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HIROMI TANGO

STORY **KIM GUTHRIE**

Hiromi Tango's creative mission is to promote healing through her work, which encompasses textiles, sculpture, photography, installation and performance. Her fascination with scientific discovery and passion for untangling emotional experience form a core around which her highly personal and often collaborative practice wraps itself. As she says, 'I'm an emotional gardener, I take care of trauma.'



I DIDN'T RESEARCH HIROMI TANGO PRIOR TO DRIVING to Tweed Heads in far northern New South Wales to meet her. I arrived empty and ironically encountered the minimalist lifestyle of the artist and her family. Hiromi shares her home/studio with her husband, artist Craig Walsh, and her two young daughters, who were all absent on the day of my visit.

Hiromi tells me she has only four sets of clothes. Showing up earlier than the appointed time, I surprised the artist and caught her in her all navy blue 'cleaning lady' attire. Once her two girls are taken to school, she routinely cleans and vacuums her home – aka the 'Hiromi Hotel' – before showering and changing into an all-white outfit. This daily ritual of cleansing fashions is, for the artist, a blank canvas free of the superfluous, before she enters her studio focused.

Her studio is actually the double-garage built into the front of their home. It resembles the cutting room of a fashion designer, with several high work tables and translucent storage bins. In this very orderly, tidy space, her honesty, selflessness, nurturing warmth and diligence are palpable.

The complexity in this spare environment is a remarkable thing. In a contemporary world of insidiously designed and purposeful

distraction, it's not an easy ask to switch off the white noise of consumerism. Hiromi and her family appear to be doing just that. There is no television, no social media; her home is sparsely furnished with little decoration and a palette of white or nearly all-white rooms.

The one indulgence appears to be very few and select artworks. Hiromi explains, 'Some of the artworks are purchased to support fellow artist friends.' A show-stopping 'doll' by the maverick Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake, famous for styling the model and musician Grace Jones, commands a void at the top of the stairs on the upper floor, outside Craig's studio: it's a stunning object. All spaces are shared freely in the Hiromi Hotel as evidenced by the girls' toys discreetly encroaching on both studios. I sense a close and loving family here.

Hiromi Tango is Japanese by birth and grew up in a strict rural environment on the southern island of Shikoku. Her mother didn't

01 *Bleached Genes (Moss) – Endless silent tears*, 2018, performance ritual for 'Chromosomes', photograph Greg Piper

02 *Bleached Genes (Mikan) – Open my vulnerability*, 2018, performance ritual for 'Chromosomes', photograph Greg Piper

03 *Courage – The ability to speak about yourself wholeheartedly*, 2018, neon and mixed media, enclosed in acrylic case, 70 cm (diameter) x 30 cm







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speaking to her and her father was an anxious man. A traditional life had been mapped out for her – until meeting Craig in Japan at the age of twenty two, when, in 1998, she left to follow her heart and him to Australia. Here, she worked part-time as a language specialist translating for visiting artists at the Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) Brisbane.

Hiromi had made art instinctually from an early age but never thought she was good enough in Japan for the very formal process of entering university and studying art there. It wasn't until a serious illness befell her sister-in-law, in Australia in 2011, that she began making her bound objects as a kind of cathartic response to this trauma. It helped her deal with it, setting the course she was to navigate henceforth.

This event awoke the beginnings of her investigations into neural connectivity and how the act of making this particular artwork had a healing effect. Hiromi subscribes to the scientific magazines *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* and has come to understand that the process of binding and the meditative nature of wrapping create new and enhanced synaptic pathways as a healing phenomenon. 'I'm an emotional gardener, I take care of trauma' she says. Her artworks are organic, quasi-scientific models of the micro and macro, universal things that may exist in a world within us and without us simultaneously. Hiromi confides, 'I believe in magic and all Gods equally.'

Although Hiromi arrived at her method independently, the tradition of Japanese packaging is a practice fundamentally linked to her process (or the fetishes found in 'primitive art' that attribute supernatural or magic powers to objects; perhaps even Nobuyoshi Araki's erotic photographs of Japanese bondage).

The discipline and endurance of Marina Abramovic's performance work is also evident in Hiromi's event-based works. There are several outsider artists really worth looking at in this context as intuitive comparisons to Hiromi Tango, such as the mysteriously unknown Philadelphia Wireman or another US artist, Judith Scott. Then there's the Belgian sculptor Pascal Tassini. All speak to the idea that there is something intrinsically therapeutic, deeply primal, and even archetypal about tying and binding as a technique.

Hiromi has ongoing relationships with her collectors, as giving is an important and profound force driving her, so too detachment. Her girls are taught to not covet possessions and so the family regularly gives clothes, toys and other objects to charity, cleansing the inessential stuff from their world. Having said this, there is no feeling of stricture but an air of gentle humility, tenderness, compassion and service to life, which is where the Hiromi Hotel moniker comes from.

Her artwork grows as a living, boundless organism. Hiromi says, 'Gardening organic vegetables is something my friends do and it's interesting how they never look flawless but taste far superior to supermarket perfection.' This is an idea woven into her production. Hiromi engages with collectors, building trusting relationships with them. An artwork is always a personal journey both for Hiromi and the collector, through the inclusion of significant personal paraphernalia, like pieces from an old wedding dress, for example.

Added contributions to artworks are, she says, 'like fertiliser is added to any garden to produce the best crop. Sometimes a work might start out to be mostly green as an emotional response to the current



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disposition of the collaborator, then at a later date they may decide that it could be more orange due to a change in personal circumstances.'

This new growth is undertaken as a matter of fact, so the idea of the organic nature of the design is true, not just its outward appearance. Hiromi's work is a holistic event; it doesn't begin and end with the object. She admits, 'I prefer the performative aspect of my practice, because it's pure; once it's done there is nothing to possess or own.'

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Recently Hiromi was engaged on her most ambitious collaborative-performative site-specific-installation to date, at Brisbane's South Bank precinct. Called 'A Force', it is a sculptural and projection collaboration between Craig Walsh and Hiromi at Flowstate, finishing in October. Of this project she says, 'I was interested in environmental force, particularly the influence of digital devices. We are concerned about digital technology changing the way we relate to one another. We wanted to grow large-scale cable flowers and wanted people to think about what cable flowers are doing to our brain.'

Hiromi Tango is an artist of immense integrity; if you ask me she is her artwork. Unlike the superficiality, affectation and self-aggrandisement of the 'art star' culture, Hiromi humbly and diligently goes about her making as being integral to her existence. ■

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04 *Healing Chromosomes*, 2017, mixed media, 200 x 520 x 48 cm

05 Hiromi Tango with Issey Miyake doll, 2018, photograph Kim Guthrie

06 *Pistil*, 2012, installation view, 'Contemporary Australia: Women', Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane

07 *Electric Human, Chromosomes 1*, 2017, pigment print on paper, 80 x 114 cm, ed. 6 + 2AP

08 *Traces – Blue*, 2013, Setouchi Triennale, Japan

Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore