

**HIDDEN PATHS** Martin Herbert

In Zen Buddhism there's a notion called *shoshin*, or 'beginner's mind'. It asks of meditation students, even the most advanced ones, that they never complacently think of themselves as adepts; that they are forever students, ardent ones, in the flush of discovery. Tal R, in the best sense, has a beginner's mind, one that he first had to regain, then retain. Jaded sophisticates look at certain fields of art, such as still life painting, and say 'it's been done'. Tal R's career has been a manifold demonstration that it usually hasn't; that, in painting particularly, whatever one might consider fully mined remains cached with riches, unexpectedness, more recessed chambers of perception to enter and, not infrequently, mysteries. When an iconographic reserve appears tapped out – tank drained, lemon squeezed – that's when he gets interested.

Sometimes, this happens even when the apparent endpoint has been reached by himself. A few years ago, Tal R discovered an eye-shaped manmade clearing in a forest near his summerhouse in Northern Denmark. (He'd been painting forests for years already, and knew he wasn't done yet.) From multiple points within this oval, shuffling his chair on successive mornings, he drew – in order later to paint – what he could see. The results fused depiction with invention based, circularly, on decades of painting and of trying to perceive reality in as unmediated a way as possible. (This brief description of Tal R's process requires some unpacking; we'll get there.) Anyway, this sequence of relatively large paintings came to a seeming end; and then, him being him, he asked himself if there might be more to say, to do. The paintings in *How to Count to Tree* prove that there was.

# Tal R

**Fallen** 2021–2022  
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood in artist made frame 50 × 85 × 4 cm (19½ × 33½ × 1½ in)



of everything. And your years of making art, as well, start to displace and literally tint your vision; things turn into shapes, like a word becoming abstract when you look at it too long, and hues become less referential, more a shorthand for how you felt, there in the woods, and a game of sorts in which colours ask to be balanced and tuned in the studio. And so in *To Count Trees (early morning)*, the chopped-down arbour is as simplified as it gets; mostly an array of free-floating, rotating, exulting triangles. In place of the grey-green-brown monotony of Northern European forests is a polychrome feeling-tone: reds and oranges and purples that weren't there calling back to the original perceiver's tickled synapses, the quotidian as near-psychedelic in its intensity. This, the work suggests, is how the world can feel to the determined amateur, the lover.

Trees becoming dancing geometry is just one aspect of the borderless – ironic term – quality of these paintings. In *Fox Read* there's a vulpine form in the foreground that nevertheless also might be another felled tree, and the convocation of brown tree-like shapes in the painting's centre seems halfway-stegosaurus. *Meadow's* multiheaded grouping of yellow flowers at night is Tal R's attenuating mathematics running at full strength: the least possible detailing necessary to evoke moonlit sunflowers glowing like lamps. The multi-coloured quartet of trees in *Forest Edge* is tipping into sheer rhythm and pattern, about to leave physical identity behind. In many cases, you can't identify species from these paintings. It's the world with the names fading out, with something of the apprehensive intensity that comes from being prelinguistic, having beginner's eyes

**Forest Edge** 2021–2022  
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood in artist made frame 63 × 91 × 4 cm (24½ × 35½ × 1½ in)



**HOW TO COUNT TO TREE** 1 July – 26 August 2023

Victoria Miro Venice || Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy



**How to Count to Tree** 2021–2022  
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood in artist made frame 63 × 101 × 4 cm (24½ × 39½ × 1½ in)

The first thing one might notice about these works is that they are modestly scaled, the landscapes in them hemmed in still further, almost comically, by internal 'frames' made of wooden beading. Outside of these is a generous edge zone speckled with capitalised language, except that Tal R long ago began vexing the hierarchical distinction between frame and painting, and implicitly between interiority and exteriority, feeling and thing. The format recalls the locale that gestated the paintings themselves, a gap in the forest; a chance invitation to concentrate sustainedly on one corner of the world, or even a corner of this corner. In *Fallen*, a sideways oak leaf presses right up against your gaze, and up against the border's edge, in depthless space: the image grows weird as you look, a small known thing turning creaturely and losing its familiar scale. Within such purposively constricted views (think, too, of Tal R's earlier works involving keyholes, or his general tendency to set temporary parameters for what and how he can paint), the operative gambits seem to be: how much world can fit in one little space? How large can that space feel? And how do you render this place – its forest-ness, tree-ness, clearing-ness – via the synecdoche, the part?

In one sense these are disquisitions in what it means to see, or at least to see like Tal R: refractions of what 'looking' is like for someone who's painted for so long. There might be a distinction to be made between mere looking and really seeing, excitedly so, which opens onto the question of how you convey such seeing in paint. Reality, here, becomes essentialised according to what Tal R has termed 'artist's mathematics' (see, again, the exhibition title): you don't paint everything, you paint what will give the viewer a sense



**To Count Trees (early morning)** 2021–2022  
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood in artist made frame 66 × 84 × 4 cm (26 × 33½ × 1½ in)

– something we've all known, and that got educated out of us. Tal R, inversely, is seeing and painting the education out of himself.

It might seem strange, then, that language nevertheless clusters at the edges of these nonlinguistic images. But then look at the language. It's a sort of urtext, sometimes associable with the work's title but often not (what does 'T.BEN' mean?). In *The Tutor*, letters reverse into near illegibility, become graphic glyphs. When things lose their IDs, a kind of nascent speech that is not controlling or even signifying seemingly becomes possible again. And whatever the language *is*, you'll notice it doesn't get anywhere near the central imagery; it's held at bay by those raised internal frames.

But here's a bit of etymological talk. Tal R has noted that the Danish words for 'edge of the forest' and for 'eyebrow' are very similar, and remember that what he's painting here, this ovoid edge given to the forest, is an eye-shaped space. The place he gets to when seeing and painting is *not* the world processed through the eye, rather somewhere near but pointedly outside it; the eyebrow, say. The eye apprehends the world as it has learned to, through categorisation, separation. Perception from somewhere slightly else – from a place of not-knowing, like if you could somehow look through your eyebrow – leads, these paintings assert, to radiant interconnectedness, to fusions of form, shade, emotion. Anyone can walk into a forest; but it can be hard, particularly without a beginner's mind, to locate the clearing at its heart. Tal R knows some shortcuts, and here they are.

OVERLEAF: **The Tutor** 2021–2022  
Oil on canvas, mounted on wood in artist made frame 63 × 101 × 4 cm (24½ × 39½ × 1½ in)