



● **ETHEREAL VISIONS:** Images seemingly floating in mid-air will confront forest walkers

A confrontation with our ancient fear of the forest

LITTLE Red Riding Hood's terrifying experience in the woods may only be a fairy tale – but for many it evokes a long-standing fear of the dark. The very thought of walking through a dark forest, the sound of footsteps cushioned by fallen pines and bracken, makes the heartbeat quicken.

Imagine the sunlight receding, filtered out by a canopy of tall pines, and suddenly being confronted with the most ethereal of visions: images floating in mid-air.

A terrifying thought? Almost certainly, and one man is playing on our fear of the dark and the woods in a new exhibition to be held at Haldon Forest in September. Photographer and artist Mike Smallcombe has created an installation of giant photographs hanging from trees.

From September, walkers and art lovers travelling through Haldon Forest, near Exeter, will come face to face with eerie photographs hanging from tree branches. **Olivier Vergnault** spoke with artist-photographer Mike Smallcombe about an exhibition that plays on our deepest fears

Explaining the inspiration for the Ghosts in the Wood exhibition in the Forestry Commission-owned forest, he said: "People are so urban these days but there still is a fear of the woods ingrained in them, dating from the times when the forest was home to bears and wolves.

"It's about creating contemporary fairy

tales based on a shared mythology and our basic fear of the dark.

"Pine forests are alien to Britain. They're dark, scary and not very welcoming. When Red Riding Hood was attacked by the Wolf she was probably walking in a pine forest.

"Even if most people live in towns,

there's still at the back of our head this fear of the woods. Forests represent the fear of the unknown."

Mr Smallcombe may have lived in London for 10 years, but the 54-year-old is certainly not scared of the woods.

He said: "I love them and always have done. I've had this idea for an exhibition outside for quite a while.

"I met someone at the Forestry Commission and visited Haldon Forest. I thought the place would lend itself perfectly to what I had in mind."

By the time the first visitors take a stroll in the woods, Mr Smallcombe, who lives and works with his wife and two children in Drewsteignton on the edge of Dartmoor, will have completed 24 exhibits.

Each will be an intensely choreographed, well-lit and heavily composed photograph laser-printed on to an eight



● **MASTER OF THE MYSTERIOUS:** Above left – Mike Smallcombe, from Drewsteignton, who is working on an exhibition of unsettling pictures to be hung from trees in Haldon Forest, with the theme of our fear of the woods. Above right – Strawman

In one of them, a young girl stares at the spectator from inside a derelict house littered with dark leaves in which a gnarled dead tree sits, its branches heavy with Barbie dolls and feathers.

In another, a group of youngsters in

tracksuits hide their identity behind rabbit masks reminiscent of *The Wicker Man* or *Donnie Darko* films.

"It's about wearing a disguise," Mr Smallcombe said. "There is something worrying about anonymity.

"You can't see their expressions. You don't know what they think, but you may feel a sense of threat from the group.

"I wanted to play with the scary idea of a pack of something. Like the dark staring back at you."

While Mr Smallcombe came up with the idea of the schoolchildren wearing rubber rabbit masks while working on something else, he admits to have based some of his photographs on stories he has written.

One of the images likely to stare back at the forest adventurers when the exhibition goes live in September is the photo-

graph of a witch-like androgynous crow child.

Mr Smallcombe said he wrote a story of a crow child who is imprisoned by an evil witch character and who finds his freedom after many twists and turns.

Then he decided to illustrate it and heavily constructed a photograph involving one of a friend's twin sons.

■ Ghosts in the Wood will remain at Haldon Forest, near Exeter, during September and October, and then Mr Smallcombe hopes to be able to take it on tour from forest to forest both in the United Kingdom and in Europe.

'Pine forests are dark, scary and not very welcoming'

feet by five feet weatherproof canvas and hung from the trees.

Mr Smallcombe, whose previous work includes taking photojournalism-like images of Mali in Africa, has already completed five images.

He said: "They're like a tableau and take a long time to organise. I have to find the right subjects, use the right actors, find the right place and props. My images are not natural. They're hyper-real."

Mr Smallcombe's photographs may be pin-sharp and rich in details, but they are also slightly disturbing, with claustrophobic Gothic undertones that touch on the viewer's uneasiness and sense of fear.

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Are you afraid of the dark? To see more photographs of Mike Smallcombe's work visit www.thisiswesternmorningnews.co.uk