

Chapter Five

Witnessing time in a reflection of nature

...a fairytale-like thread that weaves a wayward path through the body of her work...¹

¹ Ralph Rugoff, "Leap of Faith," in *Anya Gallaccio: Chasing Rainbows* (Glasgow; Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Tramway; Locus +, 1999), 15.

The experience of viewing Anya Gallaccio's work is one of marking a particular moment of encounter with an organic time of transformation. Her work broadly references natural cycles, sometimes focusing on decay, at other times on growth and regeneration. Using a range of materials from flowers to chocolate, ice and salt, oranges and apples, bronze and porcelain, Gallaccio doesn't so much seek to arrest the passage of time but merely asks her viewers to be aware of it. The viewer encounters a specific moment of growth or decay in Gallaccio's work, which mirrors a sense of the viewer's own life cycle in the constantly changing present.



Fig. 33. Anya Gallaccio, *Preserve beauty*, 1991-2003, gerberas and Perspex, 2000 red gerberas, glass, metal, rubber, 260 x 535 x 2.5 cm

Gallaccio was nicknamed “the flower girl”² in the nineties, for her large-scale installations featuring initially fresh flowers that gradually decayed. The bloom of choice was frequently the gerbera “...an industrial, farmed material. There is nothing natural about it. It's not a serious sculptural material, it's a pony girl material.”³ Gallaccio would arrange the flowers in an almost minimalist grid or rectangle, on the floor or vertically behind glass. Gradually over the course of the exhibition, the flowers appearance and fragrance would transform as they decayed. Early in her career she was so committed to the notion of impermanence that she refused to sell

² Martin Herbert, "Immaterial Girl," *Art Review* 54 (2002): 99.

³ *Ibid.*

both her works and photographs of them. All remnants were strictly thrown away at the end of the exhibition. The installations were "...consigned to exist only in the memories of those who had witnessed them first hand."⁴



Fig. 34. Anya Gallaccio, *Untitled*, 1993, color photograph, 15 x 30.5 cm

This absence of emotional nostalgia is central to her practice, pivoting around "the tension between the way flowers are perceived to be sentimental, and the fact that I'm not in the least that way myself. I'm very pragmatic."⁵ Gallaccio goes on to describe pulling rose heads off their stems for *Red on Green*, like a farmer beheading chickens.⁶ This piece was sold in 1997,⁷ a transaction that seems to polarise the artist's earlier stated intentions with the commercial demand for her work. Such juxtapositions of interpretations are inherent in all areas of Gallaccio's practice, from her materials and processes; to her titles and finite personal relationship with the works, thus creating multi-layered, multi-faceted meanings ranging beyond the initial, perhaps dismissible, punch line. Gallaccio talks about the "letting go"⁸ stage of the creative process, by removing her hand from the materials and allowing the work to sit on its own in the world. An approach that now goes beyond her initial staging of the work, inviting further interpretations and future acquisition.

⁴ Elisabeth Mahoney, "One Woman Went to Mow," *Art Review* 52 (2000): 42.

⁵ Sebastian Smee, "A Dying Art," *The Telegraph*, 29th May 2004.

⁶ Both Sebastain Smee and Tacita Dean have compared Gallaccio's process to that of a farmer, in her apparent lack of sentimentality and repetitive mass organic production.

⁷ "...it was bought by (the London art dealer, James) Hyman for his wife Claire to mark their marriage. The romantic gesture obviously worked as now, a decade and three daughters later, the happy couple revisit the piece for the first time since its purchase." Louisa Buck, "Stars Line up for Yeo," *Art Newspaper* 16, no. 184 (2007).

⁸ Herbert, "Immaterial Girl," 99.

I have been intrigued by Gallaccio's use of flowers and the cycle of decay, themes I also explore on my work. Using rose stems and thorns, I similarly attempt to avoid the romantic associations of the rose bloom in a more direct manner by not including it at all. However, sometimes absence speaks more strongly than presence, as the viewer anticipates the floral bloom but is confronted by its non-appearance. In my *Suspended Thorn* 2007 series, a red thread contrasts the green and then brown stem. It draws the gaze up as though promising, by the association of colour, to lead to the rose bloom. The thread continues beyond view like the cycles of life from which we are all suspended.



