

They stood there marvelling at the forest,
gazing at the lofty cedars

When Eileen Cooper visited Lebanon in the autumn of 2017, she too, like the ancient Sumerian demigod and king Gilgamesh some three millennia earlier, was inspired by the lofty cedars. An artist whose work has long drawn on the symbolism of and mythology associated with trees, she was struck by their beauty, size, and stability. The artist and writer Emily Carr (1871-1945), describing her native Canadian cedars, noted: 'Cedars are terribly sensitive to change of time and light – sometimes they are bluish cold-green, then they turn yellow warm-green – sometimes their boughs flop heavy and sometimes float, then they are fairy as ferns and then they droop, heavy as heartaches.' Cooper, with a shared artist's sensibility, felt similarly enchanted. Upon her return to London, wanting to make works responding to these great trees, she set out to seek a nearby specimen, eventually chancing upon one in Greenwich Park, south London, which became her model; in as far as she ever uses one, helping to prompt as she began to draw.

Born in Glossop, Derbyshire, on the northern edge of the Peak District, in 1953, Cooper drew from an early age. At 17, she went to the nearby Ashton-under-Lyne College of Further Education, where she undertook a Foundation Course in Art and Design, after which she journeyed south to London, where she studied first at Goldsmiths College (1971-74) and then at the Royal College of Art, under Peter de Francia, graduating in 1977. She was elected a Royal Academician in 2001 and, a few years later, was appointed as the Head of Printmaking in the Royal Academy Schools. In 2011, she became Keeper of the Royal Academy (the first woman elected to the position since the RA began in 1768), a post she held until last summer, with full responsibility for the Royal Academy Schools. It was at the Royal Academy that Cooper met Annie Vartivarian, who invited her to exhibit at Letitia Gallery.

Throughout her career, Cooper has remained true to figuration. From her roots in objective drawing, particularly in the life room, the female figure has always been central to her practice. In her early works, this strong and assertive protagonist was usually unclothed, dressed, Cooper likes to say, in colour. Often alone, the figure – many have interpreted her as a self-portrait, but Cooper insists she is as much you or me as she is her – contorts to fill the space, dancing, climbing, balancing. Her props have included ladders, swings, boats, paint brushes, even a spade. The subject is usually equipped for work, yet sometimes she sleeps – here the potential to dream becomes the focus. Cooper's work, while rooted in the real world, remains full of imaginative possibilities and has often been described as 'magic realism'.

Cooper's swansong as Keeper was to curate the Royal Academy's annual Summer Exhibition 2017, a salon-style open exhibition, this time with a focus on the international. One outcome was that she was invited by Nadia von Maltzahn to speak at a symposium on 'Contextualising the Art Salon in the Arab Region' at the Orient Institut in Beirut (27-28 October 2017). This, together with a growing relationship with Vartivarian, led to Cooper's visit to Lebanon, and a whirlwind tour of Beirut, Byblos, and the surrounding areas. In her typical manner, as someone who has described artists as 'sponges', Cooper absorbed each new experience and sensation, sight, sound, smell and taste, turning it over unconsciously in her mind and feeding it into her practice.

Having early on studied rigorous life drawing methods, Cooper nowadays draws largely from the imagination, describing it as a release not having to engage with a model, working 'by instinct not intellect'. And so, on her return to London, she began to imagine, seeking here and there the odd prop – including the Greenwich Park cedar tree – and also drawing heavily on Nina Jidejian's book, *Lebanon: A Mosaic of Cultures* (2001).

She describes this as going back to her early artistic encounters, when she engaged with reproductions of works by Monet and Picasso, long before seeing the paintings themselves in Parisian museums. Two works in progress, which had been standing in her studio since before her Middle Eastern experience, were brought back out, infused with new Mediterranean light, and became *Cedars*, *New Romantic* (2017) and *Lemon Tree* (2017). In each, the female figure sits, bare-footed, connected with the red soil, gazing dreamily. The oil paint is applied drily with a brush so that the effect is almost pastel-like, evoking a sense of warmth, even beneath the silvery moon in the former, and the scent of the cedar mixed with the lemon oil becomes a heady mix.

The moon was in fact another key starting point for this new body of work, with the title of the exhibition, 'Under the Same Moon', for Cooper referring to ideas of timelessness and universality, of looking back through history and across geography at different cultures, all of which are united under the same moon. The name Lebanon derives from the same Phoenician etymological root, *lbn* ('white'), as the Semitic moon-goddess *Lebanah*, and, as mentioned, folklore, mythology, fairy tales, and even Bible stories, all underpin Cooper's practice. 'These were my first stories and I loved them,' she says. 'And later [I] read them to my own children.' Her work is allegorical and not simply anecdotal, and such references render her motif-filled imagery both personal and universal.

In the painting that bears the same title as the exhibition, *Under the Same Moon* (2017), Cooper's contemporary protagonist gazes, like Narcissus into the pond, across time and space, at a mosaic found in the floor of a small chapel attached to the temple of Eshmun, the Phoenician god of fertility and healing, near the el-Awali river, two kilometres northeast of Sidon in south-western Lebanon. Silently, in this place of sanctuary, she pieces together the tiny shards of herself, filling the gaps, recreating herself from history, creating a new whole. 'I loved the idea of these mosaics surviving over thousands of years,' Cooper says. 'Looking back into history, walking in others' footsteps, under the same moon...' With her new found freedom to travel, Lebanon is the ideal starting point for Cooper, since, as a crossing point of western and eastern cultures, its mixed identity is as pieced together as her own.

