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Hanna Tai
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HANNA TAI
Trees in Space:
The Reorder of Things



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Trees in Space: The Reorder of Things

It is possible to walk around a city and not see any dirt, earth, or plant life for blocks at a time. The occasional tree, crammed in between buildings and concrete pavements, is often our sole reminder that there is earth below, and sky above; that we are connected to a living cosmos.

Trees possess a unique internal order. They contain ecosystems which in turn affect systems around them. Yet while trees have long been revered in art as a symbol of fertility and regeneration, the reality is that they are often overlooked and mistreated — rendered redundant and absurd by human intervention.

In this exhibition, Hanna Tai shows a fascination with the physical science of trees, looking at their energy structures and systems of logic as a means of making sense of our connection to the universe. She documents botanic gardens and other places where we surround ourselves with tree life, and explores the ways in which these sites are modified to accommodate our desires.

Tai approaches the subject of trees in three discrete yet interrelated ways: through an examination of the concept of *ostranenie* which reveals the strangeness in the everyday, by interpreting the energy flow that creates order within the physical and cosmological structure of trees, and through a study of the ways in which that energy and strangeness can be ordered and made malleable.

Tai states, 'I am looking at the tree as a little universe in itself. If you relate it to the wider universe, it is like a universe sitting inside another universe...'

started seeing trees not in isolation, but as solid masses connected to the earth, with bits of space in between. So the work is not about documenting local trees, or environmental issues, but about order on a more cosmic scale — in terms of energy and space relations. This project is about co-existence as well, and how we live alongside these trees.'

BOTANY OSTRANENIE

Tai uses photographs as a visual notepad, documenting and re-framing everyday things to bring out the strangeness in the image. In so doing, she complicates our perception. Everyday scenes — of trees, intertwined branches, luscious foliage — become unfamiliar and at times bizarre.

This notion of 'strangeness of the familiar' relates directly to the concept of defamiliarisation or *ostranenie*, as proposed by Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovskij. For Shklovskij, 'the device of art is to make things 'unfamiliar', to increase the difficulty and length of their perception...'¹

Maggie Finch (MF): How has the concept of *ostranenie* informed your work? One result seems to be a sense of anthropomorphism in the trees that you have photographed.

¹ Viktor Shklovskij, 'Iskusstvo kak priem', in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo jazyka* (St Petersburg, 1917, p. 13), quoted in Lawrence Crawford, 'Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization', *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1984), pp. 209–219.

Hanna Tai (HT): *Botany Ostranenie* looks at the strangeness of the familiar. Most of the photographs in that series were taken in the Botanic Gardens in Hobart, Tasmania. What I like about botanic gardens is that they are places where different species of flora are planted together, in ways that are unlikely to occur naturally. The relationships between the plant life create a kind of strangeness and humour.

The trees really began to take on human characteristics and become monster or animal-like to me. Once that idea was in my mind, they all began to look that way. Non-plant structures started to look like they were trying to join in with, or mimic, the trees too. I wanted to show the life in those things as well.

MF: You seem to use photos to upset our perception of the natural world, which links to the idea of 'making strange'.

HT: I'm interested in how everyday things can seem strange because they've been documented through photography. I'm not constructing a scene — the trees were there, they existed in that formation. I think of photography as a kind of process of reduction. By being photographed they're being isolated from everything else, and that heightens the sense of them being both real and weird at the same time.

BOTANY ENERGY

In these sculptural forms Tai creates a map of the energy flow that extends around a tree, with the openness and immediacy of a science classroom diagram. Using humble electrical materials, the photographs of trees sit as the nucleus, with energy



pulsating through their roots and surging up through their branches, to a 'sun' above — a circular motion of energy and perception.

In one sense the photo-sculptures are reminiscent of much older cosmologies and systems of order, for example the ancient concept of the Tree at the Centre — a creation story of sorts, in which the tree was seen as the 'cosmic axis', which sat at the centre of the universe linking the various cosmic zones above and below.² It is the relationship to the physical sciences, however, which is the primary concern of Tai. The works are an illustration of energy forces, an analysis of trees and their connection to the universe, in which the cosmological becomes physical.