Fig. 35. Kath Fries, *Mirror, Mirror*, 2007, colour digital photographs mounted on aluminium, ed 1/5, each 40 x 24cm

One of the photographic diptyches resulting from my 2007 *Suspended Thorn* installations is titled *Mirror, Mirror*. This work addresses feminine obsessions with beauty and our ongoing attempts to forestall the natural aging process. The two images depict the same pruned and discarded thorny rose stem, as it dried and withered hanging by a slender red thread. The title recalls a fairytale, where a vain wicked queen, consults her magic mirror “Mirror, Mirror on the wall / Who in this

land is fairest of all?”⁹ The thorny plant tendrils in my installations, and resulting photographic work, act as reminders of fairytale narratives and the boundless potential to locate interconnections between the unexpected and magical in details of the everyday.

Gallaccio’s viewers “bewitched by an echo of the fabulous, a sense of spells having been cast and spaces enchanted”¹⁰ often feel somewhat overcome by the smell, sight and tactility of the vast quantities of her everyday materials. More recently Gallaccio has incorporated traditional art processes and materials into her experimental strategies of transience and decomposition. She has found the bronze casting process relates distinctly to the decay and destruction that is so apparent in her flower pieces.

The lost wax technique, with which she casts trees, sprouting potatoes and apples, necessitates the original organic object being surrounded with plaster then burnt out from the inside. A “risky one shot deal”¹¹ aligning fluidly with her other nerve-racking methods of decay and disintegration using flowers.¹²



Fig. 36. Anya Gallaccio, 1999, *potatoes – (Not Heat Flames Up and Consumes)*, 2001, cast bronze life size, dimensions variable

It is tempting to call some of her work performative; even though it is the materials that are performing rather than the artist herself, or perhaps time-based; as the passage of time is Gallaccio’s immanent conceptual concern. Her “long-standing practice of choosing to work with states of entropy”¹³ expands beyond exhibiting decay to consider the other side of the cycle, growth. Considering gardening as a cultivated palimpsest cycle, Gallaccio staged *Keep off the Grass* 1997, situated *in* (rather than *on*) the lawns of the London *Serpentine Gallery*. Vegetable seeds were sown in the scars in the ground left by other sculptures previously exhibited there, creating a

⁹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Sneewittchen (Little Snow White)," in *Kinder-Und Hausmarchen (Children's Household Tales - Grimm's Fairy Tales)*, ed. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (Berlin: 1857).

¹⁰ Rugoff, "Leap of Faith," 15.

¹¹ Herbert, "Immaterial Girl."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Karen Wright, "Popes, Palazzi and Potato Heads," *Modern Painters* (2005): 42.

“mischievous array of common vegetables and flowers recalling the many former uses of Kensington Gardens”¹⁴. The location in the centre of London, assumed the viewers were city dwellers and somewhat alienated from nature. As such, Gallaccio’s installation confronted her audience’s dislocated urban relationship with the consumption of supermarket groceries. Developing her approach to the “critique of the packaged”¹⁵ this installation reiterated her attitude towards cultivated flowers. The everyday seasonal vegetables and weeds that sprouted in the *Serpentine Gallery’s* lawns made visible the layered palimpsest history of the landscape, briefly bringing the past to the surface of the present.



Fig. 37. Anya Gallaccio, 1999, *Glaschu*, planted green line set in concrete floor of Lanarkshire House

Her second growing garden-like work, *Glaschu* 1999, was staged in the neo-classical interior of Lanarkshire House in Glasgow¹⁶. In the concrete floor Gallaccio created a growing carpet, a “living green line”¹⁷ planted with weeds. The pattern was a magnified section of a locally designed historical paisley carpet, dating from around

¹⁴ Rugoff, "Leap of Faith," 16.

¹⁵ Leslie Forbes, "Landscapes of the Imagination," *Art Review* 54 (2004): 66.

