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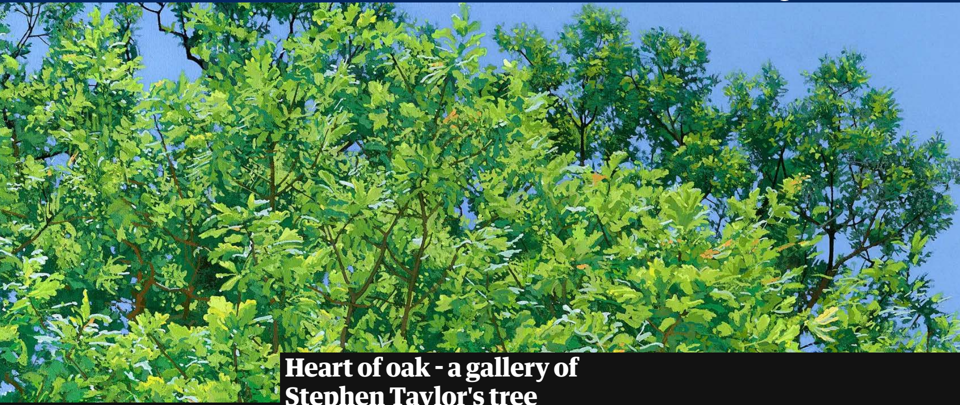


▲ Detail: Blue Tit Foraging on Pollard Branch. Oil on canvas, 910 mm x 660mm. Illustration: Stephen Taylor

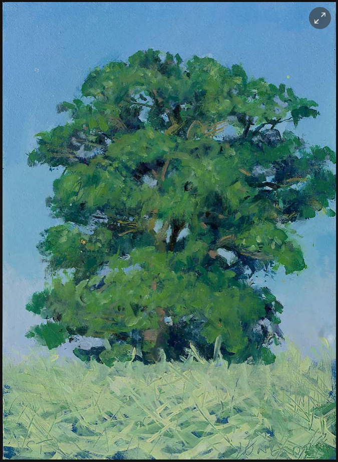
Heart of oak - a gallery of Stephen Taylor's tree paintings

After the death of his mother, a close friend and his father, the artist Stephen Taylor began a series of paintings in a field close to his childhood home. After four years painting in the field he found one oak which became the focus of his work. Here he presents some of the 50 paintings of that particular tree he made during three years, and the journey of light and colour on which it sent him

Thu 15 Dec 2011 13.33 GMT

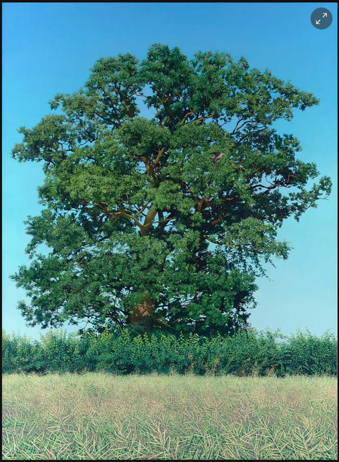
Green Fire

Oil on board, 183mm x 130mmI made the first painting during a June afternoon in 2003 (and the last one in August of 2006), sitting in a rape crop when the seed pods were a lurid pale green. I have an aversion to the smell of rape, so perhaps I was more aware than usual of the alien aspect of a modern field, with its manufactured crop imposed onto the land. The incredible energy you can sense in a field packed with a single crop seemed to seep into the tree.*All paintings: Stephen Taylor*



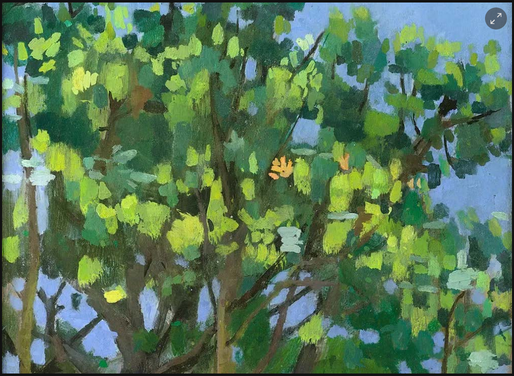
Wood Pigeon Flying over Oilseed Rape

Oil on canvas, 1550 mm x 1150 mmAs you move toward a tree, more and more subtleties of colour become visible until every shade of green seems different. The colours for this painting were taken from oil studies made close to the tree. The overall shape of the tree is based on a view from a distance, where it is easier to appreciate the general form. The result is an image with a simple initial effect, like a sign, but with a very wide range of colours. I wanted to make an oak tree that felt both observed and imagined: an emblem embedded in vision.



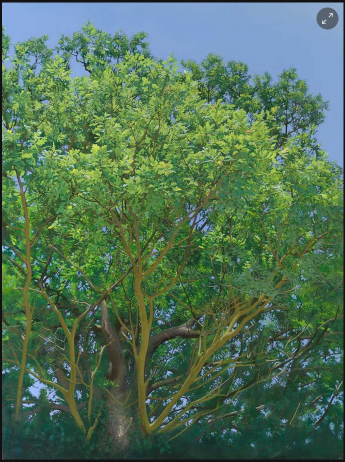
Study for Blue Tit Foraging on Pollard Branch

Oil on board, 360 mm x 300 mmThe approach was Cezanne inspired. I painted several studies without glasses (I'm nearsighted) to help me to attend to the colours. This one is the colour world of the leaves of the outer canopy.