Another work depicts a mosaic of Bacchus, the Roman god of agriculture, wine and fertility, copied from one that decorated the floor of the Roman theatre in Byblos. In this instance, it is the male figure who sees himself reflected, while the female reaches instead for the branches of the tree, etched into the stone wall, growing around the window and out towards the light. In the third mosaic-based painting, itself entitled *Mosaic* (2017), the female figure dances atop a mosaic of animals, behind her the turquoise sea meeting the cyan sky – colours quite different from those of Cooper's native land. She recalls the challenge of capturing the fused light of a Mediterranean country in which the sea is so present, with its sunny weather and cool interiors, and the longing to kick off your shoes and walk on those cool stone – or mosaic – floors, just as in this painting. The motif of a missing shoe occurs frequently in Cooper's work, although she cannot explain exactly what it means. A certain kind of freedom, for sure, as well as enabling connection between the sole of the foot and the earth. This metaphor of being able to put down her roots is repeated in both *The Cedar Tree* (2017) and *Cedar Cone* (2017), where the bare-footed female figure seems at one with nature, in touch with the earth, and, in the former, equally in touch with the pink sky, which bathes her completely, giving a glow to the exposed skin on her face and limbs.

Once dubbed 'Britain's new young nudist superstar', Cooper has, of late, tended towards clothing her figures, perhaps, she suggests, as the sexuality so present in her early works has become less pressing. In all of these new works the figures are clothed – the females in diaphanous blues and yellows: the colours of the sea, sky, and sun – but, as with the dancers in the 'Giselle' series, the strength of their bodies is apparent through their garments.

As mentioned, another longstanding concern of Cooper's practice has been motherhood and her children. *Sanctuary* (2017) therefore, with a small boy seated at his mother's feet, a dove on his right knee, could almost be mistaken for a much earlier work (in which birds also featured large). Actually, however, it relates to the custom of dedicating a statuette

of a child – usually reclined or seated, holding a dove in the right hand – to Eshmun (the aforementioned god of fertility and healing), and then purposely breaking it to simulate the sacrifice of a child.

In *Peace* (2017), the young man curled up under the cedar tree is perhaps one of Cooper's grown-up sons. Protected as the figure is by leaves, the image is reminiscent of *Babes in the Wood*, but the tree is here clearly also a place of shelter – something Cooper felt herself when she stood under her cedar tree. Even allowing for Cooper's deliberate – and often sublime – distortions of scale, the tree in the painting has some growing left to do and the question also arises of who is protecting whom, for the man, curled up as he is, seems to be protecting the roots as much as he himself is being protected by the tree's bough. This bidirectional duality is a reflection on Cooper's own experience of motherhood, as something nurturing and nourishing to both the other (the child) and the self (the mother). 'Having a child also has an amazing impact on your body so then creativity and fertility really seem to become intertwined,' she says. 'And nurture. Nurturing kids, nurturing your creativity, finding time for yourself to express the things that are going on. All of that really fed into my work, really in a very positive way. That's something people don't talk about very often about motherhood: how much it really nourishes you, even though it really exhausts you.'

The interaction between figure and tree – whereby two become one – is explored further in Cooper's new drawings as well. *Sapling* (2017) and, to an even greater extent, *Shelter* (2017) might be seen as developments of one of Cooper's earliest and most metaphorical works, *The Sad Tree* (1983), in which she draws the woman as a tree, budding, growing and reaching beyond the frame for the sky. For this, Cooper was inspired by a tiny painting in the National Gallery, London, by Antonio del Pollaiuolo – *Apollo and Daphne* (1470) – depicting a female figure, Daphne, reaching up, with both arms sprouting branches. In a striking parallel to the attempts of Eshmun, Daphne is pleading with the gods to turn her into a tree so that she might escape the unwanted attentions of Apollo. He, however, uses his powers of eternal youth and immortality to render her evergreen. Cooper has long been inspired by this story of transformation, as well as by the symbolism of the tree as something both grounded and stable, while reaching up for newer and better things. Whereas the figure in *The Sad Tree* still struggles and strives to attain, her contemporary mirror in *Shelter*, while her arms are still outstretched, seems content and fulfilled, a far happier tree.

The Cedar of Lebanon has been important to various civilisations throughout history. The trees were used by the ancient Phoenicians for building trade and military ships, houses and temples. The Egyptians used its wood to carve their sarcophagi and sun-ships, its resin for mummification, and its sawdust was found in the pharaohs' tombs. Nowadays the tree is the emblem of Lebanon and features on its flag. This rich history informs Cooper's response to her visit to Lebanon, with seven beautiful drawings and five paintings all featuring the cedar tree.

' The Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet V, 'The Combat with Humbaba', verse 1-2

' Alison Beckett, 'Without Clothes They are Timeless', *Punch*, 10 February 1989, pp. 40–1, p40