PATHS IN THE AFTERNOON.
INITIATION IN THE WOODS

ÁLVARO PERDICES
The darkness of the forest is a cliché. So is the notion that it is frightening. It is as elementary for the forest to be dark at night, as when the treetops block the entrance of sunlight during the day. Even so, the idea that darkness is the dance partner of fear is something altogether different. Although it was once believed, and still is by some, the forest does not have to be an inhospitable place with beasts and lawless, uncivilised individuals. Exceptions do not make the rule.

The unfavourable reputation of the forest is maintained in a part of children’s literature. All too frequently it is the place where children are lost or abandoned, not to mention it being home to wolves, witches and other monsters. A dense, tenebrous place, mysterious and unknown, inhuman and terrifying—but if you so choose, all such notions can be undone. One way to take them apart is by simply leaving the night-light on.

It is likewise the case that these tattered ideas are found in places that are much more contemporary and perilous than harmless forests: in mass media and social networks. Disney forests are more frightening than those of Perrault or the Brothers Grimm. If we pay attention to social media (if there really is anyone who still believes its unfounded stories), one of the darkest, most terrifying forests of our time is found at the foot of Mount Fuji, rising thick over rocky, volcanic soil. It is an authentic Sea of Trees, as an ancient name describes it. A recent term it has received is Suicide Forest, a tabloid headline with some credit, although mostly exaggerated. According to Japanese tourist information, it is an excellent area to go hiking and see unusual animals and birds, yet has been feared since ancient times, since it is believed (or else people are made to believe) that it is home to a tormented phantom.


Courtesy of the artist
Alongside its longstanding fame as an accursed location, the extensive published reputation of this forest makes it seem even worse. There are novels and self-help guides that recommend it as the best place to go to die with no impediments. It has also been the main character (and I say “character”, not “setting”, which it also is) of horror movies. Including some that are almost humanitarian, like the one made by Gus Van Sant in 2015.

It is odd that in the Sea of Trees, people lay out paths with coloured tape, following the example of the abandoned child in children's stories. Otherwise, if you get lost there is no way out, since technology does not work and there is no way to avoid being out of reach. The red ropes running through it are ways to save yourself, as without them all hope must be abandoned, like in the sign greeting those arriving at Dante's Inferno. That selva oscura is indeed a scary forest. The poet Virgil, who was Dante's guide in that daunting journey, advised him to get over his fear and concentrate on the suffering of the damned, those who had strayed from the munificent giusta via.

In the Doré engraving of Dante, where he is crowned by a laurel wreath, distrust has set in. Everything seems threatening, from the ivy and brambles around him to the twisted roots of immense trees looming over him, about to fall, and then the perilous kingdom of darkness he is headed towards. This living forest seems ready to devour him, without the artist having to use those pathetic humanising (not humanist) effects seen in animated cartoons.

The selva oscura, dense and terrifying, deep and impenetrable and so on and so on, the perdition site par excellence, is just one particular version of the forest. The famous 1946 photograph by W. Eugene Smith, The Walk to Paradise Garden, could also work as a Dante illustration, but not of his Inferno. Amongst many possibilities, forests have been the habitat of innocent hermits and venerable saints in search of transcendence and revelation.

The literary apotheosis of the forest as a site of initiation and discovery is Birnam Wood, in Macbeth. In the Kurosawa film Throne of Blood, perhaps the most impressive film adaptation of the Shakespeare play, Macbeth and Banquo ride unceasingly through the Spider Web Forest, an entangled labyrinth. In dense fog, they come across a “malignant spirit”, the term given it in the film, inside a translucent cabin. Once within, they come upon an almost transparent sorceress, spinning the tiny thread of destiny on her jenny wheel. What she does is executed in excessive detail, like the Fate engraved by Goya in the Capricho entitled “Hilan Delgado” [They Spin Finely].

With an altered voice from beyond the tomb, the soothsayer reveals Macbeth's destiny to him: the storyline will become altered when Birnam Wood begins to move. It seems to be a calming prophecy, since trees do not move. Yet here Macbeth is wrong, as the wood begins to move when its branches are cut, so that his demise will be bound to these “portable trees”, recalling the quotation by Lope de Vega in reference to the Spanish Armada, which author Jon Juaristi used as the title for one of his books.

While “the voice of destiny is heard much more than the figure of destiny is seen”, as María Zambrano has written, in the Kurosawa film (and in art in general) destiny is visible. Mountains of human skeletons complete the revelatory setting, shiny and transparent amidst the forest gloom. It could perfectly well be called a fantasy forest glade, in a dramatic interior.

