

*'Attention is the beginning of devotion'*

This quote from a poem by Mary Oliver's 2016 poem *Upstream* has come to encapsulate Kelly M O'Brien's passion for bees: 'I started paying attention to nature during the pandemic and now I am devoted to bees and all pollinators. I am not going to take their honey!'

The last few years have taken a toll on O'Brien and like many of us it is the uncertainty that has been one of the most difficult challenges. She is participating in Somerset Art Weeks and has responded to a commission on the theme of Sanctuary with a proposal to construct an outdoor installation at Deer Leap Nature Reserve in the Mendip Hills. *Pollinator Sanctuary* will be a 250 x 95 x 95 cm structure consisting of a natural beehive and a ground bee habitat and it will be sited near a B-Line which is part of a national corridor for pollinators.

The top hive will be an inverted egg form, 65 x 48 cm, which is the ideal size to accommodate 35 - 40,000 wild bees. In the middle, mushrooms will be allowed to grow and the ground-based area will accommodate bumblebees. Bees set up new hives in the spring although they can already scout for new locations before then. Mendip Hills AONB have agreed to allow the structure to stay in place and Kelly is hoping that a colony of pollinators will move in next spring.

Kelly's work is about precarity (the state of being or feeling precarious or uncertain), care and repair related to climate change. She completed an MA at Bath Spa at the end of 2019 working with hot glass and steel which both have high energy demands. By March 2020, lockdown meant she could no longer use the fabrication facilities around Bath so working from home she was forced to explore other materials. 'Looking at ways of casting for sculpture, I stumbled upon mycelium (mushroom roots)'. It is used on an industrial scale to make packaging. 'It acts like wood or compressed cork and is completely biodegradable taking only 45 days to break down.'

Mycelium is made from mushroom spores. Once they stop growing you are left with a material which is light and rigid and looks a bit like cast plaster. For Kelly this was perfect for making sculpture 'In terms of me rebuilding my visual vocabulary it was a really interesting material'. It requires a clean controlled environment during the growing process which results in a soft velvety surface similar to mushroom skin, conversely contamination can produce some very interesting surfaces. It can also be used to cast objects. If you inoculate a substrate like hemp with mushroom spore it will grow to take the form of whatever you put it in.



'PROTECTIVE NATURE' (Cast mycelium, wool, wood, 160 x 30 x 30 cm, 2022)

## Kelly M O'Brien

Kelly is increasingly exploring the concept of 'bioempathy', which acknowledges the vital importance to our well-being and that of the planet of an involvement with nature. 'A hopeful property of fungi is that certain species can protect bees from viruses leading to Colony Collapse Disorder. *Pollinator Sanctuary* brings these ideas together by using cast mycelium as shelter for bees.'

Part of the land where she lives was a brownfield site and she has created a wildflower meadow there. Wild flowers thrive on poor soil so it is ideal for her purposes. Immersing herself in the biodiversity of her wildflower meadow contributed to her determination to completely change her practice and make it more sustainable. She also did a residency at PADA in Lisbon in Portugal in

2022 on a brownfield site, the largest post-industrial site in Europe. She is a big fan of Cal Flynn's wonderful book *Islands of Abandonment: Life in the Post-Human Landscape*.

O'Brien is a committed ambassador for biodiversity and is 'Interested in developing a practice which is more than something that you look at'. Her working practice has become much more improvisational since she start using mycelium and there is a clear sense that this is a collaboration with both a living material and with the bees who will find sanctuary in her structures.

*Fiona Robinson*

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