful to think like a tree. Research shows that forests are most resilient when they're diverse rather than monocultural. The same might be true of communities.

Trees compete for light, but they also cooperate. Through mycelial networks they share nutrients, supporting neighbouring trees when needed. That balance of competition and mutual support offers an interesting model for how we might live together. Rather than prioritising individual success, it suggests the importance of collective resilience.

**CD:** That brings us back to the roots. Plant root systems are porous, allowing nutrients and water to move across their membranes according to changing conditions. Healthy systems depend on exchange rather than isolation. You spent time working in Panama. Could you talk about what you observed there, and how it influenced your thinking?

**SO:** Spending several weeks in the rainforest was transformative. I was immersed in an extraordinary ecosystem, but I was also learning from the Guna community, who generously invited us to live and work with them. What struck me was their relationship with the forest. They weren't non-extractive, but they took only what they needed. They harvested bark for medicine, for example, without damaging the tree's ability to regenerate. I was fascinated by how knowledge was developed and passed down. Much of it came through careful observation. One story described watching a snake bitten by another snake seek out a particular plant before recovering. From observations like this, medicinal properties were gradually understood and shared. It was a reminder that living with an environment requires close attention and restraint. As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, when foraging you should always leave more than you take.

**CD:** Exactly. Whether plants reproduce through seeds, rhizomes or other means, regeneration depends on leaving enough behind. Sustainable relationships begin with understanding limits.

**CV:** That makes me think about rubber extraction. Once rubber became commercially valuable, the emphasis shifted towards maximising production. The introduction of rubber plantations across Southeast Asia, alongside other monocultures elsewhere such as palm oil, demonstrates the environmental consequences of that logic.

What's often overlooked is that Indigenous communities in the Amazon had been harvesting and using rubber long before colonial extraction. Their relationship with the plant was fundamentally different. Colonial systems transformed that knowledge into industrial production, driven by profit and territorial control.

Those histories also shaped the knowledge that survives today. We know the names given by European botanists, but we rarely ask what Indigenous communities called these plants, how they understood them, or what cultural meanings they held. Those forms of knowledge were rarely recorded with the same authority.

The history of rubber is therefore not only about a material. It's also about the movement of plants, people and knowledge through colonial systems of power, trade and extraction. Those histories continue to shape the ways we understand both landscapes and the natural world.

**CD:** That brings us back to the role of art. Sitting here between these two exhibitions, I'm interested in how artistic practice can speak into those histories. Susie, what do you hope visitors take away from your exhibition?

**SO:** I used to think art was about answering questions. Now I think it's about asking better ones. Showing these two exhibitions together has highlighted both their parallels and their differences. Adrián's installation positions the viewer at a distance. Looking through small apertures, we're made conscious of our role as observers and of the power dynamics involved in observation itself.

My exhibition invites a different kind of engagement. Visitors move through the gallery rather than observing from a fixed position. I wanted the exhibition to have its own circulation, encouraging people to return through the space and encounter the works differently each time.

The sculptures reveal their internal structures through openings and cavities, suggesting spaces where plants might grow. I also positioned some works higher than expected, encouraging viewers to shift their perspective and look more closely.

Ultimately, I hope the exhibition feels embodied and playful. Rather than presenting static objects, the works invite sustained looking and encourage visitors to think about sculpture as a living, interconnected system.

**CV:** I like that you describe it as embodied. To me, the exhibition demonstrates that living systems contain knowledge about coexistence. The works invite us to move between different materials, forms and sensory experiences, showing how knowledge can emerge through relationships rather than existing in isolation.

**CD:** I think both exhibitions challenge the traditional distinction between subject and object in sculpture. Adrián presents a living plant as the focus of our attention, unsettling the usual relationship between observer and observed. Your work takes this even further by creating sculptural systems that remain active and alive. Rather than representing living processes, the works participate in them.

**CD:** I think what's interesting here is the play between, and the breaking down of, the notion of subject and object -something particularly prevalent in sculpture. Typically, one makes an object, one produces art, and I think both exhibitions are playing with that. In Adrian's work, we have the plant in the cube, which we can only view through apertures- playing on the idea of monocular vision and the privilege of looking at an object. But the object here isn't a made, man-made object- it's a living thing. That shifts the usual narrative of a living subject looking at an object. You take it further by positioning the sculpture's mechanics as external, with the plant's own mechanics set within it. So rather than creating sculptural pieces, you've created living systems- and you see that again in the drawings and monoprints around it, which explore where the subject is and where the object is. That's a simplification, because really, you're tearing down those boundaries, much like a root system. There is a boundary, but it's porous- it's about what's inside it that determines what nutrients and fluid cross over, rather than an external force. You can water a plant as much as you like, but it will only take up what it needs; that's why waterlogged plants rot. I think there's something interesting in how you're playing with that subject-object space, and I wondered if you could say more about what that means- bringing it back to geopolitics, because I don't think we can escape that. You talk about the Anthropocene, but I think we're moving into a new era beyond it, and your work speaks into that.



