

# Tree spirits

Returning to his love of the camera, the Earl of March has created a set of haunting photographs that go on show in New York and London this winter. He spoke to John Walsh

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rees have had to endure a lot of symbolic weight in cultural history. From the Tree of Knowledge and the Buddha's Bo tree to the overarching canopies of William Blake and Samuel Palmer, they've been pressed into service as multipurpose emblems. They turn up in every religion and culture, locking earth to sky, symbolising man's striving for the divine while remaining frustratingly embedded in the terrestrial. They're powerful phallic symbols, thrusting up towards heaven, but also feminine symbols of comfort, nourishment, shade, protection.

To Charles March, trees represent home – that is, the 1,900 acres of forestland on the 12,000-acre estate of Goodwood in West Sussex, which he has run since 1993 as the Earl of March and Kinrara. He grew up with them, toddled among them as a child, began to photograph them aged 12. Now, nearly half a century later, he is bringing his startling and emotional view of them to art galleries on both sides of the Atlantic. This winter, his trees can be seen in two exhibitions, at the Venus Over Manhattan gallery in New York, and Hamiltons Gallery in Mayfair, London.

March's subjects are Goodwood trees transformed, by the manipulation of his Leica and Nikon digital lenses, into non-tree things: wraiths, dryads, green rainstorms, silver tubes, moonlit »

*Main Avenue, Pavlovsk, 2014, part of Abstract and Intentional at London's Hamiltons Gallery this February*





Lord March at Goodwood in West Sussex

he took over the burden of running Goodwood from his father, the Duke of Richmond.

As well as maintaining the 'Glorious Goodwood' horse races every summer, March created the Festival of Speed in 1993 and the Goodwood Revival five years later in 1998. Both are now annual events. International racing drivers, petrolheads and car manufacturers converge on Goodwood House in their thousands for the former; devotees of vintage clothing, hair and accessories – spiv suits, polka-dot frocks, Second World War uniforms, marcelled waves and Brylcreemed partings – parade in their finery for the latter, while elderly Bugattis and Maseratis are inspected by rapturous connoisseurs.

A bonus for those attending the Festival of Speed dinner is the display of pyrotechnics Lord March stages each year in the Goodwood grounds: dazzling extravaganzas involving high-speed scrambler-bike acrobatics, water cascades, light shows, burlesque dancers and squealing guitars, followed by an indoor concert starring high-profile rockers such as Jeff Beck or Courtney Love. The shows get bigger and madder every year. For all his calm and polite demeanour, there's a big kid lurking in Lord March's psyche, a lover of noise, drama, energy and extreme velocity. But eclipsing them all is his love of photography.

He started taking pictures at Eton. After dropping out at 16 ('We didn't much like each other,' he says), he worked as apprentice to Stanley Kubrick, when the latter was making his visually sumptuous but emotionally dead *Barry Lyndon*, from Thackeray's novel. Kubrick taught him all about stills photography ('He was a very good photographer himself. And very helpful. If you went wrong once, he helped you; if you did it twice, he fired you,') and Charles, then Charles Settrington, worked through the 1980s making high-tech advertising photos for Saatchi & Saatchi, Levi's and Silk Cut. Two and a half years ago, he returned to his first love, the camera, when he launched an exhibition of photographs, *Nature Translated*, at the Bermondsey Project in London.

'Photographs don't generally incorporate the idea of time,' says Edward Lucie-Smith, the veteran poet and art critic who curated the exhibition. 'But Charles's represent a few seconds. He uses the camera like a brush, and the results are like Chinese ink paintings. He's not resistant to technology, but he's chosen the most spontaneous way of making photographs with it.'

