

Helen Thomas

No patch of green too small



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Helen Thomas, *No patch of green too small* [Exhibition]

1 Aug – 20 Aug 2025

Sovereign Design House, University of Huddersfield.

Dr Janine Sykes [Editor and Curator]

Helen Thomas

Dr Rowan Bailey

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SaH School of Art and Humanities, University of Huddersfield.

University of Huddersfield

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*Helen Thomas, studio portrait
Photo Emily Ryalls, 2025*

Introduction

Artist Helen Thomas paints small patches of plants, green and otherwise, in their locales. Her work specifically focuses on unplanned plants and organisms that grow haphazardly in the margins of our urban environment.

The solo exhibition *Helen Thomas, No patch of green too small* in Huddersfield emerges at a significant moment in (and beyond) contemporary art, where critical questions surrounding the purpose of plants, their relationship with people and the planet are explored.

The exhibition presents artworks by Helen Thomas of differing scales; new site-specific works depicting plants growing around the estate of the University of Huddersfield, in addition to works from previous shows alongside those presented for the first time.



*Drawing Buddleia,
Queensgate, Huddersfield
26 June 2025
Photo Helen Thomas*

The show takes place in Sovereign Design House, located on the grounds of the University of Huddersfield.

It is the second exhibition where the *Huddersfield Art Gallery Curates* programme partners once again with the *Cultures of_* Research Festival, an annual event run by the School of Arts and Humanities. This year's theme is Climate.

While Huddersfield Art Gallery remains closed, awaiting major redevelopment as part of the town's *Our Cultural Heart* regeneration scheme, the gallery is fostering new projects with contemporary artists and seizing opportunities to contribute to challenging debates about the role of art in society.

The exhibition and programme *No patch of green too small* are part of a research project led by Curator Dr Janine Sykes (Lecturer, University of Huddersfield) who also works as the Curator (Visual Arts) at Huddersfield Art Gallery. Collaborating with Thomas, the programme and exhibition involves a series of creative workshops with groups and partners, who take part in learning of the biodiversity of small patches of plants in Kirklees.



Site photo Hawksbeard,
background Sovereign
Design House, 2025
Photo Helen Thomas

Concepts and Context

In the book, *Why Look at Plants?* (2019) curator Giovanni Aloi asserts, the recent emergence of plants in the gallery space constitutes a wake-up-call to reappraise this relationship at a time of deep ecological and ontological crisis.

The section in the book subtitled ‘Other Spaces’ is a collection of writings that site the gallery as a special space that provides a location where meanings about plants and behaviours can be reconsidered. In his essay *Places of Maybe: Plants “Making Do” Without the Belly of the Beast* Andrew S. Yang focuses upon the misconception that plants are immobile and goes on to describe how just the opposite is the case, where their evolutionary success is down to their tactical mobility. Yang points to writer Michael Pollan, who invites us to consider the devotion humans have towards the maintenance of certain plants and that this reciprocal relationship is not only a form of evolutionary agency, but a form of tactical subterfuge – where plants look-out for possible conditions for survival.

Yang goes on to reconsider the contemporary artist who chooses the subject matter of plants as an ally, as he asks “Is the human artist with an ecological bent the creative agent or, more precisely, simply another node in the network of plants seeking possibilities?”, thereby placing the role of the contemporary artist as an agent of plants-survival in the Anthropocene age. One may think this a very bold statement and question what impact, if any, artistic gestures can achieve in countering the onset of climate change. In the short-term Yang suggests none, but in the long-term there is hope, as,

The whole existence and diversification of all microbes, plants, fungi, animals [...] is written in the language of the

most unlikely of all things actually happening just once. This has been true not only in the very beginnings, but in every subsequent change again, and again, and again that has taken shape so distinctly and persistently over the past 3.8 billion years. Every new species has emerged from the most random, contingent, and statistically improbable of events: a creative mutation inside this tiny cell; the migration of that individual; the survival of one feral seed, on one particular day, that uncertain place of maybe.

