

SQUARE ROOTS

CONNECTING QUESTIONS, AND SOME ANSWERS IN THE ART OF LISA FINGLETON

Essay by Curator and Writer Gemma Tipton

in response to The Square Tomato Exhibition

1st Feb-22nd March 2025, Siamsa Tire



The Square Tomato, Ink and watercolour on paper, 210mm x 210mm, 2024

Have you ever considered the disconnect between the sight of someone spraying their garden, farm, vegetable plot or verge with chemicals so toxic they must wear full protective gear, including goggles and a mask? Even when the sprayed site isn't immediately edible, the liquid will seep down through the earth and into the epic network of root and water systems that underpins all things. From there, it will grow back into our food, flow through the water, and hang as particles in the air. If, as W.B. Yeats wrote in *The Second Coming*, "the centre cannot hold", neither, Lisa Fingleton reminds us, can our eco-systems.

Such interconnectedness threads as a theme through Fingleton's exhibition *The Square Tomato*, but she also challenges us with a set of disconnects. There is a square tomato, a test tube of liquid for lunch, a nifty set of breathing apparatus for fish. A chemical-suited figure, Monto Man sprays the land; a future child is astonished that, once upon a time, food

was “grown in dirt”; a restaurant serving “local” food offers choices of avocado, lemon and chocolate to a bemused diner.



LUNCH 2050

Did Children Really Eat Food Grown In Dirt?, Ink and watercolour on paper, 220mm x 330mm, 2023

Fingleton's small watercolour and ink drawings have a charming immediacy, while confronting us with their inherent incongruities. She is the type of artist – she is also a grower, farmer and writer – who wears her rich and wide-ranging knowledge lightly. To this lightness of touch, she adds an extraordinary depth of purpose, encouraging us to consider the often appalling absurdities that have crept into our conception of what is natural and normal. Such absurdities are not new, and her work draws on a powerful set of legacies of artists and writers striving to make change.

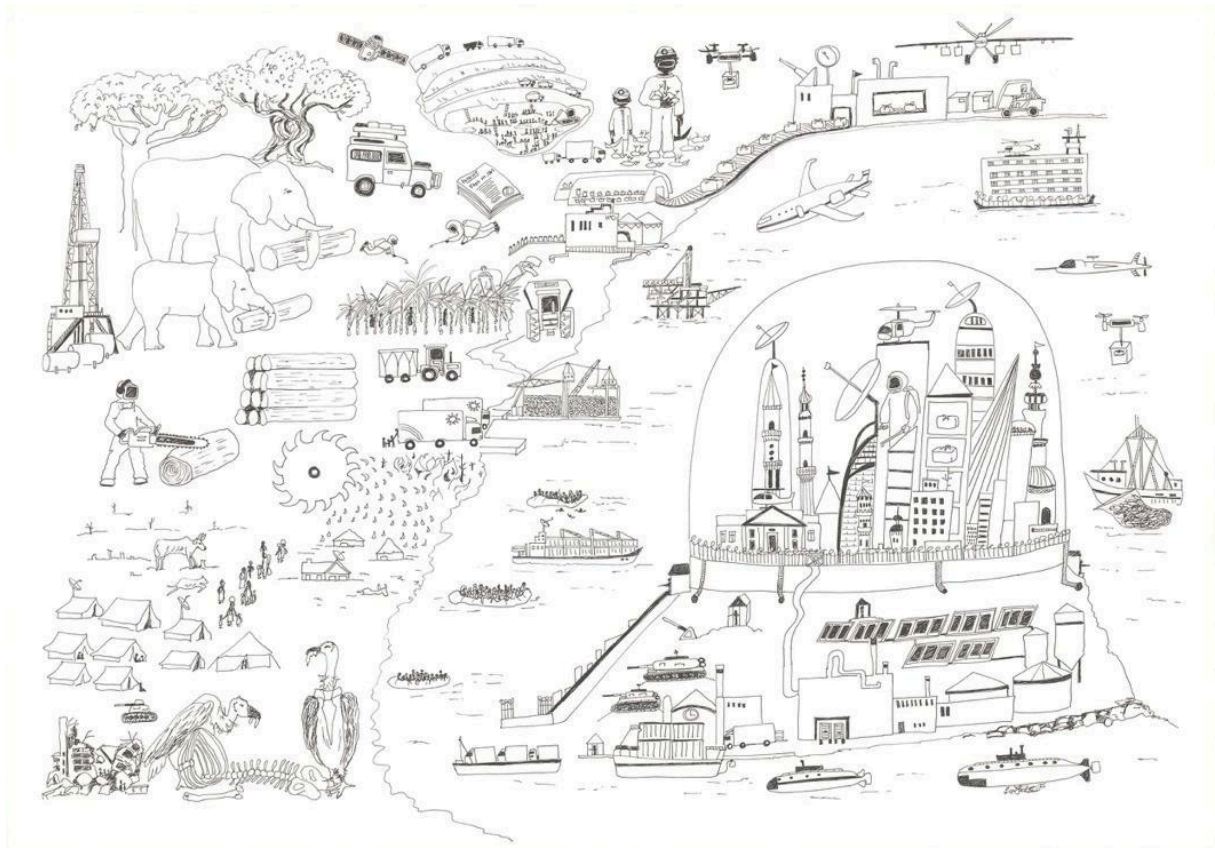
Writing back in the 1950s, Rachel Carson dedicated her energies to demonstrating the extreme toxicity of pesticides such as DDT sweeping the land in post Second World War

