

## **Groundsel and moss: particularity, time and place in the paintings of Helen Thomas**

**Dr Judith Tucker, University of Leeds**

Early April in West Yorkshire. The sky is grey on grey. The light is flat. It is blowy and damp. The reddish bricks of the multi-storey carpark, the one that's only a stone's throw from Wakefield Cathedral, turn darker as the rain dampens them. Then my eye is caught by a small streak of pale green; something has seeded itself in the crack in the pavement. I stoop to examine more closely, and I am pretty certain that it's groundsel. A few hours earlier, perhaps, I might not have noticed it, and even if I had, I might not have been confident in my identification. The difference between now and then being that I had just spent the morning with Helen Thomas, in her studio, immersed in and with her plants, or rather her painted plants. We know when a piece of creative art or viewing an exhibition has worked, when after leaving it, somehow, we see with a different perspective, through another's eyes. Perhaps, the unnoticed gains sharper focus or we see shapes and colours anew, and then perhaps we attend differently to where we are, and to what that might mean. Thomas' understated paintings of wildflowers and 'weeds' fall into this category. These paintings of plants growing where they really shouldn't, invite questions concerning worth and beauty but also about mess and complexity. All the depicted plants were seen on her walks within twenty minutes of the Cathedral. She walks slowly, she looks slowly and makes slowly, drawing our attention to both painting and plants in a quiet, peaceful idiom. These are representations of unassuming plants, the sort we can see and find close by, and surely, the local has never been more important than during this past year.

When I was in her workspace, I noticed Helen's notes to herself, written with a flourish on masking tape strips adhered to a wall. There are the charming names of 'weeds': daisy, dandelion, groundsel, feverfew, common whitlow grass, chickweed, shepherd's purse, red dead-nettle, ragwort, speedwell. Dates and places are added and little notes 'one spotted in the snow' or 'Ings Road roundabout'. Particularity, time and place are clearly important here. There are paintings that are portraits of specific plants seen as well as particular patches of city, seen once. We would never find that plant or that

place again; it would never be or look exactly the same again. There are more evocative words written on the tape too, ranged almost as open form poems across a wall: 'spontaneous, discarded, chance, flux, nature, weeds, garden, environment.' These ideas play out in her open ended, and generative process of making in which chance and accident have an important role to play.

While the body of paintings produced for this exhibition explores the multifarious ways that painting as practice and object might engage with these plants, the hang in the cathedral setting challenges how we might view painting itself. Looking for the works in the cathedral means that we are taken on a walk, encountering pieces in unexpected places and angles. In all the works we become aware of how the paint activates the surface: whether there are splashes, or flowing flowering, gestural mark making, or sprawling escaping wriggling lines and tendrils. Some works are made from direct observation, in situ, where touch, light and weather all play their parts, fleeting marks seeming to dance across the surface. Others draw on imagination, memory and affect: the long scrolls of moss-narratives, where our eye is drawn at first into the miniature mark-made worlds, and then up and down the whole, long length of each piece, variants of vivid, translucent green. The complexity of the rhythms of the small gestures and touches, the lines, scratches and smears enliven the surface so that they almost shimmer against the stone of pillars. Others are more descriptive, working through and beyond photography, the yellow of the dandelion glowing against the dark background reminiscent of a millefleur tapestry. What we would be less likely to see in such a tapestry are broken thorns, ripped petals, decaying leaves and pale, dead grass stems whereas in these small panels varied hues and species mingle. Unlike a hanging tapestry, surprisingly for paintings, we encounter these horizontally. They lie flat on plinths, reminding us of their origins on pavements and roads, but elevated to invite our full attention. Placing these works in the cathedral alerts us to the other plants in here; what a contrast with blooms and foliage of the cut flowers arranged on their stands. Yet there is a strange synergy with the illuminated decorative floral designs and viridian green clumps of grass in the stained-glass windows, the dark wood carved roses on the screens, and the energy of the foliage emerging from the green man misericord. In this context, we might reconsider Thomas' delicate mossy and tendrilled pieces. Bringing these images of wildflowers inside inevitably leads us to think about how entwined nature and culture are,

and how these paintings work both with and against the long history of flower paintings.

Painting flowers is usually considered part of the still life genre, but these paintings imply anything but stillness. Transience and permanence come into play. *Dandelions and Double Yellows* asks what might it mean to paint flowers now, in the digital age and how might painting and photography be in conversation with each other? These works are about time passing, about the seasons and the weather and, through their very making, they become about stilling time. Yet they do not operate in the tradition of vanitas. Rather, they operate somewhere between close observation, almost in the tradition of Dürer's *Great Piece of Turf*, and botanical illustration. Their focus is on the comforting familiarity of feral regrowth. We might think of the works and the plants as a microcosm of a wider landscape, engaging us with notions of the differences between growing and being cultivated, reminding us of the resilience that it takes for these to seed, at first unnoticed, bursting through concrete, tarmac and bricks. These concerns are nowhere more evident than in the largest single piece in the show: a groundsel, many times its actual size, appears to grow beyond the picture plane, pushing its way towards us, reaching towards its viewer, emerging green and glorious from the painted greys and ochres of stone surface, almost seeming to sprout into the real space of St Mark's Chapel.

By the carpark the rain begins to seep through my jacket, I bend down to look even more closely at the tiny groundsel shoot, and I marvel at both its fragility and strength.

**Dr Judith Tucker, University of Leeds, May 2021**

Judith Tucker is an artist and academic, her work explores the meeting of social history, personal memory and geography; it investigates their relationship through drawing, painting and writing.

This text was commissioned as part of 'Dandelions and Double Yellows' an art nature and noticing project by artist Helen Thomas.

An exhibition of paintings created by Helen during the course of the project is on display at Wakefield Cathedral 10th July to 15th August 2021.

The text, and further information about the project and exhibition can be found at [www.toastedorange.co.uk/dandelions-double-yellows/](http://www.toastedorange.co.uk/dandelions-double-yellows/)

Dandelions and Double Yellows has been part funded as part of Festival of the Earth, led by Wakefield Council from July to October 2021 across the Wakefield district.



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