It is in the context of these debates and Aloi’s call, to rethink our behaviours and relationship with plants, that *No patch of green too small* is presented.

The title *No patch of green too small* is a paraphrase by Thomas from a statement found in a social media post by Aloi about his new book *Lawn* (2025). The book positions the quintessential-British manicured grass lawn, as representing everything that is wrong about our conception and treatment of plants, stating, “Lawns are ecological scars: they won’t heal on their own”.

Ecological stewardship is a notion implicit in works by Thomas, as she paints the resilient, unplanned plants, and by doing so, connecting with other historical, social, economic, cultural and spiritual ideas about the human-plant relationship.

A new intersectionality was found during the research and knowledge-exchanges observed during the first of Thomas’s creative workshops and are outlined in this catalogue.



*Drawing Sow Thistle,
Queensgate, Huddersfield,
2025
Photo Helen Thomas*

Research Project

This exhibition sits within a particular curatorial research project titled 'Expanding Blended Curation', which is part of the *Cultures of Climate* programme at the University of Huddersfield. Blended Curation, developed by Dr Janine Sykes, is a model of curation that aims to achieve the highest-quality public participation, where knowledge exchanges occur. The research method for expanding the use of the model is practice research, and *No patch of green too small* is one of two exhibitions that are being used to evaluate the success and practicality of the model in the context of working for a municipal gallery, in this case, Curator (Visual Arts) at Huddersfield Art Gallery.

The methods applied to evaluate that knowledge exchanges are taking place are mainly qualitative, using questionnaires, observations and discourse analysis of the exchanges within a series of artist-run workshops by Helen Thomas, facilitated by the curator Dr Janine Sykes, before and during the exhibition.

The workshops are designed for three groups based in the Kirklees area, firstly a small group of postgraduate students, studying visual art subjects at the University of Huddersfield, and two community groups: the Friday Wanderers – an all-lady walking group, run by Support-to-Recovery (S2R) a well-being charity based in Huddersfield and We In Front – a multi-ethnic walking and hiking group based in Huddersfield.

Before an outline of initial findings from the first workshops are summarised (below) it is important to outline the insights and intersectionality found in the early research phase of the exhibition programme. Links were found between the artworks and contemporary writings on the spiritual aspects of the plant-human relationship. *Natural Connection, What Indigenous Wisdom & Marginalised People Teach Us About Environmental Action* (2025) by activist Jocelyn Longdon press importance on how

plants make us feel and connect with the ‘noticings’ of plants, found in Thomas’s creative process. In the book Longdon points to the many studies that show how immersing in nature e.g. forest bathing is now embedded in Western medical practice for the treatment of depression, anxiety and PTSD and shows positive results that often exceed therapy and medication.

In the chapter ‘Nature is a Human Right’ Longdon points to research showing that humans have known for Millennia that regular contact with nature is good for our well-being and this new focus on nature, especially in Western research omits the spiritual connection that this wisdom entails. For example, in the Japanese tradition of Shinrin-Yoku (forest bathing) comes from the Shinto tradition, where forests are shrines. This spiritual dimension of forests and nature is common in many cultures around the world, and Longdon gives many examples such as the ‘sacred groves’ in Ghana. Longdon states, what is important is how we understand our contemporary disconnection with both the natural and spiritual elements of the world, as this is key to understanding the complex issues exacerbating climate breakdown.

So along with Longdon, it is important to consider that when we speak of connecting with nature, we must be precise with who ‘we’ is. This is because not everybody has equal access to nature in the UK or other countries. This may be due to postcode, economic situation, race or gender. Longdon reminds us that nearly fifty per cent of neighbourhoods in England are condemned to having tree cover of less than ten per cent. There are also gender and racial implications of who has access to nature, and how certain identities are made to feel ‘inadequate’ in the countryside and thereby omit regular contact with it, from their lifestyle.