*Figure 4 To Tide You Over. Susie Olczak. Coleman Projects*

**SO:** That's a big question. I think we're always in emerging eras, aren't we? If we take landscape as an example, it isn't passive- it's always becoming. Both exhibitions are speaking to specific places, but I'm interested in finding commonalities between different places. Both have a focal point in Latin America but also look to Asia, thinking about the interconnectedness of different parts of the world. There is a new era happening and being created, but past histories are still impacting everything- nothing is very linear. So, it comes down to learning from past histories and past mistakes, but also from what's gone well.

When I first started talking to Frances about this exhibition, I was interested in the location here being close to the Thames and the Brunel Tunnel. At the Brunel Museum you can see the models and drawings of how people learned and adapted to do that difficult project- boring underneath the Thames took a long time, and the system they created sometimes didn't work; sometimes it flooded and people lost their lives. But they persevered, digging out small sections at a time and pushing a barrier forward to stop it caving in. There's a lot in thinking about how the natural world adapts, and how humans respond and find solutions.

We need that more than ever- new ways to think about the systems that already exist. As much as that's about looking forward, a lot of it is also looking back. Indigenous communities are interesting because they look to plants to learn from- it's not always about new inventions, but about looking back to what already worked. With increasing heat and drought in summer, but also excess water at other times, we may need completely new systems, but we could also look back at what worked in the past and find ways to be more resilient. Politicians need to do that, and so does everyone - we need to rethink things, and it's an opportunity to do that.

**CD:** So, innovation doesn't always mean new things - it can mean looking back and being able to recognise our own path, in a broad sense: the things that have gone wrong, or that have depleted resources or shifted the balance, without hiding from that, but also without spending all our time dwelling on it, because that doesn't lead anywhere. It's about being open- porous, ourselves- to different systems of knowledge that sit outside our humanness, and not seeing the human as the predominant being in the world, but as something that needs to be more subservient to the world in its broadest sense.

That's very much how indigenous communities operate- and I'm not saying they're simplistic or backward, because they engage with the contemporary world too- but there's an attention to what the living world tells us. We can't ignore what it's telling us right now. But how do we respond? Building new air conditioning systems isn't really the answer, because that just uses more resources, more energy, more fuel. There are natural ways of creating cooler environments, drawing on air flow and water flow productively, to give us what we need but no more- we don't need to sit in a room at sixteen degrees in jumpers, burning fuel; twenty to twenty-five degrees is perfectly comfortable, so we're only looking for a few degrees' drop, not enough to need a jumper, which is what a lot of air conditioning does. That's what plants do- they bring the temperature down a little, without drying the air the way air conditioning does by removing heat, like a fridge. There's something in looking at those other systems rather than just relying on technology.

**CV:** I completely agree, and I like what you were saying about indigenous peoples- not that they're simpler in any way, but there's sometimes a tendency to romanticise them as holding all the answers to problems they didn't create. I think the important point is recognising where the real difference lies, which is why we end up talking about indigenous communities. I like to connect this to the idea of being 'land-dependent'- which extends a little beyond people who identify as indigenous, to communities and cultures whose culture is intrinsically connected to the landscape they belong to, whether or not they identify as indigenous. Without romanticising them or expecting them to resolve all our problems, there's something important in recognising that- in all their plurality and huge variation-

they tend to hold a less hierarchical view of the human's place in the environment. People sometimes assume that's a simpler way of seeing things, but it actually embraces huge complexity: recognising that we are not removed from the environment but deeply interconnected with it. That ties into everything we discuss when we advocate for more considerate ways of relating to the environment- not detaching the human as hierarchically superior to other living beings, but finding more room for interconnection and coexistence.

I like how you were speaking about interconnectedness earlier, and it brings me to something we discussed before- I'd love to hear you both speak about this tricky separation: looking to natural living systems as models of coexistence and interconnectedness, and how that can inspire more harmonious ways of being in the world- and where that shifts into extraction. There's a movement that's good, natural, sustainable- about interconnectedness and exchange- and then it flips into extraction: removing, transporting, trading, globalising. Where is that line?

**CD:** That's a really interesting question, and it makes me think about my own research area, which is textiles. I use the model of the woven cloth as a way of thinking about what it means to be in community. Cloth is one of the first industrial products you see in industrialised nations, and it is extractive- the whole colonial system was fuelled and driven by cloth. The industrial revolution- the speeding up of weaving and spinning- happened partly because they wanted to create more cargo for ships to go and plunder other parts of the globe. So, there's a complex tension between that natural product, its extraction, and what it can give us as humans- not just through plundering, but through knowledge too.