Blue Tit Foraging on Pollard Branch

Oil on canvas, 910 mm x 660mmThe paler branches are pollard branches. Oak branches have a zigzag growth pattern that evolved to fit leaves into light-catching spaces in canopies of competing trees. But if an oak loses a low branch, it conserves energy by shooting out a pollard branch, leaves appear only at the tips, where the sunlight is.



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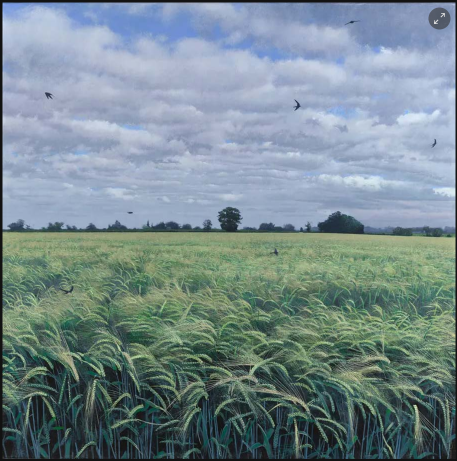
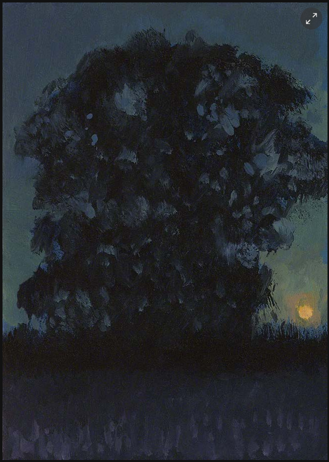
Swallows at 11am, First Version

Oil on canvas, 1020 mm x 1020 mmWhen I was painting this, at the back of my mind was Burnt Norton, a poem from Four Quartets (1944) by TS Eliot that associates a tree with ‘the still point of the turning world’.



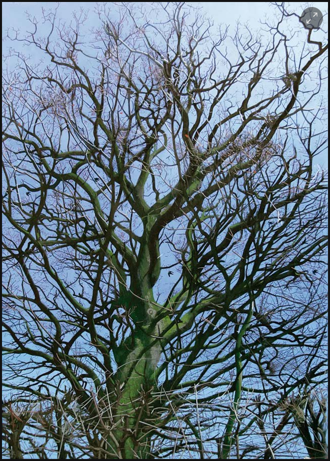
Moonrise

Oil on board, 183 mm x 130 mmWalking through wheat at night, I was surrounded by what looked like a coral reef spreading into darkness. There is so much green in the early night sky, it reminds me of an aquarium.Settling in, I put a fresh board inside the open lid of the painting box on my lap. The oak now has sharp, black, lacy edges with little holes of sky inside. The sky changes to yellow-green closer to the moon and fades to darker and redder colour away from it. Oak sits between these two colour fields with the blackest shade in the centre at its base where I can see nothing.



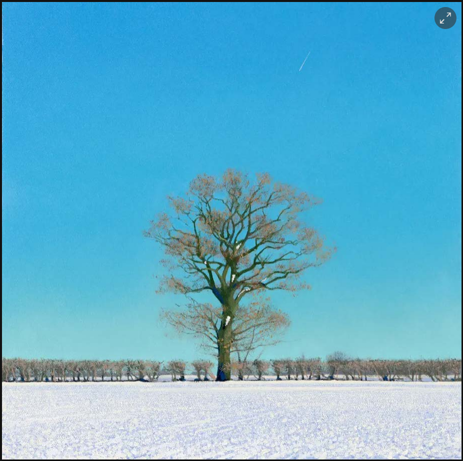
Flock of Pigeons

Oil on canvas, 910 mm x 660 mmLeaf fall reveals an architecture only seen in fragments in the summer. The deepest blue is at the zenith. Towards the sun light bleaches the sky contrasting near black zig-zag branches against a whitening sheet. The scarified hedge reflects the same bright light, creating a screen of beauty and damage.



Oak After Snow

Oil on canvas, 300mm x 300mmDuring the three winters I worked with the oak tree, barely an inch or two of snow fell, and it quickly melted. When it did snow, I got to the site as quickly as possible. I need at least three days of similar weather to finish a small painting like this. If not, I might have to jump in the car months later at the slightest sign of snow in the hope of finishing the painting. Setting up in snow on a clear winter day is blissful. There's an endless white carpet that is full of interesting unevenness.



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Author Walking to Work

This photograph is by Ken Adlard, who turned out day and night to record my labours. Altogether I painted in this field for seven years; it gave me two shows and became a kind of home. I've moved on now and am painting water in the Rheidol valley in Wales. But the tree is still there.

Photograph: Ken Adlard/New Moon Photography, Diss

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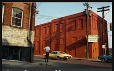

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