Returning to the topic of how nature can offer a spiritual experience, Longdon asserts that this type of language, along

with particular identities are excluded from “the bounds and rules of the elite” (Longdon, 2025, p222). The potential to counteract this gate-keeping, that is a barrier to a deeper understanding of climate change issues, she points to the book *Sparrow Envy* by J. Drew Lanham, who wrote that bird watching isn’t about identifying birds, the activity is about *feeling* who birds are, emphasising the existence of tacit types of knowledges about nature. Such tacit knowledge exchanges are observed by curator Sykes, during walks with the Friday Wanderers walking group (discussed below).

It is through the theme of spirituality that Longdon’s book intersects with a statement by Waheeda Kothdiwala (Project Worker, S2R) as she describes the nature of the Friday Wanderers walking group that meets weekly in the Kirklees area,

We are more than just a walking group. Every Friday, we come together to move through nature, share laughter, stories and reflections, we connect deeply – through the beauty of small things, in shared interests, and in a quiet spirituality that binds us. Week after week, step by step, we talk, we chat, and we grow together.

The theme also appears in the book, *Nature’s Missionary, Seth Lister Mosley Naturalist, Museum Curator and Mystic, 1848-1929*, where Alan Brooke outlines how Mosley, who established the first museum in his hometown of Huddersfield in 1920 was also an illustrator, who developed a ‘spiritual’ connection with nature.

A reconnection with nature, is offered in this exhibition of paintings by Thomas and in the workshop’s activities, facilitated by the participatory curatorial approach.

Artist Workshops

In the artist workshops Thomas was inspired by Seth Lister Mosley's illustrated 'flower postcards' which he distributed to thousands of people, across the region of Kirklees and beyond. The workshop participants created their own postcards, capturing visual studies of unplanned plants during short walks in sites across Kirklees, including the University of Huddersfield campus. A selection of these are collated and presented in the exhibition by the artist and curator.

Before the practical activity, Thomas shared some knowledge about her creative processes, thinking, context, research and readings around unplanned plants. These included the historical mobility of plants, as they were carried over on colonial trade in shipping ballast (seeds in soil, mud used to weigh down the hull of a ship). Plant seeds have also been shown to escape territories, in animals, movement, foods or collections. Giving the example of Danish Scurvy Grass – a coastal plant that likes to grow along roadsides where salt has been spread by gritting lorries in winter. Its distribution across the UK looks like a road map as it grows on roadside verges.

After the workshops, participants were asked questions to see if knowledge-exchanges had occurred and, these responses were examined, using discourse analysis. Some codes and patterns were starting to appear, around 'visuality' and 'well-being' and evidence of exchanges included the development of refined observation skills, particularly of formal elements, such as the



*Artist workshop, participant,
Dewsbury Country Park,
July 2025
Photo Janine Sykes*

Artist Workshops

form, structure, texture, and names of unplanned plants. Shifts in perspectives and behaviours were also emerging as one participant stated they were “happy to sit next to them [plants] rather than pick them”. Whereas another commented that plants “didn’t get my attention before” – which perhaps shows a shift in perspective and a reduction in what Giovanni Aloï describes as ‘plant-blindness’ [term was coined by Wandersee and Schussler].