To enter into the opening in the forest, therefore, it is best to refer to Giorgione, its pictorial inventor in the early sixteenth century, surely with the assistance of Titian. The Pastoral Concerto in the Louvre is a rural scene with four young figures, the men clothed and the women nude, as if they were Muses, which surely they are. Two idealised women and two real men in a landscape that is as real
(earthy, Venetian) as it is ideal (ethereal and bucolic). And above all alive. We can still see the leaves fluttering, the subtle transit of the clouds. An even more enigmatic work is The Tempest, attributed to the Venice Academy, which is yet another forest glade, this time with three figures, a near-nude Romani woman breast-feeding a baby and a standing soldier holding a lance, which x-ray analysis tells us was originally another half-dressed female figure. In the distance we see a walled city, while a lightning bolt darts across the sky.

There are even more forest clearings in work attributed to Giorgione, like the settings where the Sleeping Venus or Dresden Venus dreams, or where The Three Philosophers, in Vienna, have their thoughts. These three philosophers, who are possibly wanderers, witches or magicians (but not the Three Wise Men), are seen in a forest clearing that is as sharply lit as their garments themselves. Amongst other things, they represent the three ages. The seated young man, dressed in green and white with nothing on his head, does calculations with his set square and compass. The mature philosopher, dressed in red and violet with a white turban, meditates while beginning to move. The elderly figure, with a yellow tunic, tobacco-toned hood and long greying beard, holds a sheet of paper with astronomical annotations. It is possible that the younger man symbolises humanism, the mature man Arab philosophy, and the older man Greek thought. In other words, that the painting might depict the history of reason from Plato and Aristotle to the Renaissance, with Avicenna and Averroes along the way. In other readings, this is an allegory of three epochs, Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance, or perhaps of the three religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

If we leave aside these more open-ended readings (which are just a few amongst many), Tre filosofi becomes clearer, and especially when viewed it as a landscape. The figures are thinking individuals, meditating, calculating and contemplating in a forest glade open to a distant view of hills, homes and farmland. On the horizon, night is falling, though there is still light of day; the air filters through the foliage. Nothing alters the peaceful concentration of these serious, introverted sages. With nothing lugubrious, dense or fearful being conjured by some evil forest, the clearing is better suited for knowledge than for the mysterious emotions that the other paintings depict.

In the same period that Giorgione found his locus amoenus on the outskirts of Venice, in the form of open forests, enjoyable, calming places where to think and decipher secrets, Albrecht Altdorfer painted his locus horridus in Regensburg. Altdorfer’s work featured forests that were so dense, exuberant and impressive that they could dwarf everything else. An example is his Saint George against the Dragon, a claustrophobic forest glade surrounded by a veritable wall of greenery, reaching up to the sky. The main characters are merely accessory, with the knight and lizard taking up hardly any space in the picture plane, congested beyond measure with the main subject at hand. This a forest where you can only be one of two things, hunter or hunted.

Dark woodlands persist in the north, with more or less the same degree of violence as seen in gloomier times. As we learn in Simon Schama’s monumental study Landscape and Memory, which runs from Tacitus to Kiefer, the Germanic forest was not scenery, it was History itself, though not of reason or philosophy, which as we have seen, thrive better in forest glades.

In the work by Álvaro Perdices, entitled “Paths in the Afternoon: Initiation in the Woods”, we also find landscape and memory. Trees are shown, but not the trees that Rodney Graham photographed upside down, solitary and monumental enough to work as environmental statements and works of art. The landscape that Perdices has photographed is more in line with the trees seen in Joel Sternfeld’s American Prospects, a masterful photography book published in various editions.
since 1987. His photographs capture the anomalies of American life in images that evoke (and bring together) the timeless Arcadian urban landscapes created by human construction. Incongruencies and paradoxes are seen constantly in this work, where Sternfeld alludes ironically to history, literature and visual culture (including photography, cinema and art). The result is an American ideal laid over the real territory of the United States. The United States was the hope for a new world without the injustices and penuries of the old. In the film by Terrence Malik, The New World, this is precisely what is being addressed, just like the novel Ema, la cautiva, [Ema the Captive], where, like a musician, the accomplished writer César Aira counterpoints urban and native worlds, attributing the finer qualities of culture to the savages and the worst of barbarity to the civilised.

