

Ash Rise

From smitten ash comes a celebration of furniture making, craft and design, as Fi Martynoga reports.

I have a long-term love affair with the ash trees. I admire the delicacy of their foliage, the boldness of their grain and their economy of effort. That makes the exhibition, Ash Rise, irresistible to me. It presents a stunning showcase

of the considerable talent of Scottish woodworkers, and it celebrates ash, honing our appreciation of the tree and its wood. It is a joint project of the Scottish Furniture Makers' Association, the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers and Scottish Forestry and although it will have moved from the Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh by the time this article appears, it will be touring Scotland in 2025.

At the threshold to the exhibition is an inviting throne by Tim Stead (temporarily occupied by a six year old princess), harking back to The Botanic Ash exhibition of 1993, at the Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, for which he made every piece from a single tree felled there. This time the die-back smitten trees came from Killearn Home Farm. They were milled by Scottish Wood near Dunfermline, and the boards distributed to twenty artists, from furniture makers to paper-cutters.

Chairs are another of my passions. The most astounding and innovative ones in the exhibition are by Angus Ross. It would take a whole article to explore his remarkable skill and challenging techniques and that is

what I promise. Next time! Almost all the other chairs in the exhibition are informed by tradition. We have an Orkney rocker (*Skila*, by Kevin Gauld, who grew the oats for the straw back himself), a Scandinavian-inspired armchair (*Phoenix*, by Angus Richardson, a most inviting chair with fine lines), a Caithness chair (Jack Sheahan), a lovely bench with an interesting sculpted seat reminiscent of a u-shaped valley (*Ash Rise Bench*, Sam Chinnery) and a version of a smoker's bow (*Canopy Chair*, Sam Cooper and Richard Platt). There is also a greenwood stick chair, which does not feature in the exhibition list. It was made by Tom Addy as a demonstration piece for the main film that accompanies the exhibition. Tom also curated the exhibition and introduces the shorter film, a virtual tour, which is available online. Even this rougher chair is made with notable skill and elegance, while the others all show real finesse.

I was particularly fascinated by the lines of the Caithness chair. Jack Sheahan had to steam bend the supports that sweep from the back to the seat as in the Killearn ash he could not find naturally grown 'elbows' generated by the northern-grown and windswept trees that



Top: Detail InOrganic by Nikita Wolfe Murray.

Left: Detail Fire Vessels by Duke Christie.

would have been used in the past. I have it from a Caithness friend that the wide-spaced rails were intended for drying fishermen's socks, although this gently curving chair would first have to acquire some patina from use, as its pristine whiteness seems too fine for harbouring wet wool! The *Canopy Chair* also caught my imagination. The bowed arms are traditional but their organic supports evoke upper ash branches very clearly. It is made with delicacy and my companion thought it looked too frail to accommodate daily use. However, the structure is robust: the makers are long-experienced chair manufacturers who run a workshop at Marchmont House (issue 64, page 31) and specialise in rush-seated chairs.

The word 'tradition' steers me to two other striking exhibits. One is the array of wooden *Agricultural Hand Tools* that Helena Robson has made. She knows that ash was the wood favoured in the past for tool handles and has chosen five items that go further, as they are made of it entirely. Supremely functional, they demonstrate the utility and versatility of ash but at the same time are pleasingly sculptural. Alike in both these ways, functional and sculptural, the *Kayak* by Stephen Thompson is a real eye-catcher. We are so used to the kayak shape, but always rendered in fibreglass. To see it here, where its light wooden laths are visible, the shape suddenly has a new mystery, organic but

engineered by human ingenuity. I found it very compelling.

Although there is no room to mention them all, I ended up liking all of the artworks based on the ash trees that are scattered throughout the exhibition. Only the cut paper pieces by Stevi Benson, one recording the growth rings of a cross-section of the trunk and the other the vacant space in the woodland canopy left by a felled tree, seized me as interesting on first acquaintance. You really have to see these, as photos do not do justice to their skill and delicacy. Then *Dieback*, a bas-relief by Alexander Johnson, made me stop as I was forced to contemplate the striking patterns of grain which he uses to celebrate the ash and stress its resilience. Kate Owens has had some different fun in her fabric piece, *Thus (Killearn Autumn Drape)*. She made her printing ink from ash bark, fashioned the blocks with the design from the ash wood, strapped them to her feet and walked across the repurposed cloth, using her own body weight to transfer the ink to the cloth. Naomi McIntosh was equally playful, making complicated hanging patterns of tightly looped ash shavings, *Potential*, as her contribution to the exhibition.

The cabinet-makers should not be overlooked. *Emergence* by Tom Cooper (issue 53, page 36) is a striking and skilful creation. With a nod to Rennie Mackintosh it

discovers the glorious grain of ash in a singular way, as do the blackened boards of *In|Organic* by Nikita Wolfe Murray.

The prize for the most extraordinary piece has to go to a group—Rory Dowling, Caelin Harrington, Zachie Morris and Nicholas Denney—for their electric guitar. It is made of ash and *concrete!* Calling it *Concentric Harmony*, the makers tell us how it illustrates the great strength and flexibility of ash. It is a fully functioning musical instrument and the Scottish composer, Andrew Blair, has composed music for it. The artistic ambition of the project thus reaches another medium altogether.

And the extent of the information about ash trees, their timber, die-back, and their likely future should prove to be impressive too. The data boards provided by Scottish Forestry are clear and well designed, encouraging visitors to take in this important aspect of a highly enjoyable exhibition. Visit if you can, and if not, do have a look at the website.

scottishfurnituremakers.org.uk

Fi Martynoga is a writer and environmental campaigner based in the Scottish Borders. In 2025, Ash Rise will be shown at Gracefield Arts Centre in Dumfries from late January to March and in Inverness Museum and Art Gallery from late March to mid-May. Do look at the excellent website before you go.

Left to right: Clova Chairs by Angus Ross; Emergence by Tom Cooper; Tower Desk and Canopy Chair by Sam Cooper and Richard Platt.