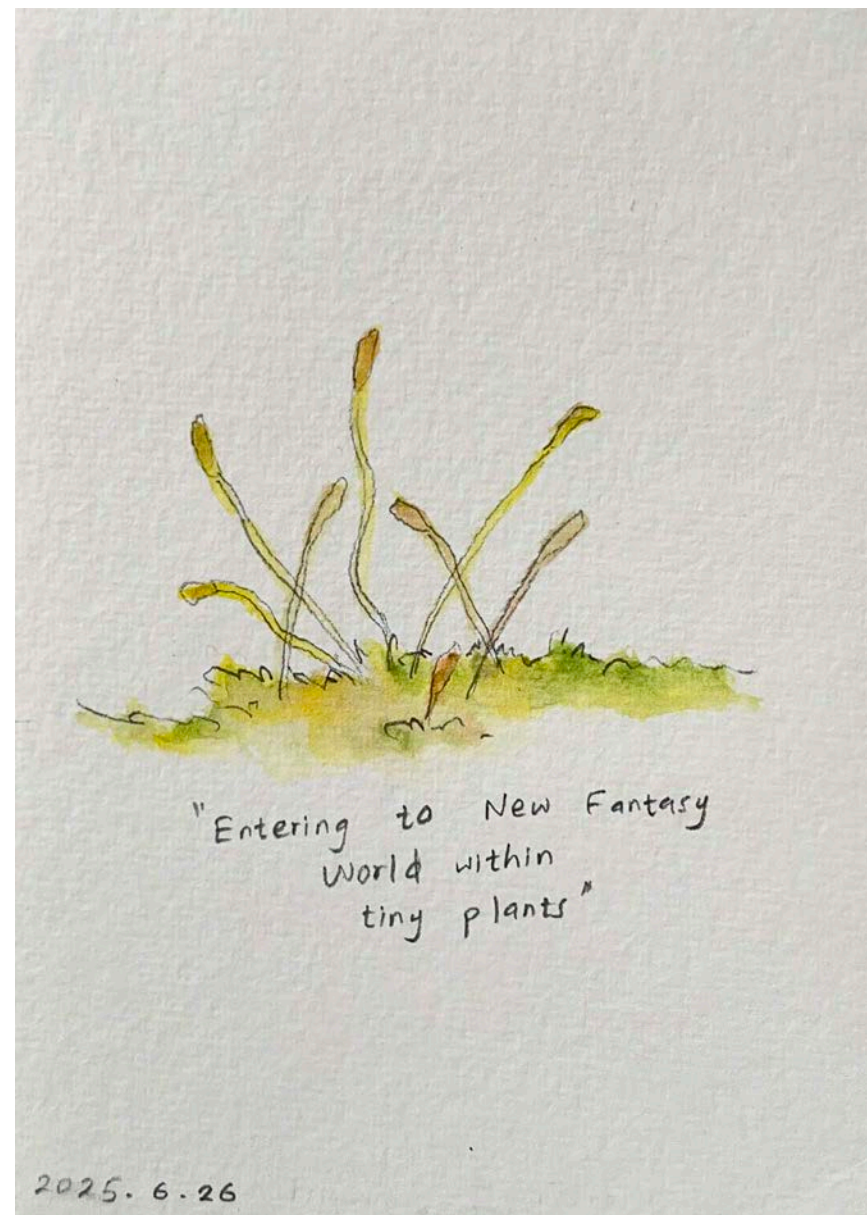
More workshops will be held throughout the duration of the exhibition and more sharing of knowledges of plants will be presented in the gallery space.



Artist workshop, Thomas and two participants, Barbara Hepworth Building, University of Huddersfield
Photo Janine Sykes