The seeds of the rubber plant were brought over on a ship, and someone at Kew Gardens would have done a lot of work figuring out how to propagate a tropical plant in a UK setting - because, oddly, many tropical seeds need freezing to germinate. So, it's not about good and bad: not all extraction is bad, and not everything natural is good - we can't romanticise it.

We have to sit with that tension. Before I hand over, I want to mention that I'm interested in the kinetic energy that holds the warp and weft together. On the loom, the threads are under tension - it's only that kinetic energy that holds it all together. For me, that becomes a model for what it means to be in community: the sharing of space, the juxtaposition, the pushing and pulling against each other, holding the community together. Even though it's a handmade product, it becomes a way of thinking about how we have to actively be in community, in relation with other people - past and future - to make sense of what's happening. I talk about repair and other things too, which I might get to another time, but that's how I make sense of it: through close attention to the textile work, to the threads in a space. It holds a lot of ways of thinking, for me.

**CV:** I love hearing this, because you're talking about the tension between the warp and the weft - and it makes me think about how often we use weaving as a metaphor in conversations like this. What you're saying breaks down why the notion of weaving matters so much as a practice within these discussions.

**CD:** Our language is full of textile terms - losing the thread, weaving, interlacing - and you find these terms across languages globally. I think it's important not to lose track of that. Yes, they often come from trade and commerce as well as production, but we can't forget that trade means different communities can access resources another community has. Barter, exchange, trade - that's not a bad thing in itself, as long as you only take as much as you need. We can't pretend trade is inherently bad and that we should get away from it altogether. It's been really nice - we've been running this as a joint programme, even though the two shows are separate but shown together. I like how the packing-case idea comes through in the space - the works are shown as if still being shipped, sitting in or on crates. The ideal is that you ship something inside the crate, and then it just sits on top of it afterwards. There's a dialogue in that: the work didn't just appear here in a white cube. It breaks that down - we're protecting the work, but we're also staging it.



*Figure 5 The Voyage. Adrián Balseca. 94 Webster Road*

**SO:** Going back to something said earlier about being land-dependent - I don't think you necessarily have to be local to a landscape; it comes down to how much time you spend getting to know it. Farmers, for instance, hold an enormous amount of knowledge and are always adapting. So, land-dependence matters, but so does the range of different kinds of knowledge people hold - no one type of knowledge should have a hierarchy over another; it's about holding all of that knowledge together.

That leads to the idea of extraction, and I think it comes down to why someone is doing it, and whether it's reciprocal - a mutual benefit, even if that benefit isn't always perfectly balanced; the balance might tip one way at one time and shift later. With plants, if it's done right, harvesting some of a plant can help it grow more - not all plants, but many, and trees often do well when pruned back a little. You're not taking everything, just enough for it to

thrive. I think that idea of extraction applies to knowledge too: as long as there's reciprocity - an exchange rather than just taking - and it's in dialogue, that matters. Thinking through plants or trees is useful, even though they can't consent to being collaborators the way a person could. It comes down to whether it's reciprocal, and if it's not, whether there's an acknowledgement of that imbalance and a willingness to redress it - to keep finding a fairer way.

**CD:** I remember a masterclass with a Japanese natural dyer, who showed us how different regions in Japan can produce different colours - the pure yellow that Buddhist monks wear can only be dyed in one particular area, because of the exact balance of plants and water there. Try it with different water, without that mineral balance, and you get murky colours instead. At the end, he showed us the plants and dyes he used, and told us a story: someone once asked him where they could get that yellow, and he said no - you have to go and find your own plants in your own area that work with your own water. Those colours exist in your own environment, but you have to find them. It can sound a bit romanticised, but I think we have to do that with ourselves too - recognise what it means to flourish. You can transport things from one place to another, but they may be different once moved, and you have to be attentive to that. That's the reciprocal nature of it - plants will tell us. They'll wither, or turn yellow, or fail to propagate if something's wrong.



*Figure 6 The Voyage. Adrián Balseca. 94 Webster Road*

There's a lovely docket in one of Adrian's pockets - a letter about sending over eighty plants, with a list of the ones that didn't survive and the ones that did, wherever they ended up. It doesn't give you much information, but maybe it gives you enough - just enough to make the point. That's the reciprocation - they tell us. If they're not flourishing, we need to be more closely observant of what flourishing means. I think we can apply that to people too: are we noticing whether people are flourishing, what that means, and on whose terms? The attentiveness we bring to our gardens and crops - do we bring that to people too? What does it mean for people to flourish? I think your work asks those questions really well.

**SO:** Thank you - I hope so. That feels like a good place to end for today.