

# MIRKWOOD



Max Reeves



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the Bethlem Forest

Max Reeves



Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,  
ché la diritta via era smarrita.  
Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura  
esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte  
che nel pensier rinnova la paura!

Dante Alighieri

That very night, in Max's room, a forest grew – and grew –  
until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around.

Maurice Sendak

## MANSIONS IN THE ORCHARD: SANCTUARY

Max Reeves most recent photographic work offers a subjective exploration of the architecture and location of a modern psychiatric hospital, as part of a project documenting the relocation of the Bethlem Royal Hospital's Archives and Museum to the former administration building of the hospital, and the creation of a new Museum of the Mind.

In 1930, the Monks Orchard Estate, on the borders of Eden Park, Shirley and West Wykham in South London, became the new home of the Bethlem Royal Hospital. Prior to the relocation of the hospital from St George's Fields in Southwark, the Reverend Geoffrey O'Donoghue, Bethlem's Chaplain and author of an historical monograph on the hospital, imagined a future scenario for Bethlem:

“a red brick palace may look down (with the recollection and wisdom of many centuries) upon the same landscape. Or it may be that detached pavilions and single-storey wards may peep out here and there among the oaks and firs.”

It is this ambience of future-past that is captured by Max Reeves' imagery. The grand neoclassical facades of the urban asylum are now displaced by the pavilion system, with wards and specialist facilities dispersed throughout a suburban landscape that is knowingly pastoral. There will be time to breathe, to reflect. The contemporary hospital eschews the spectacle of its own history (the necessary effacement of its own urban legend: Bedlam), the architecture is discrete, liminal, focus shifts from centre to periphery.

In Max Reeves' eye, the hospital itself almost disappears, receding into the landscape, as if overtaken by some benign ecological apocalypse, until only fragments remain, like jigsaw pieces glimpsed from the depths of the surrounding woodlands, a crepuscular forest which encroaches the margins of the picture frame. The perspective is often from ground-level, as if the viewer were clandestinely crouching in the undergrowth, waiting, watching the seasons migrate, from the vantage point of a telluric crawlspace: a sanctuary from human society, but also a refuge from nature itself (or, perhaps, from the reflection of our own supposed nature), “red in tooth and claw.” The paradox of the asylum.

From the perimeter of these mood-altering woods, beneath the silent ubiquity of CCTV cameras, echoes of

another past recur: the weather-beaten faces of seraphs carved on misplaced plinths, lost in the fauna like a forgotten memory of the green man of folklore; an extinct calendar collaged with dead leaves, abandoned tennis courts, stone steps that now lead nowhere, traces of a long demolished country mansion. Relics fading to detritus, as if to remind us that the linear time of human agency passes, while nature's cycle seeks eternal rebirth. Here, deep in the woods, nature is also therapy. Man-made therapy.

Max Reeves' photographic perambulation also reminds us that Nature bestows the promise of its own secret knowledge (the terrible secret of the origin) - up close, coiled within a spiral of tree bark, or from afar, branches of an old oak bleeding into a cloudscape, like Rorschach inkblots, testing our sense of self and other. Fearful symmetry.

These photographs invoke the dark forests of Norse mythology: Mykviör (anglicanised by William Morris as Mirkwood, literally 'dark' or 'murky wood'), the great primeval forest that was once the border of the known world, a place of transition from one world to another, from one narrative to the next. A zone of transformation, of metamorphosis between different states of mind and being.

Willard Kane 2015



