Participant photo, artist workshop, University of Huddersfield, June 2025

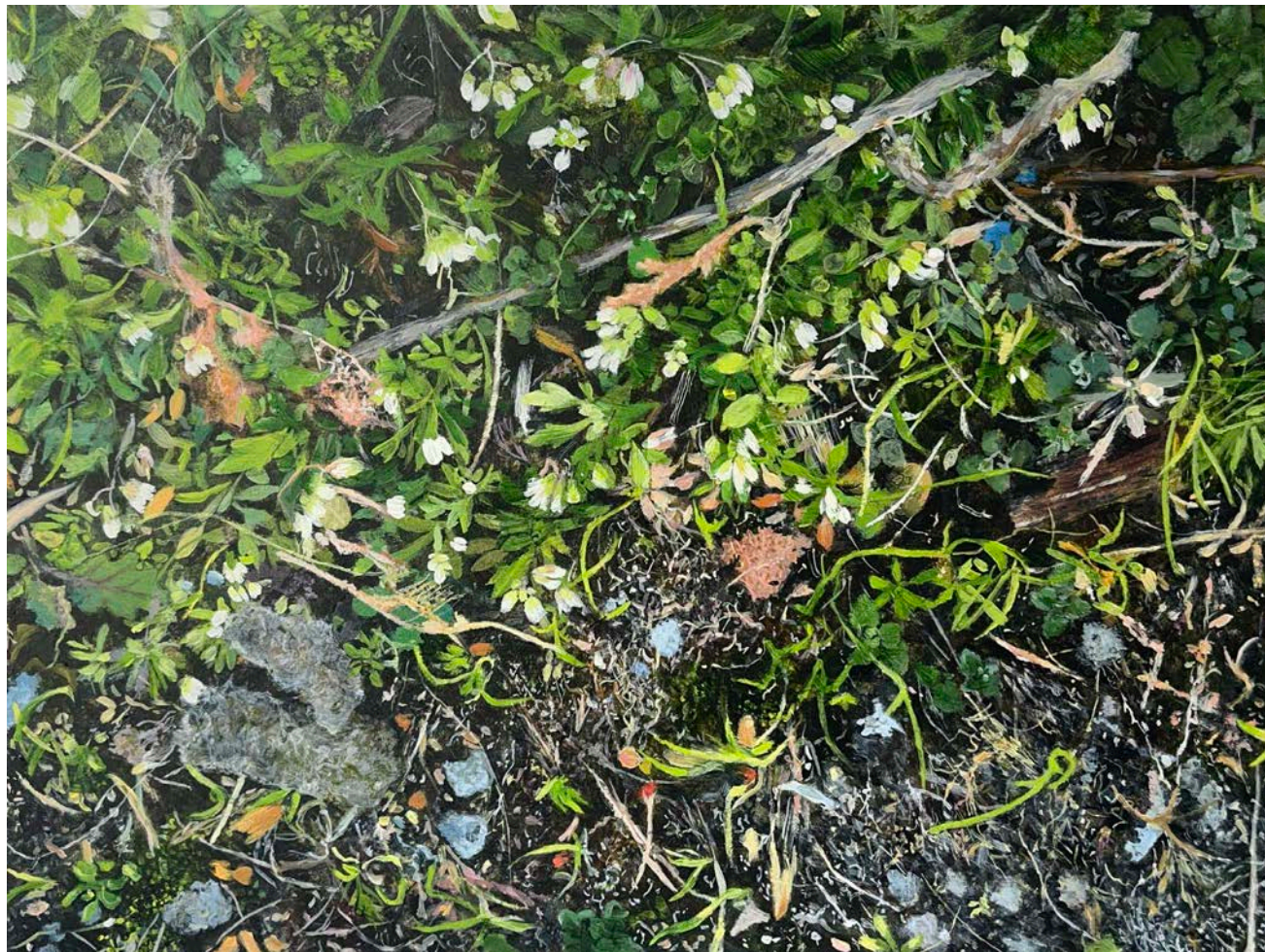




Artworks



Queen Street South, February 2025
acrylic on board, 23 x 30.5cm



Queen Street South II, February 2025
acrylic on board, 23 x 30.5cm

Merchant Gate Car Park
acrylic on paper, 200 x 150cm, 2025



George Street II
acrylic on paper, 200 x 150cm, 2024



Shepherd's Purse, Herbicide, Denby Dale Road, III
acrylic on paper, 200 x 150cm, 2023





Maybe Waldorf Way IV
acrylic on board, 21.5 x 30cm, 2022

Together and Between
work in progress [detail], 2025



My work is inspired by plants in different locales including gardens, landscape, post-industrial edgelands and, since around 2018, I have focused on unplanned plants and organisms in the urban environment. As Richard Mabey says, “They seem, to the unconditioned urban eye, as insignificant and maybe as annoying as a splash of spilt green paint” ⁽¹⁾. Urban wild plants provide wildlife habitats, contribute to biodiversity, help prevent soil erosion and absorb pollutants. They can also bring colour and softness to pavement edges, corners of car parks, and vacant plots of land.