America. In her book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, Carson asks, “how could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?”

Carson’s work was instrumental in the banning of DDT, but its publication was also notable for the response of the chemical industry and its lobbyists, using tactics that are unnervingly familiar today. Carson was dismissed as “a spinster with no children,” and “a fanatic defender of the cult of the balance of nature”. On examination, neither of these barbs is actually anything to be dismayed about, and yet the insinuation is clear: to reject chemical pollution is to inhabit an unintelligent, reactionary and conspiratorial fringe.

Against narratives such as this, Fingleton represents through her work a calm intelligence that combines activism with insight, and brings wide-ranging researches to community projects. Her evidence and inspirations are gleaned from sources as wide ranging as biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer, poet Audre Lorde and artists including Alice Maher, Bernadette Kiely, Maria McKinney and Laura Fitzgerald. Richard Powers’ extraordinary novel *The Overstory* (2018) is a text to which she returns. Alongside these, an interview with philosopher, physicist, environmentalist and activist Vandana Shiva, filmed at Shiva’s Navdanya centre in India, is key in exploring Fingleton’s themes.

In the film, *The Radical Art of Living* (2025), Shiva describes how capitalism has replaced imperial powers as today’s most intensive colonising force. This has happened to the degree that the motivations of large corporations and disproportionately wealthy individuals alter the course of governments. In tandem with this, we have been taught to understand the existential issues of our age through the prism of economics. Does the immediate financial cost outweigh generational benefits? Does the potential for immediate profit justify the collateral or longer term damages of an action? Who pays the price? As Fingleton’s *Carnivorous Capitalism* (2025) lays bare: the answer is all of us, ultimately.



Carnivorous Capitalism, Ink on Paper, 1000mm x 700mm, 2025

Writing two generations ago, Carson denounced the “little tranquilizer pills of half truth”, which were employed to fob off those who protested the use of pesticides. “It is the public,” she wrote, “that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate. The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts.” But where does one start? In our present world, where fact, feelings and fictions seem to elide, it is increasingly difficult to trust our own instincts for what is reasonable, and what is plain wrong.

Writing in *The Irish Times*, Mark O’Connell reminded readers that the idea of the individual “carbon footprint calculator” was the brainchild of PR company Ogilvy and Mather.¹ Their client was British Petroleum, and the intent was to divert attention, and mental energy from the far larger depredations of corporations. By fostering individual culpability, the genius scheme shifted responsibility, and led to a sense of paralysis through guilt: how can I protest mass pollution when I haven’t been to the bottle bank?

