

## Xu Bing: Travelling to the Wonderland

V&A London 2 November to 2 March

Stories like *The Peach Blossom Spring*, a classic 5th-century fable describing a time in which a lost fisherman discovered a utopian community hidden behind a mountain, are not uncommon in Chinese folklore. It is a tale of escape – from society, the city, from political turmoil, from corruption – so as to start a new community in some kind of natural paradise, cleansed of chaos and civil unrest, and instead imbued with harmony and balance. It is a story that inspired Chinese artist Xu Bing's intervention on the John Madjeski Garden at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Travelling to the Wonderland*, for which Xu created a layered, mountainous landscape around a pool of water that draws inspiration from Chinese landscape scrolls. It was produced from eight different types of stone, each representing a different style of Chinese landscape painting and each stone sourced from a different place in China. Little villages made from stoneware huts dot this tiny paradise, as steam machines let off plumes of mist and speakers play sounds of nature.

The installation is complex. On first glance, and from afar, it is a perfect paradise – an idyllic landscape brought to life. And yet, move closer and flora that pokes out of the scene is revealed to be cheap plastic. The sound from the generators pumping out the mist-producing steam is loud. Up close, it all looks somewhat tacky: orange lights are positioned to shine over the installation at various points. Everywhere, cables are fully visible – little effort has been made to hide them; all mechanisms appear rudimentary and unsophisticated. Look closer still and the villages have been violated. Huts have been knocked over, some even removed. Little figurines of animals and other adornments that had been perched on the rock faces have been ripped off – all that remains are the marks left where they once stood. On the day of my visit, a mother took her two children around as they attempted to repair some of the disaster scenes – a herd of animals, mostly zebras, had been knocked over by the water's edge. 'One month ago it was beautiful here!' she lamented, loudly. 'There were all these objects and now look at it!' She paused before she made her final observation: 'Human nature.'

In many ways, this was the perfect moment for an installation that essentially ruminates on just that – our human nature. In some of Xu's assembled villages, small screens are attached to the huts, depicting animations featuring stick figures. The content is crude, if not innocent. A couple making love in bed, doggy style; a man staring at a woman through his computer screen, a red heart hovering over his head; someone having a shower; a girl flashing from her window. The content somehow suits the rundown nature of the installation, adding to the sense that nothing is, as the exhibition statement notes, quite what it seems. What appears to be a garden escape, a utopian, paradisiacal enclave, is in fact an artificial construct, just like the fictional story on which this installation has been based.



Xu Bing  
*Travelling to the  
Wonderland* 2013

And yet, in the end, the landscape contains an inherent beauty in its imperfections. The stones and the forms of the mountains they invoke remain majestic, despite the detritus and the destruction.

The installation is accompanied by an exhibition related to *Travelling to the Wonderland* in the V&A's TT Tsui Gallery dedicated to artefacts from China. It includes a selection of glazed stoneware models for the houses produced for the installation, testers used in the process, selections of glazes, and painted sketches of mountains and houses rendered with various brushwork styles. There is a large work on paper, too, *New English Calligraphy: Peach Blossom Spring*, 2013, a scroll that introduces the Peach Blossom Spring legend. It is one of Xu's characteristic scroll works; part of a larger project in which the artist explores the aesthetic of Chinese calligraphy using English words and letters arranged to mirror the construction of Chinese characters. The scroll is once again another exercise in showing how something is not quite how it appears. Like the installation outside, it is an invitation to transcend surface appearances and explore a kind of wonderful absurdity that lies beneath. On one hand, Chinese calligraphy has been butchered; on the other, a landscape crudely rendered. Yet, in this destruction lies the essence of creation: a story without end or beginning. ■

STEPHANIE BAILEY is a writer and editor.

## Salla Tykkä: The Palace

Baltic Gateshead 2 February to 2 March

Salla Tykkä's exhibition 'The Palace' at Baltic unveils a new work co-commissioned by the gallery. *Giant*, 2013, completes a triptych of HD videos by the Finnish artist that connect to the colour white. Unlike some of Tykkä's other videos (*Zoo*, 2006, or *Thriller*, 2001) the works shown here do not have plots – however opaque – or characters, but act as portraits of ritualised practices or cyclical activities.

# ARTIST ROOMS: Bruce Nauman

## 15 February – 24 May 2014

Harris Museum & Art Gallery  
Market Square, Preston, PR1 2PP [www.harrismuseum.org.uk](http://www.harrismuseum.org.uk)

Harris Museum  
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Salla Tykkä  
*Airs Above the Ground*  
2010 production still

*The Palace* is a poised installation in which three projected videos play in turn from right to left, oldest to newest (2008, 2010 and 2013 respectively) on three large screens. *Victoria* is a time-lapse sequence of a giant water lily unfurling its petals twice. The first time it reveals a brilliant white flower, but on its second day of life the petals are tinged with cerise. The second video shows muscular white horses being trained to perform dressage, including the improbable 'airs above ground' – from which the piece takes its title – in which all four of the horses' hooves leave the earth. The final work, *Giant*, pictures young pupils training in two of Romania's prestigious gymnast boarding schools, responsible for a number of Olympian gymnasts since the 1970s.

