Japanese Artist Hiromi Tango Believes in the Therapeutic and Healing Effects of Art

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It's hard not to love Japanese artist Hiromi Tango's textile works; they're colourful, textured organically-shaped forms, and often feature neon text mounted on circular mirrors with empowering words like 'now' or 'new'. However, more than just beautiful works, Tango's practice is one rooted in a deep fascination with neuroscience to explore the true power of art to heal and to offer emotional support. Intrinsic to Tango's practice is the act of wrapping objects such as notes, bags, clothes and letters, braiding them into her works - a process that creates connections between multiple stories, each of which she pays homage to through her time and energy.

Tango was recently invited to showcase one of her Performative Installations *Lizard Tail (Breaking Cycle)* as this year's Imaginarium exhibition to the Singapore Art Museum. We speak to her about how she came to be involved in the exhibition and her artistic practice in general, as well as what she has planned for the future.

"Behind the Door" (2010) by Hiromi Tango at Perth Institute of Contemporary Art
*Image courtesy of the artist & Sullivan+Strumpf*
How did you get into textile art? Was your technique of wrapping objects and paper into your work a natural development from the exploration of the medium or did something else inspire this element of your practice?

From childhood, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by unlimited textile materials at home or my grandparents’ home, and I was allowed to use them whenever I wanted without having to ask for permission. I was allowed to climb anywhere in my grandparents’ home upstairs, and I remember digging in the cupboard and finding very old silk Kimono or beautifully handcrafted Japanese dolls and creating doll houses for them. Both my grandmothers made their own Kimono and were very good at art and craft, making everything and anything with everyday materials. Also, my mother was a fashion designer before she married, and she always helped me. My aunty, who I started to live with when I was 10, was an amazing knitter who taught me a great deal about knitting and color, so I was surrounded by textile artists and designers who made amazing things out of anything, and when I look back on my childhood, they were very influential.

My father was also a great supporter of the arts and I have a vivid memory of my father providing me with 100 different color pencils and paints rather than 12 colors when I was only 4 – preschool age. I did not even know how to use the brush properly, but I was mixing colors and painting by hand. My uncle got really angry with my dad and me as he thought that it was a waste to provide unlimited art material to a four-year-old without proper supervision, but I am so grateful that my father raised me as free range child up till I turned 6, and it was really great he never said no to me. Both my brother and I were quite wild children, drawing all over the house. I think my father was also influential in my art from this perspective.

For many years, my work has included working with ephemeral objects such as notes and messages, as part of an installation practice. My earlier works often involved inhabiting spaces and collecting people’s stories, drawings, etc., which I would incorporate into a larger work, sometimes stitching, sometimes using other methods. The practice of wrapping was a natural extension of this, and evolved with my interest in memory and trauma recovery. At times, wrapping was a way of protecting a precious memory or feeling from the outside world, at other times, it was a way of distancing oneself and using the process of organizing and wrapping to put a difficult memory in its place.

The activities of wrapping, sorting and categorizing are also purposeful actions that can create specific benefits, such as calming the mind, helping to process difficult thoughts and emotions, helping to bring order to a disordered mind. I recall a neuroscience researcher once telling me that purposeful, repetitive actions such as wrapping or sorting, occupy working memory and suspend negative processes such as obsessive thoughts. There are many other brain health benefits associated with this sort of purposeful, repetitive action, from assisting with anxiety, through to helping to maintain healthy activity in aging brains.
Emotions play a huge role in your work and often people donate items to your works that are imbued with a weight of their history and symbolic meaning. What were some of the most memorable items donated to your projects?

One item I can never forget is the backpack donated by the mother who lost her daughter in UK while she was doing a working holiday for a year. She passed away when a large rock hit her head. Her mother donated the backpack she was wearing, and she made the artwork with the backpack, which was a really important experience for her.

Another memory that sticks with me about the profound power that a seemingly ephemeral object can have came from the tsunami recovery in Japan in 2011. There were so many families who lost everything — loved ones, their homes, all their possessions. I remember reading about people who found photographs amongst the detritus, covered in mud. They carefully cleaned the photos and hung them out near where they were found. For those who returned to where their homes used to be, to find some semblance of their lives preserved, was very powerful. I think the individual stories that have been entrusted to me over many projects are the most memorable, whether they are enshrined in a photo, an anecdote, a poem or a story.
Your works often incorporate performance elements into them, with your body or other people’s bodies becoming part of the works. How crucial do you think performance or interactive art is part of your artistic practice? Why is it so important to you to continue to have such elements in your work?

