Birch Tree Gallery

I have been nurturing the thought of opening an art gallery for some time. In some odd way, finding a suitable venue – physical premises on Dundas Street – helped to finalize the primary focus on crafts.

I was and, to some degree, still am hesitant to use word “crafts”. As a non-native English speaker, I am puzzled that the same word can be used to describe a huge range of items made by hand and can be used in very different capacities, even including items made by preschoolers or as hobby. In my native, Lithuanian language, there are different words to describe handmade objects. ‘*Rankdarbiai*’ describes items created as a hobby (e.g. knitting, crochet, stitching). ‘*Tautodailė*’ is traditional craft, typically practiced as an occupation, but rooted in folk art (such as wood-carving, leather goods making, and traditional amber jewellery). Japan has really deep and rich tradition of traditional crafts – nearly every household item, from a fan, lacquerware box, tea cup, to a kimono, require high levels of skills and years of apprenticeship. When I think about traditional crafts in Scotland, hand-woven textiles such as Harris-tweeds, stone carving and celtic jewelry come to my mind. “A fine art of craft” (yet another level of crafts) describes decorative applied-art objects that no longer need to be “applicable” – they can forfeit their original purpose and be seen as art objects exclusively for aesthetic enjoyment. Birch tree gallery intends to exhibit fine-crafts, that is one-off handmade objects that require expertise and skill to make, but also evince unique artistic expression.

As to the name of the gallery, the birch tree image is very simple, but powerful. The strong visual and tactile quality of its bark embody many of the same qualities that differentiate fine crafts from other arts - physicality of the art medium, texture, and time to master technical skills to produce the works. After all, birches do not have the same bark when they are young – it comes with maturity. There is another component to the story. My home-town Šiauliai, in Lithuania, is at the exactly same latitude as Edinburgh - 55.9349° N. Birches are quite prominent in Lithuania and in the Scottish Highlands and two species  *Betula pendula and Betula pubescens*are indigenous to both countries. I wanted to have this "tie" to my native landscape.

While I was still agonizing about the gallery name, I was already mapping the first exhibition with Louise Oppenheimer and Maggie Zarafa. Both of them have featured birches in the past – Louise has woven tapestries depicting birch trees and Maggie had a series of cups and pots with birch-bark patterns. So, it felt like an omen that Birch Tree Gallery was the right name. Interestingly, neither Louise nor Maggie will have any works featuring birches for the inaugural exhibition ‘Semitones’ that is opening on March 11th (preview on March 10th). Thematically, their works evolved – Maggie currently is experimenting with crystalline glazes – that is what she will feature at the exhibition. Meanwhile Louise’s later pieces feature subtle repetitive patterns that display a spectrum of colours.

Despite very different media, what is common to Louise’s and Maggie’s artwork is really a subtle change of colour. Louise blends strands of wool to gradually transition from one colour to another – it is almost like mixing paints to achieve subtle hues. Maggie’s glazes are a fusion of art and science that mimic natural processes by which crystalline minerals are formed deep within the earth's crust over thousands of years and each ring has a slightly different shade of colour.

The gallery will focus on art works that have roots in nature – whether in materials, inspiration or thematic elements. Such an influence is undoubtedly present in the display of the first exhibition. Louise's inspiration comes from the landscape of Argyll on the west coast of Scotland. Here she lives and works in Kilmartin Glen with Dunadd, the seat of Scotland’s earliest kings, many standing stones, rock carvings and imposing burial tombs, a short distance away. “Weather through the seasons, water, rocky shorelines and ever changing light lead me to weave designs which show their roots in nature but can be read by the viewer as abstract patterns or a translation of place and its essence”, says Louise.
Maggie’s crystalline glazes produce patterns that suggest frosted panes, floating galaxies or delicate blooms.

Future exhibitions will include works in wood, glass, stone, clay, silver, mixed media and also, prints.