



*A VISUAL ESSAY: REFLECTIONS
ON REMEMBERING NATURE
BY PAUL HARFLEET*

THE INTRODUCTION

The following pages have helped me contextualise the work I made over the past year. In 2025, The Pansy Project marked its twentieth anniversary, and I was grateful for the opportunity to share this work in a wide range of contexts from the exhibition; *Unearthed: The Power of Gardening* at the British Library, to hosting an event at the Museum of Liverpool where, alongside a panel of local activists, we reflected on the legacy and ongoing presence of homophobia and transphobia in Liverpool and beyond.

In light of my inclusion in Remember Nature* as a representative of Homotopia Festival, and in association with FACT Liverpool, it felt important to pause and reflect on what has been an unusual and significant year of work. Remember Nature prompted the development of ideas and directions that, until I began writing, I hadn't fully articulated or understood. This writing is, in part, a way for me to record and make sense of those thoughts. If, along the way, you — dear reader — find something of interest or value in these reflections, I will be delighted.

*For further details and context on Remember Nature click [here](#) or visit page 44.

THE DREAM, THE
GARDEN, THE TREE,
THE FLOWER AND
THE CORMORANT.



Gustav Metzger practicing for a public demonstration of Auto-destructive art using acid on nylon possibly by John Cox, for Ida Kar, 1960 © National Portrait Gallery, London

When I was approached to be a featured artist for Remember Nature I was catapulted into a world of reflection, memory, dream and coincidence. I am just one of the artists that was approached by the curators; Jo Joelson and Andrea Gregson to respond to Gustav Metzger's work, words and legacy. I'd seen his work in Manchester many years before, in preparation for my first meeting I spent a day reacquainting myself with his work by reading, listening to and watching his many interviews. I was moved by this man who retained such vigour and quiet power, right up until his death in 2017. The following pages offer a reflection on my experience of making work in response and in preparation for just one Day of Action; November 4th 2025. Part of my response took weeks to create and was seen only in the context of the events that took place during that day. Compiling the work here has helped me understand how an invitation to Remember Nature has helped me appreciate and understand the possibilities of my work.

“WE APPEAL
TO ARTS
PROFESSIONALS
FROM ALL
DISCIPLINES
TO TAKE A
STAND AGAINST
THE ONGOING
ERASURE OF
SPECIES.”

GUSTAV METZGER




THE DREAM

The night before our first morning meeting, my research was circling, that night I dreamt. Over the years I've learnt to direct my dreams to solve creative questions. I've used this method for years and I tend to listen when my subconscious mind spits out a solution. In that half waking, half dream state I thought of words and rhymes and puffins, along with an image of swirling seas. As I came to, I scribbled... "Who'll be the guardian of the ocean clown" a phrase, a chant, a spell?

I was overtaken by a need to fashion a repeating question, "who will?" Informed by Metzger's request; "we appeal to arts professionals from all disciplines to take a stand against the ongoing erasure of species." In that moment I felt the urgency, I had the desire to use all of my own artistic aptitudes to challenge the climate emergency. I was drawn to the repetition of asking "who will?" A poem emerged, both as plea and spell. I became absorbed in pairing each question with a rich and detailed illustration.