The landscape of Álvaro Perdices belongs to a complex landscape tradition. Besides its consonance with what we have referred to above, “Paths in the Afternoon: Initiation in the Wood” is as clear as those painted by Giorgione and Titian, and perhaps even more. It too is a classical landscape that is friendlier and less dynamic, a low mountain range with its modest underbrush, far from intense. A clearing in the forest like those “fine, clear, aromatic and radiant” woodlands of the Spanish Levant, so greatly appreciated by Azorín. It is a landscape that can be described, although it is not necessary to do so. For as Unamuno observed, this mere description does not contain what is essential, the emotions that arise from trying to find “the souls of trees, of ravines, of the hills.” Staying with these leading figures of the Generation of ’98, this kind of landscape is what Machado called prodigious: “Tomorrow what is dumb will speak / The heart and the stone.”

A few years earlier, in 1886, Francisco Giner de los Ríos observed, in the pithily-entitled article “Paisaje” [Landscape], that its depiction is “the most synthetic, thorough and comprehensive of all genres” in art. The founder and theorist of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza [Free Institution for Education] also pointed out that “it favours the expansion of fantasy, the ennobling of the emotions, the dilation of intellectual horizons, the dignity of our tastes and love for moral things, a love that always arises in purifying contact with Nature.” A body of rational and emotional experiences to save in our memory, to never forget.

Landscape is also memory, whether inherited or learnt. Returning to Machado, now with a note by Juan de Mairena, landscape helps “awaken in the child love for nature.” In other words, as Ortega remarked, “the landscape is the teacher.” The places that Perdices photographs are meant for pedagogy. The one seen at Es Baluard is a school in the forest called Ses Milanes, found near Bunyola, in the Alfàbia Range on Mallorca. Its purpose is to get children out of enclosed classrooms, where, inevitably, “the world is beyond my understanding,” as Wallace Stevens wrote in an apparently superficial poem that persists in its discovery of a certainty: “But when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud.”

We must defer to María Zambrano to speak of her final book Claros del bosque [Clearings in the Forest], which is full of teachings and illuminations. The forest clearing is indeterminate, it is not a destination; it solves nothing; there are no maps to find it, it is an unexpected gift of chance. “We must not search for it, we must not search. This is the initial lesson of forest clearings: we must not go looking for them, nor look for anything particular in them. No prefigured determinate, nothing familiar. The nothingness and void that the forest clearing gives as its answer to what is being searched for.”

Yet what cannot be seen, and is not even searched for, can be imagined; what is ungraspable seems to be within reach in the forest clearing: “what is perceived, glimpsed at
or is about to be seen, is illuminated, vanishes or ceases to be.” It is a site of apprenticeship, and of revelation: “We move through them in a way that is somewhat analogous to how we move through the classrooms.” All that is required is to pay attention, as they are “places of the voice of those who will learn by listening,” where “what is barely seen or foreshadowed will go hide without knowing where, without knowing if it will ever return.”

Álvaro Perdices presents an all-encompassing installation at Es Baluard. The viewer enters into a gallery with the walls covered by photographs from floor to ceiling. A glade in the woods in the museum, made from photographs from another forest clearing in the Tramuntana. On the wallpaper we see vegetation, a bit of the sky and a lot of the ground, that is, earth, stones and a few branches here and there. This dominant presence of earth, of the ground, denotes a low camera angle, the device placed close to the ground. This perspective considerably enhances the height of the low-lying mountain that encircles the clearing, the vegetation not overly dense. Here we are called to sit on the floor to view the images from below.

The children of Ses Milanes are seated on the ground, some sit on rocks. They amuse themselves with broken branches, leaves and stones, besides using pencils and field notebooks. They play hide-and-seek, or marbles, jump up and down and do somersaults, running around here and there. They tug on ropes, try to steal the flag from each other, or rescue their captured friends. All this and so much more takes place, yet none of this is seen in the exhibition; it is rather in the viewers’ memory, viewers who were once children, who liked recess more than the classroom, their classmates more than the teachers, their best friends more than the rest.

With this constructed space, there is an attempt to suggest the surprise of the forest clearing. The intention is that the exhibition take the viewer outside of the museum for a while, or even a step further: that he or she might take a brief break from everyday urban experience. During these months of intense heat, perhaps this will be a breath of fresh air. Something more than a space surrounding the viewer, the clearing in the woods is where visitors are invited to stop and place themselves in suspense.

Despite the fact that the woods cannot be seen, since custom tells us it is hidden by the trees, its presence can be felt. It would be wonderful for the spectator to recall its aroma, breathing the air shifting the leaves on the trees, listening to the song of the birds that live there. More curious, sensitive visitors might discover or sense the void that all these absences have left, just as it is possible to get a glimpse, in a forest, of instantaneous appearances and vanishings of forest friends. Or the nymph that is hidden from the gaze of others, so adeptly described by Ortega in a note from 1914 entitled “El bosque” [The Forest]. “As you go walking, turn your gaze quickly towards a clearing amidst the heavy growth, and you will perceive a vibration in the air, as if it were rushing to fill the void left by a lithe, naked body, fleeing from the place.”

