

# The Wood Between the Worlds

by Christina Chua

Gnomes, an underworld, a winged horse, a benevolent lion – reading C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles* as a kid, you’d know that lions are good thoughts and gnomes are ugly thoughts. It was that simple. Life was very simple in Narnia. The “Wood Between the Worlds” is a paradigm of Narnian simplicity, seamlessly woven into the metaphysical. It was set in the first of the series, *The Magician’s Nephew*. The Wood was a portal, a sort of multiverse that could transport the willing child or unwilling witch to distant lands, if only one had the Magic and the guts. There were pools and there were trees. It was entirely still in the Wood, entirely uninhabited, and very silent. Sleepiness and a slight amnesia overcame the visitor, and one would forget time altogether, save for objects brought along to the Wood that could prompt a memory of the past.

Paolo Tamburella’s work, *Fei Zao*, has been assembled with the same intrinsic simplicity. The artist describes the set-up: “There is a man, a tree, several thousand soap bars, a chair, a plastic basin with some water inside, a situation of complete stillness, and nothing else. Nothing is going to happen.” Like the somnambulant experience in the Wood Between the Worlds, the visitor to Tamburella’s tree forgets time.

Almost. There are some indicators of time: objects scattered on the ground encircling the man, a vast array of used soap bars and soap powder. A faint, sweet smell lingers and reminds one of the bath taken in the morning, or of washing grubby hands yesterday, of rinsing a load of dirty dishes the day before that, and so on. Time is vaguely specific to these objects, as not all situations can be recalled because of our frequent disregard of the banal.

Certainly, Tamburella’s unorthodox choice of a hanyu pinyin title, the Mandarin word for “soap”, further imbues these references with modesty and homeliness recognisable in the Singaporean cultural context. This heart-lander’s simplicity also correlates with 59-year-old Michael Lee, a wanton mee seller whom the artist has placed at the centre of the scene, adorned only by a white singlet and shorts.

His age may denote the passage of time, but as he sits absolutely still under the tree, save for the occasional wash and a smoke, time is indeterminate. In spite of the commonplace associations and the “unrefined” aspect of Mr. Lee, there is a meditative, almost transcendent quality about this setting.

Noticeably, the art work’s paradox of being at once ordinary and extraordinary does not evoke the sort of shock tactics that contemporary artists have been known to employ. Instead of banking on the vicarious and the bizarre, Tamburella opts for a different strategy, one that is more subtle and more palatable. Besides the play of both the metaphysical and the common, the serene atmosphere is



Mr. Lee seated in the installation *Fei Zao*.

entirely incongruous with the bustling city that surrounds it. Through this unexpected situation, the artist questions the possibility of perfect stillness in the midst of the urban landscape, and perhaps it does not jolt the senses because the answer is, after all, that it’s quite natural for humans to long for such moments.

Indeed, Tamburella admits that his work includes an underlying existential tone, but fortunately, not one that is pessimistic or nihilistic. As he probes into the nature of big city life, he delves more profoundly into the nature of life itself. The pause that the artist affords his audience reveals much. Existence is reduced to an accumulation of quotidian objects, the leftovers from a consumerist lifestyle, the remains of a daily routine. It is a dissatisfying conclusion, but Tamburella does not leave us there. In the midst of this contemplative setting, he proceeds to beg the question if life is perhaps more than this objectification, more than these mediocre bits of soap that represent every other commodity bought, used and discarded.

Often, when visiting exhibitions or galleries, viewers will speak to each other in hushed tones, given that it is the convention to look at art in silence, but it’s questionable whether we ever truly confront stillness in art spaces. By attempting to induce a compelling silence, Tamburella provides the conditions for this fleeting and, dare I say, almost sacred moment.

Of course, it’s ironic that the thing inspiring such awe and silence is a mere bath. Tamburella manoeuvres a knowing audience’s predisposed tendency to assume art is esoteric, and that it regularly elevates dull objects to a higher status as works of art. But Tamburella does not concern himself with the “metamorphosis of readymades”, and perhaps his appeal lies in his turn away from the obscurities of art theory. Instead, he prefers a “literal kind of work” and concentrates on the easily grasped aspects of simplicity and exposure.

“I like the idea that the man is exposed in a public space”, Tamburella said. Every ten minutes or so, Mr. Lee dips his wash cloth into the basin of water, swabs his neck, arms, and stomach in a motion typically confined to the privacy of a bathroom. Once more, it is not discomfiting to watch this happen, as it is only a basic and essential part of a daily routine. The repetition of these same movements render, on a broader scale, the idea of human existence and its constituent routines. In this sense, not only are Mr. Lee’s personal habits laid bare to the public eye, more significantly, his life span, his entire existence as a human being is exposed.

This deliberate exposure is overtly observed when the element of nature is included in the scene. Arguably, the centre of focus is the man, but his gaze and positioning leads the viewer toward the tall tree, and when the viewer takes this in, the work becomes complete. The fact that this scattering of soap encircles both the tree and the man suggests an obtrusive but discreet clash between the natural and the artificial. Man-made products, although carrying the same homely associations as Mr. Lee’s outward aspect, constitute the circumference that detaches man and nature spatially.

In the work, one can see the two aspects of that homespun quality called “down-to-earth”. While *Fei Zao* is unpretentious, presenting a life lived on basic means, it also implies a life reduced to residual objects. On the other hand, the work considers a return to nature, taking “down-to-earth” more literally than what we usually mean by the phrase. Paolo Tamburella lures his audience into his own version of Lewis’ Wood Between the Worlds, where time is meditatively slowed down, if not quite halted, and the viewer can ponder upon her own state of existence.



CHRISTINA is a student. She likes looking at people, especially the weird ones and the old ones. She also likes trees, not so much in the tree-hugger sense, but in a general admiring sense.