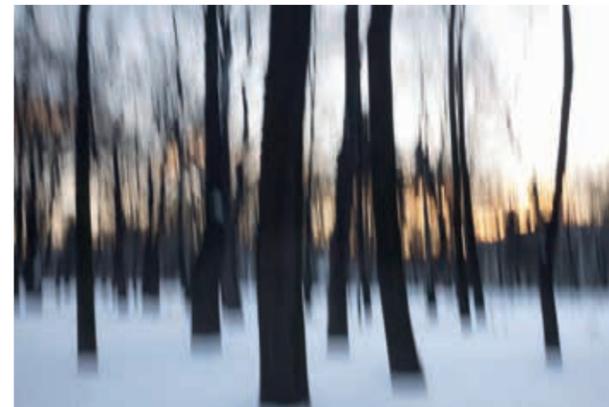
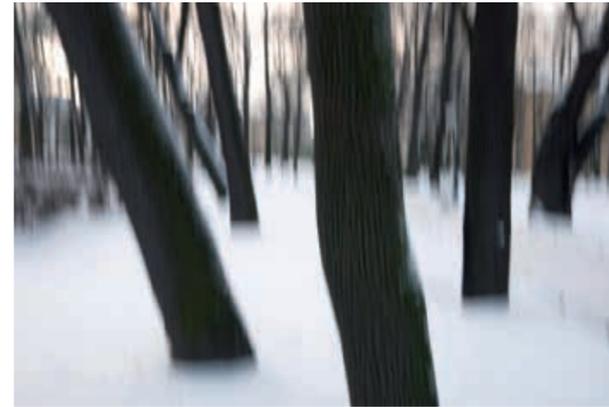
During the show, the pictures started appearing in the British national press, *Country Life* and *Vogue Italia*. Soon they were popping up on the walls of public buildings. Visitors to the Shard skyscraper in London could find themselves gazing at Lord March's monumental woodscapes as they queued for lifts to the restaurants. European galleries »

creatures. In *Ice House Copse 1-3*, three tall, scary-looking sycamores loom before the viewer like sentinels before a prison from which there's no escape. *High Wood*, by contrast, is a miracle of streaming verdant light, a very English image of the greenwood, transforming thick trunks and slender saplings into a kind of family. In the Manhattan exhibition, skinny trunks shot against a dark sky suggest lightning bolts, while elsewhere the noonday sun streams through boughs, illuminating a palette of colours Monet would have enjoyed.

The technique March employs is brutally simple: he shakes the camera during long exposures, deliberately blurring the image but suggesting a tiny passage of time, and a stab of emotion. Rather than freeze an image of the natural world in a split second, he offers a tremor of response to it.

Lord March is an unusual figure among peers of the realm. Think of the clichés of fictional lords – Lord Emsworth of Blandings, Lord Marchmain of Brideshead, Lord Grantham of Downton – and he fits none of them, being neither portly nor elderly nor hopeless with money. He's a sociable, handsome, rather dashing chap who recently turned 60, but looks a lot younger. There's a touch of Hugh Grant about his face and floppy hair. And he is crazily energetic. He has needed to be ever since

Clockwise from top left, *By The Church of the Spilled Blood 3*, 2014, Mikhailovsky Castle, and *Alexander Garden 2*, 2014. All three are on show in London this winter with *Mikhailovsky Garden 2*, 2014, bottom left



Above right, *Molecomb Peak*, on show at New York's Venus Over Manhattan gallery with *Henley Wood 1*, middle left



Parham 2, 2014, part of *Lord March: Wood Land* at New York's Venus Over Manhattan gallery from January

started to take note: in summer 2013, March's work was shortlisted for Venice's Arte Laguna Prize.

Through Lucie-Smith, the photographs came to the attention of both Alexander Borovsky, head of Contemporary Art at the Russian Museum in St Petersburg, and Olga Sviblova, the formidable director of the Moscow House of Photography and Multimedia Art Museum. The year 2014 had been designated 'UK-Russian Year of Culture', and on 22 January 2014, the Earl and Countess of March and Kinrara found themselves in both cities.

I was with Lord March in St Petersburg, the home of the Romanov court for 200 years and the crucible of the Russian Revolution. His exhibition was quite an event. The St Petersburg art world piled into the museum's gorgeous Marble Palace,

built by Catherine the Great for her lover, Prince Orlov. Lightbulbs popped and sound booms were thrust towards Lord March as 50 Russian journalists inspected the British aristocrat, a sight as rare in these parts as a flamingo.

An interpreter asked for questions. Did he consider his photographs to be art? 'They're very personal to me, and I'm not pretending they're anything more than that,' said March. How had he liked Moscow? 'Moscow feels very *brutal* compared to here,' he said tactfully. 'I love the fact that there are no high buildings in the centre of St Petersburg – it must be what London was like in the 18th century.' He added that he'd photographed the trees in Victory Park – planted to commemorate the end of the Siege of Leningrad in 1944 – and was

making them part of the Goodwood photo-forest.

