

“People wonder what I do here: ‘Why live in New York, there are no spruces here, right?’” said the artist, as she leaned over the table in a small bohemian coffee shop down the street from her temporary West Village apartment. The grey light of a rainy New York day entered through two big windows to her left. Her elbows were tightly stuck to her body, and her hands moved softly over the table surface, next to a cup of strong espresso. The voice was calm. “But I either want to be in the middle of a forest or in a real urban jungle. I imagined that even if there are obvious differences, it is almost the same thing. You have to find your own world and your own focus.”

With a view from her second-floor apartment over lively Hudson Street, Ann Böttcher, 32, spends her days studying and drawing trees. In the middle of this urban landscape, she draws pictures inspired by the deep green forests of her native Sweden. Her pencil sketches, made with extreme precision and originality, have given her much success in the art world of her home country.

Böttcher has established herself as an artist at an unusual speed. She graduated from Malmö Art Academy, in southern Sweden, in 2003. Since then, her work has been exhibited at Moderna Museet, the museum of modern and contemporary art in Stockholm. She has a contract with a high-end gallery, Nordenhake, owned by a Swede

and soon to open in Stockholm, but until now exhibiting in a space in Berlin. Three years ago, she recalls, this was the gallery she dreamt of working with. She showed her work in one of the United States' biggest art fairs in Miami in December. Several shows are also coming up in Sweden soon. Now, she is on a prestigious scholarship to work in an art studio in New York for a year.

There is something almost girlish about her: the high dark brown pony tail, the simple gray cardigan with blue and violet flowers, the dimple on her left cheek which deepens when she smiles. At the same time, there is something more: a decisiveness, an immediate sense when you meet her that there is much more behind the surface.

The same could be said of her work. Although she has used different techniques, including photography and installations, to describe nature and human relationship with nature, it is her studies of single spruces on plain white backgrounds that have become most popular. While making pencil drawings of forests and trees may sound out-dated, both in its technique and its motif, there is undoubtedly something more to it: something untouchable, something behind the surface. Only using a pencil, she describes every shape of the trees in such detail that even the paper grains seem big. And each single tree tells its own long history. One looks threatening. Another one sad. A third one looks very tired.

“Her drawings are so fragile,” said Power Ekroth, a Swedish freelance curator and writer. “They are not at all bombastic, but rather something which enters by the backdoor and just grabs hold of you.”

For Böttcher, the drawings are only a small part of her work: they are like the top of an iceberg, she said. She spends an incredible amount of time on research related to the trees and their symbolism, which makes her art more like an anthropological investigation. “For me it is not only about a romantic vision of nature,” she said. “It’s about how it is seen through history, nationalism, politics and culture.”

One of her works, called “The Sweden Series (A Collection),” showed a total of 12 drawings exhibited as a 19 meter mind-map with extracts from her research, including stories about how spruces have often served as symbols when shaping national identities in Sweden. She said her work feels more like a journalistic quest, where every part of the process counts. “Sometimes I’m scared to death that people will only see it as nice pictures,” she said. “But I guess that is okay in a way, too. They are probably nice drawings as well.”

Her West Village apartment is decorated with photos of views over snow-clad forests in typically blue Scandinavian winter light. Other photos show her father on an icy lake, as well as a small yellow house surrounded by fir-trees. That is her family’s countryside house, where she spends much time. It is close to the town of about 450 inhabitants where she grew up, in the middle of thick forests in the southern parts of Sweden.

Although she has always been drawing, it wasn’t until she was in her twenties that she decided to make it into a career. After finishing high school, she traveled in Southeast Asia for a year, where she made friends with many Israelis and found much inspiration in their culture. Once back in Sweden, she began studying modern Hebrew. For a few years

thereafter she moved from one city to the other trying to find her right path. Still searching, she left for Finland where she studied at a preparatory art school for a year. It helped her get into the prestigious art academy, Konstfack, in Stockholm.

Ekroth, who knew Böttcher slightly while they were in the art school together said: “She is a special girl. She is not the kind of girl who is like ‘look, here I come,’ but at the same time she has very high integrity. She knows what she wants”.

She began making pencil drawings of forests as a break from her other work. One illustration from that time, reminiscent of a drawing by the 19th century German landscape artist Caspar David Friedrich, resembles a path where she used to walk with her father as a young girl. She didn’t consider these pieces to be art. It was more like meditation, she said, so she didn’t show it to anyone. When she finally graduated from Konstfack, she decided to include them in her final exhibition, and they were received very positively by the audience.

She came to New York City in September, to spend a year with the International Studio and Curatorial Program, which houses studios for artists from different countries in a large building in midtown Manhattan. A prestigious scholarship, the International Artists Studio Programme in Sweden, which pays all her expenses and provides her apartment, is another indicator of how she is establishing in the art world. But success is not always easy. “Now that I have received all this to be in New York,” she said, “it feels as if I have to deliver. I have to prove that it is good enough. So even if it gives a lot of self-confidence, it also gives a lot of pressure.”

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But she said she has never worked as well as in New York. “You just go down to a café around the corner,” she said, “and people sit absorbed with their laptops or their books. They are in their own worlds, and it feels as if it is necessary to find your own world here. You probably get completely lost if you don’t find your own focus.”

This is why the city’s never-ending urban jungle of buildings and streets is not so different to her from the endless landscapes of trees that she draws. Both urge her to find a path or else there is risk of getting lost.