

Ways of Perceiving, Curation Essay

Sacred Trees

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Nearly every country in the world connect trees with spiritual potency, from European Pagan to Mesoamerica to Abrahamic religions. (Philpot, 2014, pg 1) Oppenheim suggests that this system of tree worshipping arose in Indonesia and travelled across the world (1998). I intend to curate an exhibition, entitled 'Sacred Trees', which explore the link between religion and trees across the globe.

This exhibition will take place in Woods Cathedral in Detroit, USA. The building used to be a catholic visitation church and was later converted into an art gallery. The church still has some of the original artwork painted on the ceilings, and still has the large church windows. (Taka, 2016) The exhibition will take place in the main hall of the church, and has a balcony over the space, allowing the work to be viewed not only at ground level, but also from above, enabling another perspective on them, though due to the placing of the Stela 5 stone, this will not be easily viewed from the balcony. While not in the most dense part of the city, the area is still built up, and the outskirts go out for miles around it before you arrive in nature. Bringing these trees into the city environment encourages those viewing it to think about the world that our ancestors saw and reminded them of god-like qualities they saw in that world, that we have removed for our convenience. The run-down edges to the old church also represents how the younger generation has a stronger pull away from religion, especially in Christianity. (Pew Forum, 2014)

The pieces of the gallery will form a cross shape, with a large tree in the middle of the exhibition, and the four other works standing in a square around it. This mirrors the Mayan beliefs of the creation of the world from two ancient religious sources : Popol Vuh and the Books of Chilam. Each direction has its own world tree, with one central tree in the middle, linking the underworld, the heavens and our world together. (Cole, M.D., 2015) The pieces all use different media, such as photography, water colours and amber, giving a wide view of how different people try to capture holiness in artwork. The pieces all come from different time periods, from 300 BC to 2019, studying how we have changed how we go about making religious art. I will construct white walls near the edge of the building for the two canvas, as the walls of the church are not flat and it would be difficult to place the work directly onto them. A plinth will be constructed to place the Chinese tablet on it, while the stone and tree will both be placed directly on the floor.

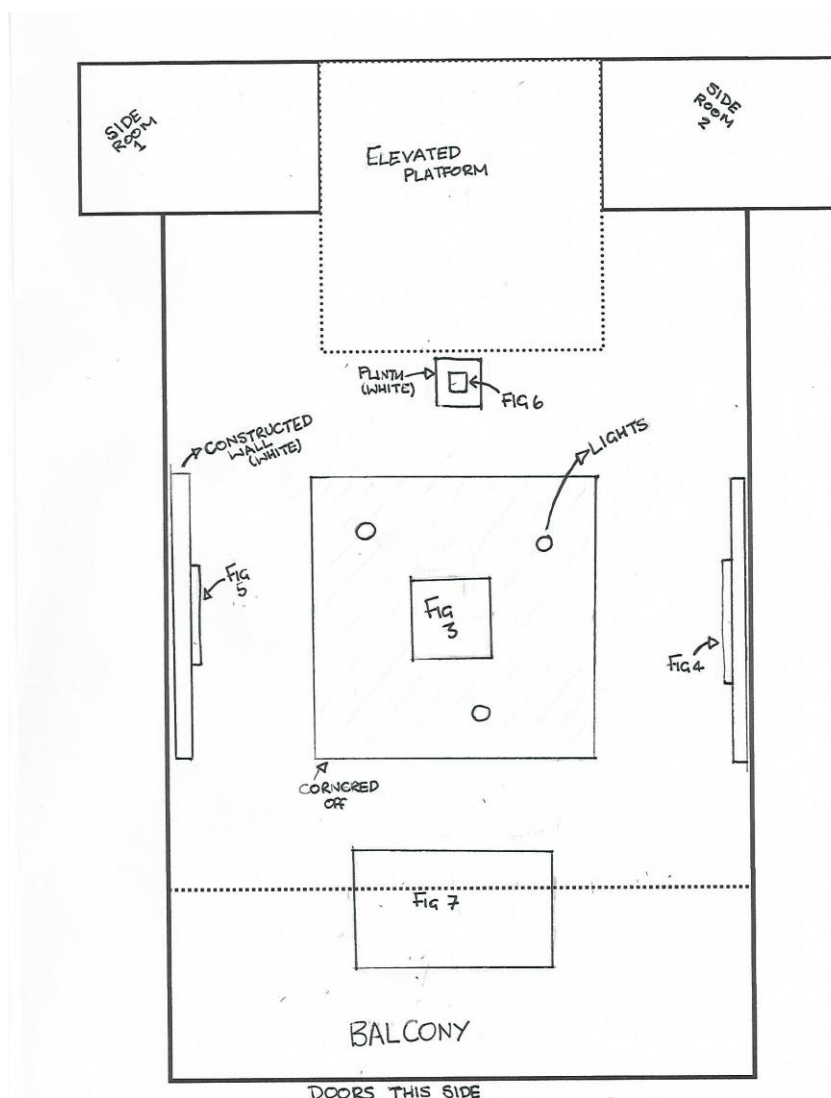


Fig. 1

The central core of the exhibition is by the artist Vibhor Sogani, and takes the form of a large, metal tree. It is called *Kalpavriska - The Wish Fulfilling Tree*, and a sacred tree in Vedic, Jainism and Buddhism, and is believed to grant the wishes of man. The Kalpavriska is also in Hinduism and Sikhism, but does not serve this purpose. (Agrawala, 2004) The piece is physically awe-inspiring, standing at 10m tall meaning the viewer upon seeing it will have to turn their head up to look at it, causing them to feel insignificant compared to the towering tree, while if they go up to the balcony they will be able to get a look at the tree on the level of the branches. It is made with mirror-finished steel, reflecting all that is around it and in the evenings the piece is lit with different coloured lights. (Dmitry, 2018) This gives the whole piece a feel of other-worldliness.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The second piece is a photograph that will be on the east side. *Shaked (Almond)* is by Tal Shochat, an Israeli artist. It depicts an almond tree lit up at night. The background is black, while the tree is lit up in a white light, giving it, like the *Kalpavriska*, an otherworldly feel as well as an impression of it being perfect. In Jewish mythology, the almond tree is a symbol of The Tree of Life, which is a tree in