No patch of green too small is an invitation to be attentive to the often overlooked, and for many more-than-human beings, vital patches of green in our villages, towns and cities. Can this noticing lead to a sense of connection and caring? Speaking about *The Lost Words: A Spell Book*, Robert Macfarlane describes the importance of names “We’ve got more than 50% of species in decline. And names, good names, well used can help us see and they help us care. We find it hard to love what we cannot give a name to. And what we do not love we will not save.” ⁽²⁾ Through acts of noticing and making paintings I have begun to recognise, to learn names, to mis-recognise, to hear stories and to question. The work is part of a conversation, an exchange about the wonder and importance of the, sometimes contentious, plants that live and grow in our everyday surroundings.

No patch of green too small brings together paintings made in response to urban wild plants in my hometown of Wakefield over the last five years, alongside works made in 2025 that reference the unplanned flora on the University of Huddersfield campus and nearby streets.

I take photographs, scrawl notes, and make paintings and drawings

from direct observation on path edges, in corners of car parks and in-between sites. This field work has a directness and an energy; responding to factors such as changing weather conditions and the often-fleeting qualities of my area of study.

In the studio I use photographs, often taken from a plan view perspective, as reference for my paintings. Memory of the visual encounter, the location and the date, become part of the work. Slow looking, slow painting; mapping tiny, seemingly insignificant patches of scrappy vegetation. There’s no zoom function, no magnification in a painting. Apparent fine detail gives way to paint. There’s so much life in even a square centimetre of the patch of ground that the painting references.

I made paintings from close-up photographs of pavement plants, which I took, in February 2025, on Queen Street South in Huddersfield. And from photos that I took, in April 2025, of ruderal plants growing on a University of Huddersfield redevelopment site near Sovereign Design House.

In June 2025 I made on-site drawings of Sow Thistle and Buddleja which were growing next to the Queensgate hoardings surrounding the *Our Cultural Heart* regeneration project, and of Nettle growing on an in-between site on the University of Huddersfield campus.

I have reworked *Together and Between*, which was originally created in 2021 for the *Dandelions and Double Yellows* project ⁽³⁾. In this iteration the Chroma Key green ⁽⁴⁾ plank edges refer both to the cut and paste, green screen, approach to plants and planting, and to “the inability to see or notice the plants in one’s own environment” ⁽⁵⁾. I painted new sketches of plants that I saw on visits to Huddersfield in amongst the plants that I originally painted

Cultures of_

Dr Rowan Bailey

in Wakefield. The new additions include: Fox and cubs, Hedge bedstraw, Lady's bedstraw, Wall rue, Herb Robert and Hedge woundwort.

I think that Dr Giovanni Aloï's words on humanity's responsibility for gardens also applies to the wider urban environment, they "[...] are not ours alone: they belong to the plants, animals, fungi, and microbes that make the soil thrive. We are only one part of the equation, and we have a massive responsibility. No patch of green is too small to matter." ⁽⁶⁾

Opinions on urban wild plants can be polarising. What benefits might there be to reconsidering our urban landscape aesthetics in times of climate crisis? Many people including landscape designers, gardeners, planners, botanists, ecologists, philosophers, artists, curators, and writers are considering questions around how we relate to, and work, with plants that have been dismissed as weeds.

A selection of references is included at the back of the catalogue for further reading.

(1): Mabey, R. (2021). *The Unofficial Countryside*. Little Toller.

(2): Macfarlane, R. 'The Lost Words: A Spell Book' <https://www.thelostwords.org/lostwordsbook/> accessed 12/06/2025

(3): <https://www.helenthomasartist.com/dandelions-and-double-yellows/>

(4): In digital photography and video production a block or background of Chromakey green or blue can be replaced with another image or video

(5): Wandersee, J. H., & Schussler, E. E. (1999). *Preventing Plant Blindness*. The American Biology Teacher, 61(2), 82–86

(6): Aloï, G. [@dr.aloi] 2025/05/26. Instagram.