¹⁶ *Glaschu* is the Gaelic name for Glasgow, meaning *dear green place*. Gallaccio was born and grew up in Scotland, so the nostalgic twang to the title, as much as she might refute emotional ties, is further deepened by her personal relationship with the country, see Andrew Nairne, "An Interview with Anya Gallaccio," in *Chasing Rainbows*, ed. Anya Gallaccio (Glasgow; Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Tramway; Locus +, 1999), 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

1840, the year the building was constructed. This installation captured a sense of the complicated, layered, palimpsest relationship between humans and plants. The seemingly permanent skin of concrete around the seeded paisley silhouette, made the work appear both ghostly yet also tangible and very much alive, “the living pattern that emerged was a reminder both of paisley’s floral origins and of the weeds that populate abandoned buildings.”¹⁸



Fig. 38. Yoshihiro Suda, *Magnolia flower*, 1996, stone pigment paint on magnolia wood, dimensions life size

Japanese artist, Yoshihiro Suda also addresses the complex connections between people and plants. Like Gallaccio, Suda’s installations convey a range of associations; a sense of absence and presence, nature and artifice, creation and impermanence, discovery and perception. Both artists examine human relationships with plants, specifically our

manipulation, selection and control of nature. For both artists, flora, as contemporary subject matter, is connected to “...undertones of virtual reality, genetic manipulation, and other human interventions into natural production...”¹⁹

Suda’s process involves creating delicately hand-carved plant forms, then carefully inserts them into peripheral margins of interior spaces. These subtle sculptural interjections are framed and contained by their surrounding architecture. As the viewer’s perimeters of interaction are contained within these architectural boundaries, so too is their personal encounter with Suda’s minute artwork. Each placement is explicitly considered, albeit in highly unusual locations, such as floorboard cracks and corners, high up on a wall, along window frames or in the gaps next to doorways.

¹⁸ Forbes, "Landscapes of the Imagination," 66.

¹⁹ Frances Richard, "Yoshihiro Suda: D'amelio Terras, New York," *Artforum-International* 38, no. 10 (2000).

Thus the contrasting scale of the seemingly empty space around, the often tiny, sculpture is essential to how one approaches the work. As such, the experience of discovering Suda's work acts as a marker allowing the viewer to pause and re-examination their personal sense of being within time and space.

Suda's awareness of his perimeters and surroundings is reflected in his continual consideration of weeds. In many cities weeds are frequently the sole intrusion of nature into highly structured, sterile environments. They tenaciously "keep growing even if they are trampled upon"²⁰. His recent installation at the *Victoria & Albert Museum* in London, was based on weeds that he observed whilst walking through Hyde Park. Suda's installation subverted the galleries pristine walls, as his plants seemed to grow from above and spring out of forgotten corners.



Fig. 39. Yoshihiro Suda, *Weeds*, 2008, stone pigment paint on magnolia wood, dimensions life size

Suda's admiration of weeds contrasts with his attitude towards his other muse, flowers, which are farmed and nurtured by people for aesthetic consumption. Reflecting Gallaccio's attitude towards gerberas, Suda says he is tempted to call such cultivated flowers "weak"²¹, as they would no longer be able to survive in the real world.²² They only exist because humans consider such flowers to be beautiful. Suda has suggested that this may even be part of the plants' strategy; indeed people might actually be the ones that are being used by the flowers.²³ David Attenborough

²⁰ Fred Camper, "Yoshihiro Suda at the Art Institute of Chicago," *Reader* 30, no. 33 (2001).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Such blooms are almost as artificial as genetically modified crops, whose grains fail to fulfill any aspect of their original fertility role, purposefully engineered by humans into sterility, the plants are no longer able to self-seed.

²³ Camper, "Yoshihiro Suda at the Art Institute of Chicago."

explores a similar symbiotic argument, questioning whether we are using plants or if they are using us.²⁴ The layered complexities of human relationships with plants are further enhanced by the contrast between Suda's subjects of flowers and weeds. Whilst flowers are sought after and valued, weeds are unwanted, unwelcome and quickly discarded. However, to have an encounter with just one of Suda's *Weeds* is to subvert the usual responses. As the viewer becomes enraptured by Suda's delicate creation, the moment of wonder contains questions as to what is real and what is fabrication, what is valued and what is discarded? Everyday judgements are turned on their heads. Almost like the catalyst for a magic spell, Suda's situations "always welcomes the gaze of the outsider; in fact, it is through this premise that they take on their existence."²⁵