Other things that are absent in the image but present in our minds can also be perceived. The meditating philosopher in the painting by Giorgione. The children playing hide-and-seek right now, beyond the picture plane. The hiker who just a moment ago put his walking stick on the ground and pulled out a notebook to jot something down, or sketch out an idea. He was here just a moment ago, you can still feel his presence. In the text mentioned above, Ortega describes such sensations: “When we come to one of these brief clearings ceded by the greenery, it seems that a man had been there before us, seated on a rock, elbows on his knees, his head resting in his hands, and that precisely when we were about to arrive, he had gotten up and left. We suspect that this man, after a short spin around, is sitting in the same position not too far away from us.”
There are only two things patent here. The first is the viewer who becomes a walker. The second is the forest become a clearing. They are brought together by the tremor of the mirror. According to Zambrano, “the clearing as a shimmering mirror, hovering clarity that can barely be illustrated, just as it fades away. And all this alludes, everything is allusion, and everything is oblique.” With a little bit of luck in the clearing and its reflection “the mute will speak,” the conditions will arise where the visitor’s heart might converse with the rock that is seated upon. So that they might dialogue, sing or listen. So that they might be aware each of the other’s existence. So that they might see and recognise each other.

It is even possible to discover that what cannot be understood in everyday life, becomes something else (the three or four hills and a cloud, the tree that is both golden and blue, the moon amidst the folds of the blanket, springtime disrobing) when walking along the esplanade of earth and weathered stones, alongside the forest’s lush walls, its tree trunks and treetops, beneath the sky, which in itself is a new forest clearing.

Álvaro Perdices has worked with the great masterpieces of the Museo del Prado. He has also been a schoolteacher, teaching all that he has learnt. Both the museum and the school gave him enriching experiences, better than any academy could have done. Later he began something else, which is education for education’s sake. Art is revelation, a little opening in the immense forest of human foolishness. Once cleared of weeds, as Zambrano writes, it is no longer “the forgotten word that will never return, the meaning of a departed thought.” Amongst other things, the museum and the school are proof that art can be a public square and a forest glade, heart and stone.
The Oak Tree

Courbet portrays as a great character (a hero or a god) the oak he cannot contain in his painting.

A monumental tree bordering on the mythical continuity of History emblem of local pride

How many people does it take to embrace an oak?

How many mules fit in the shade of a walnut tree?

The limit of our land is marked by that juniper

We are lacking the village’s stump

The Pine Tree

Painting, poem, standard
Anglada extracts the Pi de Formentor from the landscape

Long-standing trees are venerated until the moment an axe arrives
I wonder why the bramble is lesser

Are olive willows not admirable?
Do hawthorns not deserve worship?
Is the rose hip unworthy?

A blackthorn in blossom is the true picture of snowfall in the spring

Gustave Courbet, *The Oak at Flagely, or The Vercingétorix Oak, Cesar Field near Alésia*, 1864. Oil on canvas, 89 × 111,5 cm. Musée départemental Gustave Courbet, Ornans

Hermen Anglada-Camarasa, *Pine Tree of Formentor*, 1922. Oil on wood, 63 × 49 cm. Es Baluard Museu d’Art Contemporani de Palma, Ajuntament de Palma collection long-term loan
Olive Tree

Would you like to own
a centennial or millenary being
in the entrance to your home,
by the swimming pool
or in the hall of the Bank?

You'll amaze your visitors
with a sculpture that is modern,
living, massive and unique,
ever-changing and permanent
contorted and manneristic

In their new life as decoration
reinvented olive trees
have hardly any roots
nor do they produce anything
They are no longer positive, my father used to say

But who wouldn’t like to have
a Triassic olive tree standing next to them?