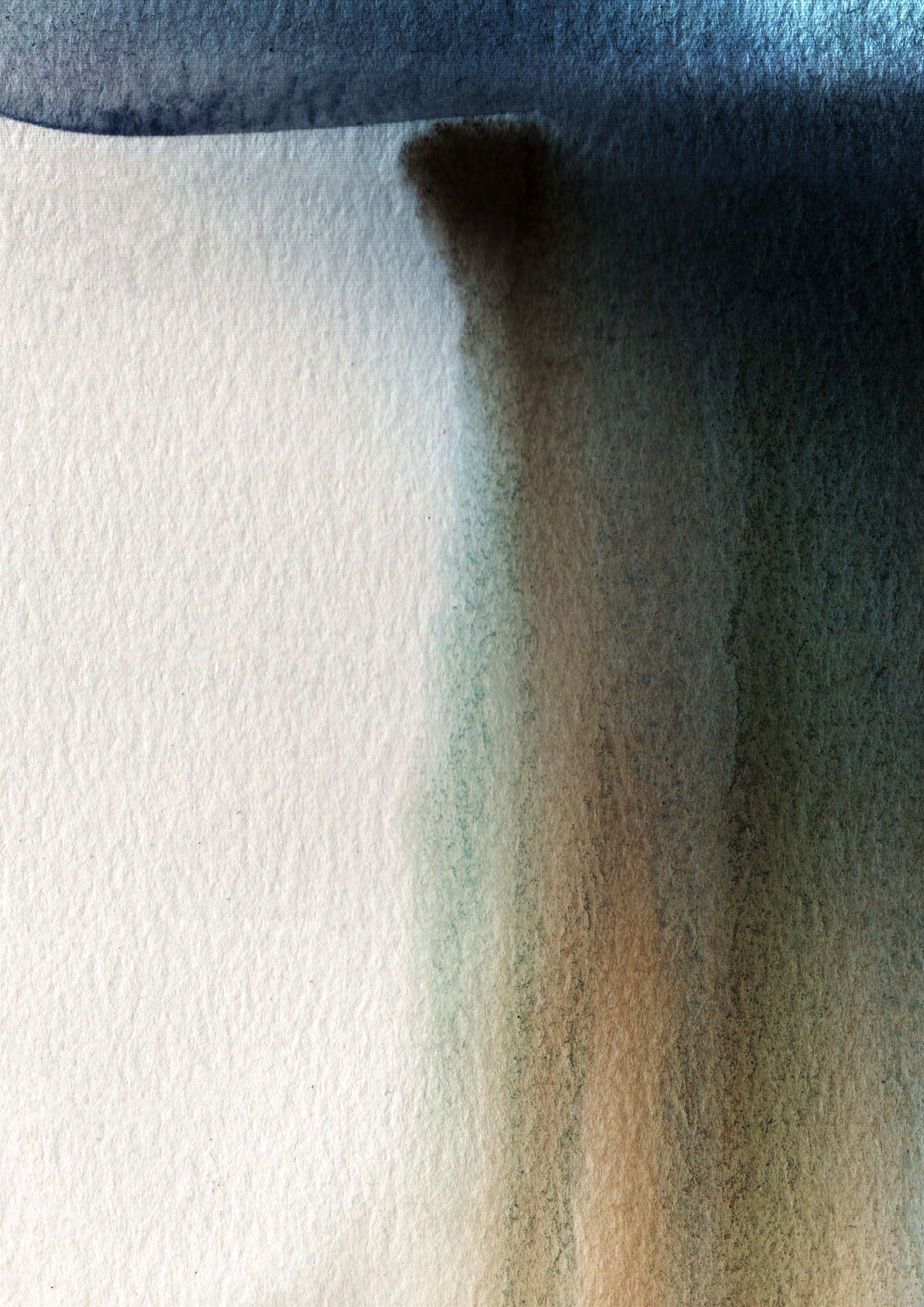


Who'll give the birds
their paradise?

A detailed illustration of a forest floor. In the foreground, a large, textured pine cone lies on the ground, surrounded by dry leaves and twigs. The background shows a dense forest of tall, slender trees with bare branches, reaching up towards a bright, hazy sky. The overall color palette is muted, with browns, greys, and a touch of yellow in the sky.

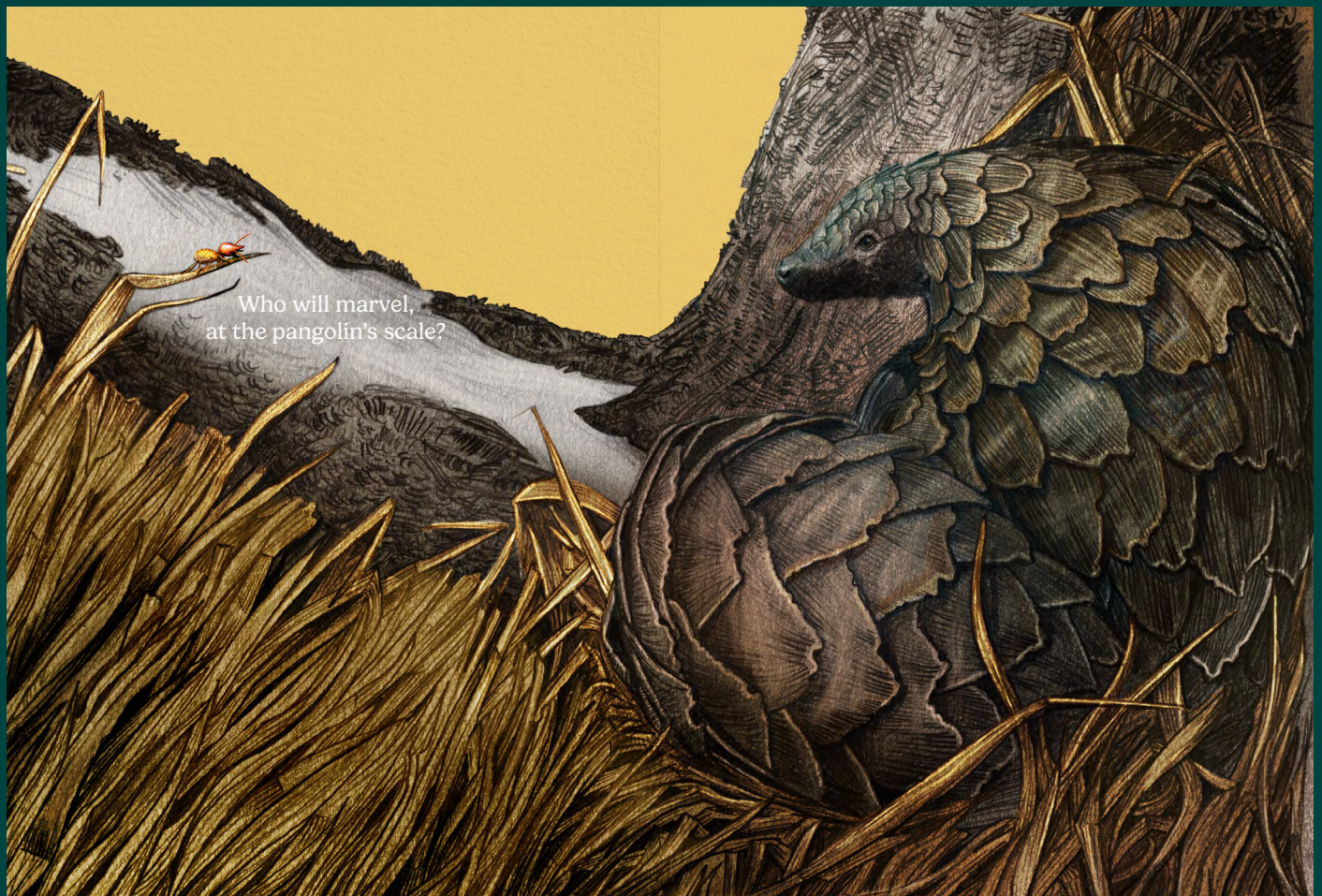
Who'll tell
the seed that
it's safe to grow?