Each of the videos is a portrait of an activity that encapsulates the legacy of a nation's identity or its dismantled empire. The Victoria lily was named by British explorers after their queen and brought back to England in the 19th century from what was then British Guiana. The plants are large, exotic and mysterious; they bloom only at night. The Lipizzaner that features in *Airs Above the Ground* is the oldest extant European pedigree breed of horse, originally having been propagated with the support of the Habsburg monarchy in the 16th century. When part of the USSR, Romania was famed for its accomplished young gymnasts and the international prowess of these teams remains part of Romania's national identity. The girls in *Giant* still rehearse in schools built in Soviet-style modernism.

National identities are formed in part through a process of othering; the creation of relational opposites as described in Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Tykkä's works often construct a binary sense of 'us', the viewer, and 'them', the viewed. Her documentary style distances the viewer from the subject, allowing little empathy. As in her highly cinematic work *Zoo*, the videos of *The Palace* show how cultural and sporting activities can become strange and alienating when examined through a particular lens. She makes plants and prepubescent bodies alien and turns ponds and exercise halls into sci-fi sets.

Tykkä's preoccupation with the reciprocal and entangled relationship of nature and culture and a fascination with beauty lies at the centre of the works in *The Palace*. She cites John Ruskin's theories of nature and perfection, and his search for purity in nature, as influences. Tykkä's use of the symbolically loaded colour white is a clear nod to the West's complex political and artistic imagination of beauty, purity and perfection. While the Lipizzaner changes from brown to white as it matures and becomes a military asset, the feminine specimens of lily and gymnast hold the colour only fleetingly. The inevitable comparison one draws between the prepubescent bodies of the young gymnasts in their skin-tight

Lyra and the secret blooming of the Victoria lily with its fragile, impermanent paleness reinforces white's unavoidable connection with virginal purity.

Having enjoyed the strange and intriguing *Airs Above the Ground* at the Hayward in 2010 I was eager to see Tykkä's new piece. I was, however, disappointed. While *Giant* carries some of the attributes of the previous two works (beautiful cinematography, a powerful soundtrack and layers of content) it lacks the visual potency and clarity of its counterparts. The use of archival footage and the audio of interviews between Tykkä and the gymnasts detract from the cinematic poise that characterises her work. The interviews are difficult to hear but, more importantly, the visual forms that the young bodies of the gymnasts make are much more peculiar and illuminating than snippets of the girls recollecting childhoods dominated by practising gymnastics.

At times Tykkä's work feels laboured. The plangent soundtrack of *Victoria* (the Adagietto from Mahler's Symphony No 5) is an excessive reference to Romanticism. Juxtapositions between footage of foals running free and stallions being trained are crass, and the revelation that both horses and girls begin training at the age of four feels strained. Despite this her videos maintain ambiguities; on the one hand the horses are whipped while, on the other, they are well looked after specimens of a breed that exists purely for the purpose of being trained for dressage. The girls that feature in *Giant* might be pitied but they are not diminutive; they are muscular and focused and their depiction allows no space for sympathy. These are the ambiguities and paradoxes that keep Tykkä's work noteworthy. ■

ELINOR MORGAN is a curator and writer based in Birmingham.

## Agnes Denes: Work: 1967-2013

Firstsite Colchester 23 November to 9 March

Navigating 46 years of Agnes Denes's work is like starting out in a dense forest and rising until the Earth is visible from space as a globe: a prickling complexity, here expressed through format shifts and scientific, philosophical and mathematical details, that steadily resolves into the relatively comprehensible. For most British viewers this is the first opportunity for such an ascent, since 'Work: 1967-2013' is the Budapest-born, New York-based, conceptually inclined draughtswoman and environmental artist's first proper UK show since 1979 (and her first survey show ever in western Europe). Its appearance here is surely down to Firstsite's curatorial enthusiasm – though one might also note that packaged shows like this, organised by the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne from its collection, potentially give institutions a bit of a breather. Whatever, given the global scope of Denes's ecologically minded, intellectually playful practice, it's ironic that half the world hasn't really seen it.

*Wheatfield: A Confrontation*, 1982, revisited in sunny photographs, is the Denes project that many people do know. Here she planted and harvested two acres of wheat on a Battery Park landfill between the Statue of Liberty and the World Trade Center, going low-profit agrarian on land worth \$4.5bn. (In 2009, the work was restaged on a deserted railway line in Dalston, east London as part of the Barbican's 'Radical Nature' exhibition – Reviews AM330.) *Wheatfield* was rustically polemical, royally poetical: both a restoration of natural rhythms to technocratic civilisation and what Denes described as 'a small paradise, one's childhood,