

## Sound of Bamboo and Sound of Lotus

*Nature is beautiful when it wears 'the appearance of art', while art can only be termed beautiful where we are conscious of its being art, while yet it has the appearance of nature --Immanuel Kant*

Sue Pedley is an artist of place. She forges links within and between places, to bring attention not only to the specific and perhaps overlooked qualities of the place we might be standing in, but also to the relationship of this place to other places, and hence to other histories, cultures and power stakes. Her site-specific interventions are subtle and ephemeral, designed to evince reflective responses, poetic musings, a gentle form of embodied awareness. They often hover on the boundary between art and nature, where we are called upon to think about this relationship and the role of art and the artist in everyday life. Pedley's installations are born out of long periods of research, when she investigates the history of her chosen site, as well as the materials and type of activity that go to make up that site's identity, so working through the links between daily experience, place, aesthetics and nature.

Sound of Bamboo and Sound of Lotus comprise three separate pieces of work, one a site specific installation in Sydney's Royal Botanical Gardens, the others a collaborative sound installation at Gallery 4A and a series of cyanotypes at Mori Gallery. The whole body of work comes out of the powerful experience of Pedley's recent residency in Sri Lanka, and her extensive travels through Vietnam. While in Sri Lanka, Pedley spent her time working alongside gardeners and landscape architects in the glorious Lunuganga, an estate designed by the architect Geoffrey Bawa in the 1950s in a style that combines European and Eastern aesthetics. Lunuganga is dominated by a huge garden, at times wild, at times mannered, both ornamental and productive. For its designer, the garden provided the perfect opportunity to give expression to his fascination with the interplay of art and nature in the creation of beauty.

For Sound of Bamboo, Pedley has selected as her site a place associated with early European settlement and the collection and domestication of exotic samples of plant-life for display, edification and moral uplift. Against the site's Occidental roots in art and science, Pedley has chosen a plant that is synonymous with the Orient, and renowned for its rampant growth and hardiness, without the need for careful tending that 'gardening' might imply: the bamboo. Using her signature red wool, the artist has spent many days amongst the thick clumps of stalks, painstakingly weaving a counter-narrative through this exotic plant, surrounded by an insistent rustle that cocoons her from the Gardens' ambient sounds. Through her intervention, Pedley invites us into the bamboo's inner sanctum, to experience its proximity on its own terms, relying on colour to make her impact. Bawa thought of colour in garden design as secondary, almost intrusive in the larger composition. Yet it is this very intrusiveness that Pedley champions.

Pedley is fascinated by the properties of the bamboo that render it emblematic of traditional Eastern lifestyles. Whereas in the West, the bamboo is often thought of as a pest, in the East it has been a valued source of essential materials for centuries. The bamboo has been said to accompany Easterners from cradle to grave: it is the most universally useful plant known to humans, used to make anything from baby's cribs to scaffolding, a source of food as much as cooking utensil. According to a Vietnamese proverb, 'the bamboo is my brother'.

The bamboo's rhizomatic root system has frustrated the ordered vision of many a Western gardener. And yet, in the East, it is this very root system that restrains a river in flood or supports rickety rural houses during earthquakes. Of course bamboo roots cannot but recall that emblematic metaphor of post-structuralist thinking, the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, that sought to replace the arborescent models of structured thought with an exploratory model of fast-growing underground shoots that germinate new sprouts at any given moment and in any direction, without relying on a central structure for survival. By selecting the bamboo as our focus in this horticultural cabinet of curiosities, Pedley thereby also seeks to re-invigorate this philosophical approach as an alternative to the superimposed order that characterises Western gardens as much as Western thinking.

Despite its association with every facet of daily life in the East, bamboo is being increasingly replaced by synthetic materials. Bamboo brooms and other household implements are now more exotic and expensive than their plastic varieties. While bamboo remains rampant in nature, the simple crafts which transformed plant into artefact are rapidly disappearing, a phenomenon symbolic of the homogenising effects of globalisation. Everyday bamboo artefacts are going the way of the museum exhibit, which in a sense brings all the more poignancy to Pedley's work. Pedley has used the proto-photographic process of cyanotypes—whereby light-sensitive paper is exposed to sunlight—to record impressions of Vietnamese utensils such as the bamboo rake or fishing basket (Sound of Lotus). These beautiful, life-size images in blue monochrome faithfully record the delicacy and humility of these objects. Bamboo then begins to take on a nostalgic glow. Simple bamboo implements come to represent the wisdom and values of those who made and used them, before the mass availability of standardised manufactured alternatives and the accompanying ideology rendered such values redundant.

The bamboo broom is also manifest in Pedley's sound installation, as the syncopated sounds of its brushing issue from long poles of bamboo suspended in mid-air. Pedley collaborated with sound artist Boyd to compose a musical impression of the bamboo, whose rustling is often actively cultivated for soothing purposes in garden design. The soft rhythms of bamboo brooms are interspersed with other diurnal sounds—motorbikes, weaving, voices of gardeners working at Lunuganga—and highlighted by saxophone and wind

instruments, to create another testament to the pervasiveness of this plant and its poetic resonance in Eastern lifestyles.

Pedley has chosen the bamboo for its many, at times contradictory, allusive qualities—its emblematic relationship to traditional Eastern values and its pest-status in the West, its notorious resilience and its perverse flowering- death (its flowering every 60 years also signals its impending death). Through her poetic intervention, Pedley compels us to muse on the relationship between art, nature and the everyday, as well as the broader social and political implications of place.

Jaqueline Milner

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