

SNEAKY



The F**King Amazing Art Of Hiromi Tango

Japanese born artist Hiromi Tango creates stunningly intricate sculptures made with found and donated material. She creates everything from tiny, almost DNA-like strands, to large womb-like enclosures. They're pretty amazing. She's a natural hoarder and has taken advantage of what some might deem a kind of obsessive-compulsive disorder and turned it into a career...

She sweeps into the room, arms wide open, wearing all red: this immediately engaging woman, who gathers masses of fabric and colour and injects them with intricate life, apologises profusely for being late and embraces me and kisses me on the cheek. She explains that she couldn't help chasing the extra hour of sleep; last night was the first time she'd rested in days.

Hiromi Tango was born in 1976 in Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. After escaping her homeland's conservative culture and its expectations she took a leap of faith, moving to Australia and marrying Australian artist Craig Welsh. Her family didn't speak to her for years afterwards.



“My father calls me a chameleon; he says I change my personality to suit everybody, like an evil spirit. But my aunt says I have a very gentle spirit – and I always want to help. It’s funny that he called me a chameleon – I came to Australia and there are so many reptiles!”

Hiromi sits down at Sullivan+Strumpf gallery with a large bag and pulls out a small handful of fabric, plastic, wool and string... they remind me of DNA strands. She intends to attach them to her body during her upcoming exhibition and move around the crowd as part of a live performance. She tells me she likes people to be able to touch and interact with her sculptures, she wants people to connect to them and hold them; she *is* her art. The first thing that attracted me to Hiromi’s work was the fact that she often physically enters her sculptures, sometimes wrapping them around her body. One recent work was a recreation of her womb that the audience could walk into. “I feel like my artworks are like seeing my organs outside of my body,” she says. I ask her how she creates the tiny pieces that make up her work and suddenly we’re both sitting across from each other, cutting fabric and wrapping string, beginning the small coils she calls “snakes” and the bubbled fabric she calls “mushrooms”.

Her main passion is to visit retirement homes, psychiatric wards or day-care centres; she loves having people interact and work with the fabric. Hiromi believes that craft is calming and soothing to the soul and she seeks out people who have mental illnesses so they might find a release through her art.

“I’m one person but I carry thousands and thousands of people’s feelings and emotions. Maybe for you it’s a casual interaction – perhaps you can let it go and move on – but every single person I meet, I carry. It’s almost like these little spirits are living inside of me.”

Hiromi invites people to donate their personal, cherished belongings: things they have kept over the years, items that hold sentimental value. All the fabric used in her workshops and sculptures is donated. She has families bring her the blankets of their deceased relatives; mothers come to her donating their kid’s childhood toys; people give her fabrics belonging to their grandparent’s – items they’ve held onto for many years. She sits with these people as they tell the stories behind the objects in order to find out the significance and emotion attached to the item before cutting them up and entangling them in her sculptures.

When I ask her to think back to somebody whose story sticks out the most, she pauses and gasps. One woman arrived with her deceased daughter’s bag, something she hadn’t touched for 10 years. She was grief stricken and Hiromi, the mother and her son wrapped the bag with material and newspaper articles, putting it on display for others to view with images of the daughter projected onto the bag.



Hiromi has other motivations for her art. Her voice turns quiet and still as she softly tells me of her own mother’s struggle with hoarding.

“She kept everything because she said: ‘The spirit and it’s beautiful energy remain’ so she gave me training in how to remember the stories and the feelings of objects.” Hiromi’s mother would spend each day preserving her hoarded objects by spraying them with lavender oil, archiving them in their own spots within the house. Over the years her childhood home became so filled with objects that guests could no longer enter.

As a child this made sense to Hiromi and to this day it remains embedded in her mind. Her family began to notice her drive to follow in her mother’s footsteps and tried to stop her hoarding compulsions. In revolt she began hiding from them, archiving her hoarded items out of view of her family’s prying eyes.

“I tried to stop it... it’s ‘undesirable behavior’ in the common world. But I knew what I was doing... it’s wonderful to find the meaning and beauty in every transaction.” She tells me of her struggle to let go of her art in one particular temporary show: the artists were expected to create a sculpture they would then throw away after the exhibition. She invited people to cut parts of the sculpture away to take home. She couldn’t bear to part with what was left over, so even now pieces of her work from 2006 form elements of her current sculptures.

“I want to live in an empty box [but] I care about everything around me. I would die if I had nothing. But this process really helps me to clean my head space, my spirit and emotion.”

Hiromi’s art is intensely connected to her life. In one exhibition in 2006 she performed whilst miscarrying: “It was in the very early stages – ten weeks of pregnancy. I had a choice: if I wanted to birth [my child] naturally or have it surgically removed. I chose to have it naturally. I bled through the entire show. “I feel like I am just a gardener with my art. It creates itself. I feel like I’m that little organ-pipe connecting to the heart that pumps lifeblood. I am that organ.”

By Ayla May Darling