Cultures of_ is a vibrant celebration of creativity, collaboration, and cultural exchange. Through exhibitions, installations, performances, workshops, talks, and discussions, it brings people together to reimagine the possibilities of placemaking and shared knowledge. As part of *Temporary Contemporary* - a visionary partnership between the University of Huddersfield and Kirklees Council - the programme has been breathing new life into the high street since 2018, transforming Queensgate Indoor Market and The Piazza Shopping Centre into dynamic hubs of cultural activity. The programme's inaugural publication, *Temporary Contemporary: Creating Vibrant Spaces to Support the Conditions for Creative and Cultural Activity* (2020), captured the energy and vision of its early days with essays and striking visual stories. From this foundation, *Cultures of_* has flourished into a series of bold, year-long, place-based cultural explorations, including *Cultures of Place* (2021/22), *Cultures of Sound* (2022/23), *Cultures of Creative Health* (2023/24) and *Cultures of Climate* (2024/25).

Each project strengthens the programme's unwavering commitment to fostering meaningful connections between people, ideas and spaces. By championing participatory experiences and cultural dialogue, *Cultures of_* inspires new ways of thinking and engaging with the world around us.

Through the lens of contemporary aesthetics and critical practice, we seek to ignite reflection, spark dialogue, and mobilise collective action - revealing the profound role that creativity and imagination can play in shaping a more sustainable, just, and hopeful future.

See: Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture - University of Huddersfield: <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/ceada/>

Biographies

Helen Thomas is a contemporary British painter based in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. Thomas works with drawing and painting, both on site and in her studio at The Art House, to consider humanity’s relationships with plants, with particular focus on unplanned plants in urban spaces.

Thomas graduated from Falmouth School of Art (BA Fine Art) and completed a year’s post graduate study with Turps Art School.

Solo exhibitions: *Habitat*, Mura Ma, Manchester (2024); *Dandelions and Double Yellows*, Wakefield Cathedral (2021); *Surfacing*, Cupola Contemporary, Sheffield (2009).

Group exhibitions include: *Nature Sensory*, The Art House Wakefield and University of Leeds (2025), *Planting Ideas*, St Barbe Art Gallery and Museum, Hampshire (2024); *Entwined: Plants in Contemporary Painting*, Huddersfield Art Gallery (2022) and 20-21 Visual Arts, Scunthorpe (2023); *Conversations with Nature*, The Art House, Wakefield (2022).

Dr Janine Sykes [Ed.] is a Curator, Visual Arts (Huddersfield Art Gallery) and Lecturer (School Art and Humanities, The University of Huddersfield). In 2024 she achieved a PhD in formulating a new model of Blended Curation practice, designed to achieve high-quality public engagement. The curation model was developed to work generously (in a safe and just space) within a regenerative economy - a notion outlined in *Doughnut Economics* (2017) by Kate Raworth. Sykes currently seeks to expand the use of Blended Curation, which encourages publics to drive meaning-making with artists and curators, to achieve ‘citizen occupation’ - true participation.

Dr Rowan Bailey is a Reader in Cultural Theory and Practice with an interest in place-based thinking and making in the public realm. This includes collaborative partnership working with different creative communities. She is also Director of the Centre for Cultural Ecologies in Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Huddersfield and Principal Investigator of the Creative Health Hub for West Yorkshire.

Acknowledgements

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Further Reading

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- A few additional resources:**
- Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, Aloi. G. Founder and Editor in Chief <https://www.antennae.org.uk>
- Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland <https://bsbi.org/>
- Pesticide Action Network UK <https://www.pan-uk.org/>
- Plantlife <https://www.plantlife.org.uk/>

