

EXHIBITION

The fabric of grief

Childbirth brought far more to an artistic mother than the wonder of her first baby, writes **ANDREW TAYLOR**.

Like many first-time mothers, Hiromi Tango believed the birth of her first child would bring joy and a sense of fulfilment to her life. However, sleepless nights caused by a baby who cried constantly and would not eat transformed an optimistic mother into a guilt-ridden monster.

"The baby was more demanding than I expected," Tango says. "She just didn't sleep and was crying."

Tango had waited a long time to become a mother, and was ashamed and angered by her inability to cope with newborn daughter Kimiyo.

Tango says she was immensely happy when her baby was sleeping or calm, but was shocked by what she perceived as her own inadequacies.

"It was a very confronting period," she says. "I felt guilty because I should have been very happy and enjoying being a mother but I have to be honest: I didn't enjoy it. I felt I was not good enough for this baby."

Adding to her woes, Tango developed carpal tunnel syndrome caused by obsessively practising her art of weaving and wrapping fabric into intricate soft sculptures, which left her unable to hold her child. Her fragile mental state, later diagnosed as postnatal depression, also led to the loss of friends.

In the midst of Tango's emotional turmoil came an environmental catastrophe in the form of massive dust storms that engulfed Brisbane and Sydney in September 2009.

As a thick blanket of dust turned the sky orange, Tango ventured out into the unbreathable air wrapped in a tangle of colourful fabrics, threads and material, which she documented in her *Insanity Magnet* series of photographs and video.

Five years later, those images of Tango in an apocalyptic landscape form the basis of *Dust Storm* at the Australian Centre for Photography.

Tango says she cried when she first looked at the images from that turbulent period.

"I needed to revisit that time because I had been hiding from it," she says. "I couldn't face it before now. It was too raw and psychologically it was making me sick."

An immersive installation, *Dust Storm*

features photographs, video and Tango's fabric sculptures into which she has woven letters, photos and diary entries. A sculpture constructed from photographic light boxes and a neon sign reading "New Memory" are also part of the sensory work, which is drenched in yellow.

Tango chose the colour to evoke memories of the dust cloud, but she says "yellow is uplifting, it makes you feel happy".

ACP curator Claire Monneraye says the work invites viewers to consider the nature of memory and how past events are constantly reshaped and reassessed by our current state of mind.

"She's suggesting that emotion and pain and memories can't be put aside," Monneraye says. "But new memories can be created by reusing and rebuilding the past."

Monneraye says *Dust Storm* also continues the artist's exploration of the therapeutic nature of art and how the sensory qualities of colour, light and texture can affect both artist and viewer.

"It's a really spontaneous kind of reaction to colour and [it's] also playful," she says.

"It's full of joy and I think that's how she approaches colours - in an emotional and spontaneous manner."

Kimiyo is now 5 years old and a big sister to Mikiyo, 2, but motherhood has not slowed Tango's prolific art practice, which spans the country.

An exhibition of the artist's neon signs and fabric sculptures, *Promised*, is showing at Sullivan + Strumpf in Sydney.

Like *Dust Storm*, the works in the show stem from emotional pain and its expression in Tango's art practice, writes psychiatrist Dr Patricia Jungfer in an exhibition essay. "Hiromi's art is an exploration via the artistic process of these complex connections that result in the expression of emotion and the recollection of memories."

Last year, Tango was commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia to create a room for students with intellectual disabilities to experience contemporary art. *Tango's Dance*, inside the National Centre for Creative Learning, features touch screens, fragrances such as lavender, and soft



Dream weaver: Hiromi Tango's work explores art's ability to heal.
PHOTO: GREG PIPER

sculptures made of yarn and fabric designed to stimulate as well as evoke a sense of security.

Tango has also been running art workshops for young people in the Western Australian town of Geraldton to make a large sculpture based around the idea of belonging and inspired by a campaign to protect the sea osprey.

Her artist-husband Craig Walsh has created digital portraits that will be screened as part of a two-year community arts project to break down the stigma around mental health.

Conducting workshops with people who have experienced mental illness has long been a part of Tango's art practice, which explores how art can help to heal.

"More recently Hiromi has extended her consideration of the healing process in the creation of art to incorporate an exploration of the impact of colour on emotional healing," Dr Jungfer writes.

Tango is keen to point out she is an artist, not a health professional, but she is adamant art helps build emotional resilience.

"Art has helped me to recover from certain times when I was having difficulties and has helped me cope with memories and emotions," she says.

"I really enjoy art but, maybe more than that, if you have art in your life, it is easier to get through any difficult time."

Dust Storm is at the Australian Centre for Photography from May 31 to August 17. Tango will give a talk at the centre on May 31.

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HIROMI TANGO