MF: What ideas inform the *Botany Energy* works? There seems to be a relationship to cosmic notions of the tree as the axis of the world, the link between earth and universe.

HT: Yeah, I think trees create their own kind of order by connecting the geological with the cosmological. I've started to think of them as 'manipulated energy structures'. Energy comes up from the ground, goes up through the roots, and then the sun pulls them upwards. It happens in both directions. By planting a tree in a certain place we're directing the energy in a certain way and we're manipulating it.

² See Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life: Symbol of the Centre*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1974, p. 9.

MF: These works show your characteristic use of exposed and humble materials. What is the importance of revealing your methods of creation in the installation?

HT: I want to share the thought process, not hide it — that's a big part of the work. The small scale of the photographs is important too. I want people to look closely to see what's going on. By doing that I guess I'm asking people to consider what's in the image, and to perhaps find some value or humour in the everyday stuff that is there.

BOTANY MALLEABILITY

A tree is neatly trimmed above a suburban gate, leaving the appearance of a magical hovering form, an Unidentified-Foliage-Object. Another tree peeks over a fence, looking for a friend below. A lamp post becomes the backbone for a climbing tree, whose leaves entwine with its silver arms creating the appearance of a tree-man walking towards you with branches outstretched. Hug anyone?

Unlike the carefully composed *Botany Ostranenie* photographs, these are snapshots — taken when riding around on her bike, or roaming the streets by foot. Tai has collected images of trees that have been cropped, cut and made to look ridiculous through human intervention. In these photographs, she explores the idea that the disruption of the energy flow creates a perceived imbalance in the natural order of the trees, allowing for a sense of strangeness and humour to emerge.

MF: Malleability is suggestive of the ability of an object to be transformed until it becomes abstracted and non-functional. How does this relate to these suburban trees?

HT: With these works I wanted to explore how trees are manipulated to accommodate our desires. I was thinking about how trees have energy flowing through them, that they are these masses, but then we've cut pieces out and changed the flow, and that's when it starts to become absurd. Their function changes when we start to manipulate them and they're no longer true to their natural form.

That kind of manipulation has also been extended to the treatment and display of the photographs in the installation. I see photographs as both flat, papery objects, and as representations of spatial things. That spatial representation can talk to the stuff outside its physical self in an installation. I like to bring that information out of the photograph and break it down somehow.

The photographs of Tai take the everyday and make it strange. They ask us to look deeply, to consider the difference between the ways in which we perceive, experience and understand the natural world, and to find both humour and worth in the trees around us.

Maggie Finch is Assistant Curator, Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria. This text is drawn from conversations with Hanna Tai in October 2009.

BIOGRAPHY

Hanna Tai makes work with a strong conceptual underpinning using various media including photography, object-making and installation. She completed a Bachelor of Design Studies (Arch) at University of Adelaide (1998), a Masters in Image & Communications (Photography) at Goldsmiths College, London (2003) and a Masters in Fine Arts at RMIT University (2007). Tai received an Australia Council Emerging Artist Grant in 2009 and an Australia Council ArtStart Grant in 2010. She teaches photography at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) and has been invited to teach in the School of Architecture at RMIT University in 2010. Tai is a Melbourne-based artist whose work has been exhibited in Melbourne, London, Berlin and the Gold Coast.

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COVER

Friends 2008
from the *Botany Malleability* series
Pegasus print
10.0 × 15.0 cm

INSIDE — LEFT TO RIGHT

All images:
Untitled 2009
from the *Botany Energy* series
Pegasus print
10.0 × 10.0 cm
electric wires, globe
dimensions variable

THIS PAGE — LEFT TO RIGHT

All images:
Untitled 2009
from the *Botany Ostranenie* series
Pegasus print
9.2 × 9.2 cm