the Garden of Eden whose fruit has the ability to give eater eternal life, mentioned not only in Genesis but also in Ezekiel, the Psalms, and in, Christian scripture, the book of Revelation. This is because they are the first tree to come into bloom in Jerusalem, and used as a sign of hope and renewal. (Bell, 2018)



Fig. 4

Directly across from this will be *The Tale of the Tree of Life*, by Luo Song-en, and is a painting of water colour and ink. The Taiwanese Protestant artist makes art as his spiritual practice, (Lin, 2019) this piece exploring the dialogue between his Christian faith and the major religion in Taiwan, Buddhism. (Cooper, 2020) The tree is formed in the shape of the cross, bringing the former religion to mind immediately. The Tree of Life in the old testament is strongly linked to Jesus' crucifixion, which in the New Testament is seen to be the only way to gain eternal life. In the *Vexilla Regis*, written by Venantius Fortunatus and first sung 569 AD (Henry, 1912), this link is clear :

O blessed tree on whose branches hung the ransom of the world... from your bark issues fragrant spice, its taste more delicious than nectar.

The other side of this tree is The Tree of Good and Evil, or the Tree of Knowledge, which is the fruit Adam and Eve ate before being cast out from the Garden of Eden, as well as depicting Noah's ark, a symbol of cleansing. This becomes even more obvious when you look at the background of the piece, the flowing lines replacing the Garden of Eden with a dry landscape garden used in Buddhism for meditation. This forms a river, a symbol in Buddhism of casting of change and decay, as well as the knowledge of good and evil (Coomaraswamy, 1998, pg. 49). This image also shows the subtle changes a belief system can undergo as it is adopted into a new culture, such as Christianity in places like Central Mexico where the saints were adapted by the natives to fit aspects of their gods. (Griffiths, 2006, pg. 62)



Fig. 5

On the first plinth there will be a small amber tablet of 16.5cm. Made in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) it depicts Dongfang Shuo stealing a peach of immortality. These fruit were looked after by the Queen Mother of the West, and said to grow on heavenly trees. Every year a feast is thrown and the

gods eat these peaches to remain immortal. Like the Abrahamic religions, heavenly fruit enable eternal life, but unlike it, the Chinese fruit is not given to those who are deemed worthy. (Irwin, 1990, pg. 57) Since the People's Republic gained power, religion is not something encouraged with only five regulated religions with all other beliefs classed as 'superstition'. (Goossaert, 2006, pg. 5) Huang Xiaoning, pastor of the Guangzhou Bible Reformed Church, said : " The Chinese Communist party (CCP) wants to be the God of China and the Chinese people. But according to the Bible only God is God. The government is scared of the churches." (Kuo, 2019) The run-down church around reflects the warning of the removal of religion that is taking place in China.



Fig. 6

The Stela 5, Izapa stone, also known as The Tree of Life Stone, will be closest to the door, and the first work the viewer will see when they come in. It was made near the Mexican-Guatemala border around 300BC - 300AD while it was inhabited by the Olmec and Mayans. It was found in a complex that contained many monuments that celebrated the gods. (Soustelle, 1984, pg 19) Ellen Miller says: " Stela 5 depicts a mythic origin from a central tree. Representation of natural flora are rare in Olmec and Maya art—the two traditions most clearly related to Izapa—and the tree of Stela 5 is a

supernatural one, from which human forms flow, as if released by the large figure to the right, who uses his nose to drill an opening into the trunk." (Miller, 1986, pg. 59-61) However not only is this tablet used to show the Mesoamerican beliefs, but some Latter Day Saints use it as proof of their beliefs that Hebrews had travelled from Jerusalem and settled in Mesoamerica, showing how the use of trees in religion can be so similar they can be co-opted into very different belief systems. (Jakeman, 1958)



Fig. 7

"Trees are a form of nature that represent life and the sacred continuity of the spiritual, cosmic, and physical worlds. A tree is often used to symbolize a deity or other sacred beings, or it may stand for what is sacred in general." (Frese & Gray, 1995, pg 25).

The link between trees and religions in all cultures, not just the western world, shows the human connection to the natural world, which is slowly being removed as we build outwards into the country side. I hope this exhibition will cause the viewer will think about the similarities we have to other cultures around the world, as well as present day attitudes towards the world around us.

Figures

Fig. Two & Fig. Three : Sogani, V. (2018) *Kalpavriksha – The Wish Fulfilling Tree* [Steel] Gujarat, India.

Fig. Four : Shochat, T. (2011) *Shaked (Almond)* [Photograph, Chromogenic Print]

Fig. Five : Song-en, L. (2019) *The Tale of the Tree of Life* [Ink, Watercolour, Gesso, Charcoal, Paper]

Fig. Six : Unknown (1644-1911) *Dongfang Shuo Stealing Peaches of Longevity* [Amber]

Fig. Seven : Unknown (300 B.C. - 300 A.D.) *Stela 5, Izapa* [Stone]

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