Notes to accompany *Seven Piles of Seven Branches,* a collaborative creative activity undertaken as part of Reversing the Gaze, 1st and 2nd September 2025

1. I collected these branches over the weekend from beneath a group of seven, three-hundred-year-old Common Limes (Tilia × europaea) that I have been collaborating with for the past 3 years.

2. To the best of my knowledge, these trees were planted in or around 1700 as part of an ornamental garden laid out in the form of a Union Jack in Killearn in the grounds of a house known as 'The Place of Killearn'.

3. Killearn was also the birthplace of George Buchanan, James VI and I's mentor and regent. These trees are now the most visible remnant of that historic designed landscape, as the house is now long gone.

4. The exercise itself was an adaption of a pedagogical tool created by the German artist and social sculptor Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), which I have used extensively during teaching over the past 10 years. In his later life, Beuys was heavily involved in the founding of the German Green Party, and also worked extensively with trees, land and memory.

5. These seven trees first became truly visible to me in the autumn of 2022. I cannot say why I did not truly see them before, having walked with children and/or dogs in this field since 2012, but I cannot un-see them now.

6. I also cannot help but see them as a necessary (and somehow, for me at least, inherently feminine) counterpoint to the brash masculinity of the obelisk that is the Buchanan Monument, which is highly visible from the location of the trees.

7. The consideration of this landscape in energetic terms, working solely from visual cues, yields some astonishing insights, and cements the current state of this relationship as a touchstone for parsing the traces that are present in this landscape.

8. From here it was a short and necessary step to thinking about these trees as 'The Seven Sisters'. One of the trees (no. 7) is separated from the others by a boundary fence, and is sited at the edge of Killearn Glen, a publicly-owned forested area which was laid out as a woodland pleasure garden at around the same time as the Union Jack feature adjacent, in what is known locally as 'The Cow Field' (and historically as 'Crow Hill').

9. So within yards of each other, there are tracts of land which have been ordered in relation to specific and prohibitive instrumental historic notions of what land is or can be – either as an idea or ideal of pleasurable woodland, or as a symbolic representation of nationhood (and the attendant processes of colonization and plantation that were promoted by James VI and I under the influence of George Buchanan). Needless to say, both modes of thinking about the land are, despite their differences, inherently extractive.

10. To further emphasise the entwining of these themes beyond these two specific historical moments - the reign of James VI and I and the laying out of these gardens, later records show that Crow Hill was subsequently purchased by James Blackburn, using compensation he received for the loss of his numerous plantations in the Caribbean at the abolition of slavery. Blackburn subsequently demolished The Place of Killearn and used its stonework in the building of a much grander house across the valley.

11. The numerous global myths which centred upon 'The Seven Sisters' are some of the oldest narratives which are inspired by a specific constellation, in this instance the open cluster Messier 45, more commonly known as 'The Pleiades' (or 'The Seven Sisters'). This group consists of around 1,000 stars which are gravitationally packed together within an area of space approximately 35 light years in diameter. Six of these stars are currently typically visible to the naked eye.

12. A surprisinglycommon element of the mythologies which surround the Pleiades relates to the absence of the seventh sister ('the missing sister'). Recent research by the cultural astronomers Ray P. Norris and Barnaby M. Norris (2021) suggests that there are valid astronomical reasons for the global prevalence of this specific aspect of the mythological narratives in question.

13. Norris and Norris argue that, although only six of the brightest stars of the cluster are now normally visible to the naked eye, the consideration of the orbits of the stars which comprise the Pleiades suggest that, historically, and likely within the past 100,000 years, there have been times at which a seventh star has been visible to the naked eye, but has then been occluded again by one of the other six bright stars.

14. To develop this theme further; examining the connection between this place, these trees and the Pleiades yields a surprising insight, especially when considered within the specific historic context under discussion here.

15. Despite previous controversies in relation to measurements of the distance from Earth to the Pleiades, the most recent and generally accepted estimate, undertaken by means of radio interferometry, is 444 light years.

16. If you stood outside this evening under a clear sky, then looked up and found the Pleiades, a photon arriving at that very moment from that cluster of stars would, as it was absorbed by a light-sensitive cell in your retina and converted by an Opsin molecule into an electrical signal travelling along your optic nerve, have been travelling for 444 years.

17. To put this figure into the historical context, the photon would have been expelled by one of the suns of The Pleiades to begin its journey to your retina in 1581, two years before James VI and I finally fully ascended to the Scottish throne in 1583.

18. I want to be clear that I do not claim any supernatural significance for this numerical relationship or otherwise want to infer that any otherworldly influence is at play here. As a neurodivergent artistic researcher, I am drawn to looking for unexpected connections and patterns, which can then be deemed significant or not, depending on whether any useful or productive meaning(s) can be ascribed to them.

19. I want only to draw attention to this connection, because for me its consideration opens up a visceral, physical and imaginative channel from our collective personal and historic now to a moment in time, 444 years ago, at which so many of the processes of extraction, conflict, exploitation and pain which we now wish so fervently had been done *otherwise* were still *in utero*.

20. For me this seems to be, somewhat paradoxically, an insight that can potentially inform a new and different sense of possibility, simply because it connects us to a moment before the unfolding of James VI and I's legacy had truly begun.

21. Next year, the first photons will arrive which left M45 after George Buchanan died in 1582– what will we make of and from them?