

profile: Hiromi Tango

Sculptor, photographer, performer and installation artist, Hiromi Tango explores the neurological reach of art and its ability to ignite the senses and to heal.

By ANNEMARIE KIELY Photographed by MICHAELA DUTKOVÁ

It's an abnormally hot Sunday morning in autumnal Melbourne, and Japanese-Australian artist Hiromi Tango is trying to elucidate the work she has just created and committed to film for the 2018 Melbourne Art Week — supporting the rebooted Melbourne Art Fair (MAF). She has pushed her creativity beyond the cultural norm since an uncivilised 4am start, kicking off with full immersion in the fountain of the Kings Domain and following with hours of unscripted performance pulling a 200-kilogram 'lizard's tail' through the arts precinct of Southbank, site of the MAF.

Tango is ready to expire but willing to talk to a wider body of site- and situation-responsive art that spans sculpture, photography, installation and performance. But first, there's the question of how her tail-dragging epic down the dark of Sturt Street might have been greeted by the clubbers heading home.

"Maybe not so strange in Melbourne," laughs the artist, who has travelled from the relative quiet of Tweed Heads in regional New South Wales. Such surreal disruption is the daily doing in a world increasingly detaching from the real — or so her art serially suggests in an assiduously low-fi, unashamedly colourful and collaborative effort to activate the senses as stimulus for self-reflection and healing.

"We are just animals," Tango says with a nod to her five-metre appendage, a sculpted accumulation of community craft that, intentionally or not, alludes to autotomy — the defence mechanism that allows animals to detach body parts in the presence of predators. "We respond to touch, but in this globalised, virtual age of communication, we need to use our hands more, awaken our senses, because it makes the brain grow in a healthy way. That's how I make art; I try not to control or predict — just engage with the imagination."

Grounding her creativity in the research of neuroscience, Tango poses questions about neuroplasticity, empathy and epigenetics, frequently collaborating with researchers in health and science to develop processes that build the optimised brain. "For instance, very basic wrapping activates the front-lobe region," she says. "If you just engage in five minutes of wrapping, it has the same impact as meditation — it instantaneously feels good."

As an artist who becomes part of the sculpture — "and the sculpture part of me" — Tango wears only monochromes and desists in the decoration of body (save for fluorescing fingernails that melt into her inhabited works). Colour and pattern are purely for art, even in her clean-canvas home, where Tango admits to no sentimentality over objects. "To be honest, information and noise are distractions," she says. "I can't compare with other artists, but in my case, time and energy management is precious. I cannot let my life get cluttered."

She lowers to a whisper within the art-filled confines of the Buxton Contemporary museum, past which she earlier dragged her tail, and confides that the attribution of 'contemporary artist' doesn't really mean much to her. "I am more interested in engaging with the disability sector, mental-health groups, addressing women's and children's rights," she says, adding that discussion of her own upbringing is not desired. "It was complex, and there are some memories I need to delete."

That caveat over conversation sorted, she hints at the intense patriarchy and prayer of her childhood in Shikoku, the least populous of Japan's four main islands, which she left at age 17 to study humanities at The University of Tokyo. She recalls her final year's charge to assist artists in residence at the Australia Council's Tokyo studio, where she met Craig Walsh, a pioneer in the creation of site-responsive artworks that animate natural environments.

"I fell in love with his art," Tango says, sharing the secret that she was moved at 21 to propose to Walsh, with whom she has been ever since. "His work was so innovative and so dedicated to community engagement in the visual context. Everything I had studied about the culture of art was in his work. I started helping him and later collaborating with him; needless to say, he has been my mentor."

In spite of exalting to star status in the Museum of Contemporary Arts 2011 Primavera show and exhibiting in most major national institutions, Tango persists in seeing herself as a humanitarian first. "I'm not an activist, but I love art; it's a little contradictory," she says. "But I believe in the power of art to take us to a timeless space, to generate a dialogue of engagement for a healthy future." *VL*

Melbourne Art Week runs from July 30–August 5; visit melbourneartfair.com.au and hiromitango.com

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Artist Hiromi Tango drags her Lizard Tail through Melbourne's Southbank as part of the 2018 Melbourne Art Week.