Fingleton’s large ink drawing *What if the Humpback Came to Talk?* (2025), present such dilemmas, and highlights the need for shared responsibility, not only of our rivers and ecosystems, but by extension to the entire food, and pollution networks that arc across our planet. Through her work she aims to nudge us out of what she describes as an anaesthetised state of amnesia and overwhelm. “In one generation they will forget that

¹ 1 Mark O’Connell, *There is something delusional about your frantic trips to the recycling bin*, published in *The Irish Times*, December 28th 2024, www.irishtimes.com

tomatoes were round,” notes Fingleton’s sentient red fruit in *The Square Tomato* (2024) but it doesn’t have to be that way.²



What if the Humpback Came to Talk? , Ink on Paper, 1000mm x 700mm, Lisa Fingleton, 2025

One antidote is achieved by the actions of doing. In 2015, inspired by a petrol station sandwich that listed more than forty ingredients, the artist set herself the task of eating a purely local diet for a single month. “It felt,” wrote Fingleton, “like this sandwich connected me to so many places, people, plants and animals from all over the planet.” Having seen at first hand the destruction of rainforests to make way for palm oil plantations, Fingleton questioned in her subsequent *The Local Food Project* publication (2018), whether there can actually be any such thing as cheap food.

Part of the compelling beauty of Fingleton’s work is that she takes her ideas into the world in practical ways that can inspire questions and ignite actions in others. There is nothing didactic about this, instead it is an experiential counterbalance to the carefully constructed premises of so many of the arguments in front of us. Arguing against the over-use of chemical pesticides and fertilisers is not to demand a return to subsistence farming, just as questioning over-medication is not to wish to undo all the advances of medical science. It is similarly neither naïve or simplistic to suggest that we can live well on locally grown food, or that a food production and retail chain that does not net huge profits based on waste is somehow unviable. Or, perhaps, we could seek a new definition of the words naïve and

² *The square tomato is a bioengineering project aimed at making packaging and transportation easier. Its first iteration, Cultivar VF-145, was made by Geordie C. Hannah from the UC Davis Plant Breeding Center, though research originated in 1942.*

simple, where naivety means the deliberate rejection of misleading sophistications, and simplicity underscores a commitment to excluding the unnecessary and ultimately environmentally destructive habits of over-consumption from our lives.

As Artist in Residence for County Kerry, and with the Creative Climate Action Fund, Fingleton's projects include *Brilliant Ballybunion* through which local participants are invited to imagine the future they want, and then help to create it through activities such as seed saving, water quality testing and local-food growing and sourcing. The *Ballybunion Bean Festival*, a new project puts seeds and growing back into the hands of individuals, and celebrates the results. The logic of this includes inspiring community pride, but also fostering the tools, and the agency to ask better questions. There is, should one require it, also a selfish pragmatism in such an approach. As Shiva notes in Fingleton's film, famine can now strike anywhere, and changing weather patterns make this a shared global problem, rather than something that happens to other people, far away.



Ballybunion Bean Festival, SM Cropped, Ink and watercolour on paper, 210mm x 210mm, Lisa Fingleton, 2024

Coined two decades ago by philosopher Glenn Albrecht, the idea of solastalgia encompasses a yearning that parallels nostalgia, but instead of wishing for a beloved past, we are distressed at environmental change, as altering seasons and storms impact feelings of safety at home. "Have outrage, but not panic," suggests Shiva. What is happening is huge, yet not inexorable, and answers and lines of defence can come from unexpected sources. There is Navdanya's astonishing seed bank in India; the work of a small coastal

community in restoring, and championing balance in their immediate environment in Ireland; and then there is art.

The challenges we face are interconnected, but just as pollutions and poisons flow into the threaded networks of roots and the trickling tributaries of the water table, this exhibition opens up another set of networks. As Fingleton explores, a line of defence against the infinitely sophisticated manipulations of corporate communications lies with the equally infinite opportunities of art. Running counter to the narrative that claims it is too late and that there is nothing now to be done, there is instead always a new alternative to explore. Yes, there is an underlying anger in some of the work in *The Square Tomato*, but there is also a remarkable sense of hope, and that is ultimately the energy that this work inspires and ignites.

Gemma Tipton is a writer and curator based in Ireland, writing for *The Irish Times*, and other Irish and international publications.