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HIROMI TANGO

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"In my early art making practice, I was much more aggressive to myself and I didn't consciously set boundaries. Now, I am more gentle." – Hiromi Tango.

In the performance piece *Insanity Magnet*, Japanese-born artist Hiromi Tango is completely submerged in a hurricane of debris: pink and white plastic flowers, giant sagging knots of

wool, hundreds of paper gift tags. Photographs of the work are almost overwhelming to look at, as abundant with gaudiness as they are with beauty, as much about the artist's presence as her absence. As she stands alone in a rose garden, Tango embodies the contradictions of modernity, full of thrilling intensity but ultimately self-exhausting. *RUSSH* talked to the softly spoken Tango from her Brisbane home, where she lives with prolific artist and husband Craig Walsh. Underneath the multicoloured woven cape we found a woman of warmth and shyness, determined to open up public dialogues about identity via her ever-evolving body of performance work, *Hiromi Hotel*.

Tango is very quiet, at least at first. For someone who expresses so much aesthetically, she finds it difficult to verbalise her constant stream of ideas. Each point she raises grasps the hand of another, whispers further suggestions. This is a woman who has given much thought to the act of existence, to the business of living. "I hoard lots of thoughts and feelings," says Tango. "My brain finds it very challenging to edit any data ... I have been constantly escaping and fleeing, either physically or imaginarily."

The first time she escaped was in a different life – at university in Tokyo – where the days were long and brimmed with excitement and ideas. Having grown up in a very traditional family on Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands, and later Osaka, Tango left home with a small-town hangover; feeling smothered and claustrophobic. "There are lots of expectations, particularly in Asian countries of being a female, of your national and cultural identity," she says. "I did not grow up in contemporary Japan – there were certain conventions that I always had an issue with. I have always been attracted to the new, to the contemporary. When I got to university ... I embraced that part of myself." It was also in Tokyo, at an artist residency that Tango met her husband, Australian projection and new media artist Craig Walsh. She migrated to Brisbane to join him and work permanently as an artist, a move that devastated her parents. "I am not quite sure my blood family will ever understand my art or feel supportive [of] my creative exploration," Tango says. "[But] through art I can explore whatever I want to and I feel less anxious."

Tango's artworks are fluid, site-specific pieces that can take anywhere between six months and five years to fully develop. They explore concepts of boundary setting and social engagement, of isolation and anxiety. In doing so, each becomes a very public dialogue, drawing audiences into its folds. Often a work begins without a discernable end point envisioned – Tango once wore a voice recorder every day for eight months with no fixed idea of what the recordings were for. She still hasn't

used them. Back in 2006, she did a six-week live installation piece at Brisbane's Raw Space Galleries; inviting passers by to come inside and have a tea, even sleep over, all the while making art in public view. Sometimes the windows were full of balloons and sometimes of nothing at all. It was to be a lesson-learning work, one that taught her the importance of establishing boundaries in order to explore them. "There were issues with privacy in that work," says Tango softly, as she considers it. "I saw the limitation of hospitality. Letting anyone in, it became quite dangerous thing and tiring ... your artworks constantly get stolen." The live-in was nonetheless important, marking the tenuous beginnings of her ongoing inhabitation installation project, *Hiromi Hotel*.

Hotel investigates the possibilities of collective identity via two channels: interaction with the public and collaboration with local artists. It's a lodging for travellers both physically and emotionally, a place where others can stop and soak things up. Tango's hotel draws inspiration from the most disparate of sources, from the paradoxical femininity of drag queens to the warmth of the colour pink. The one commonality seems to be physical excess – there is always a feast to fill the hungriest of eyes. With each work the master artist learns more about the complexities of bringing others into the folds of her personal creative journey, the trials and errors of collaboration. "Sometimes I get blind or possessed with the art-making process and I completely forget about others," Tango says. "Social engagement should be an equal transaction, but when it involves our delicate emotions ... it is almost impossible."

There is something alight in the organs beneath Tango's ribcage, something that seems so sincere, so fervent, that it could at any minute set every single part of her on fire. Her works are curiously public engagements for a woman who is by nature, very private and withdrawn; they reveal a side of her that she would most likely stray from in general conversation. *Mixed Blood*, her work for the 2011 Primavera, is the perfect example, stemming less from a need to give a stamp of permanence on a world marked by the ephemeral, and more from the

desire to simply make sense of her place in it. The new work addresses the closeness of her relationships with her husband, daughter and child-in-womb (at the time of writing Tango is weeks pregnant), the sense of "being one but also being separate" with your kin. It is a state of shared identity that the artist finds both beautiful and heartbreaking – into *Mixed Blood* are poured all of the joys and confrontations of motherhood. "Art making process is an urgent matter and it is a lifeline for me," says Tango. "I don't know if it eases the pain of existing in this complicated and anxious world, but I feel [it is] only through the process of art making [that] I am being honest and sincere to myself."

Mixed Blood is showing at the 2011 Primavera exhibition, run by Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art.