I am interested in Performative Installation, that is installation that is not a static sculpture, which celebrates our encounters and engagement, and transforms for positives. I am interested in the relationship between Performance and Installation, using the platform that is created by community members’ participation and workshops, where performers and dancers interact with elements such as sculpture, installation, light, sound and aromatherapy, and adds live energy. This process is important for me. The performance ritual is significant on a number of levels. For many participants, it is the act of joining their personal contribution to the collective work, which may be a symbolic separation from something that has been troubling them, or a way of enshrining something that is particularly important. The procession - whether it is for purposes of saying goodbye or ensuring safekeeping - is another level of sensory experience, where we engage through sound such as bells, movement, color and touch. This heightens the arts engagement experience, and creates positive brain stimulation through different senses.
You often showcase your works in quite unexpected locations, such as a camper van and a tent, or even Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne. They seem like magical lands that spring out of nowhere, only to disappear and reappear – almost nomadic. How do you decide where to show your works and where would be the most ideal location you would like it to be displayed at?

Many of the opportunities have been based on an invitation to do a project, or to propose an idea. I was really interested in Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne as an exciting site as it reminded me of brain circuitry and I was interested in interpreting the Market through the lens of neuroplasticity and a source of brain food. The camper van or tent... Craig, my husband and I traveled around Australia for two years with our children in 2011-2012 by motor home and tent, as part of Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney project, and it changed my life. It was such a wonderful experience to travel for two years with minimal personal belongings and a young family. I am inspired by many different settings, and the potential to reinterpret them through art. I am interested in how arts engagement can enhance mental health and well-being, and in creating ‘the link’ – like a synaptic link - a space where art becomes integral to healing and healthy development.
Describe your creative process. What kinds of patterns, routines, or rituals do you engage in when you create or conceive your works?

I am always thinking about art, whether I am preparing dinner, walking on the beach with my children or in the studio. I carry a notebook with me so that I can quickly jot down an idea or to make a sketch, to further develop later. I am fascinated by scientific discovery, and natural metaphors that help us to understand things like complex brain processes. For instance, I might read about the hippocampus, then research the unique properties of the seahorse, as the hippocampus was named after the unique shape of this sea creature. From there, I begin developing a work that explores the function of the hippocampus through the lens of the seahorse.

Tell us a bit about being an artist represented by a gallery like Sullivan+Strumpf. How did you become part of their roster and how has this affected your creative process or influenced your career as an artist?

It is wonderful to have representation by such an established and knowledgeable gallery. Ursula Sullivan is very generous with providing advice about opportunities for exhibitions, awards, and career development, and with promoting my work across Australia and internationally through art fairs and exhibitions. Gallery representation has created a particular focus on my solo practice, and creating works for exhibition that do not necessarily include community engagement as a core focus. This is a great opportunity to explore ideas of interest to me in-depth, whereas community engagement projects tend to respond to a particular theme or collective concern, with a focus on community outcomes. Gallery representation drives me further into ideas and creative concepts that are important to me as an individual, that I hope will have more of a universal message.
Your work "Lizard Tail (Breaking Cycle)" is part of this year’s edition of ‘Imaginarium: To the Ends of the Earth’ – an exhibition at the Singapore Art Museum for children. Could you tell us a bit about how you got involved in the exhibition and what you most enjoyed about working with children?

I was invited to submit a proposal to the Singapore Art Museum for the exhibition by curator John Tung. After my proposal submission, Ursula Sullivan met John and Andrea Fam in Singapore to discuss further. I adapted a work that I had created with an Australian community, and the work I have exhibited for Magic Object at the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art in 2016 called Lizard Tail, to make a site-specific installation in Singapore that was appropriate for participation by children from ages 3-12. Children engage with art in a very authentic way, and working with them is incredibly inspiring. For this exhibition, I created three characters, Lizzy, Telly and Zarr. My daughters Kimiyo, 8 years old, and Mikiyo, 5 years old, had created the characters and names for me. I developed a story about how they transformed feelings of sadness into joy through their creativity. Seeing how the children engaged with these characters, and used their own creativity to make something that could either keep a special secret safe, or give them a place to put something that was troubling, was fantastic.
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[Image: "Lizard Tail (Breaking Cycle)" by Hiromi Tango
Image courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf]

Do you have any upcoming exhibitions? What are your future plans or projects that you are looking forward realising?

I have a number of projects on the horizon, including a solo exhibition in Singapore at Sullivan Strumpf Gallery in January 2018 that I am really looking forward to. In the near future, I will be working with some health partners to create ‘Art Magic’ resources for specific purposes, as well as continuing my independent research in collaboration with University of Queensland Brain Institute and UQ Museum.

Hiromi Tango's work is on view as part of 'Imaginarium: To the Ends of the Earth' at SAM at 8Q, which runs from 6th May till 27th August 2017. For more information on the exhibition and open hours, [click here](https://www.singaporeartmuseum.sg/exhibitions/current.html).

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