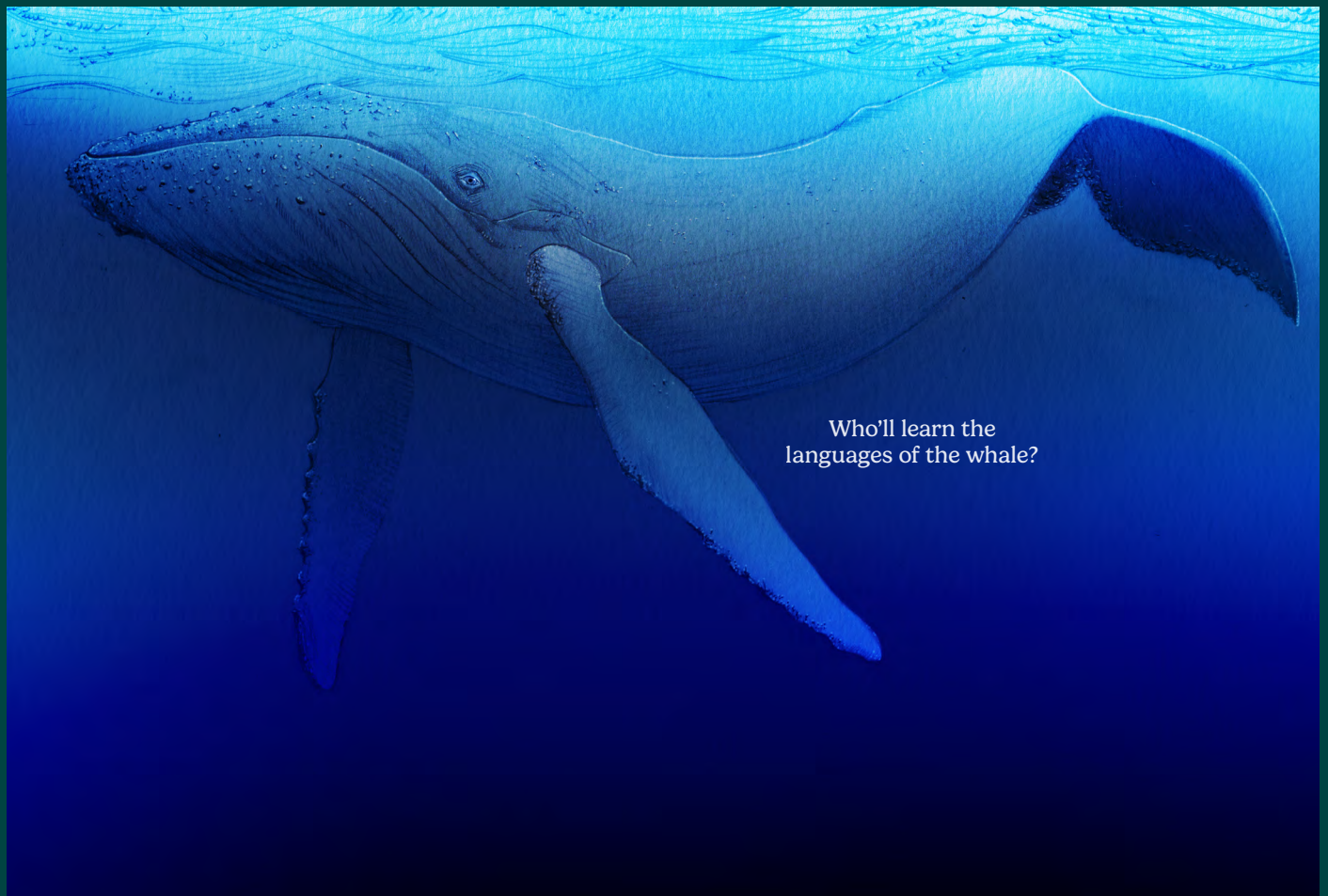


Who'll take note of where
the storm clouds go?





Who will marvel,
at the pangolin's scale?



Who'll learn the
languages of the whale?

I AM THE SPELL

Who'll tell the seed that it's safe to grow?
Who'll take note of where the storm clouds go?

Who'll be the guardian of the ocean clown?
Who'll replenish colour to the coral's crown?

Who'll coax the forest into the sky?
Who'll sow the flower for the hoverfly?

Who will marvel at the pangolin's scale?
Who'll learn the languages of the whale?

Who'll paint the hue of the tropical frog?
Who'll explain the fungus to a fallen log?

Who'll guard the riverbank for the goose?
Who'll tend the wilderness for the moose?

Who'll wrap the poles in snow and ice?
Who'll give the birds their paradise?

Who'll break the slumber of planet Earth?
Who'll wake us all to nature's worth?

Sorcerer, sorcerer hear our plea,
To protect all fauna, from rhino to flea


Who'll be the warlock and the witch?
Who'll sing enchantment in perfect pitch?

I'll cool the coral and soothe the shell.
I'll be the magic, I am the spell.



Here are just some of the sample of spreads, I became obsessed with completing. I brought together the illustrations and edited them into a short video, reciting my words against a sound scape from the natural world. I sent it to the curators, almost apologetically, not quite understanding what I'd created.

Their response was generous, and we agreed it would be performed at the close of the Day of Action at FACT Liverpool, as a hopeful counterpoint to a day confronting the climate emergency. Performing it felt magical as though I were channelling a shaman or a witch. ***I Am The Spell*** now exists as both poem and performance, with the possibility of becoming something else, circling.

A photograph of a young boy with brown hair, wearing a green t-shirt, standing in a garden. He is holding a long, dark broomstick with both hands and pointing it upwards towards the sky. He is looking up at the broomstick with a focused expression. The background shows a wooden fence, some greenery, and a brick house with a white roofline under a pale sky.

Me in the garden, inexplicably pointing a broom to the sky. Photo - probably Jenny Holloway, my grandfather's wife.

THE GARDEN

As Metzger's words continued to echo I thought about my own early experiences and explored how *I* remember nature. Part of my own half-remembered mythology is that my first words were "when can I fly?" As I pointed at birds. It seems highly unlikely that this is true but my mother used to tell me this, and now she's gone I'll never be able to confirm the tale. Suffice it to say I was always interested in flight and birds and I poured over detailed illustrations in treasured books, gifted to me by my extended family. Undoubtedly this early interest is the source for my other body of work with the birds, but more of that later.

In the scrub of my neglected suburban childhood garden I foraged for beetles, woodlice and spiders fascinated by their indifference to me. I still remember the sticks digging into my bare knees as I knelt to get as close as I could to the leaf litter to gaze at them. Perhaps nudged by my illustration for 'who'll paint the hue of the tropical frog' I remembered Luap...

Watch 'Luap, A Tribute'
by clicking [here](#).



There were two boys that lived next door. One was about my age, the other a couple of years older. One late summer's afternoon, I remember there was a kerfuffle in the garden. I went outside to explore. They'd gathered frogs from a pond nearby. I was horrified to see that they were piercing their little bodies over the fence posts. I was too afraid to say anything. When I noticed a little frog escaping from under the fence, I gathered him up. I found a tank to put him in. I lined it with earth and grass, put some water in it. I would go to the garden to gather worms to feed him. I called him Luap (pronounced 'Lorp') my name backwards, this drawing is my tribute to Luap.

