

Sunday morning, early August. The weather is a furious mix of fast rain and blazing sunlight. At first glance the studio is devoid of bright colour. The artist's dog is black, white and tan and so is everything else – the metal, wood and wax, the suspended zeppelins, a hand grenade, a head, a string of grinding discs, a cardboard box, a lump hammer, a bicycle. My eyes adjust and I recognise old sculptures, with certain parts missing, a coating of dust. Brighter colours loom through – a faded traffic cone, a fleshy lump of silicon, a row of National Geographic magazines along the desk, and in the dark space underneath, in a dirty bucket, a bouquet of flowers.

The day before the studio visit, there was a violent summer storm. Strong winds took advantage of the leaf-laden trees and dragged them down. The day after the storm the road to the city was littered with severed limbs and it struck me as a poignant coincidence that I was on my way to visit a series of sculptures resembling trees in various stages of torture, and yet it also made sense, because the artist's practice is driven by suchlike coincidences – he finds, collects, casts, accumulates, assembles – while the unfinished sculptures wait, patient as trees, for the part that will complete them.

Most of the wood, the artist tells me, is scavenged from the sea. He is attracted to spoils, to damage. Then he mends as he sticks his found wood together, sealing cracks, attaching hinges, bandaging joints with bicycle tubing. Wax thorns dangle from protuberances, weighted down by door knobs. Gold leaf engulfs short expanses in a sumptuous rash. Most of the wood spires are topped with cast feet. The artist admits they are his own, but that the alginate has a charming way of shrinking and disfiguring his extremities, transforming them into alien bodies.

The spider tree is never far from his mind as he works. For decades he has passed it on his routes around the city – the monstrous churchyard tree that overextended and knitted itself into a human-size nest. The artist knows a person who once spent a whole night sleeping inside it.

For a piece of performance art? I say.

No, he says, for fun.

He finds fun in particular combinations, embracing the ludicrous. For the artist, these sculptures are full of levity and joy, whereas, at first, all I can see is necrosis and distress. The confines of the studio have forced the wood spires to crowd together and tangle, like the spider tree, like a tiny, ancient forest. The black and white and tan dog peeks from between the cramped trunks; her eyes are owlish; she is exceptionally un-dog-like. And then something makes me remember playing on the swing-set in our garden as a child – those moments when I managed, briefly, to kick my feet above the level of my eyes, above the horizon line of treetops, and the attendant feeling of pure glee.

As I leave the artist lifts the flowers from the dirty bucket – they contain every colour the studio lacks. He wraps a latex glove around the dripping stems and holds the bouquet out by the twisted fingers of an alien hand.

Sara Baume, August 2023

