

SIDE

GALLERY & CINEMA

SPRING EXHIBITION 2019

EX- VOTO | FOREST

Curated by Liz Hingley and Sirkka-Liisa Konttinen

Ex-Voto by Alys Tomlinson is a timeless portrayal of the worship of landscape through pilgrimage, and the way that our natural environment sustains human spirit. In contrast, *Forest* by Yan Wang-Preston presents the commodification of nature, revealing the mass uprooting of trees in China for the purpose of creating an artificially constructed relationship to landscape. The tree of life, a deeply spiritual symbol of immortality, growth and strength, grounds both of these projects, which were photographed in parallel between the years of 2010-2018.

Tomlinson's poetic black and white work suggests a primordial virgin territory of woods and rivers preserved in an oasis of calm and beauty through spirituality, seemingly uncontaminated by contemporary life. Taken with the slow patience required to work with a large 5x4 camera, her images are anything but static. There is an intense animation in the highly detailed landscapes she depicts, and the earnest pilgrims they harbour. This luminous vision of paradise retains an inky darkness. The intimate portraits invite us to share in deep reflection; their direct gaze mirroring our own emotions.

In China, preservation of ancient cultural symbols takes the form of transplanting trees into vast cityscapes, seen as part of the future of Chinese high-density living. By dislodging their roots, and in so doing the society in which they are situated, Wang-Preston explores how this epic act endeavours to also re-root people into new cities. Her elegant, precise and colourful images capture spaces of flux - sterile urban environments and attempts to soften them with 'ornamental' trees. The beauty of their composition seduces our gaze so that we too absorb their struggle to cling onto life in their awkward and unnatural new settings.

Trees convey slow time; they are symbols of wisdom, witnesses to our experiments and life cycles. *Ex-Voto* and *Forest* each capture remarkable stories they have to tell us, displaying their own intangible atmospheres and compellingly an uncertain sense of place. The authors of each of these critical and distinctive bodies of work question our respect for things and beings that outlive us, and are beyond us.

Text by Liz Hingley

