

BOROONDARA
ARTS



The Memory Palace: Cyrus Tang

MAJOR EXHIBITION
TOWN HALL GALLERY

WED 26 JUL – SAT 21 OCT 2023



A MEETING OF PAST AND PRESENT

ESSAY BY

Rachel Keir-Smith
Town Hall Gallery Curator

Memories and forgetfulness are a significant and mysterious aspect of the human experience. They connect us, or more frequently disconnect us, from our past and inform the nuances of our personalities. Evasive and fleeting, we clutch to our most precious recollections in the hope they will always remain vivid, while the smaller, less significant everyday moments are lost in the fast-paced flurry of contemporary life. Before the proliferation of written text and photography, early civilisations developed memory enhancing techniques to help

encode information to memory using narrative imagery. Orators and scholars in Ancient Greece and Rome created The Memory Palace, a mental journey through a familiar environment, such as a building or town, to recall knowledge attached to the landmarks, objects, or architectural features of that chosen place.

For artist Cyrus Tang, capturing fleeting moments and committing them to long-term memory is a daily practice in life and art. Evoking the sentiments of nostalgia and the relationship between memory and fantasy,



Tang has a distinctive style that embraces the materiality of her media.¹ She documents the transformation of clay, water, books, pianos, ash, and human hair, capturing shifts between states in a miraculous convergence of past and present. The resulting photographs, videos, sculptures, and installations are hauntingly beautiful artefacts often memorialising collective experiences. 'The Memory Palace: Cyrus Tang' takes us on a journey through more than two decades of her multidisciplinary experiments in preserving the residue and remnants of the past.

With discerning tenderness, Tang reconstructs ephemeral mental images and sensations in permanent materials.² She utilises the way familiar objects, materials, and features of our physical surroundings activate our senses to help us hold on to memories or even resurrect them. Many of her works are imbued with personal histories, including recollections of childhood, family life, and experiences as a migrant from Hong Kong to Australia in 2009. 'My dad raised me; he was mum and dad as well,' Tang recalls. 'In Asian culture, we're physically close but not emotionally close. It wasn't until my father passed away that I realised how important he was to me. When I arrived in Melbourne, I wanted to hold on to a lot of memories of him.'³ At this time, Tang began experimenting with ceramics in various states. 'I realised it doesn't need to be fired, or perfect, it can be fallen apart or broken.'⁴

China's long history of working with clay and cultural rituals involving fire and burning underpins Tang's practice. 'Branches', 2008, features many little twigs dipped into porcelain. The wood on the inside was burned off during the firing process, and what remains is a shell or a vessel holding the ghost of the original.⁵ That's the beginning of me being interested in the residue and capturing the loss, which led to the books and the video

of my body melting. I started thinking about myself, time, and space, and more about my own heritage.'⁶ Tang has similarly captured the combustion of encyclopedias, pianos, and other objects symbolising Western knowledge and cultural prestige, presenting the ashes as new sculptural forms that deconstruct the meaning associated with the source object.

Tang is attuned to the ways the ordinary and extraordinary often converge. She explores and records the emotional impact global events have on everyday lives including war, natural disasters, and mass displacement. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the artist created ethereal composite images using layers of well-known imagery and motifs such as powerlines, tram tracks and supermarket aisles. Each work evokes a memory or an evasive thought as the brain attempts to grasp the recognisable forms within the picture plane. Tang's approach is time-consuming, labour-intensive, and highly meditative. Analogue and manual processes enable her to focus and slow down time, while dreaming of recovery and restoration. 'Our world's pacing is so quick, so we tend to forget faster. That's why I make work from materials we consume every day, to see how we can freeze ordinary life and the things that make us who we are.'⁷

1 Cyrus Tang artist statement, accessed 23 June 2023 www.tangcyrus.com

2 Ibid.

3 Cyrus Tang in conversation, 21 June 2023

4 Ibid.

5 Cyrus Tang in conversation, 5 May 2023

6 Cyrus Tang in conversation, 21 June 2023

7 Ibid.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS



EXHIBITION OPENING

SAT 5 AUG, 2PM–4PM

Join us for the official opening of 'The Memory Palace: Cyrus Tang'.

Free, bookings essential.

EXHIBITION TOURS

SUN 30 JUL, 12.30PM–1.30PM

SAT 5 AUG, 1PM–2PM

WED 11 OCT, 12PM–1PM

Join a curator-led tour of 'The Memory Palace: Cyrus Tang'. Hear directly from the artist and gain a deeper understanding of the artworks on display.

Free, bookings essential.

CINEMA SESSION

WED 4 OCT, 6PM–8.30PM

Join us for a screening of 'Fashion Reimagined', introduced by Tamara Russell, a textile artist and passionate advocate of sustainable living.

All tickets \$10. This event has limited capacity. Bookings essential.

For more information and to make a booking visit: www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/arts



FRONT COVER: Cyrus Tang, 'Lacrimae Rerum - 4505.00s', 2016, archival pigment print, 100 x 100cm, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

BACK COVER: Cyrus Tang, 'Melbourne City', 2020, archival pigment print, 90 x 135cm, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

OUTSIDE FOLD: Cyrus Tang, 'Cyrus', 2012, C-print mounted on dibond, 150 x 100cm, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

WITHIN TEXT: Cyrus Tang, 'The Modern World Encyclopaedia vol 7', cremated book ashes, book cover and steel base, 35 x 25 x 30 cm, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

INSIDE FOLD: Cyrus Tang, still from 'Sky Orchestra', 2022, HD video, 19 minutes 12 seconds duration, image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery.

OPENING HOURS
Mon–Fri, 10am–5pm
Sat, 12–4pm
Closed public holidays

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