The garden was my own tiny wilderness, long summer evenings were spent there. As time passed I came to realise my family and I were a little different to what was the 'norm'. My mother was seldom up in the morning and the curtains were often drawn long into the day. Her mental illness wouldn't be diagnosed as schizophrenia until much later. **And** I knew I was gay, from an impossibly young age, sensing even then, that it was paramount to keep this secret. Though apparently according to those around me, my gentleness gave me away.

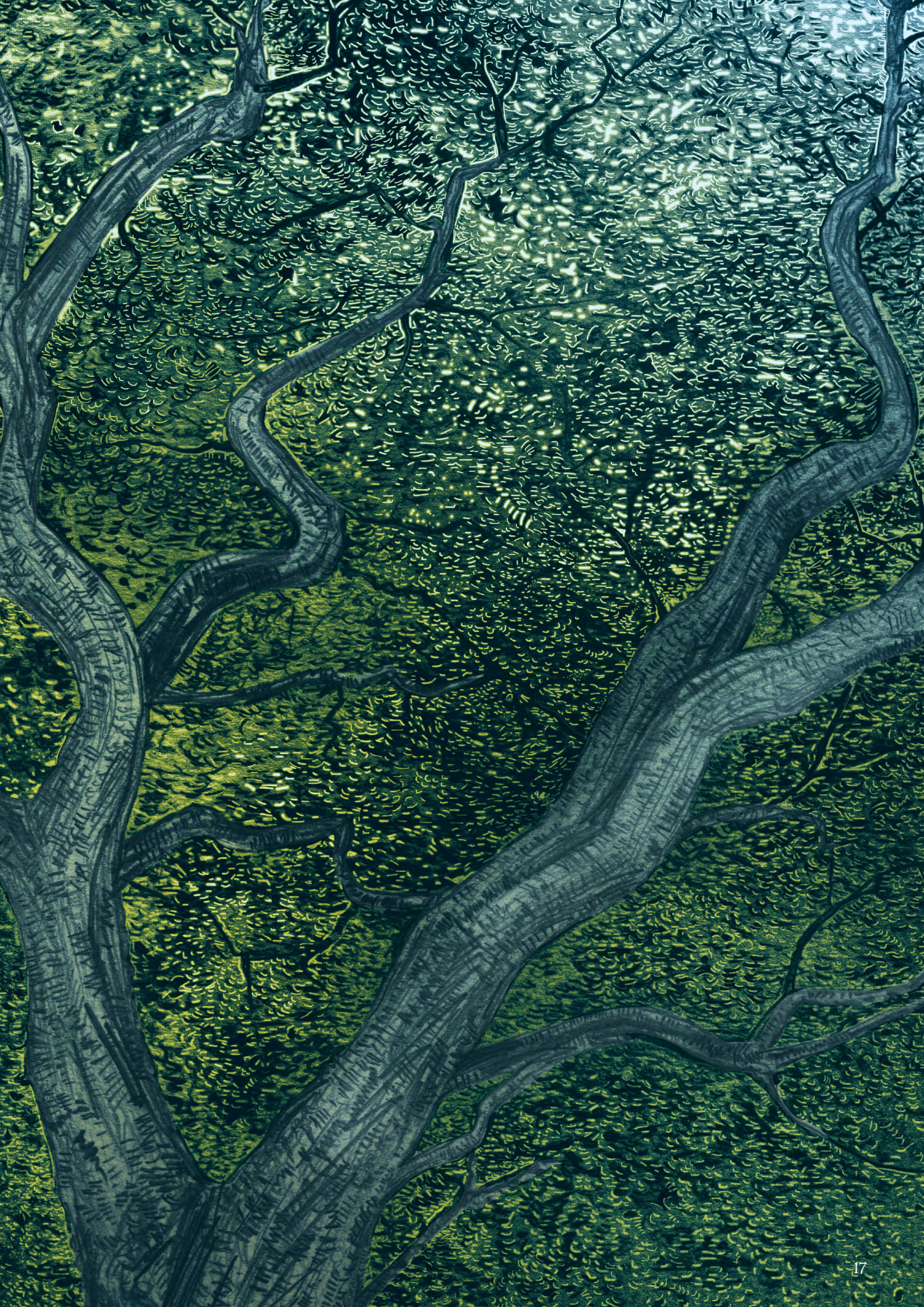


Part of the commission for Remember Nature, was that each featured artist would create a special edition poster. I loved this idea and wanted to make something as beautiful as I could. During our initial meeting, Jo Joelson and I discovered that we lived near one another, and that she had been a neighbour of Gustav Metzger, all of us connected, in different ways, to the area around London Fields.

I had a hunch that Metzger might have spent time in the park, perhaps he even drew there. When I later asked Jo, she confirmed that he had indeed visited and made drawings in London Fields. This knowledge gave me a sense of permission and connection to do the same.

I went to London Fields to draw, sitting beneath the same London plane trees where Metzger once sat. I imagined a quiet connection across time: two artists, both looking, listening, and responding to the same natural surroundings.

As I sketched the canopy above, Metzger's words stayed with me: "There is no art without nature." Sitting on the bench, I became aware of being observed, perhaps as Metzger once was, both of us seen while drawing, contemplating the natural world, leaves rustling overhead and crows cackling around us, separated only by time.



“THERE
IS NO ART
WITHOUT
NATURE”

GUSTAV METZGER



A first study of the
trees in London Fields.

THE FLOWER



When I reflect on my experience of The Pansy Project, particularly within the context of Remember Nature, I recall another memory from my childhood that speaks to neglect and care. In that same overgrown garden (mentioned above) there was a narrow, forgotten path, bordered by what I then understood only as weeds. Driven by an urge to tidy and restore it, I began pulling out dandelions. As I worked, I noticed small purple violas, remnants of a once tended garden. I remember the happiness of uncovering them, and the satisfaction of seeing those delicate purple dots emerge against the fresh dark earth.