'But what is the *meaning* of spooky trees?' asked a lady hack, bluntly. 'There is no meaning at all,' replied Charles March firmly.

Haunting photographs of the Victory Park trees, grounded in snow and backlit by winter sun, feature in the Hamiltons Gallery exhibition. 'I found St Petersburg profoundly moving and soulful,' says March, 'and the weather – the blue, blue sky, the snow, the minus-25 temperature, and the blackness of the trees – it all felt very Russian. The memory of the war and that appalling time is etched on people's faces. I don't think I've ever felt any place's recent history as intensely as I felt St Petersburg's. Russia moves the soul in a way that other places don't.'

There are, by coincidence, several connecting threads between Goodwood and the Russians. 'Tsar Nicolas came here once,' says March matter-of-factly, as if he were talking about last month. 'It was just a quick visit, but we built the whole South Lodge for him to stay in. My daughter Atty studied Russian language and literature at Moscow University. But the really important connection was my great-uncle Charlie. He fought in the First World War and was a prisoner of war at 19, and came back to England at 21. He was a bit bored, so he trained as a signals operations officer and decided, on a mad whim, to join the British Expeditionary Force to Archangel to fight with the White Russians against the Bolsheviks. He died in hospital of septic wounds after being machine-gunned while crossing a bridge.' He paused. 'He's buried over there. He was the eldest son and heir. It was a huge family tragedy.'

March's Russian trip drew admiring notices. 'Mesmerising,' said *The Moscow Times*. 'March's photographic principles are surprisingly reminiscent of the Wanderers' movement of 19th-century Russian Impressionist painters. The vivid forestry and landscape paintings of Isaac Levitan and Ivan

Shishkin brim with a similar guiding force.' Earlier, in the *Daily Telegraph*, Jonathan Glancey had written: 'When March first showed me his *Nature Translated* shots, the initial comparisons that raced to mind were the electrifying paintings of the Italian Futurists Umberto Boccioni and Giacomo Balla. Obsessed by movement and, above all, speed, these young artists... conjured dazzling oils that appeared to accelerate the world around them into a blurred frenzy.'

March is happy to reveal his true influences. 'In my teens, I read a lot of books about camera technique by Andreas Feininger. He was good at photographing natural objects in an abstract way. And I had some books by Ernst Haas, the Austrian photojournalist, one of the first pioneers of colour. I loved his strong, bold landscapes. When I was starting out, Lester Bookbinder was in London, and Irving Penn, whose portraits treated people as if they were still lives.' Among painters who've affected his work he cites JMW Turner, and Ivon Hitchens, one of the 'London Group' of artists who exhibited between the wars. 'He was a good old English artist from the 1930s, and I like his abstract landscapes a lot. He lived for years in a caravan not far from Goodwood, in Petworth.'

March looks down at his most recent photographs with a slightly puzzled air, as if wondering how his art has become more abstract without his willing it to do so. 'The new stuff is less about the specifics of place – the location of certain trees – than about emotions,' he says. 'Some images are bright and exuberant and exciting, while others are quite dank and low and dark.' His recent work is all stabbing verticals, cross-lit by sunlight. 'The stripe of the landscape is the binding visual message, I think,' he says.

What March doesn't say is that some of his pictures resemble an electrocardiogram, a reading of the human heartbeat in response to the trees that cause it to flutter. How appropriate for a restless entrepreneur, a master of racing-car revels, who took to photography as a career, found himself to be an artist and is now caught up in a grand tour of galleries, from Bermondsey to Moscow and St Petersburg, New York and London, but is still moved by the trees of home. 'I hope the photographs feel contemporary,' he says, 'but I'm influenced by the heritage of Goodwood, and I hope there's an emotional feel to them. The trees may look like something very modern – but they're very much bolted to the past.' ♦

Charles March's photographs can be seen in *Lord March: Wood Land*, at Venus Over Manhattan in New York from 21 January – 7 February and *Abstract and Intentional*, at Hamiltons Gallery in London from 2–7 February. [venusovermanhattan.com](http://venusovermanhattan.com) and [hamiltonsgallery.com](http://hamiltonsgallery.com)

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All photographs © Charles March