

Henry Lee

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Ashes to Ashes

2021

Charcoal, Pencil and Acrylic on Canvas

H 101.4 cm x 76.2 cm



European Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*)

The world tree at the centre of the spiritual cosmos in Norse mythology, the colossal green ash Yggdrasil is found in Scandinavian, Slavic, Siberian, North and Mesoamerican mythology. The nine realms connected to it are reinterpreted as the nine heavenly bodies of the solar system (including Pluto), with stone steles bearing their classical astrological symbols. Cradled at its centre is the symbol for Earth – the only world known to harbour life – while various animal denizens graze around the tree, the source and nurturer of all terrestrial fertility and life. At the base of the three extensive roots of Yggdrasil are the water bodies that sustain it: Urdarbrunnr (well of fate); Hvergelmir (bubbling boiling spring), the source of many rivers and where Nidhogg the dragon lurks, gnawing at the tree's roots; and Mímisbrunnr (well of wisdom), to which Odin sacrificed an eye. The withering of Yggdrasil is seen as an omen for the coming of Ragnarök (twilight of the gods), the final reckoning for the planet. The threat of ash dieback (fungal plague) serves as a warning of the great battle of our time: climate change and natural disasters with changing weather patterns and rising sea levels.