For Michael Causer
Tarbock Road, Liverpool.



“You gay faggot cunt!” - Punched.
Bold Street, Liverpool.

Remembering this now feels uncannily prescient: a kind of botanical archaeology that echoes the logic of The Pansy Project. Where I once uncovered flowers buried by neglect, I now place them deliberately, inserting these small purple markers into the soil of public space.

The Pansy Project does not directly address biodiversity loss or the climate emergency. Instead, it asks how ideas of the ‘natural’ are shaped by the diversity of human values. The pansy — selectively bred from the wild viola and cultivated into a familiar garden flower — represents a form of nature that has been designed, controlled and manipulated into what a horticulturist desires. This process mirrors the way queer lives are often judged against narrow ideas of what is ‘natural’. By placing pansies at sites of homophobic and transphobic violence, the work draws a connection between cultivated nature and regulated identity, revealing how both are shaped by society rather than biology.

It is these cultural structures that art can disrupt, revealing the contradictions and absurdities of how humans define and control the natural world. As the climate continues to shift, our relationship with the planet will inevitably change. Art has the potential to help us to reflect on, and potentially re-imagine that relationship before it is reshaped by the impending climate crisis.



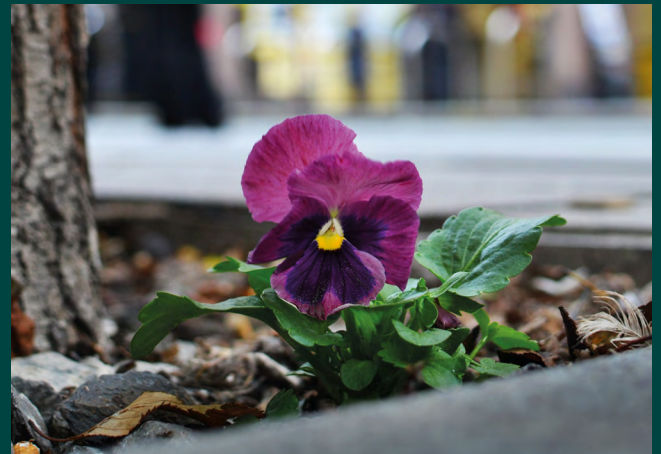
**"You gay faggot cunt!" - Punched.
Bold Street, Liverpool.**



**Beaten
Fleet Street, Liverpool, UK**



**"Do you want to die?"
Lime Street Station, Liverpool, UK**



**Punched and kicked,
Moorfields Station, Liverpool, UK**



Attacked
Stanley Street, Liverpool, UK



Head-butted and punched
Old Nelson Street, Liverpool, UK

My presence in Liverpool with Remember Nature was in association with Homotopia Festival and supported by FACT Liverpool. My links with the city are long lasting and entwined with my experience of The Pansy Project, I first planted pansies there with the Homotopia Festival in 2007. In 2009 I returned to plant a pansy for Michael Causer (previous page), a young man tragically killed after a homophobically motivated attack. I planted the pansy alongside Michael's parents a year after his death, this remains an emotional and impactful experience. I returned several times to work on various projects over the years so returning to Liverpool in this context felt especially poignant.

These six plantings were made over a period of two days. Each tells a story of abuse. Over the next pages I share the stories behind each planting, you may find these stories and the language used disturbing.

A selection of these photos will feature in a group of 60 photographs from The Pansy Project's archive in *LOOK Climate Lab*, at **Open Eye Gallery**'s biennial programme exploring how photography can be a relevant and powerful medium for talking about climate change. The exhibition runs at the Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool from 23 January – 29 March 2026.



“Do you want to die?”
Lime Street Station, Liverpool



Above; Punched and kicked, Moorfields Station, Liverpool. Two men were subject to a homophobic attack on 29th April 2023. One of the men was punched in the face and then kicked while on the ground, causing serious injuries to his jaw, leg and foot. The second person was also punched and sustained injuries to his face and bruising to his head.

Left; “Do you want to die?” Lime Street Station, Liverpool. In 2015 a young trans woman was leaving Lime Street Station in Liverpool after she had attended a support group for the trans community. She was set upon by a young perpetrator who pulled off her wig and punched her to the ground: “He stood in front of her with his right fist clenched. She put her right arm out to protect herself and he said ‘do you want a die?’ She did not respond and he punched her, resulting in her stumbling backwards, before he punched her a second time.”



Head-butted and punched
Lord Nelson Street, Liverpool

In June 2021 a young bisexual man was attacked, it was unclear whether the attack was motivated by homophobia, though the survivor believed that it was and during media reports at the time of the crime he called for the LGBTQ+ community to feel safe on the streets of Liverpool. This attack was one of four that were reported during the summer of 2021.



Attacked
Stanley Street, Liverpool

On January 20th, 2022 there was a reported homophobic attack at the Superstar Boudoir nightclub, on Stanley Street, "the victim suffered serious injuries and was left extremely shaken." I went to Stanley street and there was no suitable location to plant a pansy, I went to the Dale Street end of the road and found some abandoned land, I planted there, the end of Stanley Street is just visible in the background of the picture.



"You gay faggot cunt!" - Punched. Bold Street, Liverpool.



Participants look on at the Remember Nature, Day of Action event, as I document the planting on Bold Street. Photo - Sophie Marie Louise Keough.



Beaten. Fleet Street, Liverpool

The two pansies above were planted during my planting tour on the Day of Action for Remember Nature. Above left: “You gay faggot cunt!” - Punched. Bold Street, Liverpool. In July 2021, a young man from Belfast was attacked verbally and physically by two men. The survivor of the attack spoke to the Liverpool Echo; “He said, ‘Don’t speak to me like that, you faggot cunt, you gay faggot cunt’ and then he punched me. Now, I have to fully put my hands up, I hit him back. Like I wasn’t going to stand there and let him hit me. But two of his friends came and I was like, well I can’t hit all three of them... I was like ‘Oh my God what if I die?’” The assailants were identified and caught by the Merseyside Police.

