

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH HAN SAI POR AND NATALIE FOO

The Black Forest (2011)

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

As part of Visual Arts

8 Apr – 8 May 2011, Jendela (Visual Arts Space)

Notice:

This interview was published in the programme booklet for *The Black Forest* in 2011.

Minor edits have been made for clarity.

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The Black Forest is an art exhibition by artist, Han Sai Por (Singapore).

It was exhibited at the Jendela (Visual Arts Space), from 8 Apr – 8 May 2011.

The Black Forest, an art exhibition by Han Sai Por

*“But over all things brooding slept
The quiet sense of something lost.”*

It can be imagined that in few other works of art does that line from Tennyson’s poem In Memoriam A.H.H. have greater relevance than Han Sai Por’s most recent solo exhibition, *Black Forest*.

Han Sai Por is one of Singapore’s most respected artists, best known for her nature-inspired stone sculptures. The founder of the Sculpture Society (Singapore), winner of multiple accolades including 1995’s Singapore Cultural Medallion, and the artist behind such highly visible local public artworks as Spring, sited at the Revenue House, the Seed series at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Shimmering Pearls at the Capital Tower and 20 Tonnes at the National Museum. She has also exhibited in prestigious venues such as Japan’s Fukuoka Museum and the National Museum of Modern Art in Seoul, Korea, and her works may be found in institutions and private collections around the world.

Educated in the fine arts and landscape architecture, Sai Por has, for three decades, channeled both passions into a body of work that makes significant comment about the changing landscape. Although it is the environment at large to which Sai Por’s works generally refer, in Singapore, where the landscape undergoes change at a brutal pace and too often with scant regard for flora, fauna, heritage or the preservation of older, slower ways of life, her works have particular resonance.

Commissioned by Esplanade *The Black Forest* continues Sai Por’s enduring theme of concern for the natural environment, and expresses her lifelong love for the land, its materials continuing for her to be both the source and inspiration. This time however, *The Black Forest* sees Sai Por taking on a different approach. A singular work composed of a series of paintings, drawings and a central installation – *The Black Forest* marks the first time Sai Por is showing her paintings primarily rather than her sculptures.

What they reveal is just as significant – a palpable shift in temperament. For while Han's previous works have always been characterised by an intense quiet, the pieces in *The Black Forest*, although enveloped still by a sense of hush, exude great disquiet. Depicting skeletal remains, gnarled, twisting tree branches, roots and trunks in bleak landscapes of the mind painted in varying shades of black, with found materials such as stumps of wood and charcoal pieces rendered into an installation that contributes to the overall impression of a wasteland.,

Yet, while *The Black Forest* offers the artist's fears and dark vision of the future and seeks to raise visitors' awareness of man's ongoing degradation of the land, it does so without a trace of pedantry. Not simply ominous, it is mournful and poignant with its stark, epic feeling of devastation. This is a work marked with a deep and abiding sense of loss. Rooted in the artist's love of the land, it is a work that ultimately speaks of love.

Natalie Foo (NF): This exhibition continues your focus on issues of environmental damage. Can you tell us about the theme of *Black Forest*?

Han Sai Por (HSP): I thought about Germany's Black Forest, how it is so dense that light cannot penetrate the canopy to reach the undergrowth, that's how it got the name "*Black Forest*". But this *Black Forest* is different. It is not black because the trees are alive, it is black because the trees are dead, a result of having been chopped down, damaged, razed. Its "blackness" is a comment on man's treatment of the environment. It evokes gravity, pessimism, disappointment.

NF: What motivated you in your creation of *Black Forest*?

HSP: When I think about man, I see that, in terms of his relation with the earth, he is violent. He destroys the earth, clearing forests with his unquenchable desire to create urban cities, set up houses, farms, infrastructure and so on. Additionally, he pollutes the earth with emission from cars, air-conditioning, etc.

I have created *Black Forest* to offer audiences an experience that will help them think and feel differently about man and the environment. I hope that, rather than appreciating this

piece or that, they will come away with an overall feeling. Perhaps, some of them might come away feeling what I feel, recognising that problems such as deforestation are occurring around the world every second of our lives, and keen to set things right.

NF: This is the first time you are displaying mainly paintings in a solo exhibition. How did this come about?

HSP: Yes, this is the first time. At my exhibitions *Rainforest* 10 years ago and last year's *A Changing Landscape*, I displayed charcoal and ink drawings alongside my sculptures, but not to the scale or scope of the paintings in *The Black Forest*.

In the beginning, my preference was for stone sculpture; I have always liked working in stone. Then I began to receive commissions, especially for public art, to make stone sculptures, and that became what I was known for, even though in my own solo exhibitions I have also worked with many different materials.

With regards to *The Black Forest*, I was commissioned by Esplanade to create my paintings as (curator) Tamares Goh liked my drawings; she thought they had a lot to say. For me, painting and drawing is another aspect of my art-making process.

NF: Please tell us about your approach to painting.

HSP: As a sculptor, I paint with a feeling of space. I imagine space when I draw or paint. I also like a sense of topography. It is the form of the forest I conjure up. I don't look at actual landscapes when I draw. While travelling, I look at the landscapes, capture the images in my mind, and then bring them out in my drawings. I draw the images in my mind.

I also don't use a lot of colour. When I use too many colours, I lose a sense of the form and feeling. For *The Black Forest* – assuming white is not a colour – I just used black acrylic to create different tones, and it was these various tones that created the form.

NF: Yet your paintings have light...

HSP: Yes, even through all the black, some light comes through, signifying the presence of hope. In the *The Black Forest*, not all is lost, not if man changes his ways.

NF: Besides density, there is also a lot of emotion in your pieces...

HSP: I prefer that they have some depth to them, some profoundness. I try not to be too abstract as that would make it very hard for me to both clarify my feelings and also convey to people the meaning. On the other hand, they are not too realistic either. In them, I put my thoughts and feelings.

NF: Please tell us also about the installation in the exhibition.

HSP: The paintings are accompanied by an installation made up of stumps of junk wood coated in black colour, resting on a base of charcoal pieces. I have not carved the wood stumps but left them in their raw, natural shapes as I would like this exhibition to feel as natural as possible.

NF: How do the paintings and installation relate to one another in this exhibition?

HSP: Being a sculptor, I have a strong feeling of space. I think about what to do with the space; I want to create a feeling. In *Black Forest*, the paintings bring your eye down the wall to the floor. You see what the paintings depict, then you see the stumps of wood, the charcoal on the floor...these lead you through the exhibition space as if on a journey.

NF: Where did you get some of your materials from?

HSP: I got the junk wood from a wood factory. It is the nice part in the middle of the wood pieces that buyers are interested in, so I obtained the unwanted parts.

NF: What message would you like to bring across with *Black Forest*?

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HSP: I would like to tell people that the earth has become very sick. If we don't begin to look after it, everything will someday evolve into a Black Forest.

Natalie Foo has been a film features writer, a literary arts reviewer, the editor of architecture and industrial design magazines, a creative copywriter, and a writer and editor of publications at a performing arts centre. She is currently writing for various projects on music, design and sustainable architecture.