The juxtaposition between Suda's painstaking methods, his meticulous attention to detail and the placement of his works in locations that are usually overlooked, may at first seem to negate his efforts. The viewer's physical scale creates an essential link between the gallery's architectural space and Suda's minuscule sculptures nestling in the peripheries. Such a site-specific encounter can become a "haiku like meditation on death and the fragility of life."²⁶ For others his work is too subtle, it is easily simply not seen, the surroundings acting as a



Fig. 40. Yoshihiro Suda, *Weed*, 2004, stone pigment paint on magnolia wood, dimensions life size,

²⁴ He considers that most successful, prolific and dominant plants are the ones best adapted to human uses, particularly grasses and grains for human or livestock consumption, such as wheat, corn and rice. Adopted by humans, we serve these plants by clearing and fertilizing the ground for their growth, and spread their seeds throughout the world. See David Attenborough, "Living Together : Episode 5," in *David Attenborough's The Private Life of Plants*, ed. David Attenborough (Great Britain: BBC, 1995).

²⁵ Kazuko Aono, "The Tree of Calm Mountain - Works by Yoshihiro Suda: Hara Museum of Contemporary Art," *Biennale de Montréal 2000* (1999), <http://www.ciac.ca/biennale2000/en/visuels-artistes-suda.htm>.

²⁶ Ken Johnson, "Yoshihiro Suda," *The New York Times*, 17th March 2000.

camouflage.²⁷ Generally Suda's work offers an exciting child-like treasure hunt, as viewers embark "on a quest for the elusive exhibit"²⁸. This act of seeking and discovering imbues the *Weeds* with an additional sense of value, as the viewer feels privileged as though privy to the artist's private joke. Suda's playfulness is almost a manipulative strategy "a mix of self-proclamation and self-abnegation, iconic power and a shrinking modesty"²⁹. The attraction of the miniature³⁰ relates to our desire to possess and contain within our hands seemingly precious commodities. Given the scale of Suda's work, the viewer yearns to scrutinize it intimately, but when immediate gratification is denied the real intent of the work becomes clearer, as the essential thing to be observed is our own response at being seduced by appearances.³¹

Suda's installations are like a performance where the performer is the viewer, to the extent that the work is robbed of its power without this dramatic moment of engagement. "In Suda's art theatricality swiftly undercuts realism, and the meaning of his work nests in that foreclosure."³² In an installation, in a New York Gallery, Suda staged his work as though within a Japanese teahouse. Further manipulating the viewer's interaction with his work, by challenging their sense of physical space and movement, as the only way to enter was "by ducking through a doorway less than 4 feet tall. In a traditional teahouse, visitors must submissively crawl through a considerably smaller entry; Suda only made his New York viewers bow deeply."³³



Fig. 41. Kath Fries, *Encroach*, 2008, rose tendrils and graphite on walls, detail view, installation approx 1800 x 170 x 56 cm

²⁷ Richard, "Yoshihiro Suda: D'amelio Terras, New York."

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Camper, "Yoshihiro Suda at the Art Institute of Chicago."

³⁰ For a detailed discussion see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 1st paperback ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

³¹ Richard, "Yoshihiro Suda: D'amelio Terras, New York."

³² Ronald Jones, "D'amelio Terras," *Frieze Magazine*, no. 53 (2000).

³³ Ibid.

Exploring a similar moment of engagement, my 2008 installation *Encroach* aimed to effect how viewers approached and interacted with a space. Located 200cm above the floor along the walls of a long entrance corridor, intertwining thorny tendrils wove in and out of pre-existing crumbling holes, interacting with architectural features. Snaking, silhouetted outlines were drawn onto the walls surface with graphite pencil. The play of natural light created shifting shadows causing the installation to become increasingly unnerving, as though sinister plants were creeping closer to the people below. The placement of the work, well above eye-level, allowed it to remain unnoticed by some unsuspecting visitors, until they glanced upwards and made the surprise discovery of ghostly thorny tendrils sneaking along the length of the space. To enter the house, visitors had to pass beneath my *Encroach* installation, so the subtle interventions of the work were almost unavoidable, transforming visitors' sensory expectations and experience of being in that particular time and space.



Fig. 42. Kath Fries, *Encroach*, 2008, rose tendrils and graphite on walls, detail view, installation approx 1800 x 170 x 56 cm

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