Above; Beaten. Fleet Street, Liverpool. A young man posted images of their badly bruised face on Instagram the day after the attack on the 17th June 2021, this was the third I marked that represented this wave of high profile attacks over that summer. When speaking to local press he said; “The attack was unprovoked and completely random – I’ve no idea who the man is, or if/how he knew me. It was broad daylight on a busy street,”

The perpetrator was caught. In the subsequent case the court heard that the assailant repeatedly punched his victim in the head and body before coming back to attack him for a second and third time. He was sentenced to 14 months in prison.



Documenting the pansy planting on Bold Street, Liverpool on the Day of Action, November 4th 2025. Photo - Sophie Marie Louise Keough





THE CORMORANT

Phalacrocorax carbo



Workers repairing one of the Liver Birds on the Liver Building.

From my earliest meetings to discuss my contribution to Remember Nature, it was clear that The Pansy Project would be the primary focus. However, given the title of the curatorial framework and my more recent work with birds, it felt necessary to find a way to bring this relatively new methodology into the conversation.

I was only half-joking when in those first meetings I suggested that I might 'do' a cormorant. I wasn't entirely sure whether I was remembering correctly that Liverpool's mythical Liver Birds were modelled on cormorants, though the images included here reveal that I was at least partly right.

The Liver Bird belongs to Liverpool's modern folklore rather than its ancient past. Writing in 1774, Liverpool's first historian William Enfield described the Liver Bird as existing only in "fabulous tradition," comparing it to mythical creatures such as the phoenix or griffin.

This was reinforced in 1911, when the Royal Liver Friendly Society crowned its waterfront building with two large sculptural birds. These figures, which resemble no real species, helped fix the idea of the Liver Bird as a fantastical creature in the popular imagination.


Earlier evidence tells a more ambiguous story. A bird appears on Liverpool's earliest surviving corporate seal, dated 1352, (below) with later impressions from the fifteenth century. The bird itself is indistinct, suggesting its maker was neither an artist or knowledgeable about birds.



Scholars turned to the medieval seal's symbols and lettering for clues about the original bird. Evidence suggests the bird was intended to be an eagle; the symbol of St John, patron saint of King John, who granted Liverpool its first charter in 1207. The presence of accompanying symbols such as a star and crescent, and a sprig of broom (a badge of the Plantagenet dynasty), further ties the seal to King John's authority and era.



What might have been. A golden eagle with gentle reference. Read about the context for this work [here](#).



Over time, the original eagle-like bird became gradually reinterpreted, and by 1611 civic records describe a bird resembling a cormorant, a species common in the Mersey estuary.

In 1797 the College of Arms formally granted Liverpool its coat of arms, depicting a cormorant holding a sprig of seaweed called laver, and from that point the cormorant became the official Liver Bird.

The most famous Liver Birds, known as Bertie and Bella, sit atop the Royal Liver Building. Made from hammered copper plates fixed on internal steel armatures, they stand about 18 feet (5.5 metres) tall with wingspans of around 24 feet (7.3 metres) each.

The Liver Birds do not only crown the Royal Liver Building; they appear throughout the city in architectural details and civic imagery. The Liver Bird is also the emblem of the Liverpool Echo and of Liverpool Football Club, as sentinels they are woven into the fabric of the city and its lore.

One bird is said to look out to sea, guarding sailors, while the other watches over the city and its people. In a local echo of the ravens at the Tower of London, legend has it that if the Liver Birds were to ever fly away, the city will fall.



An early depiction from 1850, from the old Sailors' Home, now housed at The Museum of Liverpool.

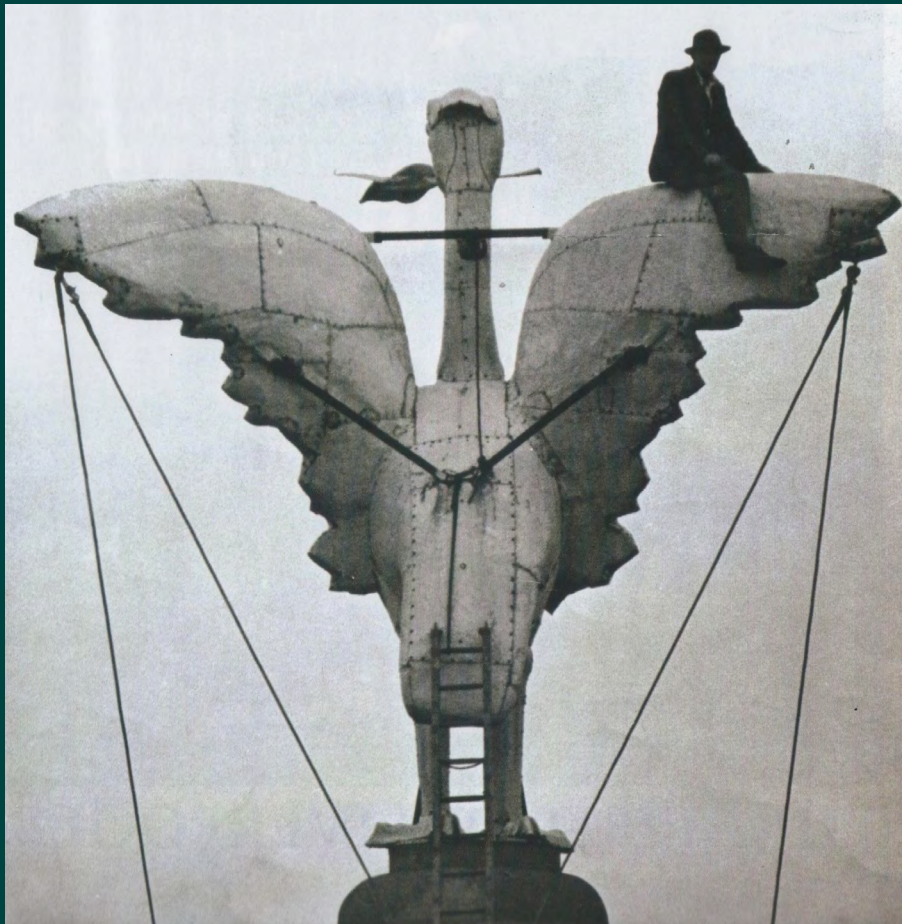
The making of the Liver Birds have an interesting history too. In the lead up to 1911, The Liver Birds were designed and sculpted by Carl Bernard Bartels, a German born artist who had won an international competition for the commission.