The Wood Sawyers

Two faceless executioners
hack up an innocent tree
They strive to dominate
indomitable nature
The homeland of peasants

I recognise myself
in Millet's bond with the earth
his paintings celebrate
a timeless world
that lives poorly from its surroundings

A spiral of planting and harvesting
fertilising and depleting the land
for very little in return

Sacrificed trees indicate
that the woods also provide food
when things go wrong
bread for today, hunger tomorrow

Let's not forget that trees are inherited

Josep Truyol, Olive Tree of Mallorca, 1920-1930.
Photograph printed on postcard, 14 × 8,5 cm

Jean-François Millet, The Wood Sawyers, 1850-1852.
Oil on canvas, 57 × 81 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, Londres
Wanderers

Artists who need the open air to get to know themselves

Lonely wanderers surrendered to their dreams

Free spirits who consciously avoid the ways of the State

Sailors without a compass who seek North in the dark

Philosophers who need to get lost in order to find themselves

Forest paths that lead nowhere

Escola del Bosc

Two plane trees and an erythrina: the best school is in the shade of a tree

Sun and air, desks and blackboards, striped smocks and espadrilles, buckets and spades, hoes and baskets

I spent a summer volunteering at Ses Milanes, a clearing in the forest of the Serra d’Alfàbia, near Bunyola

Among trees and bushes that nobody planted boys and girls study nature while they run and play hide and seek

The still relevant teaching of the Free Institution for Education: the ideal of every school is the open air

Summerhill

All the freedom,
within the group
with no rules, programmes
nor authority
only open doors
to experience
success is not rewarded
and mistakes are not punished
No one is right
agreement is not the aim
at the same time, everyone is
equal and everyone is different
The school in the open air
under the sun and stars
does not teach how to behave
but to go off the beaten track
without feeling ashamed

Jakintza

The idea was to feralise
the classroom, to become wild
leave the children alone
without adult supervision
They decided they wanted to
hide and disobey
When they let me in
I saw no faces
Hiding between
clothes and carpets,
locked inside cupboards,
under desks
they were no longer apprentices
of order and reason
They did it so well that
they didn’t even appear in the
photographs I took

Neill & Summerhill. *A man and his work: A pictorial study*  
Popenoe, Joshua.  

Colour photograph, 50 × 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist
There Is More to Come

Alaire, near La Laguna,
is a forest school
in a field full of broom,
tall and flamboyant shrubs

El Médano, in the south of Tenerife,
is a small beach on the edge
of the Montaña Pelada volcano,
full of ravines and caves,
tabaibas and giant cacti

Zubitxu Natura Eskola, in Gorlitz,
is an Atlantic forest school
brambles and hawthorns, a stream,
cowslip, kampalinas,
udaberri loreak or primula veris,
among the remains of machinery
and the ruins of a mill

What I learnt there
I will also teach

Álvaro Perdices, Untitled (Ongoing Projects).
Alaire free school, 2023. Colour photograph, 34 × 50 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

“Paths in the Afternoon: Initiation in the Woods” is a site-specific installation created for one of the gallery spaces at Es Baluard. Being specific to a given location will always be a challenge, just as it also involves commitment to the nature of the work and the conceptual framework, the site where the work is found. It is an aspect that increasingly concerns me, and something I seek to insist upon, perhaps because when something is specific it becomes possible to have a more genuine, intimate and personal experience. In other words, the possibility to go home with something, which should not be understated.

The group of photographs I am showing were made during various weeks working as a volunteer at the Ses Milanes nature school, in Bunyola, Mallorca, in the summer of 2020. The project was conceived using this material, thinking of the value and experience of a natural setting as an experimental, pedagogical site for growth. The images are displayed on three walls. On the first (the wall that we never see when entering, because it is always behind us), a large forested area is engulfing us.

On the second wall, the images separated by thin white lines become a sequence, a route that shows us various clearings in the woods. Sites where things have taken place. If we look carefully amongst the foliage or on the floor, we can trace actions that refer to the liveability of these places, which indeed we pertain to. We do not encounter figures, like those that move amongst classical landscapes, but the indication of activity and the archaeological quality are evident.

At the end of the room, on the third wall, with four images emphasising perspective, we can perceive the way out of these forest meadows, yet only by passing through sites of experience and knowledge. In other words: spaces where the body is called to action. Surprisingly, an image that we have left behind us appears again. In this case, as project curator
Horacio Fernández suggests, a shin bone, a rod of power or a guide stick lies forgotten on the ground.

The photographs are accompanied by a fourth wall, a mirror where these images and the reflections of visitors to the room are seen. The textured flooring invites us to seat on it, stretching into various photographs on the wall. By sitting on the floor, the visitor’s gaze is adjusted to the height of the camera, while also corresponding to the approximate eye height of the boys and girls at Ses Milanes.

A further piece, entitled Genealogia [Genealogy], bids us farewell, while connecting again with the exhibition. It is found outside of the room, in the exterior hallway, and composed of a sequence of images made with the work of artists from other periods, texts by various authors and passers-by, historical documentation on nature schools in Spain and elsewhere, as well as various previous and current projects I am currently involved in. This line of work seeks to show a visual ecosystem and the various ideas I am engaged with.