He had become a naturalised Briton, after falling in love with the country on his honeymoon in 1887 and moved to London in his early twenties. Despite the civic honour bestowed upon Carl Bernard Bartels he was arrested in 1915 at the height of anti-German feeling during the first world war, he was imprisoned in an internment camp on the Isle of Man.

At the end of the war, he was forcibly repatriated to Germany, separated from his wife and children. Eventually Bartels managed to return to the UK and continued to work as a sculptor. During the second world war he even helped create artificial limbs for servicemen.

With post war xenophobia still rife, The city began to credit the foundry or sometimes the architect of the Liver building; Walter Aubrey Thomas as the makers of the Liver Birds and chose to ignore the originator of the design. Sources vary on what happened to the original drawings and blueprints for the sculptures, they were either lost or destroyed. And so it seemed his association with what became the iconic symbols of Liverpool would be lost forever, until a campaign began in 2007 to credit the sculptor appropriately.

In the lead up to the centenary celebrations of the Liver building the city of Liverpool acknowledged the injustice and welcomed Carl Bernard Bartels descendants back to the city. So over fifty years after his death in 1955, Tim Olden, the great grandson of Bartels received the Citizen of Honour Award on behalf of Carl Bernard Bartels at a ceremony in Liverpool Town Hall in 2011.



A worker sits on top of one of the Liver Birds giving a sense of scale of the final sculpture. Source: unknown.

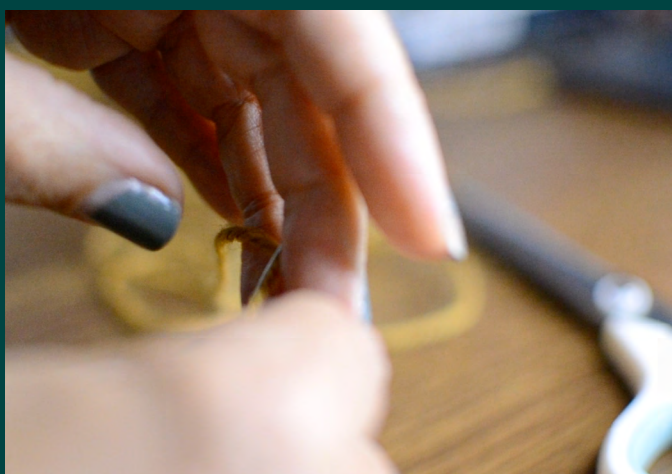
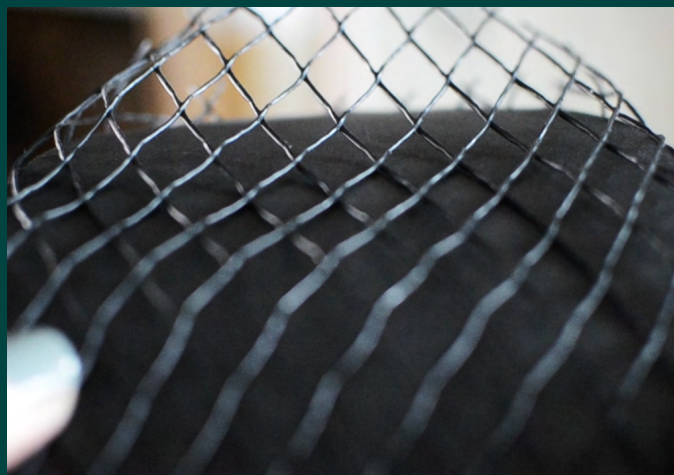
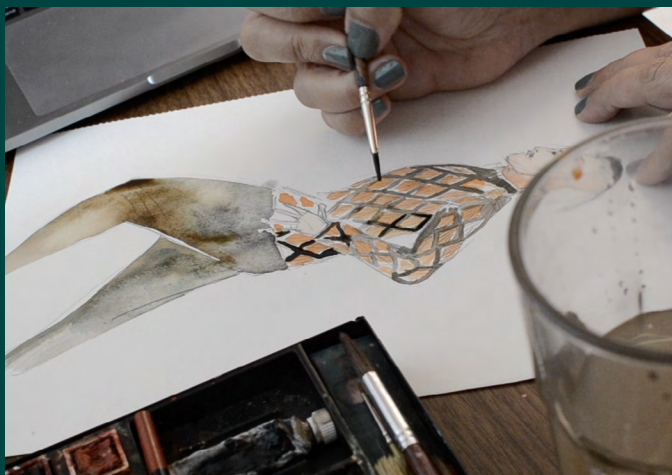
My initial assumption that the Liver Bird was based on a cormorant was almost correct. The original bird may have been an eagle, or perhaps a hybrid of eagle and cormorant, though it now feels fair to say that the Liver Bird has settled into its cormorant identity. The posture of the birds atop the Royal Liver Building appears to confirm this reading.

Cormorants are unusual birds. Despite spending much of their time diving for fish, their feathers are not fully waterproof. After diving, they must outstretch their wings to dry, a familiar sight along rivers and estuaries. I went to study cormorants in person at Victoria Park, which has a healthy population, and was pleased to see them drying beside the pond, even in the winter sun.

For my gentle reference, I echoed the bird's plumage by embroidering wool onto a waterproof jacket, subtly rendering it impractical for rain — a small nod to the cormorant's lack of waterproofing. I made a fascinator-like headpiece from card, covering it with fabric and a veil fashioned from a found piece of packaging. This recalled both the cormorant's plumage and the suggestion of fishing nets, a nudge to the bird as a hunter of fish. These elements were brought together in a short film, ***Making of the Cormorant***, which documents the process from drawing to costume, styling to photo-shoot, edited with the sound of the cormorant's call and gently crashing waves. The short film has become integral to this work, inviting the viewer to glimpse behind the curtain of production. On the facing page are stills from the film, and overleaf the final image brings this gentle reference to a close.

At its simplest, *Birds Can Fly* begins with drawing a bird and ends with dressing as it. I describe this process as 'gently referencing'. From the outset, I was not interested in mimicry, but in echoing selected elements of a bird's plumage or form in order to explore its cultural history, symbolism, and associations. This work leans into my queerness and my history with drag. I construct props, alter clothing, wear make-up, and document myself, using self-portraiture as a way to draw the viewer in.

The intention is to draw the audience into the research that accompanies each bird, which lives on my blog, and to encourage a different way of thinking about the birds that exist alongside us. What began during the pandemic as a way to share drawings has gradually evolved into a research-led practice. Through this process, I have become increasingly interested in the cultural histories of birds, and in the ways ornithology, folklore, and national identity intersect — as this gentle reference to the cormorant seeks to document.



Above, stills from 'Making of The Cormorant'.







A CONCLUSION

In *Remembering Nature*, I have come to see the neglected garden of my childhood as foundational to both my sense of self and my continuing artistic practice. My impulse to repair and console echoes a troubled background: lost mornings with my mother, and a comfort that should have been there but wasn't. That absence was partly filled by the overgrown garden and its inhabitants. I found purpose in saving a tortured frog, in weeding an abandoned border. This drive to mend continues to sit at the heart of my work.

Birds Can Fly differs significantly from *The Pansy Project*, yet both are shaped by my interest in how humans conceptualise, represent, and assign meaning to nature, whether through cultivated flowers or the symbolism of birds. Ideas of the natural are formed through history, language, myth, and habit; what we call 'natural' is often temporary, held in place by repetition rather than truth.

The apparent absurdity of countering homophobia with pansies, or of gently referencing birds, is deliberate. The lightness of these gestures — a pansy at the base of a tree, a drawing of a bird — belies the seriousness of the subjects they carry. By leaning into humour and oddness, I celebrate my queer perspective and mine it for its idiosyncratic creativity. My aim is to disarm the viewer, to draw them into encounters with difficult realities, from the terror of homophobia and transphobia to the darker foundations of ornithology.

I have long believed that queerness offers a different way of seeing, and I find myself wondering why humans have evolved the need for us at all. In *I Am The Spell*, I explore the possibility that perhaps we are shamans, or witches, figures who reveal the unexpected, celebrate the strange and the absurd, and quietly offer other ways of understanding the world.



A sketch from a
childhood photo.



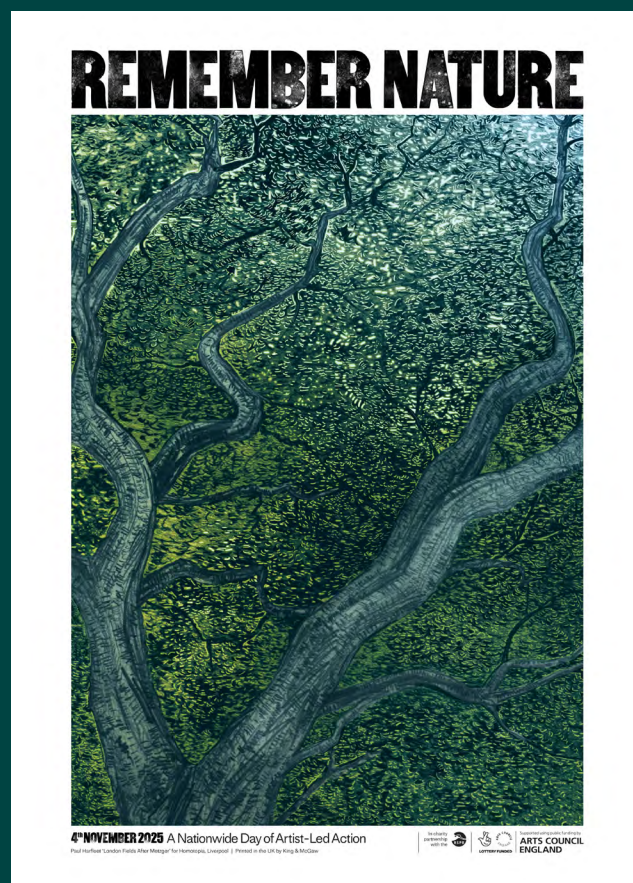
The Remember Nature Day of Action was hosted by Fact Liverpool. I began the day with a planting tour and presentation at FACT where I shared my journey with The Pansy Project and Birds Can Fly, I was representing Homotopia Festival. Artists Tom Doubtfire, Ria Bagley and Bernadette McBride also shared their work and research representing FACT. To round off the day Studio/Lab at FACT hosted a discussion with all four artists, chaired by award-winning climate communicator and advocate, Dominique Palmer. Titled *The World Is On Fire, What Now?*, This discussion moved beyond conversation to encourage action and outline next steps. I ended the day with a performance of *I Am The Spell*. Photos of the day above, courtesy of Sophie Marie Louise Keough.

REMEMBER NATURE

Remember Nature 2025 was an ambitious new staging of the visionary art project initiated in 2015 by the celebrated artist Gustav Metzger (1926–2017). To mark the 10th anniversary of Remember Nature on 4th November 2025, there was a nationwide day of art action to stand up for nature, realising Metzger’s hope and belief in the future power of art to halt universal extinction.

Remember Nature 2025 was curated with Metzger’s original collaborators Jo Joelson and Andrea Gregson and 16 regional art partners across England: Art Gene, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, CAST, Castlefield Gallery, De La Warr Pavilion, FACT, Hatton Gallery, Hauser & Wirth, Homotopia, Ikon Gallery, KARST, Kestle Barton, Kettle’s Yard, MIMA, Serpentine, Tate Modern, Turner Contemporary.

Lead artists were commissioned for each region and worked with their host partners and local communities and groups to create artistic and public interventions to “remember nature”.



The **Remember Nature Poster Collection** is produced in collaboration with the commissioned artists, partners and leading charity the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds). The posters are available to purchase online at **King & McGaw** as well as directly from partner institutions, with a proportion of proceeds going to support the work of UK nature charity, the RSPB, which carries out conservation on a large scale, protecting and restoring habitats to save species from extinction.



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